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Spring 2019

## Too Cool

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Too Cool

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Lillian Margaret Cary

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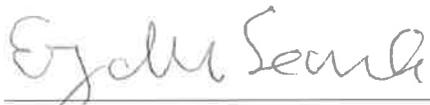
2018

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 1, 2018

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Lillian Margaret Cary entitled *Too Cool* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.

  
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Accepted

  
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## Abstract

*Too Cool* is a collection of short stories and essays concerning a young woman's experiences with relationships, and how they help shape the world around her. The body, foregrounded as metaphor, is threaded throughout each story and essay in the collection in the hopes that all readers will relate to the sometimes un-relatable. Both in fiction and non-fiction, these pieces explore heartbreak, friendship and the human need for connection. The stories and essays are written in a minimalist style to emphasize that what is written is just as important as the information that has been left out, and their themes focus on self-exploration and identity.

## Acknowledgments

This collection would not have been possible without the love and support of my friends, family, and mentors. To my parents, thank you for believing in me. To my mentors, Elizabeth Searle, Sarah Braunstein, Poro-chista Khakpour, Justin Tussing, and Aaron Hamburger thank you for everything you have done for me. Thank you, Elizabeth, for your guidance and encouragement. Thank you, Sarah, for challenging me as a reader and a writer. Thank you, Poro-chista, for allowing me to experiment with my writing and giving me access to an exceptional list of women writers. Thank you, Justin, for your guidance and patience. Thank you, Aaron, for pushing me to dig deeper and find my voice as a writer.

To my friends Chris, Maggie, Nic, and Tony, I would not have had the confidence or strength to write these stories without your support. I am forever grateful to the Stonecoast community and the friends I have made. You have pushed me to write about the difficult and uncomfortable truths that most people don't want to talk about. You have helped me become the writer and person I've always wanted to be. These stories were written in order to not only understand myself as a writer, but as a human being as well. Though these stories can be heartbreaking or sad at times, my hope is that this collection will serve as a reminder that the search for human connection is universal.

## Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Too Cool.....	11
Stories.....	13
Too Cool.....	15
How to Get to West Virginia.....	25
Bad Habit.....	30
There Must Be Something Wrong with Me.....	38
Rosaline.....	59
Watching and Waiting.....	66
Ten.....	72
How to Lose Your Virginity.....	76
Essays.....	81
Spicy Chicken Wings Gave Me Herpes?.....	83
A Question of Numbers.....	87
Vitiligo.....	93
The Perfect Woman.....	98
A Year in Rupert, West Virginia.....	103
We Are Not the Same People Anymore.....	114
Bibliography.....	131

## Preface

In the first grade, my mother helped me carry one hundred books to the one-hundredth day of school. However, thinking about reading and writing as a way to make sense of the world didn't happen until somewhere around the ninth grade. Our English teacher printed out copies of lyrics to songs by bands like Cake or The Clash and we would discuss what these lyrics meant. For a creative writing assignment for the class, I wrote about young love and heartache, about my eighth-grade boyfriend giving me a rose on Valentine's Day the year before. The teacher gave me an A.

Continuing to take creative writing courses as a communications undergraduate, my first story for class was an attempt to make sense of something that had recently happened with a man I'd known since I was fifteen years old. What happened with that man is what helped lead me to pursuing a career as a writer. Writing about him created a space that I could claim for my own, to have control and make the decisions.

As a twenty-one-year old sophomore in college, and living in my first apartment with a roommate, I was home alone on a Friday night, watching television and chasing a pint of Seagram whiskey with Diet Coke. This man, named Patrick, was in town for his fall break. He was texting me throughout the night, making the rounds out at the bars with his friends. Another male friend named Steve, who had been over the weekend before, texted me to say he'd left his coat and was going to come by to pick it up. When Steve knocked on the door, I was drunk but still conscious and alert. He stayed around for a while, we listened to some records. Steve was still over when the other man, Patrick, showed up.

I was chasing whiskey, flipping through records. Steve was sitting on the couch, and after some time Patrick walked into my bedroom. He was calling my name. He was lying on my bed, still wearing his black pea coat. He pulled me to him and kissed me. I pulled away, and by the time I went back to the living room Steve was walking out the door. The last thing I remember from that night is locking the door behind him.

Waking up the next morning, I was naked and saw a vivid waterfall of vomit trailing down the side of my bed. The sheets were a mess. My head was pounding. Someone had been here. By the time I was able to bring myself out of bed I came out of my room and saw my roommate in the kitchen making coffee. I asked her what happened the night before—and if Patrick had been here.

“You really don’t remember?” she asked.

“I must have blacked out,” I said. “I really don’t remember anything. I’m assuming we had sex, but I don’t know.”

“What do you see in this guy?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

I showed her my bed and the vomit, how it fell onto the black carpet. The black carpet, where a half-empty pack of cigarettes that must have fallen out of his coat pocket stood still. He had been here. I decided to smoke all of them.

It was later in the afternoon that I decided to call him, to find out what had happened. “What happened last night?”

“Well, we had sex...” he said.

“We did? Oh. I don’t really remember, that’s why I was calling.”

“Yeah, you were pretty out of it.”

At the time, I was seeing the guidance counselor at school for something entirely different. As she listened to my story of what happened, the way she looked at me told me something was wrong.

“You know what that is, right?” she said.

“Even if I was the one to invite him over? I mean, I didn’t expect to get blackout drunk, but I knew why he was coming over. Isn’t it my fault?”

“No.”

“So, are you saying this was date rape?”

When she nodded, I started to cry.

Later during that same semester that my creative writing professor introduced me to a short story by writer Susan Minot called “Lust.” This story changed what it meant for me to be a writer. It showed that just because a writer uses simple language to tell her story doesn’t mean that the story doesn’t hold value. The story is structured using fragmented paragraphs, the different lengths telling their own kind of story. The narrator is direct yet withholding. Each man she tells the reader about is different in minute ways, except they are also all the same. They only want one thing from her. Sex. The sparseness of Minot’s style and way she used the naked truth of being a young woman who is scared of the power of her own voice was instantly relatable. Minot inspired me to use fiction as a vehicle for finding my voice, as well as my place in the world.

In Minot’s story, there is a line that goes, “You wonder how long you can keep it up. You begin to feel as if you’re showing through, like a bathroom window that only lets in grey light, the kind you can’t see out of.” (14) As a fiction writer, this paragraph validated the power of minimalist writing. The emotionality of the narrator comes

through with phrases like ‘grey light’ which suggests that she does not view the world in black and white. Minot also likes to change point of view throughout the story. Her shift from second person to the first can be so swift and without pause that the reader may not even realize it. A paragraph near the end of the story reads, “I was ashamed but couldn’t look him in the eye.” And then the very next paragraph, “You wonder about things feeling a little off-kilter. You begin to feel like a piece of pounded veal.” (Minot 16) This shift helps bring the reader in and helps universalize the experience of the narrator. Minot’s story taught me that this was the kind of writing that could help me make sense of the world.

Much like my experience with discovering Minot, the writer Roxane Gay came into my life during a period when I was questioning what it meant to be a woman living in the modern world. In my mid-to-late twenties I was walking through a bookstore and opened up to a random page of a copy of Gay’s *Bad Feminist* and read the first sentence to the beginning of a chapter, “In my high school yearbook there is a note from a girl who wrote, ‘I like you even though you are very mean.’” (83) With only one sentence, Gay’s writing spoke directly to the reader. Her style of writing made me feel as though I was sitting across the dinner table from her, as if we were old friends re-connecting and no time had gone by.

Gay’s memoir *Hunger*, which came out during the summer of 2017, has been recognized as a painfully honest and confessional account of what it’s like to walk around in her body. Although it took her a long time to write this book, Gay knew that she eventually had to write it specifically because it was going to be difficult. She had to

because deep down she knew it was necessary. The following is the last paragraph from her book.

Writing this book is the most difficult thing I've ever done. To lay myself so vulnerable has not been an easy thing. To face myself and what living in my body has been like has not been an easy thing. But I wrote this book because it felt necessary. In writing this memoir of my body, in telling you these truths about my body, I am sharing my truth and mine alone. I understand if that truth is not something you want to hear. The truth makes me uncomfortable too. But I am also saying, here is my heart, what's left of it. Here I am showing you the ferocity of my hunger. Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom. Here. See what I hunger for and what my truth has allowed me to create. (Gay 304)

Throughout this memoir, Gay lets her heart bleed onto every page. But this particular paragraph captures the raw emotionality of a writer who has allowed herself to take up the necessary space in order to tell her story.

Gay has sometimes been referred to by male critics as a 'diarist' because she expresses herself in a minimalistic and direct way. Like Gay, I too in my writing have engaged deeply with the personal and confrontational. During my time at Stonecoast, I've learned the importance of how being vulnerable in my writing allows the reader to be able to connect with the story. However, because we are living in a patriarchal society, women who write about difficult subjects are often taken less seriously than their male counterparts. Gay and Minot have shown a way out of this potential trap, demonstrating

how to craft stories about personal subjects in ways that don't isolate the reader, specifically by using vulnerability to form connections with readers.

After college, I continued to write about my relationships with the men as a form of catharsis, using a sparse minimalist style like Minot's as inspiration. When I applied to Stonecoast, I was working as a baker. After working in some version of the restaurant industry for ten years, I wanted more for myself. So, in 2010, I moved to a small town in West Virginia to do a year of service in AmeriCorps. There I started a blog with the hopes of writing about my new life. Though I didn't keep up with the blog as much as I had intended, over the next few years the blog became an outlet for my creative writing. After writing a piece, I would use social media to tell friends and followers about my work. Though it was a slow process, people would gradually start to tell me they had found my blog and liked my writing. As my audience grew, I began to write more frequently. A couple years later, after spending the summer of 2015 baking hundreds of doughnuts, I was ready to do something with my writing.

Originally, a decision had to be made between applying as a fiction or a non-fiction writer. The work on my blog felt too close to be called fiction. But my writing wasn't non-fiction either because minor details had been changed, the truth of each story a bit murky. Finally, after consulting my writing professor from college, with whom I had stayed in touch, he told me to apply as a fiction writer.

When I found out I was accepted to Stonecoast, I realized I was going to be taken seriously as a writer. Not exactly sure what to expect at my first residency, I remember standing by myself drinking a glass of wine in the banquet room at the hotel in Brunswick thinking I had never seen so many extroverted writers in one room before. I

had missed my connecting flight that morning and missed the welcoming orientation for new students and still didn't know anyone. As people around me laughed, hugged, and embraced the energy in the room that night, I spoke briefly with the program director Justin Tussing, telling him that I was surprised how energetic everyone seemed to be. Though I was excited to be there, I was shell-shocked as well. He would go on to tell me that my time at Stonecoast would go by quickly and to make the most of every day. By the next residency, I actually knew what he meant.

During my time in the program, there have been a few key themes that have emerged about my work. Because I mostly write from the first person, I've had to focus a lot of creativity on learning how to separate myself from the narrator and the story. Being able to separate myself from the narrative and the narrator has often been a challenge for my writing. I tend to fictionalize personal experiences, so it's been difficult to allow myself to make room for where the story wants to go.

Part of the issue is that I've come to see my writing as one of the only spaces I feel I can claim for myself. Rarely, are the questions asked, who are these characters on the page? What do they want? Where do they live? Do they have families? Rather, I tend to focus on particular moments that happen between the characters, which has really just been a way for me to make sense of something in the real world. Over the last two years I've learned that writing about personal and difficult subjects does not have to be a word-for-word re-telling of something intimate that actually happened in my life. As a writer, finding my voice has meant being able to get outside of my own head in order to make room for the creative work.

Besides finding my voice as a writer, learning how to create a certain distance from the work has been important for my writing as well. Sometimes it has been a challenge to ask questions like, what do I want my audience to know? Not know? Who exactly is my audience? When I began to consider applying to graduate school, these questions became crucial when deciding to make the leap and apply. I wanted to give myself the opportunity to explore and expand my knowledge of storytelling, and be a better writer. My writing style has always been about trying to find the right balance between self-censoring and craft, and being in a writing program would be able to help give my writing structure and focus.

For the last two years, I have worked with mentors who have encouraged the honesty and rawness of my writing. The writers and the books I've been exposed to have taught me how to be frank, and that minimalist writing can be just as powerful as maximalist writing. I developed a fondness for writing personal essays and began to experiment with the structure and style of my writing. Working with mentors like Sarah Braunstein and Porochista Khakpour opened up my horizons not only as a writer, but as a reader as well. Reading books like Sarah Gerard's *Sunshine State*, Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams*, Lorrie Moore's *Self-Help*, and Mary Gaitskill's *Bad Behavior* made me realize the possibilities of storytelling.

While working with Sarah, I found myself creatively blocked. I had told her about my blog, how that format for writing seemed to work well for me. So instead of the traditional packets, I started a private blog and posted my material online. The page count requirement was less intimidating this way because it was a safe space. When working with Porochista, she also gave me the freedom to experiment with the style and structure

of my writing. We even discussed playing around with point-of-view. The first story in *Self-Help* called “How to Be an Other Woman,” uses the second person in order to get the reader inside the mind of the female narrator, who tells the story of being someone’s mistress. The language is intimate and personal, and the story is set up so that the reader feels sorry for her. This story has had an influence on my work because of how Moore demonstrates a good use of strong personal writing in fiction by using a point-of-view that can be difficult to pull off.

Popular culture has been influential as well. Certain movies and television shows have helped contribute to my path as a writer. While watching the television show *Sex and the City* I became jealous of Carrie Bradshaw’s column. I was jealous of Lena Dunham’s character, Hannah Horvath, on the show *Girls* because she had been accepted to the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. From the dysfunction and depravity of Hank Moody on the show *Californication* to a film called *Stuck in Love* starring Greg Kinnear as a writer, I kept looking for ways to be able to relate to these fictionalized writers. But I wasn’t going to drop out after two weeks of classes like Hannah. I wanted to do better than someone who wasn’t real.

One of my goals for myself after finishing the writing program was to work with young women through a non-profit organization. Through the art of writing, I wanted to help give them the confidence I never had at their age. Over the summer, I taught my first writing workshop through the Girls Rock Camp Alliance chapter in Louisville, Kentucky. The class was called “Rockin’ Writing” and used multiple writing exercises that provided an opportunity for the students to talk about music and why it mattered to them. The day of the class I brought in a handful of vinyl records for a specific prompt which asked

them to write about what they saw on the cover. The students varied in ages from ten to fifteen years old, and a strong majority of them were active in the participation. There was one student in particular who wrote about cover of TLC's *CrazySexyCool* and her response reminded me just how powerful writing can be.

Even though the workshop was only one afternoon, it occurred to me that I had made my dream come true. Though I was nervous and shaking, kids listened and wanted to share what they had written. They didn't know I used to be a shy student. When I was their age and a teacher asked me a question in class rather than answer I would sit quietly, say nothing, and wait until they moved on to someone else. After the class was over and I went home, the realization that I could have a future in teaching terrified and excited me.

In the last two years, I have gained confidence not only as a writer but as a woman as well. When I write, I have an authority on the page that is often difficult to replicate in social situations. People listen when I write about something personal because I am not being interrupted. Writing has always been and will continue to be a place for me to make sense of the world. By continuing to write about difficult subjects, I want to help people engage in more honest conversations about themselves.

The journey is just beginning in my career as a writer. Although it's difficult to predict what will be next, Stonecoast has helped make the idea of becoming a writer a reality. My feelings about writing have been forever changed by the influence of the people I've met and the books I've read. As my writing continues to progress, I hope to continue the momentum I've gained during the program. Now that I finally feel like I have my own voice, I want to be able to use it to help connect other women and writers, to keep taking up space with my writing. I want to claim my authority.

Too Cool



## Stories



## Too Cool

I was listening to Waylon Jennings when I remembered I had left my favorite lipstick at Jeremy's house.

Kentucky in the fall can be a crapshoot. It was early October, an unusually sticky day. High eighties. Full humidity. Saturday afternoon. I sent Jeremy a text message, asking if he was home and if I could I stop by. Surprised that he agreed, I left my apartment and got into my car, an old brown Mercedes I had recently bought from my father. The backs of my legs burned when I sat down on the hot leather interior.

“Fucking shit.”

When I pulled up to his house, he was sitting on the porch smoking a cigarette. There was a small orange box and a black Bic lighter resting on the small table next to him. His eyes were red and vacant, his thin brown hair was greasy as if he hadn't showered since we had we broken up the week before.

“You're not a smoker,” I said.

He stared at me and shrugged his shoulders.

“I bought a pack when you told me you needed space.”

His neighbors were outside drinking cheap beer talking about video games.

After the uncomfortable silence, we walked inside his apartment. His bright red couch was almost the same shade as the lipstick I had come over to get, a color I had bought for the name alone. Street Walker.

“I was going to throw it away,” he said.

For a minute, I had to remember where I was. “Huh?”

“Your lipstick.”

I reached for the side of my head and combed my hair through my fingers.

“I’m glad you didn’t,” I said. “It’s my favorite color. They don’t make it anymore.”

He walked upstairs as I waited in the apartment where I had recently broken up with someone for the first time. When he came back down, he stood in front of me but seemed far away. He handed me the lipstick.

“Thank you,” I said.

I walked towards the door and I told him to take care as I reached for the handle. I turned my head and noticed his body was moving farther away from me as he walked up the stairs. He did not turn around.

When I got into my car, I rolled down the windows and played Bruce Springsteen’s *Nebraska*. He had never liked Springsteen, considered him a sentimentalist.

God, I love the sound of the harmonica. It sounds how love must feel.

