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CALAMITY OF THE WHITE PICKET

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Calamity of the White Picket is a collection of essays that portray how perfection—whether a perfect image, perfect relationship, perfect friendship, or perfect family—becomes withered down, destroyed, and turned into something else. They explore how the idealized image of a family surrounded by a cute white picket fence is dismantled and rearranged through theft, addiction, and a disintegrated family. The essays explore drug addictions, childhood nostalgia, the relationship between heritage and property, innocence, and a stolen best friend.

The collection is a train ride of family problems, broken friendships, lying and stealing, and hidden secrets about love and sex. Through these essays, I let go of my versions of the white picket fence, and embrace the new and complicated life that replaces it, ultimately still trying to maintain happiness.

Dedicated to the one who knows me best, my mother, whose endless optimism serves as the thread that held the sweater together.

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INTRODUCTION

My collection of essays are centered around the relationship I have with my mother, and the closeness I feel to her throughout our experiences together, the desire to fit in with my brothers, who ultimately push me away when they become addicted to drugs, and lastly, the collection highlights certain turning points in my life where I attempt to find myself and redefine who I am.

In “The Anatomy of a Drugged Life,” I use several of my mother’s diary entries to depict the absurd and ridiculous events that go on in a household where two drug addicts live.

“Pirate Brothers” shows the childhood I shared with my two older brothers, contrasted with scenes from our more present relationships.

“The Gold Necklace” is a Swiss heritage story that deeply observes the way my mother feels about trinkets in the family passed down from Swiss relatives. The jewelry represents her Swiss heritage, and after it is gone, she no longer wants it back.

“Fighting for Something” is an essay about my best friend. The essay tells the tale of the complete dissolution of the friendship, because of several events, including a new relationship between her and my brother.

“On That Time in High School” is an essay about a sexual incident that occurred during my senior year of high school. This moment defines a turning point in my life.

The final essay, “Portuguese Affair”, is an essay about an emotional affair between a coworker and me while I am in a relationship with someone else. It’s about making a choice between contentment and risk.

THE ANATOMY OF A DRUGGED LIFE



Figure 1: Family Christmas photograph. Chris: left, Gabrielle: center, Kurt: right.

My mother opened the bathroom door of our perfect Florida suburban house, and my brother was blue. The eggshell walls and tile floor were the only things she recognized. She remembers thinking the moldy emerald green towel was his altar, his cruddy deathbed. It lay limp under him, separating his glacier body from the coolness and comfort a tile floor usually brings to sick children with a stomach virus, up all night vomiting. She had never seen him so tranquil. A needle and spoon were thorn roses adorning his grave, accompanying him in his next life, always by his side.

He was sitting up, body slumped over and folded into itself, face by feet. Legs in a frog position, like the butterfly stretch my mother and I did at the end of yoga. He almost looked as if he were praying, or meditating, like a Buddhist.

When I was younger I would nap with my mother, stealing glances at her chest to make sure it still rose up and down. For some reason, I feared she would die and leave me in her sleep. I needed her, and she me. I needed her chest to move. Here she looked down at my brother, peaceful and frozen, chest still as the murky bathwater beside him.

I was fourteen. I was at gymnastics practice. He had taken a bath and locked the bathroom door. After a while, my mother got suspicious and knocked.

No answer.

She pounded on the door.

No answer.

My oldest brother, Chris, became slightly interested then. He had been sitting on a lounge chair on the back porch by the pool, smoking a cigarette. He came inside, but moved in slow strides like a sloth. My mother slid the extra key from the top of the undusted wooden doorframe and unlocked it to an image she'll never forget. The blueness of his body unnerved her.

"I'm going to call 911," my mother said desperately.

"I'm going to give CPR," Chris said, already ducking down onto the floor to push Kurt's body flat.

I'm going to pray, I would've said. The only thing I would have thought to do.

I believed in God but I wasn't too religious and I stopped going to church when I went to high school. I still felt it was important to have faith in something. Faith would bring me to happiness. Faith could bring my entire family to happiness. I think I leaned on this because it was all we had; maybe it was the one thing that could fix something so broken. It was something to turn to that wasn't fancy vacations or expensive cars or court-ordered therapy. It was the single most hopeful thing that had the potential to be more concrete than all of that. Something bigger than all of us.

Six years later, my family sat down in our high-ceiling maroon dining room to celebrate Thanksgiving. I was twenty, and old enough to be tired of my family's problems. Kurt was constantly high, my parents constantly fought over him being high. Chris didn't encourage Kurt to get clean, but rather enabled him and traded drugs with him. I took out the long, tapered white candles in their glass holders and placed them on the table runner. My mother came in the room, saw them, and smiled at me. She found a lighter and lit them. To maintain the illusion of a normal family, my mother and I were the only two who hadn't completely given it up.

The dinner would have been pleasant, if the fork clinking, chewing sounds, and light conversation hadn't been interrupted by my father's offended fists pounding the wood and clattering the china. The food was delicious: sweet potatoes with butter and brown sugar, stuffing with walnuts and celery, juicy turkey with homemade gravy, steamed carrots and onions. He didn't slam them like a father does in the movies, to stop an argument or make an angry political point. He did it to wake up my brother Kurt, who every few minutes would fall asleep in his food after slowly struggling to lift the fork up to his mouth. His eyes were engorged, red, different. Every time he blinked I felt sympathy for his hardworking eyelids, which seemed to weigh fifty pounds. I just wanted him to give them their release, but somewhere else. Why didn't he just go to sleep? Just get in his bed, and sleep? I was too ignorant to know that you can get high from Xanax and sleeping pills if you fight past the drowsiness. He was twenty-five.

“He won’t even remember it’s Thanksgiving,” my father muttered. I thought that was a bit of an exaggeration. Chris, my mother, and I rinsed off our plates, loaded the dishwasher, and tried to envision our lives before this.

“It’s Thanksgiving today,” Kurt said the morning after as he paced out of his room, cigarette ready in his hand and sweaty bags under his eyes. He was sporting a pair of what my mother called Zombie Shorts: gym shorts with a speckled pattern of small circular burns in them, a result of falling asleep smoking cigarettes.

I guess my father was right.

“Thanksgiving was yesterday, Kurt,” I told him from where I sat on the couch. He had feasted on painkillers and turkey, mashed potatoes and Zanax.

That night, he cried to my parents in remorse. He apologized for getting high again. My mother and father nodded, not really listening, just knowing that it would eventually happen again, like clockwork. My father kept his eyes on the television while my mother kept up half-hearted nods.

In my family, the guilt came from both directions. The user and the witnesses. The addict and the enablers. Kurt, the middle child, was a drug addict. Heroin, cocaine, painkillers, Zanax, sleeping pills, Oxycontin. You name it, he’s done it. Chris, two years older than Kurt, wasn’t exactly an addict, but went through a lengthy cocaine phase and couldn’t go a day without smoking marijuana. My mother enabled Kurt by coddling him. Kurt enabled Chris by selling him fixes every now and then. My father enabled Chris by buying him a red shiny car when Kurt crashed his black one. I enabled everyone by not helping, but watching, just watching. It was all I could do.

Truthfully, I think we could have made it if Chris had been the only one with drug issues. But Kurt's issues were colossal, unyielding, and vicious. I think we all felt guilty for knowing our lives would be easier without him. At least that's what I assumed everyone felt. We would be stronger, happier, maybe even peaceful.

He confirmed that thought in his three suicide notes, left on my stairs or on Chris's over the years. Chris's note said *fuck you*. My note said *I always wanted you to be proud of me and I've always looked up to you, I'll meet you in heaven and we can play Magic cards again like when we were little*. I think he knew we might be happier. I wanted him to know that though that may be true, our family wouldn't be our family if he weren't in it. And so we would roam the streets searching for him. And he would come back like the prodigal son.

When my mother was twenty six years old, she was happily married to my father and taking care of her first born, Chris. My father went to night school to get his Bachelors in Engineering, and my mother coached gymnastics at night after she taught speech at an elementary school during the day. My father came from a very poor family, who lived in a tiny house in Roselle Park, New Jersey. It always smelled like broccoli, cats, and dust. My father's mean sisters and their ignorant daughters tried to bum food and money off of each other and live there for free. I had cousins who didn't know their fathers and cousins who had several. The house was overcrowded and dirty and people smoked cigarettes inside. I hated visiting them on holidays. And if it weren't for my Grandma Marge's cheese and rice casserole I would have hated it all the time. There was

always a random man, who was the dad of some cousin of mine, whose name I never remembered. My father was the first child of five to go to college. His siblings resented his success, his beautiful house in Florida, his shiny BMW. But they didn't know what I knew, that we really were poor, poor from unhappiness.

My mother's parents came to America from Switzerland, to see New York and find work for one year to see if they liked it. My grandfather loved America so much they decided to stay. They had three daughters and bought a farm and a house. They put their children to work each day, bailing hay, shoveling horse manure, feeding chickens. My mother lived at home while she commuted to Rutgers University, and got her Bachelors in Psychology. She never lived on her own, but married my father out of college and got a house with him on a mountaintop. They lived a few miles from my mother's parents.

Neither of my parents were privileged or spoiled in any way. They worked hard to make a life together, start their careers, and raise a family. I have always been proud of the world they have built, and it gives me something to aspire to. But I saw my brother Chris grow up differently and make different choices. Chris was twenty six when he flunked out of college, moved back in with my parents in their new Florida house, and got a job at Planet Smoothie.

At Chris's high school graduation party, my parents set up a PowerPoint slideshow on the computer in the den room. Guests roaming through the house, clutching their White Zinfandels or Miller Lites, could watch as it played on repeat the whole day. Photographs of my parents and Chris littered the desk, framed in shiny silver. I loved the

slideshow, it was like watching Chris's life, from him as a newborn to him as an 18-year-old. The song "I Hope You Dance" played in the background, with several of my parents' other favorite tunes. My parents' pride was clear; it radiated throughout the room. I sat there, watching it over and over. Chris in his marching band uniform, with a big white fluffy tail on the hat, playing the snare. Chris snowboarding at Mountain Creek. Chris in a talent show, holding a guitar and belting out lyrics to Elias, his hand-picked band behind him. Chris holding a candle next to a line of other intelligent classmates, getting inducted into the academic honor society.

Graduating with honors, he received a scholarship to Allegheny, a private school in Pennsylvania. Pre-med. A marching band member for four years of high school, he was an outstanding drummer. He could also sing and play guitar, and brought together a band himself. He took German, and when Kurt and I got to high school so did we. He was also athletic and incredibly handsome, which I didn't realize until he picked me up from gymnastics practice one night and all of the older high school girls in the levels above me whispered frantically and asked me a bunch of questions. I was in middle school, and only understood crushes as far as Jasmine and Aladdin. I looked up to him like those high school girls, but as my protector and my role model, like a hip and younger second father. I wanted to be just like him.

I never noticed that my parents' expectations and pressure on their oldest child were also in the room at his graduation party. All I saw through my young eyes was happiness and bright wishes for the future. But the perfect honor roll student didn't

transition well to his freshman year of college. As far as I knew, he was off studying to be a doctor. But this is what really happened:

He smoked a lot of marijuana.

Vandalized the furniture in his dorm room.

Skipped class.

Got a tattoo of a sun. Then a tribal band. Then a snake.

Partied all night.

Joined a fraternity.

Got kicked out of the fraternity.

Got more tattoos. Greek letters. Latin words. An angel. A sword.

Changed his major to music.

Wasn't sure if he fit in at his college anymore, or so he told us.

He moved back in with my parents in Florida when I was a freshman in college, to be job-less and degree-less. And I only learned about what went on at Allegheny through bits and pieces over the years. My parents said they were trying to protect me, but sometimes I wondered if they just didn't want to hear themselves say it out loud. I'm not sure who his failures bothered more, my parents or me. My parents wanted the best for him because he was their son, but I wanted the best for him because he was like my utopian muse, the projected version of the self I wanted to be.

After my two brothers left college way too early, I promised my mother I was going to graduate college in four years, the expected timeline for regular students. Kurt had attended Rutgers University, just like my mother, and was put on academic probation

his first semester for failing class. He didn't change his behavior in his second semester, so he was kicked out. Chris just came home, too distracted from marijuana and a goalless attitude to finish. I knew if I made mistakes in life but still managed to graduate, I would be happy knowing I did that for her and for myself, so that she wouldn't have to live through that disappointment a third time.

I wanted my parents to have one-third of normalcy in their lives. One child who got it right. I wanted that for myself too, but I knew it would be them, and this story, driving me forward.

Kurt liked to crash cars.