A couple years later, I heard from a friend that he had gotten married. On a random Monday spring afternoon while I was still at work I received a text message from him that said, *ever know the feeling that everything is completely falling apart and the only thing holding you together is fear of the unknown?*

It seemed he was unhappy with his life. The song “Pale Blue Eyes” by the Velvet Underground was playing in the background at the vintage store where I had been working for the last few months. I didn’t respond to his message and a couple nights later he was parked outside my house.

I drove around the block and called my friend Emma, who was in town from Baltimore.

"What the fuck do I do?" I said.

"Tell him you have plans with me," she said. "I'll buy you a drink."

"Shit. That works. Okay."

I parked my car and took a deep breath. He began walking toward me.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I said.

"You didn't text me back."

"Because it was fucking cryptic. And hello, you're married."

He shrugged and looked at his feet.

"What do you want?" I said. "I'm getting ready to go out with a friend."

Emma pulled up in her parents' car while I was talking to Jeremy.

"Can I come? I just need to talk," he said.

"Fine," I said, rolling my eyes. "But you have to drive separately."

Getting into the passenger side door of Emma's car I tell her Jeremy is coming to the bar with us.

"What? Why?" she said.

"He said he needs to talk."

"Isn't he married? What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry Emma. I'll buy your drinks."

The three of us sat in front of the well at the empty bar. While Emma was in the bathroom I ordered us both a Tom Collins. Mine tasted like dirty water. Jeremy ordered bourbon.

"Where's your ring?" I asked him.

I felt his knee touch mine, I became stiff. He reached for my hand underneath the bar. His skin was dry and calloused.

"In my car."

"Don't touch me, Jeremy. What the hell did you want to talk to me about?"

Emma sat down next to me and took a sip from her drink.

"This tastes like shit," she said.

"I know, we should order something else."

Jeremy moved his knee away from mine as he knocked back the rest of his bourbon in one sip.

"So, Jeremy. How's married life?" said Emma.

He didn't look at her and instead ordered another drink. She and I looked at each other and I mouthed the words telling her I was sorry for putting her in this position.

"Two bourbon and gingers?" I asked her. She nodded.

The female bartender had tattoo sleeves on both of her arms. While she was making our drinks, Jeremy had gotten up to use the bathroom.

"I know what he's going to tell you," said Emma.

"What? That he's still in love with me?"

"Yes."

"That's ridiculous. Then why would he have gotten married?"

"Ask him, not me. I'm just telling you, tread lightly."

The bartender handed us our drinks, the smell of bourbon so strong I could taste it before taking a drink. When Jeremy came back, I asked him where his wife thought he was tonight.

“Out. I don’t know.”

“Why are you here?”

“Because I wanted to see you.”

“I don’t think this was a good idea,” I said. “Maybe you should go.”

“I’m going to second that,” said Emma.

He stares into his glass and nods. His hand without the ring crumbles up a wet cocktail napkin. He finishes the rest of his drink and leaves a twenty-dollar bill on the bar.

Three years later, he is standing at the bar. I had gotten there early and was nearly finished with my first cocktail. He is going bald on the back of his head. His thin brown hair is slick as if he had just taken a shower. He still has his beard, although trimmer than I remembered. He walks back to the table where I’m sitting and I tell him we should go sit outside.

He and I are now in our thirties. He is divorced. I am single. We sit at a yellow picnic table. I look around to see if I know any faces. I am glad that I do not because I can’t explain why I am here with the man who broke my heart at nineteen, twenty-one, and twenty-six.

“So, what’s up?” he asks.

I laugh. His feet are jittery and the table is slightly shaking.

“Well, I was recently accepted in a graduate program for my writing,” I said.

“I’ve also been working as a baker for the last two years or so.”

“I saw that,” he said. “I looked you up online. Are you still making doughnuts?”

“Not really. I wanted to pursue writing.”

I notice his feet are trying to touch mine so I put my feet up on the empty seat to my left. The tequila and soda I’m drinking has turned into water but I drink the rest of it anyway. Some of the sweat from my cocktail glass is dripping onto my jeans. His phone rings and he steps away to answer. After a couple minutes, he comes back.

“Sorry about that,” he says. “Work.”

“No problem. Where do you work these days?”

“I’m at the night manager for a produce company,” he said.

“Do you like your job?” I asked while I moved my legs back underneath table so I could cross them.

He shrugs. His dark brown eyes and long eyelashes are probably what I missed the most about him. There was something sincere about them, even though I would never use that word to describe him. The air is quiet and there are questions I need to ask. His feet are looking for mine again. Our shoes kiss and I straighten my back. Someone is smoking a joint. For a few seconds, I am not sure why I wanted to see him.

“I have to ask,” I said. “Why did you get married so young?”

I am trying to look at the spot on the back of his head when I ask the question. He is having trouble looking me in the eye while he shifts in his seat.

“I asked you a question,” I said.

He runs his hand through his balding hair. “I thought it was time for me to be responsible and grow up.”

“At twenty-years old?” It’s a bad time for my drink to be empty.

He looks around the bar as if he’s ashamed.

“I thought we talked about all this six years ago,” he said.

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

He says nothing so I get up and go inside to get another drink. It took me less than an hour to realize how little he has changed. Something inside of me still needs closure after all these years and so I take my fresh tequila and soda and go back outside.

“When did it get this cold?” I said. “Let’s move inside.”

He nods and follows me into the darkly lit bar.

He gets back in touch with me a month later and offers to take me on a date. I say sure because I can get a story out of it. He picks me up at my house and opens the car door for me. I give him directions to the restaurant and his hand that isn’t on the steering wheel slowly moves towards me. I folded my hands together in order to prevent contact. He parks the car and we look both ways to cross the street. My hands are inside the pockets of my stonewashed jean jacket because I know he wants to hold my hand. Going out with him feels different now because I’m not as attracted to him as I used to be. He’s halfway across the street when he turns around and notices I’m still standing on the sidewalk. He loops his arm in-between the opening I accidentally created and we walk towards the restaurant that used to be a church.

The dim lighting soaks into the refurbished wood that is everywhere, the bar, tables, stools. There is not much of a crowd tonight, and I pick a table by the stained-glass window.

“I don’t know,” he says. “You seem too cool for me these days.”

“How so?”

“You’re more self-confident. More sure of yourself.”

The server delivers our beers and walks away. I ask if we should get an appetizer. Maybe pretzel bread and beer cheese. The order is put in and we make small talk. He is slightly leaning over the table showing that he is interested. His feet trying to kiss mine again. I lean back into the church pew and stay distant. I don’t remember what we are talking about and then suddenly I say, “Sometimes I forget you have children.”

“No, you don’t,” he says.

“How many do you have now?” My hand doesn’t leave the beer glass.

“Three.”

We have another round of beers and finish our food. It’s still early as we are leaving the restaurant and drive back to my house. We park outside and I finally let his fingers touch mine. It’s been over two years since I was intimate with anyone, which is why I said yes to going out with him.

“Do you want to come inside?” I ask.

He turns the car key and the car doors open. Then close. *Beep*.

“Let me kiss you,” he says.

I’m on top of him and realize I’m bored. He pulls my head towards his and I want to revolt. Too much tongue. I quickly change positions and I ask him to try something

different. He's awkward about this too and unable to perform what I want. No talking, until finally we are done.

"Could I ask you a question?" he asks.

"Go ahead."

"What was with that fuck-you face you were just giving me?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Maybe it was just the angle," he says.

"This is what my face looks like."

The air is quiet. My head now lying on his chest with my arm across it. I'm staring at the tattoos on the inside of his arm. Specifically, at the one that is written in red barbed wire with his initials plus the initials of his ex-wife. After a few minutes, he asks if I want to smoke some bud and watch television. When he touches my back, his hands make a cold chill go up my spine. I tell him I have work in the morning and need to go to sleep because it's close to midnight. The room is silent while we pick our clothes up off the floor. After I'm dressed I watch him tie his shoes. He looks up and his brown eyes make me think of marbles. He throws back his hair and runs his hand through. I'm thinking about his bald spot.

He goes to the bathroom and I sit and wait for him in the living room.

"I had a great time," he says.

"It was fun."

He steps onto the porch and down onto the sidewalk. I briefly watch as he walks away. Both of his hands in his front pockets, his head slightly angled towards the ground.

Suddenly his back becomes unfamiliar and distant. I smile, close the door and turn off the porch light.

## How to Get to West Virginia

In the fall of 2005 you will apply to a local coffee shop. You will get the job and work there for close to five years. Almost four years after you've been working at the coffee shop, you will decide you want to do more with your life. You no longer want to make overpriced low-fat-sugar-free-no-foam beverages. You start looking into the AmeriCorps program and decide you want to move to a new town and volunteer for a year.

In the spring of 2009, you will be sitting outside on the back patio of a bar with a group of your co-workers. You will be drinking a gin and tonic when you see your ex-lover walk outside onto the patio. Your face will become frozen and pale because the last time you had spoken to him was three years ago when he got married while on spring break in a different country. You remember this because you found out the night of your twenty-first birthday.

You will continue to keep drinking gin and tonics. Later in the evening you will say hello to him while standing outside of the bathroom. Eventually, you will leave the bar to walk with him to his car. He will be holding your hand the entire time. He is still married.

A week later, you will meet him for a drink. When you leave the bar, he will walk you to your car where he kisses you. During this moment, you will remember that he wouldn't talk to you for six months after he got married. You will remember the taste of your tears bleeding into the carpet, the weight of your body unable to move from the floor.

Now, here he is leaning against the door of your car. Your heart is beating stupidly. The next week you will finalize your application for AmeriCorps and specify that you'd like to be placed somewhere in West Virginia because you had been to that part of the country before.

The first time you sleep with him he will finish in thirty seconds. After he leaves, you'll put on a fresh change of clothes and go to your closing shift at the coffee shop.

The next time he comes over, you will sleep together again. It will last longer, but barely. You all will watch a movie. He will fall asleep and you will be staring at the television screen. The next morning you will wake up alone, and realize he left his jacket on your couch.

The jacket will stay there for a couple weeks. It doesn't move. You will pick it up and smell it. The jacket smells like the bottom of a wet cardboard box that was filled with produce. You will have to see him again when he eventually picks up his jacket.

You will continue to keep seeing him because you think you're in love with him. He will ask you to go to the movies. Out in public. You will say no. He will tell you *she* is out of town and invite you to his place. You will say no. It's around this time you start calling one of your friends for help.

You will call your friend unable to stop the bullshit from running down your face. When she gets to your apartment, she will find you on the floor. She will help you write a text message to him saying you can no longer be involved in this relationship. He'll tell you this makes him sad, though he understands.

About a month later you will drive back to your apartment one night after work and his car will be parked in front of your place. When he tells you he can't stop thinking

about you, you think he's being sincere. When he leaves your apartment later that night, the bullshit will start running down your face again. It will continue to do this for some time, it never really leaves. You wonder when you will hear back from AmeriCorps.

He has dragged you back in again and it feels as though you're living in a black hole. The bullshit becomes more frequent, and you'll notice there are parts of you missing. When you find out you got placed in a small town in West Virginia, you realize you will be moving in less than two months.

One night, you will walk to your friend's house and drink beer on the porch. She will help you end it, for the second time. He will ask you where you are because he wants to talk about it in person. He doesn't understand why. He doesn't understand how your heart beats stupidly and wild, pulsing for someone who isn't married. You don't understand why you keep going back to him.

A few weeks before your birthday, the relationship gradually falls away. He stops responding to your text messages. This no longer seems to be convenient for him. He won't wish you a happy birthday, and this will make you sad although you won't be surprised. You will put in your notice at the coffee shop and be moving to West Virginia in a month.

It is a five-and-a-half-hour drive to your new home. You will live above the community center where you will be working. The closest grocery store will be ten miles away. The closest pizza place will be four miles away and will be called *Possum Holler*. On your first day working at the center, you will have lunch with the elderly couple who own the center. You will have one of the best cheeseburgers of your life at a store that

functions as a partial food mart, collectible goods store, and a restaurant. The radio station will also be broadcast from this multifaceted space.

You will drive by this store one afternoon and the sign out front will say that they're offering Chinese food today. You do not eat there again.

One night after work, there will be a loud knocking on your door. You do not answer right way. After a couple more knocks, you'll slightly open the door to find a dirty, shirtless man with no teeth asking for money. You tell him you don't have any cash and close the door. You will be shaking because you realize you are living by yourself in an unfamiliar town. You immediately make yourself a bourbon over ice.

There is not much to do here. You will occasionally go to the town eighteen miles away instead of the one closer to you because it has restaurants, a coffee shop and antique stores. You will drink a lot of wine and cheap beer on the weekends while you binge watch the discs from Netflix you got in the mail.

You will ask the people you work for if there is recycling here. They'll tell you the closest recycling center is thirty miles away and they only make the trip once a month. You'll learn that West Virginia doesn't recycle glass, so you start bringing down your beer cans and putting them with the community center's recycling. One day, the woman you work for will tell you that one of the volunteers saw all the beer cans, put them in a trash bag and hid them in the back of the building.

You start bringing your dog with you to work. She'll stay with you in your office until the center closes, when you let her run around and play. She'll have an accident in your boss' office, and your boss will try to clean it up with hand sanitizer.

Six months in, you will have a fight over the phone with your boss and start crying. You don't know why you wanted to come here. You'll feel like you've accomplished nothing. You moved here because you wanted to make a difference and experience life outside of Louisville, Kentucky.

There is no contact between you and the boy from back home until one night in the winter. He will send you a text message that says he saw on the news West Virginia was getting a lot of snow. He will say he wanted to check up on you. You'll tell him about the snow and he won't respond.

You'll no longer think about him. During your last few months in West Virginia you will help organize book drives and clothing drives. You will become more involved with the hot meal program. You will have developed friendships with the people who live in town. A woman will give you a silver feather necklace as a goodbye present. The day you drive back to Kentucky, the sky will be cloudy and the air will taste like cold water. Going home will never feel so good again.

## Bad Habit

I had been in love with him since I was fifteen, though I never told him. Over the summer, I turned twenty years old. He was staying at his parents' house in the suburbs of Louisville while he was home from the college he attended in Chicago. His parents were out of town for the weekend and he invited me over.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I know you won't care."

"Why don't you tell me anyway and I'll decide whether or not I care."

I took a deep breath. "It's been an intense week for me, that's all."

His back was turned as he searched for a bottle opener in his kitchen.

"How so?"

He continued searching as he walked into the other room pretending to listen. I just stared at the floor.

"Rosaline's dad came into the coffee shop the other night," I said. "I hadn't seen him since the funeral."

Silence.

"I ran into her sister the next day."

"Yeah, Rosaline is dead. Kinda weird, huh? Friends start dying when you get out of high school, that's just how it goes," he said.

"I guess," I said.

He walked over and stood in front of me. He handed me a shot of tequila. He smelled like cheap pot and bad cologne.

After we took the shots he asked me to kiss him. I took a step back.

"No."

"Why not?"

He moved closer to me.

"Beau---"

He kissed me. I could hear the phone ringing. He pulled away as I went to the bathroom to throw up. When I was done, he was still on the phone.

"Where'd you go?" He finally asked.

"I puked."

"Oh. Do you need to lay down?"

"Sure."

I followed him down to the basement. He put a blanket on the couch and asked if I needed anything else.

"No," I said. "I'll be fine."

He left the light on. I watched him go back upstairs. I closed my eyes and pretended to be somewhere else, but I kept hearing his voice. It was after two in the morning and he was on the phone again, going up and down the stairs.

I was about to fall asleep when he asked what I was doing.

"Writing the great American novel."

I sat up, giving him the invitation to get this over with. He sat down and leaned over me.

"Why don't you like me?" he said. "I've liked you since we were fifteen"

"What are you talking about?"

“I always thought you were beautiful. Tell me what you want me to do.”

His hands began going through the motions, searching for private places. My body remained frozen. I bit my lip and said nothing.

“How am I supposed to know what you want if you won’t tell me,” he said. “You have to talk to me.”

His hands were cold, but that was all I could feel.

"Wait---" I said.

But he didn’t listen. He was going to get what he wanted. I waited for it to be over.

Ten minutes later he had gone into his bedroom. The light was still on. I got up and pulled my skirt back down. I turned off the light and put the blanket on the floor. It wasn't long enough to cover me.

I woke up six hours later un-rested with rug burns on my elbows. I folded up the blanket and left it on the couch.

A couple months later, he was back in Kentucky during his college fall break. He had called to let me know he was in town and gave me the address of the house where he would be hanging out later that night.

It was close to ten in the evening when I got into my car. A handful of wet orange leaves were stuck in the left windshield wiper of my black '91 Volvo. When I turned the car on, the volume on the CD player was loud with the vocals of a woman talking about waking up in her makeup. I turned down the volume and slightly rolled down the windows to let in the tepid October air. It was a thirty-minute drive to get to him, and it

didn't occur to me to consider that even though I had feelings for him, I was also afraid of him.

Turning into the darkly lit neighborhood, I had trouble finding the house. I turned around and drove slow. In a driveway at the end of a street I saw the back end of his stark white Honda, of which I had been a passenger only a couple of times. He didn't like to wear his seatbelt, he listened to The Misfits and smoked Camel Lights.

He stood in the drive way as I parked and got out of my car. His face was clean shaven and his dark hair shined with too much product. Even in the dark, his cold blue eyes were dangerous. We embraced and asked how each other had been.

"Let's switch parking spots," he said.

"How come?"

"I was planning on going out to the bars later."