I was sound asleep in the downstairs bedroom of my parents' house that I had temporarily moved in over the summer of my junior year of college. It used to be Chris's room, but since he moved back in and I lived in my sorority house during the year, he swapped his small downstairs bedroom for my vast upstairs master with its own bathroom and big window. My sorority house was closed every summer, so I was subjected to the regular late night arguments between my brothers, followed by my mother's endless tears.

Before this one summer night, I had no idea Kurt even gambled, but later my mother would tell me he wasted away hundreds of dollars on online poker. Since he didn't have money, he found ways to get his hands on my parents' money. I would have done a silent addition in my head of how much money he had probably cost them, gambling not included, but I never was a great math student and I'm fairly certain the

answer would have made me shudder. To me, gambling was watching snide gangsters toss dice on the floor in my favorite classic movie, *Goodfellas*, or on my cruise to Mexico during a spring break trip where I put a few dollars in the machine and lost before I figured out how the game worked. I had no idea how to gamble, and that was perfectly fine with me.

Chris, sober now, drove a black Hyundai Tiburon which he helped pay for, washed once a week, and kept in great shape. He drove an old red Jeep Wrangler when he did cocaine. He awoke furious when my parents delivered the news.

They stood at the bottom of the stairs, speaking up to him. I could see them clearly from where I lay in my bed, cozy in my comforter. A pane of light from the hallway shone on their faces, which both wore different expressions.

“He stole your keys,” my father began. “Drove to a Daytona casino,” he continued, “and crashed it on the way back.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Chris yelled. I could only imagine how much fury was in his eyes.

“Your father is going to pick him up. We don’t know what condition the car is in yet. Your brother is fine,” my mother added.

Only my mother’s face expressed worry and dread. I heard Chris hyperventilating, knew he was about to lose his temper. My father looked nothing but tired, probably only irritated that his alarm would be going off in two hours to get ready for work. I understood his lack of compassion. Like watching a soap TV show, every week we experienced a new dose of drama. It actually would have been abnormal for a

week to pass without something happening. Every conversation included a “What did he do?” or a “How much was it?” I very rarely enjoyed my time living back at my parents’ house.

My first car, when I had only a driving permit, was a 2004 navy Volkswagen Jetta. Kurt totaled it one rainy night when he was high by crashing into a tree. My cousin Stefan picked him up, and Kurt stuffed drugs into Stefan’s pocket to hide from the police.

When I actually got my license I drove a 2006 silver Volkswagen Jetta. It overheated when Chris and Kurt took it to I-Drive one day, but they kept driving it anyway. The engine never ran correctly again. My dad sold it.

All car privileges for Kurt were revoked when he crashed my mother’s Suburban. It was massive and dark emerald green and the third crash. I was still in high school, so I was gone for the day studying Marine Science and staring at a football player I wished was my boyfriend. He went to a bar in Sanford to drink, during the day. Night fell by the time he decided to head home, but not before he bought a handle of vodka for the ride, which was half empty when the car was searched later. He got the DUI of all DUIs. Twelve grand, at least. He ran into parked cars on the side of the road and kept driving, didn’t even notice he was hitting them.

One was a cop car.

Almost hit a boy riding a bicycle.

Kurt’s use of alcohol seemed to come out of the blue. It was just like one day he stopped doing drugs, and started drinking. My mother, who practically had our lawyer

on her speed dial, sat down for a meeting with him to discuss the accident. She told me about the meeting, but not until I was older, when she knew it wouldn't scare me.

“Carol, I have to ask you something,” Michael Nappi said to my mother, concerned. I always thought Mr. Nappi was a wonderful man, young and successful, who deserved a medal for dealing with my family. He had a healthy marriage and healthy children, and sometimes I wondered what he thought of us. His lawful magic had gotten us out of several disasters, myself included, with my speeding tickets and one count of underage drinking. I made my share of mistakes too, though they were what I considered normal teenage mistakes. I wasn't addicted to anything, wasn't kicked out of college. I didn't get a tattoo or go to jail. I went over the speed limit and I had a vodka Sprite before I was twenty one.

“What?” asked my mother.

“Was he trying to kill himself?” he said.

My mother fell silent.

“What do you mean?” she said.

“The amount of alcohol that was in his system when he went to the hospital was enough to kill someone. He could have died. I have reason to believe that if he bought a handle of vodka to drink completely by himself, while he was driving, after drinking all day at a bar, this might have been his intention,” he explained.

My mother fell silent.

It still scared me a little, but I mostly just thought it was really stupid and unintentional. It was then I realized my brother was an alcoholic, who used liquor to fill

the void of the drugs he tried to quit. If it wasn't one thing, one addiction, one obsession, it was another. That was Kurt.

Often, I find myself looking back and searching for where it all went wrong for Kurt. Kurt started using shortly after Chris, both starting only with marijuana. I know my mother looks back and searches too, and I know it's far more painful for her to think about it. She can't even look at pictures of Kurt as a kid, or watch our old home movies.

"He was such a sweet boy," she said whenever I showed her an old picture of him. "He looked like a little cherub." He had round, perky, fat cheeks. He had a bowl haircut of blonde locks, and an adorable lisp. He couldn't say his R's. My mom taught him speech; she worked as a speech therapist at the elementary school we all attended.

She told me how attached he was to her. He wanted to snuggle with her every night, while he fopped his bottie on his face as they watched *Robin Hood*. My mother said they probably watched *Robin Hood* a hundred times. His bottie was his blanket: frail, thin, knitted blue and purple. She called it fopping his bottie when he took the fringes of his blanket and hit them lightly over his face over and over again. It was a soothing habit for him as a toddler. I realized that was the closest they would ever be.

As Kurt and my mother grew older, and apart, so did my parents. I believed Kurt was the only reason they grew apart at all.

During my childhood, my parents seemed young, happy, and in love. They went to Bruce Springsteen concerts and threw all-night barbecue parties with family and friends on our white deck with blue railings that I helped paint. We had a hammock and

a hottub, even a trampoline for me to practice my gymnastics flips. Our yard was huge, and my dog Apollo ran as wild as he wanted, or as wild as his electric fence boundaries would allow. My parents never fought, yelled, or cursed in front of me, or at all as far as I knew.

Kurt was a senior in high school the first time I heard an argument between my parents. This was the age in his life where it all started. I listened to them talking quietly in their bedroom one evening. I was in middle school so we still lived in the New Jersey house. Their voices wafted down the short hall that separated my periwinkle-walled room from their master suite. The television buzzed dully.

“Ken, he’s skipping class. He has missed eight days already and if he misses any more he won’t be able to walk at graduation,” my mother said. She sounded stressed.

“It’s fine, Carol. Stop worrying about it. He will go to school this week. It’s just one more week,” my father said.

“You don’t even care to find out what he’s been up to? Why he’s been lying to us? What does he do all day when he cuts class? I know it has something to do with that Evan Federici kid. He is bad news and Kurt was more focused before he started hanging out with him,” she said.

I knew Evan from the short glimpses I’d see of him and Kurt, who would head into the woods together and come back up to the house shortly after. Kurt had outgrown the long summer days when we built forts, searched for animal tracks in the mud, and created our own adventures of Robin Hood. Now, I didn’t know what he did in the

woods for those short periods of time with Evan. The woods had gone from adventurous to stealthy, becoming a hiding place.

“Evan is an alright kid. He lives in our neighborhood, we know his parents. Why do you think it has anything to do with him?” he said.

“I caught them smoking cigarettes in the woods. Now they’re smoking weed and dipping. This is going to turn into a cycle, and they’re only going to get into more dangerous stuff. Kurt looks up to Evan. He wants to be in that group,” she said. I wondered what group she was talking about. The cool kids? So far, I felt like my mother just wanted to argue.

My father sighed.

“That’s enough, Carol. Let it go. I’m getting a headache and I have a meeting tomorrow,” he said. The television switched off.

His tone was final. I heard someone get up and slam the bathroom door. Seconds later, I heard my mother’s quiet sobs.

I didn’t think anything of the argument. My mother was being paranoid, and my father was right to brush off her worries. I knew Kurt skipped class, but I didn’t know where he went instead or why. I didn’t know drugs were involved. I didn’t know anything.

This argument was the prologue for the next eleven years. She was right to be paranoid, and our lives would’ve been different if it had stopped there.

Not only was this the beginning of Kurt’s demise, the birth of his new self, but this was where the divide between my parents officially began. For the first time, they

had separate views. Views on how to parent, how to discipline, how to react to misbehaved children. Chris was off at college, so my parents didn't know what he was up to, and therefore didn't fight over him. My father was dismissive. It wasn't that he didn't want things to change, he just knew they wouldn't. In his mind, it was trying to win a lost fight.

One summer day as a child, I asked my mother if I could open a bag of Doritos. She said no. Knowing it was wrong, I went outside and asked my father. He said yes. I went back inside, headed to the pantry, and opened the bag as my mother watched. I acted like nothing was wrong with my actions.

“What are you doing? I just said no,” she said with a raised voice.

“I asked Dad,” I replied simply.

“Put them back, I said no,” she said.

This was when I learned that I should always go to my father. He would always say yes. She would always say no. He was the nice parent, she was the mean parent.

When the Drug Years began, I realized quickly it wasn't that my father was the nice one, he just checked out. My mother wanted to address the addictions of Chris and Kurt, outline their problems, fix them. My father simply checked out. He was either too busy, too hopeless, too tired, or, the most depressing and accurate reason of them all, too smart. He stayed away from the pain, the pain that my mother and I wrapped ourselves into so tightly. The pain that we let consume us both.

“Would you rather just do nothing?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

These excerpts are my mother's diary entries. They show Kurt through the lens of his mother. I was twenty, so most scenes in the essay are from this time period.

8/30/10: Kurt was sober and productive today. He cleaned his room and started his laundry. I was not sure if I should mention this and tell him that I appreciate it, so I did nothing. The last two times I thanked him for sobriety he didn't stay that way for more than a day. Maybe me encouraging him doesn't work.

I wanted to do some digging on encouragement, specifically in terms of parenting children, since Kurt mostly reminded me of a child. Robert Grille, in an article called “Rewards and Praise: The Poisoned Carrot” for The Natural Child Project, evaluated the negative effects of praise and reward through parenting for children: “When children are bribed with rewards for ‘good’ behavior, they soon learn how to manipulate us by acting the part that is expected of them.” Praise is “seduction in the place of tyranny” and “a reminder that the praiser has power over them. It diminishes the child's sense of autonomy, and, like a little pat on the head, it keeps them small.”

I never believed praise could be a negative thing. I would give my yellow dog Apollo a bacon-flavored treat every time he peed outside. But Kurt seemed like the perfect candidate for a guinea pig for The Natural Child Project. Experimenters would never guess he was a full-grown adult. He lived at home, where my mother cooked his dinner and did his laundry. She only asked for his room and bathroom to be clean, a request that was always ignored. He wouldn't do chores or dishes, functions that any child is capable of doing. Chris was more independent, less bratty.

And then there's Chris, who confronted my parents, and asked them why they never praised or appreciated him. It took until I was in graduate school for him to speak

up. Chris had a full-time job that didn't pay well. He updated stats for college football online. He didn't budget his money. My parents helped him with groceries and rent.

I was visiting my parents one evening, and brought my laptop with me to write about the thing that perplexed me the most: my family. Ironically, a full on war broke out between them right in front of me. Chris had stopped in for a visit too. He wanted to eat a free meal and pick a fight.

"I just want you guys to stop focusing on pot," Chris said. He was positioned halfway between the living room, where I was, and the kitchen, where my parents were. I could only see him from where I sat on the plush beige couch. I froze and watched the battle, sitting on the sidelines, like the golden child that I was. I was the one who made the expected accomplishments, the one who maintained a healthy relationship with my parents.

"Then stop smoking pot!" my mom yelled.

"You shouldn't care that I smoke pot. I have a job. You have never said you're proud of me. All you focus on is my downfall," he said, slamming his fist on the small counter that held the coffeemaker, at the mouth of the kitchen.

"You want to hear the honest truth?" my father said. My jaw almost dropped at the sound of his voice. "You had the world going for you. You could have had a much better job. A much better life. And you and your brother let your lives be surrounded by drugs for years and years, causing problems for yourself and your family. And that is something that yes, we are disappointed in."

My father actually said something back. My father didn't sit there and ignore the argument. Maybe he did care after all.

It was the most honest I've ever seen him. The only time I had ever seen him explain what was truly in his heart, rather than sit back and ignore everything.

"You say all the time Gabrielle is the golden child. All the time. She isn't the golden child. There are none," my mother said to Chris, although I didn't know what I had to do with the conversation.

They knew I could hear them. I was in the adjacent room, typing. I knew her words were actually true, but they still stung. I think we all wanted a little praise.