"Oh, I guess I can't come then," I said. "I don't have a fake ID. I don't turn twenty-one until April."

"We'll figure something out."

I got back into my car and watched as he got into his. After our cars changed positions, we walked to the backyard. His phone rang and while he was on the phone I walked into the quiet house to get a drink. While I was looking for the kitchen, I saw a girl come out of the bathroom with a man I presumed was her boyfriend.

"You ever do coke?" she said.

"No..." I said.

"Good, it's a bad habit."

I was going to introduce myself, but my inability to speak hung in the air. The boyfriend stood close by, didn't say much.

"Would you like a drink?" she said.

"Yes, please."

I walked with them to the kitchen. She poured a bourbon and ginger ale into a plastic red cup and handed it to me.

"So, how do you know him?" she said.

"We met in high school. I used to go see his band play at The Pandemonium."

"Oh, ok. So, are you two...?"

"We're just friends," I said.

We'd never been just friends. But there wasn't a term for whatever we were. He was never my boyfriend, because that implied at some point that human was decent to you for at least as long as it took to drink a cup of coffee.

While the girl and I were in the kitchen getting to know each other, the man I had driven to see came in and said he was going to the store to get cigarettes.

"Do you want me to come with you?" I said.

"No, I won't be gone long."

Through the kitchen window, I could see the boyfriend lighting wood in the fire pit. The girl and I took our drinks and walked outside.

Twenty minutes later, he was still gone. My bourbon and ginger tasted flat, but I drank it quickly. I sat outside with the couple watching them chain smoke by the fire. After taking the last sip of my drink, I went back inside to make another.

When I came back outside, his car had pulled into the driveway. He walked over and sat in the chair where I had been sitting. He lit a cigarette and nodded his head, implying for me to come over. He pulled me into his lap as I wrapped my arm around his neck.

“You having a good time?” he said.

At least he was considerate enough to blow the cigarette smoke in the other direction, I thought.

“Yeah, it’s been a good night.”

I was self-conscious sitting on his lap. It felt too intimate for whatever we were. He was looking at me like he wanted to kiss me, but he never would in front of his friends.

He had decided not to go to the bar because he didn’t want to make the drive into town. A little later, after another round of drinks and the fire had died down, the four of us went back inside the house. The girl told us which room was ours for the night. When he opened the door to our bedroom I noticed that the bedspread, the sheets, the lampshades and the wallpaper were all the same shade of forest green.

“Everything in this room is so...green,” I said, stumbling to sit on the bed.

“That it is,” he said.

We were standing on opposite sides of the bed, facing away from each other. His back was turned away from me as he began to undress. The room was dark and quiet. I couldn’t remember where I had left my purse. I started to ask him what we were, if we were just friends or something more. I was looking for a human response.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “You think too much.”

His ability to make me feel less than human was his super power. I took off my clothes, got into bed and felt his body next to mine. That was all I could think about.

I hadn't heard from him in almost six months, when I ran into him at an empty dive bar on the night of the Kentucky Derby. It was after one in the morning and we were both alone.

"What's wrong with your face?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"Why do you look so mad? It's Derby, lighten up."

I was waiting to order another drink from the bar.

"Why are you being such a dick?"

Where the hell was my tequila and soda?

"I was just trying to make conversation," he said. "It's good to see you."

"That's not how you start a conversation, asshole" I said. "I haven't heard from you in months."

"What's your problem?"

"Fuck you. Leave me alone."

That's the thing about still talking to someone I've known since I was fifteen years old. He had a kind of power over the person I was trying to become. My face was cold and unresponsive.

"Fine," he said. "I just don't know what I did. I've always been nice to you and you've always been mean to me."

The bartender still hadn't taken my order, so I left my tab open and walked out the door. By the time I got home, there were messages from him on my phone.

*“I’m sorry”*

*“Say something.”*

*“I wish you wouldn’t be mad at me.”*

*“I think you’re beautiful.”*

I read the messages a couple of times before blocking his number. If I continued to talk to him, I knew I wouldn’t be able to move forward with my life because I would always feel like I was still fifteen years old. It was time for me to break my bad habit.

## There Must Be Something Wrong with Me

The night we met for our first date, the sky was dusted with white sprinkles. I was standing next to Adam in the parking lot of the bowling alley, both of us wearing jean jackets and black sneakers. We had driven separately. It was the beginning of October in Kentucky and the humidity was finally gone. The air was crisp, breathable. Almost sweet, like a cantaloupe. It was league night at the alley and now we were trying to find somewhere else to go.

“Damn it. I was really looking forward to bowling,” I said.

“Me too,” he said. “What should we do instead?”

“What time is it? Maybe we could go see a movie?”

“Almost eight-thirty.”

“Hmm...late night movie on a weeknight. I like it. Yes.”

Adam looked at the movie’s playing at the nearby movie theater on his phone and mentioned there was a 9:15 showing of the film *Drive*.

“Is too late?” he said. “Do you have to open at the café tomorrow morning?”

“I do, but it’s not a big deal. You’re worth it.”

He smiled.

A couple nights later, I met him for a drink at a neighborhood bar. The place was mostly empty though there were a few familiar faces, painted with the exhaustion of an honest living. We sat in a dark corner of the bar near the bathrooms. Across the room, there was a cowgirl, bright, fluorescent and yellow that hung on the wood paneled walls next to the jukebox nobody was paying attention to.

“So, how long have you...” I said. I took a sip of my Pabst Blue Ribbon.

“How long have I what?” he asked.

“Been divorced? Is it okay that I asked that?”

“Of course. I signed the papers a couple months ago.”

“Oh.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Well not really, but...”

A man with curly blonde hair came up to our table and shook Adam’s hand. They worked together at the construction company that was owned by the father of the woman who owned the café where I worked. After they talked for a few minutes, Adam and I continued our conversation.

“You stop yourself a lot when you talk,” he said.

“Why would you notice something like that?” I said, biting my lip.

“Because I like when you have something to say. Is that strange?”

“Yes. I’m not used to it.”

“Used to what?”

“Having someone interested in what I have to say.”

“I get a feeling,” he started to say. His hand was on the empty glass, which by now was a pool of melting ice.

My hands were underneath the table quietly picking at my naked fingernails.

“That you’ve been with men who weren’t good to you,” he finished.

Someone had finally put a quarter in the jukebox. Neil Young's "Cowgirl in the Sand" played throughout the bar. My feet tapped along to the beat of the song. I smiled, took one of my hands from underneath the table and placed it on his knee.

"I don't think we need to talk about that tonight," I said. "After all, I'm sitting here with you."

"You're something else, you know that? I can't figure you out."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all."

Two weeks later, it was the night before Halloween. I invited him to my apartment to hang out. Outside, the wind was strong and the leaves of the trees made a sound as if whispering in someone's ear. I could barely make out his knock on the door through the sounds of a Hank Williams record. His oil black hair was slicked back and he was wearing the same jean jacket he had worn on our first date.

"Did you trim your beard?" I asked.

"I did. Thanks for noticing."

"I trimmed mine as well. My beard, that is."

"I thought there was something different about you."

He was carrying a six-pack of Coors Banquet in one of his hands. He put the other arm around my neck and kissed me on the lips. He smelled like worn leather and Old Spice.

"How's your week been?" he asked.

“So, Tuesday was my day off and I drove out to this farm to pick my own pumpkin. Organically grown and shit. I woke up this morning and some neighborhood asshole kid stole it from my porch.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, dude, it really hurt my feelings.”

“I’m sorry, lady. Here. Have a beer.”

He handed me one of the cold bottles, the red cap a twist off. Taking one for himself, I told him to put the rest in the fridge. I continued looking through my records, trying to find something else to play. He came back and sat down on the off-white couch. He ran his hands through the part of his hair, tucked back pieces of thick black hair behind his ears. My knees buckled.

“How’s work been?” I asked.

“It’s fine for now,” he said. “We’ve been working on restoring an old sewing factory.”

I put on a Loretta Lynn record and sat next to him on the couch. He took out his phone and showed me a picture of the words *float like a butterfly sting like a bee* written in what looked like black ink on the dusty grey wall of a building. Earlier that week, someone he worked with had tried to convince him that this was where Muhammad Ali used to fight.

“You’re more gullible than I am,” I said.

“It was a good joke,” he said. “I’ve shown the picture to other people and they thought it was legit too. How’s the coffee shop?”

I worked at a small café where along with assorted pastries and treats, they also sold vinyl records. I was in charge of several things, but my favorite part was making the fruit salad. There was the pineapple, watermelon, strawberries, blueberries, kiwi, purple grapes, cantaloupe. I would arrange the fruit very specifically, each with its own section.

“It’s been busy. The owners have gotten a lot of press recently, so we’ve had more people coming in. A woman randomly asked me the other day if I knew when the moon was going to be void.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I don’t fucking know. I thought it was the name of a Pink Floyd album.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her she could probably find something online about it, but then she asked if I had a phone number for an astrologist.”

“Did she know she was in a coffee shop?”

“I’m not confident she knew where she was.”

He laughed and moved his hand towards my face and placed it on my cheek. His rough, almost animalistic face moved towards mine. He had a crooked smile and sea green eyes. His newly trimmed beard tickled my skin. Our lips pressed together, my hand reached further up the length of his thigh. We continued kissing and after about fifteen minutes I pulled away.

“So...” I said.

“Yes?”

“I want to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why...”

“Why what?”

“Why aren’t...”

“Just say it,” he said.

“Why aren’t we naked yet?”

The skin on my face became hot, flushed. I buried my face in his shoulder.

“Are you embarrassed?” he asked.

“Kind of.”

“Don’t be. That was hot.”

I stood up, pulled him off the couch by his belt buckle and took him into the bedroom. The tableside lamp was on and there was a pile of unfolded laundry on top of the bed. I took the pile of clothes and threw them on the floor while he began taking off his pants. My clothes came off almost as quickly as the clean pile I had thrown next to my feet. He got underneath the covers while I stood naked and mentioned that I was thirsty.

“I’m going to get another beer,” I said.

“Now?”

“Yeah. Is that weird?”

“I thought we were...you know.”

“Oh, yeah. Just let me get a quick drink.”

I took a few sips of the cold beer and put it on the nightstand. He kissed me and began lowering his body toward my thighs. I watched the reflection of his movements in the gold encasing of the overhead lighting.

A week later, I was getting ready to travel to Texas for a friend's wedding. I met Adam for coffee and bagels in the morning, my flight didn't leave until the early afternoon. We sat across from each other at a table in the corner by a large window that housed a tall cactus in a Terra Cotta planter.

"So, before I go I have to ask you something," I said.

"Shoot."

"Do you want to be exclusive? Because I don't want to see anyone else."

He took his hand that had been holding onto the cup of coffee and reached for mine. His hand was warm.

"I'm all yours."

In the late morning at the bakery when we kissed in the halo of the warm sun coming through the large windows.

During the next month and a half, we continued to see each other on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the days when he didn't have his daughter. I had gotten used to our schedule and was understanding of the time he needed to spend with her now that he was no longer married to her mother.

New Year's Eve was on a Saturday night. I wore a purple sequin dress with gold fishnet stockings and my great-grandmother's cowboy boots. He wore a button down black shirt with jeans and tan leather boots. There was a band called The Junkyard Dogs playing at our favorite dive bar that night, where I told him he had to kiss me at midnight. It was the first time I had asked a man to kiss me on a holiday in public.

The next morning the light was cold and grey. The street was quiet. It was unusual for us to be together on a Saturday night and Sunday morning because that's

when he usually spent time with his six-year-old daughter. I woke up next to him and tucked myself into the warmth of his body. He woke up and kissed my forehead. It was a little after ten in the morning, and it was time for him to leave.

After he put on his clothes and used the bathroom, I opened up the door and gave him a hug goodbye. When he let go, I started to shut down.

“I had a great time last night,” he said, his hand on the handle of the screen door.

“Me too,” I said, my eyes watering.

“Don’t be sad. I’m sorry it has to be this way.”

“I know. I just wish...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing. Tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“I always take my daughter over to my parents’ house on Sundays.”

My eyes felt vacant as I stared through him.

We kissed goodbye, and as soon as I closed the door behind him the tears began to fall. He called me an hour later but I didn’t answer. I didn’t answer the next three times he tried calling either. I had tried to hide my feelings when he left, his calling meant he knew something was wrong. I didn’t want him to know how deserted I felt. I cried, breathing in the New Year air, trying to ignore the popular U2 song stuck in my head. My phone stayed off the rest of the day.

Later in the afternoon, I got in my Jetta and drove to a fast food drive-thru. I ordered the two-cheeseburger combo meal with a large Coke. On my way back home, I

stopped at a red light and saw his black Subaru across the intersection. I didn't honk. I didn't wave. It was as though we didn't exist to one another.

“We have to find a way to make you less afraid of me,” he said.

I didn't know how to respond. My heart dropped, I let the weight sink in. We were standing in his kitchen making dinner, both of us barefoot. I was leaning in the doorway as if I couldn't step any closer. He had finished cooking the chicken and moved to the next burner to sauté the greens. Staring at his black shirt, I wished I had the courage to stand behind him with my arms around his body. That's what normal women would do. There must be something wrong with me. I don't have anything to say.

I grabbed a couple plates from his cabinets which was full of thrifted kitchenware. Nothing matched, which made me like him even more. When I turned around to hand him the plates, we briefly embraced, kissed on the lips. My hand went under his shirt and slid softly across his stomach. He pushed back laughing because he was ticklish. I smiled because in this moment I was myself. We plate up our food and go sit on the navy-blue couch in the living room.

“What do you want to watch?” he said.

“I don't care, whatever you want to watch.”

“Have you ever seen *Die Hard*?”

“No, I haven't actually. Don't hold it against me.”

He smiled and got up from the couch to put in the DVD on his big screen television.

After we had finished eating, I stretched my legs over his lap. He looked over at me and winked. The green in his eyes pulled me closer to him though in that moment I

was thinking he was too good looking for me. He was divorced, had a child. I was always looking for the perfect thing to say around him in case it was something he already knew.

I winked back and wondered why it was so hard for me to realize that someone could look at me tenderly and mean it. He kept glancing over and turning away. He was trying not to smile, and I could tell he was holding back words on the tip of his tongue.

“Yusuf,” he said.

“I’m sorry, what?”

His eyes were looking at me, full and glowing. Something was happening, but it was confusing. The movie in the background was loud and full of cheap words. Bruce Willis was not having a good night.

“Yusuf...” he said, and reached for my hand.

“Islam? As in Cat fucking Stevens? What are you talking about?”

He put his hand on my cheek, moved his face closer to mine. Yusuf. Yuuusuf. You. I love you?

“Hey, Ace, are you trying to tell me you love me by using the name of an old hippie who was once banned from entering the United States?”

When he laughed, he used his whole body. I felt the movement of his laugh on my legs, which were still stretched over his lap.

“I love you,” he whispered in my ear.

“I love you too,” I whispered back to him.

It was nice that I had something to say. We let the movie play and moved onto his unmade bed.

“Hold that thought,” he said, my arms reaching to take off his black sweater.

While he was in the bathroom, I took off all my clothes and got underneath the covers.

The toilet flushed, followed by the sound of a sink faucet. I heard his footsteps and pulled the sheet off of the top half of my body. His eyes met my small breasts.

“Goddamn,” he said.

The next morning was Saturday and I had to work a mid-shift at the café. I had asked him before we went to sleep to set the alarm for eight o’clock in the morning. Because I didn’t have a toothbrush at his apartment, I had to go back to my place to change and brush my teeth.

Later, while I was at work he sent me a text message.

*About what I said last night. I shouldn’t be saying things like that right now.*

I asked him why not.

*I just got divorced. I shouldn’t be saying those words right now.*

Oh, I texted back. I waited a few minutes and texted him again.

*I told you from the beginning I didn’t want to be a rebound. Remember?*

He responded, *I do. I don’t want to stop seeing you, I really care for you. I’m just saying maybe we should take a small step back?*

I re-read the message four times before I turned off my phone. The café was slow, the first customer I served was a man who asked if we served American food. I told him I didn’t know what he meant, but there was a McDonald’s a couple blocks down the street. He got a cup of black coffee and left.

Adam and I continued to see each other for a couple weeks afterwards. Whenever I was at his place and his daughter called, he would put the phone on speaker. I was

allowed to hear her voice, but this was as close as I was ever going to get, the speaker phone seemed to say.

On a spring afternoon in March, I tried to get a hold of him. No texts, no call backs. My gut knew we were done before he texted me later that night. After I got home from having dinner with a friend, I decided to call him.

“Hey Adam, what’s going on? I haven’t heard from you all day.”

“Hey, yeah so, hey. Listen,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“I think I need to be single right now.”

My legs collapsed and I sat on the hardwood floor. I started crying, and he told me how sorry he was.

“I umm... I just don’t understand,” I said.

“It has nothing to do with you,” he said.

“If you pull that it’s-not-you-it’s-me shit I swear to God.”

He was silent. I was hyperventilating.

“Look,” I said. “I can’t talk to you right now. But just so you know, you owe me a conversation in fucking person.”

“I agree.”

“Ok, well goodnight I guess.”

Adam came over a few nights later to talk. He called when he was parked outside my apartment. It was easier for him to have this conversation sitting in his car rather than my apartment where we used to spend time together. I got into the passenger side seat and waited for him to say something.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’ve been better.”

We looked at each other in the dim light of his car. Even in the dark I could see his eyes were watery too.

“I was married for five years,” he said. “And I just feel like I’m not giving you the best version of myself right now. I need to spend time alone and work on who I used to be.”