Two of my cousins from New Jersey are my best friends because we are very close in age. Alyssa is a few months younger than me and Andrea is a year older than both of us. Alyssa has wild and frizzy curly brown hair like my mother's, and Andrea has thick straight lighter brown hair more like mine. We were all around the same weight and height. The summer of 2010, they flew down from Jersey to spend a week with me in Florida. I took them to Daytona Beach, the local college bars, and the park pool in my neighborhood. My family adored them because they were wholesome smart girls who loved and cared for others easily. They each brought about \$300 cash with them for the trip, to cover food and expenses. We pulled up to my parents' driveway one evening after a long day at the beach. A mixture of sand and sweat stuck to our burnt skin, hid in the folds of our bathing suits. We couldn't wait to get inside and shower.

“Gabby, I don’t want to jump to conclusions or assume anything, but I think there is a hundred dollars missing from my wallet,” Alyssa said from the backseat. Her voice was shy and polite, like always. She had the most tender heart I’d ever known. She reminded me of my mother’s mother. Her brown eyes were glass teddy bear eyes.

Both girls had kept their wallets locked in my car at all times, orders from my mother, the warden. I turned around and looked at them.

“Yeah, this seems weird, but I think I’m missing a hundred too,” Andrea added, her hazel eyes skeptical as she searched her wallet. She was more assertive and bossy than Alyssa and I, very cunning and smart and studying Pre-med. She was always logical and always right.

Oh no, I thought.

“Okay, there is no way Kurt would steal from you guys,” I said. I denied the possibility of this, not physically, because Kurt could find money anywhere and break into anything, but emotionally, mentally.

From me, sure, but not you. You’re on vacation. He loves you both so much.

I was only embarrassed. Kurt stole from my parents and me numerous times. It was more annoying than anything, but we were all used to it. If anything went missing, it just meant it was our fault for not hiding it better. Sometimes my mother walked around with her cash in her underwear. Sometimes I watched television holding my car keys in my hand. No one outside our family was supposed to know that this was normal, expected. It was our embarrassing secret.

My mother paid the girls back what they were missing.

That night, we gathered on the couch to watch chic flicks, the ones we had loved for years: *Save the Last Dance*, *Center Stage*, *10 Things I Hate About You*. A box of chocolate Whoppers, a jar of Nutella, neon sour gummy worms, and ice cream were laid out on the coffee table in front of us. Our mini bar. I heard a weird splash, and turned around.

Kurt was high at the kitchen table and asleep with his face in a bowl of cereal. From a scientific point of view, I wondered how he was breathing. It impressed me, truly.

I briefly considered snapping a picture on my phone to show him the next day, but then realized it wouldn't matter. The pictures never mattered. He denied everything, even when there was proof. I once showed him a picture on my phone of him sleeping standing up, and he denied it. A picture of him slumped off half of his bed unnaturally. A picture of him sleeping and smoking a cigarette outside. I hoped my cousins wouldn't notice as I silently turned back around to pretend I was in one of the movies.

4/16/10: Gab came in at 3 am. Pup started barking. Kurt went into hot tub after 3 am. I told him not to and he bargained, "Give me another pill and I won't go in. Shut the shutters, and then I will be quiet". He accused me of rifling through his room and taking/moving something (his money) around 4 am. Repeatedly told me to "Tell the truth, swear to God." He stayed at my door until Chris came down shouting, "Shut the fuck up". Kurt sent me a text at 4:21 am calling me a liar and that something was moved in his room while he was in the hot tub.

In the New Jersey house when we were not yet teenagers, my brothers both had bookshelves in their rooms, with stacks and stacks of Goosebumps and American History books spilling out of the compartments. When they weren't home, I'd wander through

their rooms to find good books to read, games to play with, or Magic cards to rifle through. I festered with jealousy for Kurt's red ancient Gameboy, his prized possession. I took it and wrote "Gabby" on it in Sharpie. I'm sure my parents would've bought me one if I'd ever asked. That wasn't the point, though. I gained some sense of adventure, roaming in their rooms, fondling their model airplanes and Pogs without them ever knowing. Kurt never let go of the Gameboy incident, couldn't get over that I had touched something of his and called it mine. I mean, what harm did a little Sharpie do? The game still worked.

Every member of my family, except really me, hated their property being touched. I guess no one ever really touched my stuff, so maybe that's why it never bothered me. It drove my mom crazy when I borrowed her makeup, or stole a lipgloss color I liked. I would try her expensive Clinique eye cream and use her contacts, which were a similar prescription to mine, when I forgot my own pair. I would wear her running sneakers to bartend at night.

My grandma bought us a Wii for Christmas one year. Kurt thought it was his, because he played it the most. He whined when I used it for an hour or two to play Just Dance 4. No one was allowed in his room if he wasn't there, especially not in his closet, where he hid secrets like empty vodka bottles and drug planting materials.

My father hid his Band-Aids in his sock drawer, instead of in his bathroom cabinet, because he claimed everyone used his. I used his razor sometimes because it was sharper than mine. His bathroom drawer always had nail clippers, scarce and

coveted in our house. When I stole them, I often forgot to put them back. My brothers used his clothes and boxers and belts.

Chris owned precious amps and guitars and speakers and stereo equipment that were probably worth more than his Hyundai. He would scream like a girl if he caught you so much as touching them. I didn't, because I didn't know how to use them and they didn't hold my interest. Kurt would steal Chris's car keys and take his car.

Yet, Chris stole my father's tools from the garage. Pawned them for drug money. Kurt stole my great aunt's jewelry that she left for my mother in her will. Pawned it for drug money. So where was the line? Nothing was safe. Nothing was respected. And everyone contradicted themselves. I'm sure I would've been a hypocrite too, if my belongings were touched.

6/28/10: Chris found Kurt at 1 am on the table sleeping and out of it. Kurt would not stop badgering me to go to Amscott to make a payment. Said that he put in the wrong account number and the transaction didn't go through. I adamantly refused. He badgered me and I locked myself in my room. He told me that Chris has been buying him lunch as a trade for pieces of Suboxone. He then taunted Chris till Chris came down the steps after him. I stood between them and begged them to stop fighting. Once separated, Kurt threatened to call the cops on Chris. I drove Kurt to Amscott to get them apart from each other.

Catch Me If You Can was one of my favorite movies. Leonardo DiCaprio's character fascinated me. I gawked at how he conned and tricked people, using only smoke and mirrors. Distract a woman with jewelry or a smooth compliment; avoid her looking at the check with detail. His suave moves and debonair scams cheated bankers, pilots, and companies out of millions.