“So then why did you even ask me out?”

“Because I wanted to get to know you.”

The car was silent. I turned my head towards the window and cried.

“I hate that I’ve hurt you,” he said. “I swear to God that’s the last thing I wanted to do. Do you believe that?”

“I want to.”

About a month later, I was working a busy Sunday morning shift at the café. There was a line to the door. The shop was loud and filled with human noise. The record that was playing had just ended. I left the counter and walked into the space where the records and record player were kept. Tommy Ramone had just died, so I put on *Rocket to Russia*.

I was taking a customer’s order when I saw him standing in the back of the line. My eyes were drawn to his green eyes and his untrimmed beard. Then I noticed he was holding the green cookbook and a handful of records I had left at his place. My hand was shaking as I wrote the customer’s name on the coffee cup.

The olive-green polka dot dress with the sheer neckline I was wearing used to be his favorite. People kept ordering coffee and pastries. I wrote the orders down on a piece of paper so I wouldn't forget, but all I could think about was the cookbook, glowing under the harsh white light. I bet he forgot my measuring cup, I thought. Once we were face to face, I could barely hold the pen in my hand.

“Can I get you anything?” I said.

“How about a Mexican coke?”

I reached into the cooler and grabbed an ice-cold bottle. I struggled with the bottle opener, his eyes watching me trying to remove the red and white cap with my hazardous limbs.

“How's your morning been?” he said.

“Really busy, but good.”

He looked at me as if I knew what do with the evidence he was holding.

“That's good. So, what should I do with this stuff you left at my place?”

I wanted to ask him why in the hell he was doing this to me at work. My heart was racing. The customers standing behind him looked as if the greatest decision they would make all day depended on what kind of milk they would be using for their latte.

I asked him to put my things in the coat closet next to the bathroom. All he had to do was put the items in the closet and shut the door. It seemed so simple for him. He stood around for a few more minutes, talking to other people he knew. When I heard him laugh, I felt sick to my stomach. He had given back the only things I knew how to share. And now, they were lying on the dirty floor of a coat closet.

I left work a couple hours later with my evidence in tow and stopped at a fast food drive-thru for a large Diet Coke. When I was back in my apartment, I picked through my records and found the saddest shit I could find. Patsy Cline. The needle scratched as it hit the black surface. I stood still sipping my soda and realized I had nothing to return to him. There wasn't a trace of his existence in my apartment.

A couple months later, it was his thirtieth birthday. It wasn't as humid as it usually was for Kentucky in the middle of June. Though we had been keeping in touch, I hadn't seen him since he had come over and explained to me why he shouldn't be dating anyone. He texted and said he was at a bar that played old country records and had over fifty types of bourbon behind the bar. Though I had already been drinking, I wanted to see him.

He was sitting at the bar under the glow of the out of season Christmas lights. As I walked over, I noticed he was talking to our mutual friend Will. There were cans of beer and empty shot glasses in front of them.

"Happy Birthday Adam," I said. "How long have you all been here?"

Adam got up from his seat and gave me a hug. Will raised his beer and winked.

"Thanks lady. We've been here for about an hour," said Adam. "You look fancy, where've you been?"

I was wearing a black cotton dress with black ankle boots and a brown cowboy hat I had taken from my mother's closet.

"I just felt like looking nice," I said. "I was out at a different bar with some friends from work."

Will moved over a seat so I could sit between them. My feelings for Adam were still there, and if he wanted to see me on his birthday then maybe there was hope we would get back together. I ordered a beer, and Adam ordered more shots of whiskey.

“Hey Will,” I said. “How are your kids? How old are they now?”

“Roky is five and Stella is three,” he said. “We’ve been letting them sleep with us lately because Roky has been having some behavioral issues. And Stella, she can’t do anything without her big brother.”

“That’s sweet. How’s your daughter, Adam?”

“Man, I have to be honest. She’s been such an asshole lately.”

“Can you call your kid an asshole?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” the men said in unison.

At midnight, we all took another shot of whiskey to celebrate Adam’s birthday. After the shots and another round of beers we decided to walk back to Will’s house a couple blocks away and keep drinking.

Will’s wife and kids were asleep upstairs. We sat in the downstairs living room drinking bottles of craft beer and talking. There were plastic children’s toys spread across the rug and pieces of construction paper and crayons that had been left on the table in the next room.

“You all should stay here tonight,” said Will. “You can stay in the kids’ room since they’re sleeping in our bed right now.”

“I definitely can’t drive,” I said.

“I’ll take the couch,” said Adam.

“We’ve slept in the same bed before Adam. I promise I won’t ask you to get naked.”

Before we got in bed he took off his jeans and told me not to look, as if I had never seen him in his plaid boxer briefs before. I took off my hat, my shoes and considered keeping my dress on but decided to take it off because the bedroom was warm. He passed out almost instantly and started snoring.

He didn’t know I was still awake and that I was thinking about his thick black hair and how my hands would feel running through it. Our toes touched underneath the covers and my body whimpered. There was an urge to move my body next to his, but I was afraid he would think I wasn’t over him.

We were in bed together, in a child’s bedroom. His snoring sent waves swimming through my spine. I kept tossing and turning. My eyes were shut tight, trying to making sense of how we had ended sleeping next to each other in our underwear without being physical with one another.

I hadn’t slept in the same bed with someone since he and I dated. I wanted to wrap my arm around his stomach, bury my nose in the warmth of his skin. But what if his body pushed me away?

What was he dreaming about? I wished for heavy eyes, but my mind was racing and busy plotting our future together. The sounds of our friend’s dog walking up the stairs distracted me. She must have been unable to sleep as well. Her shadow came into the bedroom and I watched as she circled looking for a comfortable spot.

What time was it? My phone was downstairs. There wasn't a clock in the child's bedroom. Instead, there were books thrown across the carpeted floor, a chalkboard in one corner and stuffed animals tossed into another.

My eyes returned to him again and again. I wondered what his hair would look like in the morning, if my long brown hair would be tangled and sweaty. Slowly, the sky began to change into morning colors. Gray light pushed through the bedroom window. The air tasted dry.

My right arm was behind my head, propping up the thin pillow I had been resting on all night. His body moved through the springs in the mattress. When I looked over, he was awake and staring up at the ceiling.

After a few minutes I said, "You definitely still snore."

We both laughed.

"I'm so sorry."

The soft yellow walls of the room were glowing in the pale light of morning. He and I stayed in bed for a few minutes longer. The dog got up from her spot and rested her head on the bed. He petted her head and she took that as a sign to jump onto the bed, snuggled between the two hungover humans.

We had sex six months later. I almost remember the smell of that fall evening when I had to call and tell him I had tested positive for a sexually transmitted disease. We were walking through the fresh, virginal October air along the train tracks near his apartment. I wore the kind of sandals that left my toes exposed. Mostly, my eyes were focused on the gravel to make sure I avoided any sizeable rocks.

As we begun to turn away from the tracks, I became lost in the glow of houses. My eyes shifted upward as we merged onto the sidewalk of the neighborhood. My feet were swimming in the crunch of fallen leaves.

This neighborhood was known for their decorations beyond the usual cobwebs. I felt like a ghost walking with mannequins through a haunted mall surrounded by Styrofoam graveyards. When we came across a house with a skeleton riding a motorcycle, he stopped. The owner of the house was outside and I watched them talk about the skeleton's mode of transportation. I heard something about a shovelhead and tuned out.

My eyes glanced over the grave markers in the rest of the guy's yard. Once I had read them all I looked at the house across the street. The small strings of orange lights and the wooden skeleton figure stuck in the yard seemed minimalist compared to the rest of the neighborhood.

Once they were finished talking, he and I kept walking towards the end of the block. Neither of us enjoyed scary movies, yet we were walking through a holiday shrine to tricks and treats. The decorations were a nice distraction from what had brought us back together.

The air smelled like lukewarm apple cider and fire pits. We hadn't said much to one another. At the end of the block we crossed the street and headed back towards the tracks.

"Should we watch a movie?" he said.

When he said *we*, I forgot we weren't actually together.

"Sure. But I'm not watching a slasher film."

The neighborhood became darker and quieter as he and I (we) inched closer to the tracks.

“What about *Beetlejuice*?”

“I can handle that.”

My eyes grazed back onto the train track travel.

“I conquered one of my biggest fears the other night,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Karaoke.”

“What did you sing?”

“ZZ Top’s ‘Tush.’” He and I (we) both laughed.

“I’ve never had any interest in karaoke,” he said.

“Well you’ve never lived until you’ve told a room full of strangers you’re just looking for some tush.”

He and I (we) looked at each other and smiled.

Back at his apartment, he was unable to find his copy of the movie. It wasn’t streaming on Netflix, so he asked me to choose another movie.

“Christ, I hate making decisions. Umm..how about *The Craft*? I haven’t seen that since high school. It’s Halloween-y. Teenage witches and shit.”

I took off my sandals and sat down on the couch. I tucked my bare feet into one of the couch cushions and noticed he was sitting on the opposite end of the couch.

“I have to ask you something,” I said.

“Shoot.”

“Are you hanging out with me because you feel sorry for me?”

“Not at all,” he said. “We’re friends, I like hanging out with you.”

Friends.

After the movie was over, I put my sandals back on. A cold bed was waiting for me back at home.

“I had fun tonight,” he said.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Are you okay?”

“I will be.

When we hugged, I stayed for longer than I should have. Once out the door, I had to adjust my eyes to the dark of the poorly lit parking lot. Dead leaves crunched underneath my feet walking to the car as I let go of the future I imagined we would have.

## Rosaline

Lila was driving her black Jetta, the interior the color of caramel ice cream, when she got the call. Her friend Maggie's voice seemed distant and unsure of what she needed to say.

"It's about Rosaline," she said slowly.

Lila's heart was beating, faster and harder in an unfamiliar way. She hadn't spoken to Rosie in almost two years.

Lila didn't take her eyes off the stoplight.

"She's..."

"What? What's wrong?"

The light turned green and Lila pushed her foot on the gas pedal to move forward. She was going to take a left at the next light. But before she made it to the light, Maggie said, "She's dead."

Lila felt her weight sink into the car. The rush hour traffic became a blur as she felt her face transform. She still had to make that turn so she could at least find somewhere to park.

"But I saw her a week ago," Lila said, her hands shaking on the wheel. "She walked right fucking past me."

Maggie was silent for a few seconds.

"Are you okay?" she said.

"I wish I wasn't fucking driving right now."

Lila thanked Maggie for calling and hung up. There was nothing to say. Was the radio still on? It didn't matter. In half a mile, she came to another light and drove straight

down the hill that lead to the Ohio River. She would be able to stop at one of the gas stations at the bottom of the hill.

As other cars drove past her, she wondered if they could see her crying. The windows were down in the car, the summer air floating through her hair. Halfway down the hill, she let out a scream.

Turning into a gas station parking lot, she found a spot where she could park and turn off the car. Her face and hands hugged the steering wheel. She opened the door and stood up briefly. Her legs were weak so she sat on the asphalt next to her car. If she was making a scene, nobody noticed. She stayed there until she was able to drive. A week ago, Rosaline walked past her at a concert. They hadn't spoken in over two years, around the time when Rosaline had started dating a drug dealer.

A couple days later, Lila sat in her car in the parking lot of a funeral home. She waited for the Violent Femmes song on the radio to be over. They used to be Rosaline's favorite band. Once the song was over, she got out of the car and walked through the parking lot into the funeral home for the visitation.

The receiving line was long. The air was stale and quiet. The casket was open, and "Wite-Out" white with words written in bright colored markers. People were being encouraged to write on the casket, so she started to carefully consider the importance of her words.

Ana, an old friend from high school, walked by with a man she assumed must be her boyfriend. He was wearing a wrinkled baby blue button down, barely tucked into his khakis and well-worn brown leather boots while Ana wore an unwrinkled black dress

with black tights and black heels. They were on their way out, when they stopped to talk to her.

“This is surreal,” said Ana.

“This is impossible,” said Lila.

“Can you believe how many people are here?”

“Yes, I can. You didn’t really know her that well, right?”

Ana’s eyes wandered around the room while the man in khakis stood silently looking at his yellow Nokia cellphone.

“No,” she said. “But I thought it would be the Christian thing to do.”

The light in the chapel was harsh and bright, the red sweater Lila had worn over her dress now seemed inappropriate. The heat of the July evening was soaking through underneath her arms as she wondered how much longer she was going to have to talk to Ana. When she turned around to face where the casket was, she realized they had been holding up the receiving line.

“Well, Ana, it was good to see you under the circumstances,” she said.

“You too, Lila,” she said. “You aren’t here alone, are you?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m sorry, that has to be hard. Did I forget to introduce you to Jordan?”

“I guess so.”

He looked up briefly from his phone and shook her sweaty hand.

“Well I guess we should get going. We’ve already been here, like, half an hour.

Bye, Lila.”

“Bye. Good to see you.”

Once Lila was next in line, the room shrank. The brightness of the lights seemed too vulgar for the intimacy of a young death. She was disturbed by the stillness of the body, half expecting Rosaline to rise up and start looking for her cigarettes. Flashbacks of late night skinny dipping in Rosaline's backyard were running through her head. They would have sleepovers and talk about boys in bands and punk rock music. She hugged Rosaline's mother as if holding onto a porcelain vase.

"Rosaline would be glad you're here," she said. "We found her diary in the carriage house last night. She was writing about what she wanted to do with her life. She wanted to be a veterinarian, did you know that?" Her arms were tight around Lila when she whispered this into her ear.

"No, I didn't. I'm so sorry." Once Lila pulled away, she grabbed a brown sharpie and wrote her goodbye on the casket.

Lila left the funeral home without talking to anyone else. Her eyes quickly filled up as she got back into her car. She drove to the independent video store that was still in business and parked in the back-parking lot. Feeling self-conscious about going in to the store wearing black heels, a black-and-white striped knee length dress, and a red sweater, she called Ana from her flip phone.

"Hey, it was good to see you earlier," Lila said.

"I can't believe how many people were at the visitation," she said.

"I know. I can't make sense of any of this. What did you think?"

"I don't know, I thought what Rosaline did was really selfish," she said.

"I don't know why you would say something like that."

"You asked me what I thought. I told you."

“I have to go.”

Walking to the front of the store she noticed they were finally taking down the Kentucky Fried Chicken across the street that had been closed for years. The interior of the movie store had worn green wall-to-wall carpeting and tan painted walls. Lila didn't know what movie she wanted to watch, but knew it had to be something funny. Her hands flipped through the individual plastic envelopes that held the DVD covers of each movie they carried. She thought about what Ana had said, took a pause and looked out the window. She moved to a different section and chose *Annie Hall*.

The funeral was two days later. As they brought the casket into the church, the back of Rosaline's younger sister was slouched over the wooden rail in front of her. She could barely hold herself up. The uncontrollable sounds of her hollowed crying echoed throughout the church. As Lila tried to look away, the program fell between her feet.

When people began filing out of the church it was as if she were still in high school. The kids from her school were still standing with the same people they used to hang out with. An older girl who used to dye her hair hot pink and have sex with her boyfriend in the parking lot during lunch stood underneath a willow tree. The black dress she was wearing didn't hide the fact that she was pregnant. This wasn't surprising. Ana and Maggie were nowhere to be found.

As the cars left the parking lot, a sea of purple flags waved in the late morning air. By the time Lila was leaving, they had run out of flags. She followed the procession to the cemetery without listening to any music.

It would have been Rosaline's twenty-first birthday today, but no one talked about that. Not even during the service at the church. Rosaline's grave at the cemetery

overlooked a large dark pond. Several curious geese stood near the parked cars moving their small black and white heads from side to side.

The heels of Lila's shoes kept getting stuck in the ground. Her eyes were glued to the colored letters on the casket. The minister spoke so softly it was difficult to hear what he was saying. The girl in the cut off jean vest with the safety pins and band patches across from Lila sneezed.

"I'd like to invite anyone who would like to say one last goodbye to Rosaline to come up and take a small handful of dirt and place it on her casket," said the minister.

Lila rubbed her sweaty palms against her dress. She didn't move. Rosaline's family was standing off in the distance, away from the crowd. Her sister was wearing large black sunglasses to keep her pain private. A small gust of wind made the sprinkles of dirt spread across the casket, which made Lila burst into silent tears. The man in the navy-blue suit standing next to her, who she had gone to high school with, reached for her hand. No one spoke, and just for a moment the sun came out and made the blue-green glow of the duck pond shine.

There was a postcard from Colorado in her mailbox when Lila got home from the funeral. Her cousin had recently moved out west to work for an outdoor gear company. At the end of the postcard, she had written *Come and visit anytime. You'll always have a place to stay! Love, Jenn.*

Two weeks later, Lila packed the trunk of her Jetta with bags of clothes and the necessary supplies to make the drive out to Colorado to see her cousin. As she finished packing, she found a silver ring in the bottom of her make up bag. Rosaline had gotten it for her somewhere in Europe while on a school trip. She placed the ring on the middle

finger on her left hand. Outside, the lukewarm air mixed with the cloudy sky. The shine of the ring flickered as Lila closed the trunk of her car.

## Watching and Waiting

The deck of the restaurant across the street was stained the color of orange rarely seen outside the tragic tribes of young women in Southern Florida. I continued to watch, sitting underneath a black and white awning sipping a mild Pinot, as clumps of khaki and corpulent figures hovered around the entrance waiting for their name to be called. While my date was in the restroom, I continued to watch their movements. They seemed to be the kind of people you stand in line with at the drug store. Most likely, we would make small talk about the weather or the cover of scandalous magazines. In front of the chintzy restaurant, a banner advertised a bargain deal on pitchers of margaritas. My date had just returned from the restroom as I looked away from the across the street and wondered what it was like to be simple.

He was wearing a white cotton shirt underneath his sandy brown blazer. There were worn leather patches, another ruggedly handsome color, on the elbows. I was curious about the life experience behind this blazer, how many other women it had tried to impress. He smiled when he sat down and winked with his right eye. The skin on my cheeks felt warm and childish. We had just finished a bottle of an Argentinian Sauvignon Blanc.

“Should we order another bottle of wine?” he said.

“Of course. Maybe a red this time?”

“Absolutely. How do you feel about blends?”

“I’m more of a Cabernet kind of woman.”

The restaurant where we were dining was located on the corner of a busy street. Traffic had mostly slowed down by this hour, the reverb from car horns and public transportation stops operating as minor background noise. We sat outside on the small patio with another couple a couple tables away that appeared bored with one another and enamored with the glow of their personal devices. The man was wearing the kind of faded, ripped blue jeans that warned you about his politics. His olive-green button-down was unbuttoned twice at the top, enough to accentuate a toxic masculinity and imploding arrogance. I admired her petite figure, almost apologetic looking in a black cotton summer dress. As if to say this was the best she could do. I wondered what they talked about when they actually spoke to one another. Why they even bothered going out to eat. She appeared to have gotten some sun recently, her small tan highlighting the dirty blonde hair piled high in a messy, almost beachy hairdo.

“Babe, do you understand this menu?” I heard the woman say.

“It’s top ass, babe,” he said without looking up from his phone. “It means small portions.” He meant *tapas*.

“Can we go to a regular restaurant?”

“You told me last week when you wanted to eat here,” he looked up at the woman sitting across from him. His voice was slightly raised.

“I know babe, I just thought they’d have normal food.”

“Jesus Christ. This is real food.”

They didn’t speak for a few minutes. The shape of her pink pouty lips and the slump of her shoulders suggested her frustration with the man in the ripped jeans. She looked like a child.

The appetizer my date and I ordered arrived while I was listening to the couple's conversation. The sun was on its last gasp as if to say goodnight and good luck. We shared a simple Caprese salad, using the complimentary homemade sourdough bread to make small open-faced sandwiches.

"How are things at the university?" he said.

"Exhausting" I said. "It can be difficult to get my students to engage with the material."

"It's difficult to get anyone to want to learn anything of substance these days, don't you agree?"

"I do, you're right. Sometimes I wish I could spit in their Starbucks."

"Remind me to never get on your bad side."

The waiter who was wearing black pants with a neatly tucked in black button down shirt brought out the main courses. I had gnocchi with a creamy fontina sauce and an order of bone marrow with caramelized onions. He ordered the fish special, a Chilean sea bass with mango chutney and a plate of sweet red peppers stuffed with goat cheese drizzled in smoked honey.

The sky was a dark shade of blue, illuminated by an atmosphere of lights hung with care, a soft glowing white surrounding the perimeter of the patio. I leaned over and kissed him on his rugged cheek. There was a quick, loud crash that suddenly filled the air with sounds of tires screeching and screaming. There was a hint of vibration underneath our feet when I noticed we were the only ones left on the patio. I had stopped paying attention to the feeble-minded couple after the man had to explain to the woman that this

restaurant served real food. The still of the night had been interrupted and suddenly we were witnesses.

“Stay here,” he said.

His movement was soft and masculine, somewhat demanding. He walked to the front of the restaurant, took a right and disappeared. I could hear people begin to gather. Traffic stopped. The neon orange hands glowing, still blinking and insistent. A minute or two later, his head popped around the corner, his arm motioning me to follow. I stood next to him and gripped my hand through this. The man in the olive-green shirt was behind the wheel of the vehicle that had been badly hit. The vehicle was one of those boxy cars that sat low to the ground. It was dark red, and it shined underneath the streetlight glow. I could just make out the messy beach hair of his dining companion. They were silent and still. Sprinkles of blood were painted across the cracked windshield.

It appeared they had been hit while attempting to take a left out of the parking lot behind the restaurant across the street. The other vehicle was a large gray truck, probably a Ford, the driver wearing a blue baseball cap. He seemed shaken but appeared to be all together. In the distance, I could hear the beating cries of ambulances and police sirens.

As the cries grew closer, our holding hands grew warmer. The whole street was watching, waiting as if the accident were a ripple within their own lives. The faces of the people at the restaurant across the street had changed, almost unrecognizable. They were no longer looking at one another but trying to make sense of what they had just seen. Their dinner most likely growing cold.

The ambulances and police cars were quick to the scene, and by the time they arrived I wondered if he had remembered to pay our bill at the restaurant. Nobody was moving.

But we were there, standing together. Waiting for something to happen.

The next morning, I sat at my kitchen table reading the paper and drinking a cup of black coffee. I wondered if the couple from the restaurant had left so the woman could get a regular sized meal. The phone rang and it was the man I had seen last night.

“How’d you sleep?” he said.

“Tossed and turned a bit. How about you?”

“I haven’t gone to bed yet. How about breakfast?”

“With real food?”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

We were both silent for a few seconds.

“I think I’m going to quit my job,” I said.

“And do what?”

The question mark echoed into the receiver.

“I don’t know. Write, maybe.”

“Is that what you want?”

“I think so. That and some scrambled eggs and a giant Belgian waffle with maple syrup.”

“Pick you up in twenty minutes?”

“Okay.”

I hung up the phone. Outside, the sounds of birds chirping fluttered through the kitchen windows. My stomach growled and I put my hands on my belly and whispered, “soon.”

## Ten

### JACKSON

He drove a red truck. I was a senior in high school. He was a couple years older and over six feet tall. He still lived at home with his parents. The first time we did it, he wouldn't take off his shirt. The second time, the phone rang. He stopped and picked it up to look at the caller ID. He didn't answer. I thought that was nice.

### JEREMY

We met for the first time in person at a greasy 24-hour diner. He had long eyelashes and brown eyes. I was still living at home. We mostly hung out in his dorm room. We used to make popcorn and stay up late watching adult films. I was convinced he was the one because he liked to hold my hand in public.

### PATRICK

He used to be in a band. He had wavy dark hair, blue eyes and played the guitar. He smoked Camel Lights. When I was in college, he took me to his parents' room where we slept together for the first time. I didn't expect it to hurt. We only had sex after we had both been drinking. He would never look me in the eye. For years we stayed in touch, mostly talking online. I blocked his number last year.

DAVID

He was from a small town and would drive two hours every weekend to come see me. He also had dark hair and blue eyes. He liked heavy metal and The Eagles. That should have been a sign right away. We would end things over coffee and eggs at a Waffle House in Tennessee driving home from a concert. I cheated on him with Patrick and Jeremy.

SCOTT

Probably the best I've ever had. I wasn't that into him, though I liked the rough texture of his permanent five-o'clock shadow. He always smelled like kitchen grease, and liked to quote lines from the movie *Tombstone*. He liked to ask me why I never called him by his name. A week after I told him I was falling for him he broke up with me in front of our friends.

DERRICK

This was my sophomore year of college. I liked his blonde curly hair and ripped jeans. He smoked a lot of weed and liked to drink Makers and Diet Coke. We liked to order off the dollar menu at Taco Bell and drink from blue plastic cups. He asked my roommate why I was so weird. I asked her why he thought this. It was because I never kissed him first.

CHRIS

My senior year of college. I hadn't slept with anyone in over a year. I was taller than he was, but he had Kurt Vonnegut tattoos and liked Prince. He also had dark hair and blue

eyes, but no facial hair. We used to listen to The Cure and make out in his white Subaru. I had to take Plan B twice in less than a month. He broke up with me through a Facebook message.

#### JEREMY

He had gotten married. I remember finding out the night before my twenty-first birthday. A few years later, I saw him at a bar. We held hands as I walked him to his car. A couple weeks later, he was at my apartment. He only lasted thirty seconds.

#### ROBBIE

He wore glasses and collected comic books. I was living in a small town in West Virginia for a year. When I came back to Kentucky he told me I was too attractive for him. He told me I was going to leave him for someone with a beard and a record collection. Eventually I did. I haven't seen him since.

#### ADAM

He had a beard and a record collection. He was divorced and had a child. Truth be told, he was better than Scott. He collected vintage motorcycles and liked to drink Miller High Life's. He broke up with me two weeks after he told me he loved me because he needed to be single. Eventually I became friends with the woman he started dating three months after me.

## UNKNOWN

I was on vacation in New Orleans. He was an Australian in town for Wrestle Mania. He sat down next to me at a bar and offered to buy me a drink for my birthday. He had a limp dick and had never heard of *Catcher in the Rye*. I would remember all of this six months later when I made an emergency phone call to my gynecologist. I would remember the results. I wouldn't remember his name.

## ADAM

Six months after I got back from New Orleans he had broken up with the girlfriend after me. He asked if he could buy me a drink. We met at a bar, and later went back to my house and listened to Neil Young records. After we slept together, his ex-girlfriend texted me asking if I was going to start dating him again. A week later, I called to tell him I had tested positive for a sexually transmitted disease.

## JEREMY

He was divorced now, and starting to go bald. I wanted to know if he could still be the one. He didn't last long. I wondered if anyone actually enjoyed the sixty-nine position. His text messages were never more than three words: *That was fun. So, yup. What's good?* I didn't respond back because I realized he wasn't the one. I was looking for someone I could talk to.

## How to Lose Your Virginity

Senior year of high school I became friends with the guy my best friend was dating. She had graduated early and was in her first semester in college an hour and a half away in northern Kentucky. On a fall Saturday afternoon, I crossed the Louisville downtown bridge in my black Volvo sedan to Southern Indiana to pick up the guy, who was three years older and didn't own a car. I drove him to see my friend because I thought I wanted to see her. At her dorm hall, I watched them embrace. I sat awkwardly while they snuggled on her bed. Eventually, I stepped outside and sat by yourself on the concrete steps.

When they broke up a month later I continued to talk to him on AOL Instant Messenger. We had begun to have feelings for each other. I asked my friend for permission to date him, and she was okay with it because she had a tendency to move on quickly. Though when she asked me not to sleep with him, I told her that hadn't crossed my mind and that I wanted to wait. Three months later, I no longer want to wait.

My best friend called me one day after school and mentioned that my boyfriend had asked her why I was always talking to him about things he didn't want to know about, like my thoughts, my feelings. He had referred to these things as "stupid shit." He didn't want to know about my stupid shit, like what I had for lunch or about basketball practice. I never told him I knew that he didn't care. Did I ever question why she told me this? No. I wasn't prepared for how this would affect my relationships in the future, how I wouldn't know what to do when a man asked about my day or what I was thinking about and actually meant it.

I had been dating my boyfriend for maybe two months when he decided to move to Florida to live with his mother for reasons unknown. This didn't last long. A month later I spent spring break in Panama City, where I turned eighteen years old and drink Coors Lite for the first time on a cold beach. My boyfriend met me there. He got nautical stars tattooed around both of his elbows. After we leave the tattoo parlor, the two of us walked down the strip and went into a store with neon lights and bars across the windows. I bought cigarettes and a porn video called *I Know Who You Did Last Summer* because I decided that this was what being eighteen meant.

I was still on my period when we went back to his hotel room and thought about doing it then and there, even though his friend was asleep on the other bed. A week later, I found out he loved me because he had written about it on his online journal. Years later, I would regret losing my virginity to someone with ear plugs and bad grammar.

I had been back from Panama City for a week, maybe two. He had declared his love for me grammatically incorrectly. I decided I was ready to have sex. He used one of the condoms that was on the birthday cake given to me by my friend's mother in Panama City. I thought it was weird that he didn't take off his blue-collared polo shirt but said nothing. Afterwards I said, "So, that was sex huh?" He laughed lightly, and I noticed how quickly he got up to leave the room.

The second time we had sex I said if I had to take off my shirt, he had to take off his. He did, but then the telephone rang. He stopped what he was doing to look at the caller ID. He told me it was his ex-girlfriend. It took him too long to put the phone back on the floor. I stared at the child's cartoon that was playing on the television screen and said nothing.

He broke up with me a week later because he wanted to spend more time with his friends. I wondered what I had done wrong. I wondered if I had said something wrong. *Stupid shit.* I couldn't listen to New Found Glory or All-American Rejects without crying.

A couple weeks later, it was almost time for the prom. I didn't want to go alone and realized he was the only one I could ask to be my date. He accepted. My heart was still broken. I drove the twenty-five minutes to pick him up knowing I would have to do this drive again after the dance.

Years later, I found a picture of the two of us standing in my parents living room. I had forgotten how tall he was. Six-foot-four. I wore a shiny maroon floor length dress. I had acrylic nails, a spray tan and black hair. When I looked at the picture, the taste of American Spirit cigarettes lingered on my tongue even though I never inhaled. After I requested a song to the DJ at the dance, my ex-boyfriend and I stood in the back of the room where we held hands and listened to Guns N' Roses' "Sweet Child of Mine." We left the dance a little after eleven that night, and drove through the park looking for a spot to park the car. I took off my underwear and straddled his lap. After a few minutes, the lights of another car pierced through the windows. The moment was ruined when the other car parked less than ten feet away. He drove my car back to Sellersburg because there was something I wanted to try.

I was running late. My friends kept calling because they were waiting for me to go with them to the after-prom party. At my friend's house, I got into another car and we drove another forty minutes to walk into a party where I stood in a corner the rest of the night.

I was the only one still wearing a prom dress.



## Essays



## Spicy Chicken Wings Gave Me Herpes?

It's hard to forget the day you get the phone call you've been dreading all weekend. It's especially hard to forget when you're out in public at a bar-b-que restaurant during lunch hour. I was sitting with my friend and her three-year-old son, debating if it was too early for a beer when my phone vibrated on the table. I looked at the screen and got up from my seat to find a more secluded section so I could pick up. My hands were shaking.

I already knew what she was going to tell me. I might as well have an order of spicy chicken wings to go along with my diagnosis. It didn't occur to me until after I had hung up the phone what had just happened. Not only did I order hot wings guaranteed to leave a near burning sensation in my mouth, but my doctor told me that I did, in fact, have genital and oral herpes.

When I sat back down the waitress told me I looked like I could use a beer. I told her to go ahead and bring two. I wasn't sure what the next step was. I was sure by the time I finished at least one of the beers I would wake up as someone else. But then I realized, oh shit, there was another phone call I had to make.

I had never made a phone call like this before. I never thought I would have to. I was standing in the parking lot of the restaurant grasping for air. I probably shouldn't have been standing so close to the smoker. When he answered, I could tell that he was driving. Was this the kind of information someone should be hearing while operating a moving vehicle? I figured there was only one way to find out.

My throat was dry and every word was running together. I felt it was necessary for me to mention that I wasn't pregnant. No, nothing like that. My hand could barely

hold the phone still. I was pacing and watching the movement of traffic. Somehow, I managed to use my salty lips to blurt it out, push it from the bottom of my throat. I was surprised to hear his voice still on the line, apologetic and sincere. Confused. We would have to talk about this in person.

Somehow, I managed to Google herpes only once. I panicked. I was still in denial and figured going online would only make me feel worse. Later that evening, I went over to his house. We sat on his couch and when he told me that dating wasn't over, the words went in one ear and right out the other. I've had a skin disease called vitiligo since I was nine years old and now this. Of course, I was un-dateable. He mentioned he had spent the afternoon doing research online, looking at message boards and finding statistics. He had even found a dating website for other people who had it. Although hearing the information from him made me feel less alone, I still cried on his shoulder when he gave me a hug.

I eventually learned that I didn't get herpes from him. He and I had been friends for years, had briefly dated for six months. I was grateful to be able to go through a life changing experience with someone I knew. However, this meant I no longer had an ally. I had to focus. How would I be able to convince myself I wasn't disgusting or undateable?

I had to find a way to get outside of my head. I decided a good way to do this was by watching television. I was going to avoid reality by engaging in hours of mind numbing escapism. And pizza. My plan seemed to hit a wall when I quickly learned how much Hollywood loved jokes about herpes. There was an entire episode of *The Office* where the main character Michael Scott got a cold sore and made calls to his former lovers to tell them he had herpes. There was even a herpes joke thrown into a thirty-

second preview for the following week's episode of a popular television program on HBO. I had to keep reminding myself that these jokes had nothing to do with me. That the writers were lazy and unoriginal. But still, I felt the weight of these jokes pushing me deeper and deeper into the couch.

I wondered, would I still be silently suffering over the idiotic incidents of Michael Scott if my test had come back negative? Would I give these jokes a second thought if I had not felt personally attacked? No, I wouldn't. It was no longer about herpes. I began to think about perspective and the role of pop culture. What our culture knows about the stigmatization of herpes is basically centered around the cheap jokes and short laughs witnessed through the lens of television. I am still a part of that culture, just on the other side.

It took close to two years for me to be able to accept that this would one day have to be a conversation I was going to have with a potential partner. The Hollywood jokes no longer seemed to affect me the way they used to. I decided I would have to become comfortable with myself and my body before considering dating again. In other words, I had to learn how to trust and forgive myself. Slowly, I became more confident when I started to learn how to pleasure my own body. Not only did it change the way I saw myself, but it helped me understand how my body worked. My orgasms were self-sufficient and brought me back to life.

The stigmatization of herpes is laughable because nobody wants to talk about it, but there are commercials all day long for men experiencing erectile dysfunction. I'm supposed to think I'm unlovable and disgusting even though I may never experience

another outbreak? Even though, statistically, one out of six people have it? Because Hollywood can't produce better writers?