I had my own flesh and blood version of DiCaprio's character Frank Abagnale: my brother Kurt. The payments Kurt made, organized and secret, never were for what he told my mother. He would say he owed someone money or had to pay off old credit card debt. He would do a cash transfer at Publix or do some account meddling at Amscott. I don't even know what he really did. It seemed he got more creative as he aged, better at what he did over time, like any true criminal. He grew into Frank Abagnale so harmoniously. I caught myself second guessing him constantly. He was a ghost; he could take anything and stay invisible. I spent that fifty in my wallet at the mall, didn't I? It wasn't long before everyone in my family started to think they were crazy.

Time collapses. After a while, the years blend together, and we forget what day it is or why this is still happening.

On some day during some year:

"Gabrielle, where did you put your keys?" my mom asked.

"Mom, oh my God, they're in the drawer of my nightstand, by my bed," I answered.

I was annoyed with her. Why did she feel the need to ask me the same question everyday? It was like second nature to me now. She really did get more paranoid every year.

"That's not good enough. Yesterday, I put cash under my mattress and it was gone today," she said.

Wow. I wondered how often he checked her mattress. I wondered why he was her son and acting like he was robbing a stranger. I was surprised and annoyed.

“And he found the cash I hid in the rolls of toilet paper under Dad’s bathroom sink,” she continued.

Surprised, annoyed, and impressed.

“It’s like living with a criminal, Gabrielle. Remember that,” she said.

She was right. We had gone through three safes because Kurt broke into them. My parents quit drinking alcohol because the bar would be cleaned out no later than 24 hours after my father brought home liquor to make martinis. One time when my mother searched Kurt’s room, she found his Houdini instruments: bent wire hangers, empty pen canisters, crazy homemade tools for breaking into things.

Today, in the year 2014, the secrets and instruments have changed, slightly. My mother found Kurt growing hallucinogenic mushrooms in my old bedroom. He had conned her into taking him to Home Depot for some odd supplies, which she paid for without asking. The supplies were needed to grow the mushrooms. If he had put half the energy into college as he did into tricking my mother, he might have graduated, with honors.

Suboxone, a narcotic drug, contains a combination of buprenorphine and naloxone and is designed to help patients wind down from severe addictions to heroin, painkillers, or other opiates (“Why SUBOXONE Film?”). I had to do my research on this, because I wasn’t really sure what it did. Kurt became dependent on Suboxone, which apparently made him feel high enough to get through his taxing, hard days lying at

home. I had seen him take it for years, making me question how much it really helped him.

Adults are instructed to put cough medicine, aspirin, and painkillers in a hard-to-reach cabinet. The cap of most medicines must either be squeezed on the sides and turned, or pushed down on and twisted to open. Child-safe.

When we moved to Florida, my parents bought a safe because Kurt started stealing. It served the purpose of keeping our valuables protected. My mother, though at first I thought she was paranoid, forced me to put my keys, wallet, and jewelry in it each night before bed. It served a dual purpose when it eventually became The Medicine Cabinet and housed Kurt's Suboxone. An eternal child like Kurt can't control himself, has zero limitations. My mother kept the Suboxone locked in the safe at all times. I understood why; she only gave him the right dosage, making sure he never took more than he should. Child-safe.

This put a certain strain on my mother, who was always badgered for more and more Suboxone. That was her term, badgering. She said it almost every day to describe the torture Kurt inflicted upon her. We could always depend on him to behave far worse when my father was away on business trips, which was usually at least once a week. He wasn't there to intimidate, to protect. Kurt wasn't afraid of my mother. He would never pull the same stunts with my father around. I never got a chance to see how my father would react, because Kurt didn't do anything at all with him at home.

She constantly locked herself in her room, but eventually gave in when Kurt's pounding on the door went on for a few hours. Sometimes, he would sit outside her room and cry for more.

This always reminded me of bratty little kids. I felt I was sometimes like this when I was younger, but I grew out of it.

Girl sees a Barbie at department store.

Asks mom for it.

Mom says no.

Girl cries.

Mom says no.

Girl cries louder.

Mom says no.

Girl screams and rants at the top of her lungs.

Mom just wants her to be quiet.

She buys her the doll.

7/12/10: Today is the year anniversary of Chris returning home from Jersey after flunking out of college. I left text message to Kurt thanking him for his efforts to stay clean. I had left Gab a text saying her bankcard is here and it is locked in the safe. She asked if she could come over to get it and if she could have friends over in the hot tub. Gab came in the middle of the night to go in the hot tub with 3 friends. At 1:30 am I woke up because of noise outside. The dog was crying outside so I got up to let him in. The hot tub was on, the garage door was open and the garage light was on. All cars were gone.

During the summers I often left my apartment at UCF to come home. My parents lived an easy thirty minutes away, and all of my friends from high school came home for the summers. I liked to go to house parties, invite friends over to swim in my pool, spend days at the beach or Universal Studios. I never thought my plans to have fun over summer vacation would ever complicate my parents' lives. I constantly flitted in and out of the house, grabbing meals or clothes or taking a quick nap to jumpstart my energy for a night out. That was my mother's term, flitting, and it drove me crazy. Why did she care that I went in the pool? Or had friends over?

I didn't think about actually spending time there, asking my mom if she was okay or finding out how my father's day at work went. I grew selfish, and only cared about my own agenda, no one else's. As a sophomore in college I figured I had earned the right to have fun on my time off. I wonder now, though, if my actions played into the twisted formula that made up my family's life. My family's destruction. I should have picked up the slack for my brothers. I should've helped around the house and brightened moods. I should've grown up faster, learned how to cook meals. I didn't realize how much my mother needed me. How much they all needed me.

I considered my own issues to be minor in comparison to my brothers. I remember the first time I got in trouble with the law. As a junior in high school, I walked into the kitchen one evening, after receiving my first traffic ticket: failure to come to a complete stop at a red light before turning right. (The light was yellow. But cops are cops.) I was terrified to tell my father, who had just gotten in a nasty argument with my brothers. I figured I would test out the tell-someone-bad-news-when-they're-already-in-

a-bad-mood theory, as opposed to when they're in a good mood and ruining their perfect day. Wrong choice.

My father was cleaning up dinner. We had spaghetti and sausage with red sauce.

“Dad, I have to tell you something,” I said.

He looked up, fire in his grey blue eyes, and sighed.

“Just tell me, what is it, what?” he said, rushing me. I was always scared of my father, but now I actually had a reason to be scared.