Having a sexually transmitted disease does not define who I am. Trying to equate my life through the ideals of Hollywood caricatures is basically a form of emotional kamikaze. The more I continue to talk about it, the less it has seemed to matter. Although my personal life has remained stagnant, the conversation is constantly in the back of mind. My gynecologist told me to consider it a test. The right person will want to stick around. I believe her. But for now, I've decided to stop worrying and love myself as I am. Herpes and all.

## A Question of Numbers

*I would imagine it would be difficult to date you. You seem like you'd be hard to please.  
What's wrong with your face? You're going to die alone. You're too picky. Loosen up.  
You're intimidating. You're unapproachable.*

I haven't slept with someone in over two years. I haven't been in a relationship in close to seven years. (Side note: If it hadn't been for a very brief fling with an ex-boyfriend, it's actually been more like four years since I was intimate with a different ex-boyfriend.) This is not the first time this has happened. I am thirty-three years old.

I've made brief appearances on online dating apps like OK Cupid, Tinder and Match. I met a man I met off OK Cupid once at a neighborhood dog park. We let our dogs run around and play while we sat on a bench and talked.

"So, you're the manager at Skyline Chili," I said. "Does that mean you're the one in charge of the three-way signs?"

"Yeah."

He didn't seem to find the question as humorous as I did. I changed the subject and asked him about the tattoo on his hand.

"It's some kind of tribal symbol. It doesn't really mean anything."

"Oh, ok. Is that the only tattoo you have?"

"I have one on my butt that says 'your name.'"

"I can't tell if you're joking."

"I'm not. It was a dare."

“I mean, I’m intrigued but I’m not going to ask you to pull your pants down at a public park.”

A couple nights later, I went over to his house for dinner and a movie. When I asked him questions like what kind of music he liked, he said he left the public radio station on sometimes. In his profile picture on the dating app, he was dressed as Clark Kent. When I asked if he was a Superman fan, he said not really. It was his Halloween costume. I liked that our dogs had gotten along, but it was clear that there was no love connection between us.

The last and final time I deleted Tinder was last February while I was sitting on the toilet at work. Once the few men I had talked to had figured out I was capable of having a real conversation and wasn’t just looking to get laid, they ghosted. I was tired of getting my feelings from complete strangers. I deleted my profile, removed the app from my phone, held down the lever and flushed.

I re-watched the film *Kissing Jessica Stein* recently. Jessica Stein is a 28-year-old successful single straight woman living in New York City. Fed up with the men she meets, she responds to a personal ad in the newspaper which eventually turns into a relationship with a woman named Helen Cooper. Jessica is smart, hardworking, neurotic and stubborn. Throughout the film, she is criticized for her dating habits. The men she meets not being good enough for her, or able to meet her standards. She is, in other words, a difficult woman.

There is a particular scene about halfway through the film where Jessica takes Helen home for her family’s Passover Seder dinner. Jessica removes herself from the table and is sitting outside. Her mother sits down next to her, and she begins to reminisce

about a time when Jessica was in a school play in grade school. Jessica quit the play because she didn't think the student who got the other lead part would be good enough. There is some back and forth until her mother looks at her and mentions how she knew her child was going to suffer because no one was ever going to be good enough. They're both teary-eyed on screen. I was crying on my couch drinking cheap red wine wondering if that speech had anything to do with me.

Two summers ago, I met a friend for drinks at a neighborhood bar. She and I sat outside. The sky was dark, the air was warm. Gradually the conversation turned personal, and I admitted that I haven't really dated anyone in close to six years. I awkwardly leaned into my dialogue about having received a diagnosis for a sexually transmitted disease a couple years earlier and how I still felt emotionally paralyzed. When I had my first one-night stand while on vacation in New Orleans in 2014, it was the first time I'd had sex in two-and-a-half years.

The conversation turned to the number of sexual partners we've had. After she told me her number, she assumed mine must be around the same because I was also single. She had slept with sixty people, where I had only been with ten. I could never figure out why she assumed our numbers would be equal. I never told her how much this bothered me. Her assumption was a direct result of my feelings of inadequacy around her, but it also didn't occur to me then that what was insignificant to her was significant to me. I wondered if being single in my early thirties was supposed to dictate my sexual practices. Am I not supposed to prefer being alone than finding someone to take home at the end of the night? Why do I suddenly feel responsible to equate my human worth with

the ability to sustain a love life? As far as I knew, there was no statute of limitation on how to be single.

If being single is a question of numbers, I blame popular culture. When a single woman is represented on television, in a film, or in a book I instinctively compare myself to the way she chooses to live her life. I realize comparing myself to fictional characters is not a healthy habit to maintain, but sometimes it feels easier than identifying with the more sexually experienced women I know in real life. I like to repeatedly re-watch shows like *Sex and the City* because these women live in New York City, where their lifestyle choices and refusal to settle down are socially acceptable parts of the cosmopolitan culture. The characters make me feel better about myself and where I am in my life. Their lives are a nice escape into a world where being single is cause for celebration.

Being single is also a question of setting. I live in Louisville, Kentucky, where people get married young. They couple up quickly and tend not to stray outside their social circles. I also come from a background with a family in the public eye, where strangers know who I am and acquaintances assume things about me because my parents named their restaurant after me when I was two years old. I am aware of my loneliness here if only because it is more visible here than somewhere like New York City. Louisville is like a big small town, and it's unusual for me to go anywhere without running into someone I at least kind of know.

About two-and-a-half years ago I started hanging out with a man I knew through social media and a local outdoor flea market. It was the first time I thought I could like someone again for the first time since 2012. Late one evening, I received a text message from him telling me he had herpes. I responded and told him that I did as well. When I

didn't hear back from him, the next night I asked him why he didn't respond. He said he was going to hang out with his friends. This man was almost forty years old. He stopped talking to me for two months, and I would later learn that his ex-wife had sent me that text from his phone as a way to get me to stop spending time with him.

If the numbers conversation has come up with men I've been in a relationship with, it has happened naturally and without much thought. We've always tended to be in the same playing field. The man who took my virginity when I was eighteen told me he had been with three other women before me. I figured at least he'd know what he was doing. Part of the argument I'm trying to make is that these numbers hold no absolute value. Saying I haven't had a relationship in six years or that I haven't had good sex in four is essentially meaningless. However, the emotionality of those statements is what I can't seem to get out of my head. I'm thirty-three years old, isn't that supposed to mean something?

These numbers don't mean anything to anyone else. It feels like I'm driving myself away from the possibility of anything good ever happening to me. But wouldn't it have happened by now? That's my head talking, psyching myself out again. Because everyone I know just had their second child or just bought a house and I'm still here. Writing helps to remind me that taking the time to get to know yourself and process old feelings and emotions is infinitely more valuable than leveling my self-worth to please any type of social standard. But that doesn't mean it doesn't get lonely.

I do believe I am a sexual person. To me, being a sexual person isn't necessarily about going out and having multiple one night stands. Sexuality is about being confident and comfortable in my own skin. And in the last few years, I have gotten more confident

in myself through the ways my body can bring me pleasure. I can honestly say my confidence is finally where I always wanted it to be, though sometimes my head has a hard time remembering that. I lose focus easily when I remember the things I don't have in my life yet.

Instead of hearing the voices telling me I'm a woman who seems impossible to please, I've chosen to believe I am a woman who knows what she wants and whose value can't be contained by questions of numbers. I decided I am not going to compare myself with women who want different things or live their lives differently. But you should know, I understand. I understand what it's like to want a warm body next to you (even if he or she snores.) I understand what's it's like to want someone to have someone to order takeout and watch a movie with on a Saturday night. I understand what it's like to want a partner who fills up the ice trays, and helps get you through organized family gatherings.

## Vitiligo

My grandmother has a three-hundred-acre farm in Kentucky. When I was younger, there used to be a tree house overlooking a field filled with the kind of dark green grass that felt soft underneath my bare feet. One summer Sunday evening, my family was out at the farm for dinner. I was around eight or nine years old, playing with my older cousin who was four years older. He and I quickly walked up the old rotting wood steps of the tree house, and though he had made it safely to the top floor, I began to hear the sounds of cracking wood underneath my small feet.

The next thing I knew, I was about to fall through the floor. Somehow, I had known to throw my arms out to my side to keep from falling through to the ground. Underneath my hanging legs was a pile of wood, the rusty nails almost glowing in decay. I screamed for an adult, and whoever it was helped pulled me up and out of the rotting hole. There were red, tender scraps along the inside of both of my arms. They hurt like hell. They would continue to hurt for weeks.

It was maybe a month later when a white spot began to develop on my upper left thigh. It slowly began to spread to other parts of my body, most noticeably on the front of my legs. Eventually, my family and I would learn there was a name for what was happening to my skin. It was called Vitiligo, a skin disease where patches of skin lose its pigment. I was in the fourth grade, and not only was it an ugly word, it was embarrassing to say and difficult to spell.

When Pop icon Michael Jackson was twenty-four years old, his skin started to change. In 1993, he would famously address his skin condition on an episode of *Oprah*.

Some years later, my mother would confess to me she wrote a letter to Michael telling him about my story with the skin disease. He never wrote back, but the motherly gesture was enough to recognize how little understanding there was of this condition at the time. Twice a year, my mother and I would drive up to Cincinnati to see a specialist who worked with patients who had vitiligo. He prescribed me different creams that did nothing and eventually I stopped using them. At one point, a different doctor had even suggested rubbing a bit of urine on a small patch of vitiligo on the inside of my arm to see if pigment would start to come back. It didn't.

One summer when I was around eleven or twelve years old, I was swimming at the country club where my family belonged. The vitiligo had become more prominent on my body. It had spread across both of my legs, which looked as if someone had painted the front of my shins white. There were white spots on my arm pits, my eyelids, wrists, even on my vagina. My friend was standing at the edge of the diving board while I stood watching from the side of the pool.

“I don't want to be friends with you anymore,” she said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you look like Michael Jackson.”

This was not meant to be a compliment, and I knew that. It was hurtful, and came out of nowhere. Around the same time, I was going to a doctor's office in Louisville where I would stand in a tube of blue UV Ray lights in nothing but my underwear. For the next few hours after that I would have to wear the big white plastic glasses that senior citizens wore to protect their eyes. After several months of this I told my mother this wasn't working and I no longer wanted to do this.

I had been on the summer swim team at our country club for several years when I decided I also wanted to be on the diving team. Every Sunday we had a meet at either our club or an opposing club. Despite my friend telling me I looked like Michael Jackson, I wasn't afraid to put myself in the public eye. Being a diver meant standing on a diving board with hundreds of eyes staring at me in dead silence. I don't think it occurred to me then how vulnerable this made me.

I was fearless, until one Sunday during one of these meets, a young boy and his friend in blue Speedos walked past me at the country club. He elbowed his friend and pointed at my legs as I sat nearby on a pool lounge chair.

“Your legs are disgusting,” he said.

His friend laughed. I reached for my pool towel and threw it over my legs in shame. I was constantly being reminded that I wasn't like everyone else. When other kids saw my legs, it was as though that's all they could see.

For as long as I can remember I've hated wearing shorts. This is in direct proportion to having my vitiligo in places where I was no longer invisible. Strangers could see my skin and they would stare. When I saw their eyes, I felt small. My legs were merely a portrait of a story they would never bother to read.

As a teenager, I was the most self-conscious at venues like amusement parks or the State Fair, arenas for the mass gatherings of ignorant people. If I was going to have a good time, it would all depend on what I decided to wear. Wearing jeans during the middle of summer could be challenging, the thick material hot and sticking to my skin. But at least my legs would be covered. I could get away with the spot on the top middle

of my forehead or the white patches on the back of my elbows. They were less noticeable.

I used to write in my diaries in middle school about how I would never have a boyfriend because of the way I looked. The entries were filled with hateful language about being chubby and having disgusting skin. According to my mother, the last time I saw my pediatrician I was sixteen years old. When he asked me how I was dealing with the vitiligo I told him I didn't see it anymore. I told her I didn't remember saying this, and was impressed that I could say something so powerful at a difficult age.

None of the men I've been with have ever asked about my vitiligo or made me feel bad about my body. Not a single one ever asked me if I had poison ivy, if I was a painter, if it was a birthmark or if my legs had been badly burned. In my late twenties, a woman once asked if I had been baking, assuming I had flour all over my legs. This happened a year or two before I became a professional baker. I've lost track of the other things people have said, but these are the most unforgettable.

Although I pay less attention to the eyes of strangers now that I'm in my thirties, the staring is still something I'm conscious of. It's physically ingrained in me to be alert to my surroundings. I've just become more accustomed to ignoring what I cannot control. When I go into a Whole Foods or Target sometimes my mind slips when a middle-aged blond woman with perfect skin and a perfect figure glances down at my legs and looks me narrowly in the eye. But if the color of my skin is part of my narrative, it was always going to be part of the story I was meant to tell.

I wouldn't be who I am without my skin disease. Having vitiligo has helped make me a stronger person, and has over the years forced me to confront the power in being

someone who is different. When I was diagnosed with a sexually transmitted disease four years ago all my old feelings about having a skin disease rose to the surface once again. I felt unlovable and un-dateable. Why would a man want to date a woman with herpes and vitiligo? I asked myself this question for months.

Multiple friends reminded me that having these things didn't define who I was as a person. It took some time for their words to kick in, and one day I woke up and just stopped thinking about my skin diseases. I could have prevented the STD, but there would never be a reason why I had gotten vitiligo. Doctors had said it could have been genetic, but no one else in my family has had to live with patchy skin.

Recently, my mother told me I never saw her cry while I was learning about the changes in my skin. She always made sure she left the room or waited until I was asleep or out of the house so I wouldn't know how upset this had been making her. When I asked how my father dealt with this she said he wasn't as sensitive to it, probably because he was a guy. He'd never been a great communicator when it came to difficult information. He'd leave the room if it was something he didn't want to talk about.

I could say that I don't see the vitiligo anymore, but I wouldn't be telling the truth. I see it every day because it's who I am. It's the skin I live in. I don't know who I would be if my skin hadn't lost some of its pigment. If it makes me different from the people I talk to at work or see at the grocery store then I can accept that. After all, there is no normal.

## The Perfect Woman

A couple years ago, I found myself in bed with Roseanne Barr. This was before any talk of a modern reboot of the television show *Roseanne*, and before her racist tweets were national news. I was binge watching the second season, which was filmed in 1990, and admiring the authenticity of the characters and the writing. There was one episode in particular that led me to multiple days of introspection. In the episode, called “All of Me” Jackie has a new boyfriend named Gary. They’re having dinner with Roseanne and her husband Dan. Jackie, who is 33 years old, is clearly smitten and “acting like a high school girl,” according to Roseanne.

Dan and Gary go out to the garage so the women can talk. Roseanne brings up a man Jackie dated the year before. She hints at Jackie’s bad track record with men and seems concerned Jackie is, once again, throwing herself into another man’s personality while ignoring her own. “We do things I want to do all the time. Or, we will,” said Jackie. They continue to talk in the kitchen, and Jackie is convinced she shouldn’t have to tell Gary what she wants because he should already know. “Yes, he should be able to read your mind,” says Roseanne.

In the next scene, Jackie and Gary are in bed. He asks if she wants to go out to dinner the following night. When he asks what kind of food she’s in the mood for, her response is, “I don’t care, whatever you want.” It’s impossible for Gary to know what Jackie wants because she’s trying to be so agreeable with him. The more agreeable she is, the more distant she becomes. At this point on the screen, her back is turned to Gary and

the camera is focused on Jackie's face. It's clear she's unhappy, most likely because he's making all the decisions and she's letting him by not expressing how she feels.

When Gary asks her if something is wrong, she doesn't want him to be mad at her and is quickly apologetic to him. When I looked at Jackie, I saw myself in past relationships where it was too difficult for me to have my own voice. "All you had to do was say something," says Gary. This haunted me. *All you had to do was say something*. It seemed so simple when Gary said it to Jackie. Suddenly, I began to see different versions of myself grasping for the words I couldn't seem to find. I could feel the breathlessness of the words *I'm fine* haunting from the graves of relationships past.

In my early twenties, I stopped taking birth control because I didn't want to pay the \$35 and I was too embarrassed to ask my gynecologist for more of the free samples that she had provided for me in the past. During this time, I briefly dated someone I met through a mutual friend. I hadn't been with anyone in over a year and was more concerned with that than anything else. The first time he and I slept together, he didn't wear a condom. I didn't have the courage to ask him to. When he was about to finish, he asked me if I was on birth control. When I said yes, he came inside of me. The warmth of his semen swam through my body. I put my hand on my stomach and in my head, I kept repeating *fuck* over and over. He didn't spend the night, and I fell asleep thinking about who I was going to call in the morning.

I must have broken down and ended up telling him I hadn't been on birth control after all, but I don't remember the exact details. He broke up with me through a Facebook message a few days after. Within less than a week, our mutual friend had told me he was already seeing someone new. This new girl was an ex-heroin addict who had Hepatitis C.

That relationship didn't last long for him and soon he was texting me again. He told me he had gotten tested and that his test had come back negative. He was back in my bed again, and I let him come inside of me again. It was as if I had disappeared from my own skin, and convinced myself the attention from this guy was more important than my own body. I wouldn't allow my voice to be heard because of the possibility that he would get upset. When I was around him, my throat felt dry, as if I were too parched to ask for the thirst of his affection.

I went to Planned Parenthood twice in less than three weeks for the morning-after pill. Going into the clinic for my second time, the same woman was behind the counter. I pretended like I didn't know how this worked. She told me the morning-after pill was \$28 and I acted like this was brand new information.

I used to feel humiliated by this story. I used to think there was something wrong with me because I couldn't speak up for myself when I needed to the most. Despite the short life of this relationship, there was another moment where we were in bed and I asked him what he was thinking. "I don't like those kinds of questions," he had said. I felt more vulnerable asking the question than I did being naked next to him. If only he had known how difficult that was for me to ask.

"You have your own thoughts. You have your own opinions," Roseanne tells Jackie. "He doesn't know the real you. He likes 'perfect woman' Jackie." But Jackie still refuses to take that chance, and at this point, the episode became almost too painful to watch. It felt like a head-on emotional collision. Jackie and I both knew that once we let our guards down we're toast. We know they'll change their minds.

During this episode, I wondered why Gary sticks around for her. Why he is so persistent with Jackie, and what it will take for her to believe that Gary isn't going anywhere. Finally, at the end of the episode, he tells her he's in love with her. Something shifts with Jackie and maybe that's all she had needed to hear all along. But will it be enough?

The idea of being vulnerable without consequences with a partner has always felt like fantasy to me. The second I let my guard down in a relationship, the different men I have dated have broken up with me. Perhaps that's why I try to find pieces of myself in fictional characters. I sympathized with Jackie because I saw so much of myself in this episode. I remembered how difficult it could be to say my boyfriend's name, or even just say hello to him in the parking lot. It was as if it were somehow inappropriate for his name to pass through my lips.

Watching a fictional character refuse to let something good happen to her, it felt like I was looking in a mirror. In this mirror, I saw a woman who was conflicted with not just herself, but her place in the world. Someone who treated romance like an invisible anchor, holding her back from herself.

By pretending to be the perfect woman, I've been setting traps for myself. Like Jackie, I've always wanted to be agreeable with whoever I've been dating. I've been catering under the assumption that while men do like women who have something to say, it has to be the right thing. This has often left me second guessing myself and my words, putting his feelings before my own. Being able to write has offered me the space to help me realize what having a voice actually means and feels like. Over the last few years, I've become more comfortable writing about my personal experiences. This process has

led to a lot of introspection not only about who I am as a woman and a writer, but what my needs are as well.

While attempting to be the perfect woman in the past, I realize now that silencing myself in order to seem more attractive has only caused more harm than good. My plan had backfired. I had vowed to not be the woman who takes an hour to get ready, who likes to argue and requires a great deal of attention. Somewhere in there I forget to think about the woman I actually wanted to be. From what I know now, I can tell you she's far from perfect but at least she's more confident.

## A Year in Rupert, West Virginia

I was walking my dog on a mild summer afternoon and instead of going on my usual route behind the grey two-story building where I worked and lived, I decided to cross the street. I walked past by the library, which consisted of two white double wide trailers with an American flag flying high on the pole near the entrance. When I passed the elementary school a couple of blocks later, I heard music in the air. At the end of the street, an elderly woman was playing the accordion on her front porch. Although she didn't see me, I smiled as I walked past and thought how the warmth of the sun made me happy I had moved to this quirky rural town of less than nine hundred people.

It was May of 2010 when I first arrived in Rupert, West Virginia to work at a community center called Wellspring of Greenbrier owned by an elderly couple, Fred and Charlotte. They had opened the center in 2004 to assist the poor, homeless, transient or otherwise disadvantaged people of Greenbrier County. I had picked this part of the country because I had grown up going on family vacations in nearby Virginia, and had relatives near Charlottesville.

I lived in a small apartment above Wellspring. Fred and Charlotte didn't charge me rent to live there and I would be able to use my bi-weekly stipends from AmeriCorps without worry. I had brought my dog along with me, a new addition to my life that provided a level of comfort in moving to a small rural unfamiliar town. The kitchen became my favorite space, the white cabinets matching the white tiled floor on which I would cook my meals barefoot, usually drinking from a bottle of cheap wine. Through

the kitchen window I could see a garage that did not seem to have a name but appeared to be a space where people worked on cars.

On evenings when the weather was nice and the sun set late, I would open the kitchen window, and mix the fresh air with whatever music I happened to be listening to, along with the meal I was preparing. On one particular evening, a smell resembling that of something burning came through the kitchen. When I looked outside there was a giant pile of leaves, and possibly trash, on fire. There were a couple of men standing close by as the flames grew tall and the smoke danced towards the sky. I closed the window and stood transfixed, albeit nervous, because I realized this was only out of the ordinary for me.

Wellspring's regular hours were Tuesday through Thursday from nine to four p.m. They closed for lunch and if we didn't go out we would gather in the kitchen at the center. Although the hot meal program was the most popular service that the center provided for their low-income families, there were usually leftovers. I had only been working there for a couple weeks when Charlotte informed me they had made a deal with the Pizza Hut in the nearby town Rainelle. They would be saving what was left over from the buffet table and putting the food in the freezer to be picked up the next day. This offered an opportunity for less waste and would provide a variety for the people who relied on Wellspring for sustenance. Charlotte would often save one of these pizzas for the volunteers. When I started bring my own lunch with me, usually a Lean Cuisine or a salad, my healthy choices were often met with criticism.

"You'd rather have a microwave meal than pizza?" said Fred.

“Yeah, I’m trying to eat healthier.”

“Boy, I’ve never met a pizza I didn’t like.”

I smiled politely and didn’t mention that I preferred my pizza to be fresh.

During one of my first weekends in Rupert, Wellspring hosted an event called The Bluegrass Supper. The event was open to the public and was advertised as a pot luck with live bluegrass music. It was a modest event that gathered a community of religious, mostly elder folks. The night of the supper, I met a family who were expecting their ninth child. One of their teenage sons came up to talk to me while I was in the kitchen. He asked where I was from, and upon mention of being from the big city he told me his eldest brother was in the seminary school in Louisville. When he asked me about my education, the first question he asked was if I had been home schooled. When I said no, he asked if I went to public school. I told him no again and felt the back of my neck become warm. I admitted that I went to private school and wondered if he knew what that meant.

He told me his parents took him and his siblings out of public school because of the stories about kids being sent home from school for wearing crosses around their necks. There was no way for me to know if this was true or not. Our conversation ended quickly after and he went into the main room to get another plate of food. A woman came up to me after he had left the kitchen and said softly, *that’s just something they tell the kids to scare them out of going to public school.*

When I needed to go to the grocery I had to drive to Rainelle, which was about nine miles from my apartment in Rupert. The drive to the store was windy and flat, and on the way, I would pass a pizza place called Possum Holler. Not much farther there was

a Taco Bell attached to a small gas station, and that's when I knew I was half way there.

On one of my first trips to Kroger, the cashier asked how I liked living here.

"I just moved here from Kentucky for a job," I told him. "I'm still adjusted to things."

"Where in Kentucky?" he asked. Most of his teeth were missing.

"Louisville."

"Y'all take the pronunciation of your city pretty serious."

I laughed.

"Is there culture in Louisville?" he asked.

"Yeah, but there's more to us than bourbon and horse racing."

"I don't know anything about bourbon, drinking is against my religion. You'll probably like Lewisburg though."

I nodded and mentioned like that I did like it there. After I paid for my groceries and left the store, I thought about the way he had used the word "culture." I wondered if we defined it differently.

A couple weeks later, Charlotte had asked me to represent Wellspring at a local flea market in Lewisburg on a Saturday afternoon. Late in the afternoon, an older man who I had never met came up to me and handed me a two-dollar bill. "When you finish your book, go and get yourself a coke," he said.

There were characters in this town, and I slowly got to know quite a few of them during my time in Rupert, like a man who would walk past the center every morning holding a case of Keystone Light. Occasionally, this would happen again in the afternoon. Despite the poor quality of life, these people would come in wearing smiles

and ask how I was doing. This was a place where the response I received when I asked someone at the drug store how they were doing was, “Tickled pink. Fine and dandy. Plum crazy.” This was a place where they gave their children names like Coon, Fluffy or Kohl Boyee.

During the day, the greens and blues of West Virginia were savage and beautiful, vivacious and misunderstood. At night, the colors were quick to transform to a pitch black almost erasing the land. On the occasion that I drove to spend time with fellow AmeriCorps friends, I would pack a bag, take my dog and spend the night in towns so small they were lit by the white shine of the stars.

I had been living in Rupert for maybe two months when a different male cashier at the grocery store noticed that I wasn't from his neck-of-the-woods. He was thin, had large wide-set brown eyes and short dark hair. I had to explain why I bought healthier groceries than the other people who shopped there.

“The organic food is cheaper here than is in Louisville,” I said. “Annie's Mac and Cheese is only ninety-nine cents and the milk is, like, three dollars cheaper than back home.”

“Why don't you just buy Velveeta?” he asked. “Can you really taste the difference between organic milk and regular?”

I didn't have the heart to tell him that Velveeta was basically plastic.

“I can taste the difference, yes.”

Suddenly it occurred to me that he might be trying to flirt with me. When I looked at the bag of bagel thins on the conveyor belt, I wondered if he would ask why I was buying deflated bagels.

I had been working for Wellspring for four or five months when Fred fell off a ten-foot ladder while he was at home alone and almost died. With Fred and Charlotte gone from work, I stayed in my office playing solitaire for hours. I did this for weeks because the other volunteer didn't have anything for me to do. Eventually, I started sitting at the front desk, answering the phone and talking to the people who came in either to do laundry or pick up their meal. I struck up a friendship with a woman named Jennifer whose mother always waited outside in the car rather than come inside. Jennifer lived down the street with her parents in a shanty home on top of a muddy hill, and it was well known around Wellspring about her family's history of sexual and physical abuse. She came in one afternoon with her hair dyed a new color and manicured nails, she looked happy.

Jennifer was only a few years older than me. She was tall and overweight, and sometimes when she came into the center she would be covered in black dust. She would always ask about my dog and tell me about what new romance novel she was reading. Her face would glow when she talked to me about those books, they were an escape for her. On her birthday, I bought her a card. She gave me a hug and told me she had met a man on the Internet. Eventually I learned she had run away from home, either to be with the man she had met online or to get away from her family. Possibly both.

I became accustomed to friends and family telling me they couldn't do what I was doing. Sometimes I understood what they meant. When I hit the six-month mark, I still felt like I hadn't accomplished very much. I couldn't figure out why I had uprooted my life to work in a place that was only open three days a week. While Charlotte and Fred were still out of the office, Charlotte would call into the center to check up on operations.

One afternoon she and I were on the phone talking about flyers for the next Bluegrass Supper. She began speaking to me in a condescending manner. She wouldn't listen to me when I tried to give her my opinion and that I knew the routine for distributing the flyers. I felt underappreciated and under-used. The rest of the call didn't go well, and I ended up telling her I didn't want to speak with her because I was frustrated and angry with my lack of voice and role at Wellspring.

*Chevy's are like tampons every pussy has one* read the decal on the back of a beat-up baby blue Ford truck in the Rite Aid parking lot in Rainelle. The man I had started seeing from back home took a picture of the decal. He and I got out of my car which was parked next to the Ford and went inside the drug store. The week before I had gone through the drive-thru to pick up my birth control, and the woman who handled the transaction asked more questions than I was used to. She didn't smile or tell me to have a nice day. And now, there I was walking up to the register with a man holding a bottle of Gin and a pack of condoms.

In January of 2011, we began helping low-income families with their taxes. I worked with a woman that Charlotte knew through her church. An elderly windowed woman came to see us and told us about how she had moved here several years ago because she had met someone. Her smile melted the wrinkles on her face. Most of the people who came through the door were on social security or disability. The young women who came in always had at least two children and a deadbeat boyfriend that was unemployed. Their willingness to talk about their lives made me feel like I was finally beginning to accomplish something in Rupert.

Charlotte and Fred were back at work during the last few months of my residency at Wellspring. We got along and I helped out with the spring clothing drives and continued helping with the food packaging for the hot meal program. I never saw Jessica again, but told Charlotte if she came back in to tell her goodbye for me. While my experience with Wellspring and the AmeriCorps program was at times challenging, I had expected to leave with a sense of accomplishment. That somehow, I would have made a difference in some aspect of the community where I had spent the last year of my life.

The morning I packed up my car to move back home the center was closed. I called Charlotte and Fred to say goodbye and to thank them for letting me have me this experience.

I took my dog for a walk one last time around the neighborhood of different colored one-story homes behind Wellspring. Once my dog and I were in the car, I rolled down the windows and drove the windy roads blasting “Free Bird” as I headed towards the interstate.

Six months after I was back in Louisville, Charlotte and Fred came to visit. We had dinner with my parents at their casual, yet up-scale restaurant, which has been recognized as one of the first farm-to-table restaurants in Louisville. Lilly’s Bistro was named after me when I was two years old. My mother had been working in the restaurant industry since the 70’s and had her own catering business before she opened the restaurant. She is currently still the head chef.

At dinner, Charlotte and Fred mentioned several times this was some of the most delicious meals they had ever had. Fred had ordered veal with a mushroom sauce, and Charlotte ordered crab cakes. People still asked me about me at the center, Charlotte said.

While I was enjoying my burger, the story about my first lunch in Rupert at the food mart/restaurant/collectible goods store came up. Fred told my parents he had never seen someone eat a cheeseburger so fast.

About a year later, I was a bridesmaid in a friend's wedding in Lexington, Virginia. I had left a day early to spend the night in Lewisburg, West Virginia reconnecting with Fred and Charlotte.

I stopped in Rupert in the late afternoon before checking into my hotel. Wellspring was getting ready to close for the day. The smell of powered apple cider was in the air as I greeted Fred and Charlotte.

“Look at your chicken legs,” said Charlotte.

I had lost about thirty pounds after I had left Rupert. Later that night I had dinner with them at the Ruby Tuesday in Lewisburg, a town about eighteen miles away from Rupert, a town voted one of the “coolest small towns in America.” A town where you wouldn't find the words “Pill Billy” written in graffiti on the sides of rundown buildings. When the food was delivered to our table, Charlotte and Fred bowed their heads and closed their eyes. Fred started talking about God and being thankful as I took a sip from my cold draft beer and stared at the wall.

The next morning, I checked out of my motel and drove back to Rupert to have lunch with Charlotte and Fred and a couple of their volunteers. We met at a diner called the Dairy Delite, located a quarter of a mile down the road from Wellspring. There were six of us sitting at a table, which overlooked a wall filled with pictures of men in green camouflage and bright orange suits holding the deer they had just successfully killed.

Our waitress had curly brown hair and thick red glasses. She looked exactly the same as she had when I lived here two years ago. I ordered a cheeseburger and fries, and noticed I was the only one to order a glass of water instead of soda. The woman sitting next to me, who was one of the volunteers, was talking about how excited she was because Rainelle was getting a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

While sitting in the red booths at the Dairy Delite, everyone asked me about my life in Louisville. Because I mentioned that I was single, the KFC woman's husband told me to make sure I married a man with a lot of money. Charlotte and Fred agreed with the man I had known for less than an hour. I choose not to argue with people I hardly knew telling what to do with my life. Outside, the sun was shining and the light was leaking strips of white into the restaurant.

Charlotte and Fred talked about the evening we had shared at my parents' restaurant a year ago. They were telling the other couple what a wonderful time they had and about the amazing food. Charlotte said that it was a nice restaurant and that you had to have a lot of money in order to be able to eat there. She looked me in the eyes and smiled when she said this. I faked a smiled and took a sip of water. Without skipping a beat, our five-dollar cheeseburgers were delivered to the table.

I had planned on spending some time at Wellspring after lunch before getting in my car to drive to Virginia. Leaving the restaurant, I no longer felt like I belonged in Rupert. Charlotte's comments had reminded me that I couldn't be myself here. I let her say these things because it was easier than standing up for myself in a town that wasn't my own. I told Charlotte and Fred I needed to get on the road and said my goodbyes. Back at the center, I got in my car and backed out of the parking spot. The gravel cracked

underneath the tires as I took a right on to the country road and headed towards the interstate.

## We Are Not the Same People Anymore

At the baggage carousel, I wondered if we would recognize one another. I checked my phone and the text message from Lucy said she was there. When I turned around, the first thing I noticed was her hair. An auburn brown color, half-down. The other half held high in a small, messy bun. Her trademark hair style that I remembered from high school.

“I didn’t know if I would recognize you,” she said.

“You haven’t changed a bit,” I said.

“Neither have you.”

We reached to give each other a hug and I put my arm around her wrinkled baby blue button down shirt. I could smell a faint hint of lemon and pine as I pulled away.

“This is really surreal, isn’t it?” I said.

We hugged again. “And it all started with an Instagram photo of a homemade Taco Bell crunchwrap supreme!” she said.

I was still waiting for my luggage and asked her to keep an eye out for a black suit case with a red bandana tied to the handle.

“There it is,” she said.

I had forgotten the sound of her voice, the way she carried herself. I had gotten on plane to come visit someone I hadn’t seen or spoken to in almost fifteen years.

After we got my luggage, we walked to her car in the parking garage. Outside, the North Carolina air was humid and thick, just like back home in Kentucky. Her car was parked on the fourth floor, and once we got on the elevator I realized there was something I needed to say.

“How many people do you think would do this? Spontaneously buy a plane ticket this many years later to visit someone they went to high school with?”

“Probably not a lot,” she said. “We weren’t even really friends, right?”

“No, more like frenemies. That seems like a more appropriate way to define our relationship back then.”