“I got a ticket on the way home from work today,” I said quickly.

He didn't say anything. I wish he had.

Instead, the burly hands that were holding the handles of the spaghetti pot lifted, the pot rose, then came back down crashing on the marble black countertop. Pasta flew everywhere: in the sink, on the floor, covering the wall. I'd never seen my father lose control before.

In the grand scheme of things, I knew it was just a traffic ticket. My first offense in the adult world. But anything I did, any little thing, was like the Jenga piece that made the tower fall. My parents were so constantly on overload from the trouble my brothers had caused, that anything I did was treated like murder. I couldn't screw up the way normal teenagers did, because they had no empty space to be filled for more disaster. I felt it was impossible to please them, which was all I wanted to do.

My grandmother bought my family a Wii the Christmas before she passed. It was a gift to my brothers and me to share. We were thrilled. I bought myself one game, Just Dance 4, because I loved pretending I was Britney Spears waltzing around a stage

shaking my butt. It was also a great workout. My parents bought my brothers a few games to start off with, and the following Christmas I bought Kurt two games, at fifty bucks a pop. I got him the new Call of Duty and Fifa Soccer. I was twenty-two, and budgeted my weekend bartending money to \$150 a person in my family, totaling \$600 to spend on Christmas presents. Chris was finally buying presents for us without help from my parents, but Kurt still had to be given money to spend because he was unemployed. He was unemployed a few times, when he was twenty six and twenty seven. And a few times before.

This never bothered me, because it made me happy to buy presents for my family with my own money. I had been doing it since I was sixteen. This was the second year Chris bought us presents himself. I think Kurt bought me a birthday present with his own money once. That was the year I got beef jerky and Red Bull from the gas station.

I stood outside Kurt's door, knocking. I was heading back to my apartment and wanted to borrow the Wii for one night. The stench from his room wafted around me: dog hair, unwashed boxers, stale pajamas.

"What?" he said without opening the wooden door.

I opened it. He was lying on his bed facedown, after sleeping all day.

"Can I borrow the Wii tonight? I have a meeting around here on Tuesday so I'll be back that morning with it. It's just one day," I said, trying to be as polite as possible.

"You could've played it all day. You were here all day. I have nothing to do here. I need it," he said. He sounded like a five-year-old.

“I was doing homework all day! And whose fault is that? Do something with your day,” I said. I couldn’t help it. My mother wasn’t the only one frustrated by him doing nothing.

“No, you can’t have it,” he said.

I paused.

“Well, I was only asking you to be polite, instead of just taking it. I’m taking it, because it’s not yours. I was just letting you know.” I stepped into the room to gather the equipment. I had never tried to be this brave before, this assertive. I usually caved to his wishes, because it was just easier.

“Alright, Gabrielle, you’re going to be a little hussy?!” And with that he lurched off the bed, screaming. Zero to sixty.

“A hussy means slut, actually,” I said. I laughed a little. He didn’t know what the word meant, and I was brave now, brave enough to point that out.

“No.” He started coming at me, spit flying from his mouth and hatred in his eyes. “It means someone that’s a little bitch. Someone who talks with an attitude. You’re a fucking little bitch,” he yelled at my face.

Through my hard-shell exterior, I cringed at the word bitch. It stabbed me. This was one of our few major fights. I just never had the guts to disagree with him before.

“You don’t see me calling you an asshole or a prick or name calling,” I said, my voice still even.

“Yeah, that’s because I’m not being one,” he said.

“Oh you’re not?”

“No.”

He ripped the Wii equipment from his TV, where it was kept 24/7, and shoved it into my arms. He slammed the door in my face, almost hitting it.

“How would Oma feel if she saw how you were acting over this? It was a gift to us, for us to have fun with. She would be disappointed,” I said, quieter than before.

“Oh, you’re going to throw Oma in my face?!” he screamed, opening the door back up.

Maybe I shouldn’t have brought her up. She was my mother’s mother. Her death had been sudden and quick, over a cancer we never knew she had, and she was the only thing good and pure in this life that we all loved the same way. Pain, like so much else, was something Kurt didn’t know how to deal with. But I was right; she would be ashamed of us, of him. She had the rare type of complete selflessness you never see in this world.

“GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!” he yelled, slamming the door shut again.

I gathered up my bag and the equipment, cords draped over my arms, and walked into the garage, shocked at what just happened. I got outside to my car, put the stuff in my backseat, and fought back tears.

They betrayed me, and rolled down my face angry and pitiful. My heart ached for being called a bitch, for just trying to borrow something that was partially mine. I opened the backseat door, took the Wii back out, walked back inside, and put it in front of Kurt’s door.

I got in my car and drove home crying.

J.M. Barrie once said, “You can have anything in life if you will sacrifice everything else for it” (“James M. Barrie Quotes”). I think for my mother, she sacrificed everything in her life for Kurt’s sobriety. And the saddest part was, she never achieved it.

My mother and I like to have coffee at home. We like to sit together on the couch. We use the time, with hazelnut notes and Columbian roast drifting through the air, to catch up on each other’s lives. Mostly, we talk about our family.

I was still twenty-two. I asked her about things I’ve never asked her before. I asked her what she thinks of this life.

“I used to do anything in my power to prevent your brothers from using drugs or fighting with each other. I used to sleep on the bottom of your stairs, between their bedroom doors, on nights I feared they would try to use. Did you know that?” my mother asked.

“No,” I answered quietly, trying to imagine her short body curled up by the tile.

“I’ve always sacrificed my happiness for what was more important. For this family. And during the time I wrote my diary entries I believed love could surpass and endure anything,” she said.

I began to ponder a little about sacrifice, and about what each member of my family had to sacrifice for the presence of drugs.

For my mother, it was her happiness, and living a stress-free life.

For my father, it was his pride, knowing he could've had three successful children who had careers, who were clean and healthy.

For Kurt, it was friends and maturity. His excessive drug use stunted his growth, made him lose himself, lose his personality. His only friends were drug dealers.

For Chris, it was the life he could have had, the medical student from Allegheny he could have been.

And for me, it was normalcy. The chance to see how a family without drugs could function.

I realized sacrifice is a part of life. But most people are sacrificing for other people, for living, breathing things.

Not for drugs.

9/24/10: When I woke Kurt was outside smoking and sleeping. Ken and I both suspected that he used again. Chris called downstairs and said he found a rolled up dollar bill on Kurt's desk and his guess was that Kurt got a hold of some pills again. There appears to be no end to this. After wrecking the car and getting some support from people at work and given another chance he continues to use. It is so stressful living a life always on edge and waiting for the next relapse.