Once we were in the car and ready to drive out of the garage, Lucy turned the music up in the car. The soundtrack to the year 2000 film *Centerstage* was playing. A melodrama about ballet students competing for a spot in the Academy in New York City, this was a film that had somehow reminded us that we at least had one thing in common during high school.

“Do you remember when I made a burned CD of this soundtrack for you?” I said.

“Duh.”

“And at some point, I’m pretty sure you made me cupcakes for my birthday one year. I don’t understand why we didn’t get along.”

“I don’t either.”

When we arrived at her house about half an hour later, her wife Lisa was already drunk. Lisa had short, bleached blonde hair, and bangs swept to the side of her face. Her eyes were dark and hidden behind the thick black frames of her glasses. Her jeans were well worn and ripped, paired with a green t-shirt. She was barefoot and controlling the music through a black speaker called Alexa. She was loud, and her movement suggested she had been drinking for a while. I liked her immediately.

Lucy and Lisa lived in a two-story townhouse in the suburbs of Raleigh. I took my luggage upstairs to the guestroom they had made up for me, kicked off my brand-new

sandals that had rubbed blisters onto the sides of my feet. I was immediately offered a glass of wine when I came back downstairs.

Even through the loud club music being played over the speaker I could hear the sharp, piercing squawks coming from a cage with a navy-blue blanket covering the majority of the structure sitting in one corner of the living room.

“What the hell is in that cage?” I said.

Lisa walked over to the cage and lifted up the blanket. She opened the door and out flew a small bird with a striking yellow coat with trims of red and green.

“That’s Jay,” Lisa said. “He’s named after *The Great Gatsby*.”

Jay had flown into the kitchen and landed near the kitchen sink. Lisa was now pulling shot glasses down from a cabinet and referring to the bottle of vodka on the counter as gay vodka. The bottle was decorated in a limited edition iridescent rainbow color scheme celebrating LGBTQ rights. “Love Wins” it said on the side of the bottle.

While Lisa was busy pouring shots, Lucy whispered something in my ear.

“I hate Jay.”

I sat at the kitchen counter for the majority of the evening, chasing vodka shots with warm two-buck chuck wine from Trader Joe’s. Lisa’s movement nearly mimicked the bird, restless and demanding attention. She was refilling the shot glasses every ten minutes. My head was going to hurt in the morning. Lucy stood across from me and drank quietly, and watched as her wife danced across their living room with a bird on her shoulder.

“I still can’t believe I’m sitting here in your kitchen,” I said.

“I’m so glad you’re here, said Lucy.

The next morning, Lucy and I got in the car to drive two hours to Wilmington, North Carolina because I had told her I wanted to see where they had filmed the TV show *Dawson's Creek* twenty years ago. She told me prior to our reunion that yes, she would help make my teenage dreams come true.

Before getting on the highway, we drove to McDonald's and ordered large Diet Coke's to cure our headaches from the vodka fueled night before. Once we got on the road, we began to talk about outgrowing friendships while getting older. She started to tell me about the falling out with her long time best friend Rachel, a woman we had both gone to middle school and part of high school with.

"I'm really curious to hear your opinion," she said.

"Well, we've got the time," I said. "I'm all ears."

"When Lisa and I were planning our wedding, we knew we wanted it to be simple and small," she said. "We ended up getting married at the courthouse."

I listened and nodded, trying to keep my focus still in order to ignore the nausea swimming and circling throughout my body.

Lucy continued. "It took my parents a while to come around to the idea of their daughter having a lesbian wedding."

"Have they made any effort since the wedding?"

"Things with my mom are better," she said. "Dad, not so much."

"Ok, we don't have to talk about that right now. Keep telling me about your wedding and what happened with Rachel."

"So, we had a small party afterwards, with just close friends and family. We didn't have a lot of money so we wanted to keep things low key. We didn't have

bridesmaids, and I didn't invite Rachel since she lives in Louisville and has her own family. I thought it would be too much to ask for her to travel for something we weren't making a big deal."

"I know you all have been friends for a long time," I said. "Was she mad you didn't ask her to be in your wedding?"

"Basically. I mean, it's more complicated than that, but I felt like she was being selfish. Because her family has money, I felt like she wasn't understanding of our situation."

"When was the last time you talked to Rachel?"

"She sent me a really passive aggressive email maybe two years ago basically telling me I was a bad friend. I responded back to her and never heard back. Lisa doesn't like her."

Lisa didn't want to come on the road trip with us because according to Lucy she thought going to the beach was a waste of time. Also, she had never seen *Dawson's Creek*. Though I liked Lisa, I was glad Lucy and I would get to spend some time together.

"Can't say I blame her. I never really knew Rachel that well, but it really sounds like you're better off."

Outside, there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The road was gray and flat, even with the windows up the leaves on the trees along the side of the road were whistling inside the car.

"Yeah, I know. It just makes me sad."

“I understand. But using the same expectations that you have for yourself and putting them onto someone else never works out. You always get hurt. In my experience, anyway.”

“What about you?” she said. “What happened with your friendship?”

By this point my plastic soda cup was dripping in sweat. I picked it up anyway and took a sip. The soda was warm and diluted from the melted ice cubes.

“Well, to make a long story short I just finally realized I couldn’t be in a one-way friendship anymore. After my first trip to Maine for grad school, I changed. I came back home and realized how much more I wanted for myself. I couldn’t connect with that group of people anymore.”

The car was silent for a few minutes. Maybe she was waiting for me to continue. The sky was still the same shade of crystal blue. Lucy reached for the pack of cigarettes next to the gear shift and took one out. I watched her light a cigarette and slightly roll down the window.

“What else?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Did she do something specifically that made you want to cut her out of your life?”

“Well, basically I had posted a Facebook status about how there weren’t any gentlemen left anymore. This was after I had received a direct message on Instagram telling me he thought I was sexy.”

“What an asshole.”

“I know, right? Wait for it. After a few minutes of talking, I looked for his Facebook page to make sure he wasn’t a robot. I pulled up his page and there was a picture of him with his wife and a small child.”

“What a dick.”

“Told you. So, this led me to make the post about why there weren’t any more gentleman and the girl I thought was my friend wrote a pretty aggressive comment basically telling me that it was my fault. That I asked for it because I responded to him.”

“Yeah, you don’t need that.”

“Should we change the subject?”

At that point, we’d only been on the road for maybe forty-five minutes. Lucy took the last few drags off her cigarette, rolled down the window and tossed the Camel Lite. She rolled the window back up, our hair quickly thrown back into place.

Lucy took her left leg and raised it so that it rested on the side of the driver’s side door. She had removed her sandal and her barefoot laid on her seat. Her casual driving made me nervous, but I didn’t say a word. Instead, I took off my flip-flops and put my bare feet up against the glove compartment allowing myself to feel comfortable too. We had been driving into the sun for almost an hour, the heat of the car interior warm on the bottom of my feet.

“It can be difficult to still be friends with people who knew you during a certain period of your life,” I said. “Which is why I’m glad we’ve been able to reconnect and get along so well. We can get to know each other as adults.”

As we laughed, we both reached for our Diet Cokes.

“Good news, the hangover nausea is finally gone,” I said.

“Oh, that’s good, you’re doing better than me then.”

After a few minutes of silence, Lucy confessed that she had had a difficult time in college. Her eyes focused on the road, while she sat with her back straight but slightly leaning forward toward the wheel. She wasn’t comfortable being so vulnerable.

“I had to spend some time in the looney-bin,” she said.

“What for?”

“I was really depressed. Cutting myself, doing a lot of coke. I was making a lot of bad decisions.”

“How long were you in the hospital?”

“Only a week.”

Once Lucy opened up to me about her past, something shifted. I thought about how I remembered her in high school. She was popular, liked to wear short shorts, played field hockey and was involved with the theater program at our small liberal private school. We had gone to middle school at a different private school, a more conservative school with uniforms and a particularly mean class. We had both shared an affinity for Ben Affleck. In a matter of minutes, she had become a different person to me.

“How did your parents feel about you being hospitalized?”

“My mom was supportive. My dad didn’t really talk to me about it.”

“I’m really sorry Lucy. I had no idea.”

“Oh, it’s fine now. Thanks though, I appreciate you listening.”

There was hardly any traffic on the highway. The car was silent again. It stayed this way for maybe fifteen minutes. I brought my bare feet back onto the floor and crossed my legs. Lucy reached for another cigarette and slightly rolled down the window.

“So, *Dawson’s Creek* huh?” she said.

“I can’t explain it,” I said. “But if I was going to travel to North Carolina I figured I had to ask. When you mentioned you were only two hours away from where they used to film the show it just felt too good to be true. Even in my thirties.”

“Fair.”

“The reason I’m still single is because I’m waiting for my Pacey Witter.”

“As you should.”

“Thank you for driving by the way, for helping me fulfill an old teenage fantasy.”

“Duh. Happy to help.”

About an hour later we were just outside Wilmington, driving into Wrightsville Beach. This beach had served as the location for several scenes in *Dawson’s Creek*, where the actors could be seen frolicking on the beach underneath the infamous pier known to bring tourists to this particular beach. The traffic became heavier and it quickly dawned on us that it was the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend, it was a cloudless beautiful day and we were trying to go to the beach for a quick tan and to get a glimpse into the year 1998.

We rolled down the windows and could taste the smell of the salt and sand. People were sitting on old wooden docks wearing straw hats, there was thick white rope tied to fat wooden stumps along both sides of the street. We drove past summer homes painted outrageous colors, turquoise or burnt orange.

“Did you bring sunscreen?” I asked.

Lucy was silent for a few seconds. “No.”

“Shit.”

We drove around for almost an hour trying to find a place to park, turning around at opposite ends of the beach not ready to give up.

“This is ridiculous,” she said.

“Are you getting hungry?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Me too. I think we should just call it and go get something to eat.”

There was a restaurant in downtown Wilmington that had been the location for Pacey’s restaurant on the last season of *Dawson’s Creek*. It was less than ten miles away, so Lucy and I decided to drive there. We parked the car and walked down a hill to the restaurant which overlooked the water. Once inside, I asked the hostess if we could sit outside. She walked us through the restaurant with cracks of light from the narrow windows sharpening the dark wood interior. I couldn’t help but picture the cast of the show sitting at the bar.

“Looking for Pacey?” said Lucy, who was walking behind me.

“Obviously.”

The green plastic table where we were led sat on a weathered gray dock with a view of the water and a seafoam green colored bridge in the distance. Before I sat down, I looked back at the exterior of the restaurant. I recognized the three different levels of the outdoor dining space, and the heavy wooden door we had just walked out of. Lucy and I were having lunch at Pacey Witter’s fictional restaurant. I couldn’t stop smiling.

“This is too funny,” I said.

After lunch, the drive through downtown Wilmington was quick and filled with tourists. A side street was blocked off for an art fair, cars stopping to let people cross the

street. The next destination on our tour was the location for Dawson Leery's house. About five miles outside of town, we took a right onto a quiet road. After a few minutes of driving, there was a fork in the road and a line of black mailboxes on the right side of a gravel road. A black and white sign indicated that going to the right meant entering private property. We stopped the car stopped in front of the sign.

"Are you sure this is where it is?" said Lucy.

"That's what the website told me."

"Did you know it was private property?"

"No..." I lied.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"We could just drive down a little way and see what happens."

"Are you willing to go to jail for this? For Dawson?"

"I don't know about that. But we're here. We can always turn around."

The energy in the car shifted quickly from one of a teenage thrill to knowingly trespassing. Lucy drove slowly down the long, narrow gravel road. After a few minutes, we stopped again at a bend in the road to ask just how committed we were to getting a picture of a house from a TV show that had ended in 2003, the same year we graduated from high school. Just ahead I could make out the head of the silver-blue water that was such a crucial aspect for the setting of the show.

"We should just turn around," I said. "I don't feel good about this anymore."

"I think that's the right call."

Lucy found a tight spot to turn around in and we drove slowly back up the narrow road.

“If it helps, you know the cast and crew used to drive down this road years ago.”

“True. I wonder how in the hell they found this place.”

“No idea.”

The car was silent as we headed back towards the interstate. We were tired and defeated. On the road, Lucy answered a call from Lisa who told her she had invited a couple friends over to cook out later that evening. Lucy and I barely talked on the ride home. We mostly listened to the radio and then two hours later, we were back in Raleigh.

On Sunday morning, the loud squawks of Jay the bird caused me to wake up earlier than I expected. I sympathized with Lucy. I went downstairs and Lisa was already up watching a movie.

“What are you watching?” I asked.

“*Cliffhanger*.”

“Holy shit. I remember seeing previews for this when I was a kid. I’ve always wanted to see this.”

Jay was flying across the room as I walked into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. His flight patterns made me jumpy. After I sat down on the couch, he flew back over to Lisa and landed on her shoulder. She didn’t even flinch.

Lucy came downstairs an hour later and watched the end of the movie with Lisa and I. Later in the morning, they both went back upstairs to get in bed. I stayed downstairs and watched *The Office*, exactly as if I hadn’t left Kentucky. Although my hope for the trip had mostly been about reconnecting with a pseudo enemy from high school, I hadn’t planned on sitting alone in their house texting friends back home.

Later in the evening, we had dinner reservations at a space that was not only a restaurant but also housed a brewery, an in-house florist and a small library. The food menu was Asian inspired, and the drink menu specialized in picking out a beer or wine according to a hierarchy of adjectives. After dinner, we drove to another restaurant owned by the same James Beard award nominated female chef.

It was a smaller restaurant, a modern take on a southern diner. The dark, moody interior and the red booths made the space feel slightly erotic despite the fact that the smell in the air was hot and pungent. Lucy and Lisa both ordered a glass of wine, while I ordered a margarita. My glass was sweating, sticking to the white cocktail napkin that was absorbing moisture and falling apart. The drink was too sweet and I could barely drink half of it. Lucy and Lisa were talking to each other, and I sat on the edge of the conversation waiting to be tapped in. After the single round of drinks, we headed back home.

The next morning was Memorial Day. The sun was bright and soaked through the thin, white curtains in my room. I was naked as a jaybird and lightly smelled of sweat. After a quick shower and fresh clothing, I went downstairs. Jay was performing his morning routine, flying from the living room into the kitchen. He watched with curious eyes as I discarded the used coffee grinds and began brewing a fresh pot. He could sense my reluctance to provide a perching shoulder.

In the afternoon, Lucy and I went to a pool that belonged to friends of her parents. Lisa stayed behind. The infinity pool was surrounded by cement statues of frogs, and a newly built cabana with a flat screen television and state of the art bar and built in grill.

Tom Petty and Lynyrd Skynyrd were on heavy rotation through a music channel on the flat screen as we drank cheap beer and soaked in the salt water pool.

“I feel like this weekend has been a huge disappointment,” said Lucy.

“Why would you say that?”

“Because we’ve spent most of your vacation driving in my car.”

“Don’t even worry about that,” I said. “I really appreciate you driving me to Wilmington.”

“But we didn’t do anything.”

“Well, we trespassed for the sake of *Dawson’s Creek*. I’d say that’s something. It’ll make a good story.”

“I still feel bad.”

“You shouldn’t. It’s really meant a lot to me to get to you know again. I had no idea how unhappy you were in high school and in college. I never would have known.”

There was hardly any traffic in the neighborhood where we were swimming. The rustle of the trees mixed with the music. I didn’t tell Lucy that I agreed the weekend had been disappointing because I didn’t want to seem ungrateful. Standing waist-deep in the warm water, I looked at her and thought about how simple it was for us to reconnect so easily from hundreds of miles away. Now that we were two feet away from each other something felt strained, but I couldn’t figure out what it was.

“Aren’t you glad we aren’t the same people anymore?” she said.

“Oh, fuck yes.”

A couple hours later we drove back home. Lisa was in the kitchen and had started preparing dinner. Cheeseburgers and fresh vegetables were on the menu for my last night.

A bottle of wine from Trader Joe's was opened and after the food was grilled and ready, we took our plates to the back patio.

"Are you sure you've had a good time?" said Lucy.

"Yes Lucy, I've had a great time getting to you know you again."

"Okay, I just want to make sure I've been a good host."

"Duh. I mean, I bought my plane ticket, what, three weeks after we started reconnecting?"

"Yeah, that's pretty crazy."

The three of us continued to sit on the patio after we had finished our meal. Lucy and Lisa smoked cigarettes and I continued to drink wine. Afterwards, we went inside and watched a movie in the living room. Throughout the movie, I kept wondering to myself how well we ever really know someone else and what they've been through. Neither Lucy or I were who we expected of one another. We could quote lines from the same movies, and like the same terrible music but it wasn't until our conversation on the drive to Wilmington that we became more than one dimensional to each other.

My flight the next day wasn't until the early afternoon. The airport was mostly empty. A white light followed me all the way to my gate, never quite letting me out of the spotlight. I stood in line at a fast food restaurant near my gate and ordered a cheeseburger with a large Diet Coke. After waiting fifteen minutes, I sat down with my overpriced airport food at a table near the window. I took my phone from my back pocket and placed it to the side of my red cafeteria tray. There was a text message from Lucy thanking me for visiting.

By the time my connecting flight touched ground in Louisville it was dinner time. The sky was a soft yellow, ready to become evening. I was glad to be back in Kentucky, in the comfort of familiar space. It felt easier being able to re-connect with Lucy online because of the detached perspective social media requires. What would our friendship would be like if I eventually decided to move to North Carolina, what would change? Reconnecting meant that we were now emotionally involved with each other's lives. The time I spent with Lucy and the little I had gotten to know Lisa made me realize how difficult it can be to grow older and come into the lives of other people. If we were still the same people we used to be, this trip never would have happened. I'm glad it did.



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