We always have the pursuit of happiness. And I still have not given up hope that faith will lead me to that happiness; lead us all to that happiness.

I knew it wouldn't just come, especially not easily. I would have to work towards it everyday, with each member of my family. I would have to forgive my brothers, and forgive them for good. For hurting my family, for their mistakes and for their faults, for the expectations I had that they never lived up to.

As for me, I graduated from college in four years like I said I would and started graduate school. I didn't get any special attention, but I knew my family was proud of me. I treat my mother with more kindness and respect than the late nights when I brought over my loud friends to hangout in the hot tub. I focus on what I can do to make my family whole again, not what my brothers can stop doing. I have not given up, and neither has my mother. She is the one who feels the same pain, hopes the same things, sees us through to the end.

This family is crazy, unorthodox, disturbed, and disconnected. But it is mine. We will work. Even if it kills me, we will stay together. Drugs and all.

PIRATE BROTHERS

When I was four, my parents moved us from a small mountain house in New Jersey to a vast traditional colonial home just a neighborhood away. They were poor when they married and fresh out of college, but I spent my childhood in our new home, after they had gotten on their feet. My brother Chris was eleven, my brother Kurt nine.

The newer, bigger house would always be my favorite home. It might be because we left so much of ourselves there. My two brothers rooms were right next to each other, separated by only a staircase. A bathroom connected my room to Kurt's hallway, something I would hate when I was older and had to clean up his minty toothpaste residue. My room, with periwinkle walls and a peach carpet, was right next to my parents' room. My two big windows looked out to the front lawn, which housed an enormous row of pine trees. In the winter the crystallized snow clung to the needles, and I'd silently stare at them from my floor at nighttime, the only light in my room emitting from the electric candles my father placed on each windowsill during Christmas. My room blushed with magic when I switched the lights off, the tender yellow a lullaby whirring me to sleep.

When I reached high school, my parents and I moved to another big house in Lake Mary, Florida. After flunking college one by one, my two brothers moved into the Florida house, where I had been reborn an only child. They were different. We were different.

CHRISTMAS MORNING:

I'm sound asleep. I am six years old. My comforter protects me from the chill of the air in our house, the single worst part about getting up in the morning on school days, that abrupt change in temperature from bed to bathroom.

"Ahhhh!" I scream. Someone has ripped my comforter off me. My body is exposed; feeble pajamas fail to provide me any warm solace.

"Gabrielle, get up! Get up!" Kurt says.

I rub my crusty eyes and yawn as I look up at my brother, whose identical grey-blue eyes flash with the amusement and pride of a bully. I feel a hot anger build, but I'm excited too, so it fades as quickly as it came. He might just find this funny, but he did this every year, he chose me. And I couldn't be angry with that.

"Let's go look at the presents!" he says.

I hop from my bed as he drops the handful of Little Mermaid sheets onto my floor and the two of us run downstairs. It's still dark out. We know we can't open anything, but we spend the next few hours looking at each present. We pick them up, shake them, and share theories on their shapes and weights. We scramble to read the label on the big packages, and get jealous when it isn't one of our names written down. Every now and then, one of us tries to wake my parents up. Chris is older than us and outgrew most of the Christmas morning rush, but Kurt is still immersed in the fun, still stakes some of his childishness into me.

Later that afternoon, after all the wrapping paper is recycled and the late breakfast is devoured, my brothers and I head outside to test out our new toys. My brothers got two plastic snowboards, in which you just had to shove your feet into the foot holdings

and ride down a hill. I got a bright pink sled built for one. We prepare our bodies for the cold, hunting for wool mittens and hats in our drafty gasoline scented garage. My brothers suit up in their snow gear: insulated Boy Scout clothes and camouflaged boots. I pull on my neon pink snow pants with suspenders, an embarrassing one-piece I happen to love. It is too small on me now, and fits me like a sausage casing. On top of it I throw on what looks like Barbie's party jacket from the 80s and follow Chris and Kurt out the door and into Antarctica.

My black high heels clacked the floor of my parents' house as I popped into Kurt's bathroom to take one last look at myself. I breathed in the smell of piss, and stepped on a mound of towels thrown on the floor. Toothpaste was caked on the sink, decorating it with baby blue splotches. I looked at my reflection through the water-stained mirror, fixing my smudged eyeliner and adjusting my dangly earrings. I had just turned twenty-one, and was headed out with some friends to grab a drink.

Kurt's door was slightly ajar, so I pulled down my skirt a little and knocked.

"What?" he said, half grunting.

I hesitated, debated going back into the bathroom, and then rolled my eyes and pushed the door further open.

Kurt lay on his bed with mismatched sheets and an old comforter, in the same sweatpants I had seen him in all week. His carpet stunk of dog hair and moldy clothes, and Reese's and Lay's wrappers littered his desk. He was watching a pirated bootleg version of Avatar.

“Hey,” I said. I looked awkwardly at my feet, uncomfortable for what I was about to say.

He just glared at me.

“I, um, just wanted to let you know I’m going out with some friends if you want to come. We are just going to grab drinks. If you maybe want to meet some new people,” I said. It sounded rehearsed, because it was.

My mother had strongly suggested the invite. Sick of watching him lounge around with no job, no money, and no friends aside from drug dealers, she tried to push him on me, make him my burden. I would’ve been glad to help, but he was nothing but cold to my parents and me. And it wasn’t easy for us to just forget everything he has done.

I tried to imagine him socializing with my friends and me, who were so much younger than him. I would feel embarrassed for him, and I felt embarrassed I had to invite him.

“No,” he said, “Can you shut my door?” His response didn’t surprise me, but I thought I heard a little gratitude in his voice.

I smiled and closed his door, happy he rejected my offer and happy he knew I tried.

THE DITCH:

It is still winter and I am still six. In between our house and our neighbor’s house, there is a big grassy ditch that lies between our yards. It looks like a hole in the ground, a

large crater, and has a drainage system on both ends for when it rains. In the summer it's useless, but in the winter it is our infinite playground. We sled down it and then take our sleds, walk back up, and do it again.

Chris and Kurt seem to enjoy their snowboards, challenging each other in races or seeing who can stand up the longest during the ride down. Kurt's big ears stick out from under his blue and orange Knicks beanie. He watches Chris's turns down the Ditch with young jealousy, and treats our sledding as a competition, only smiling when I fall down and become something he can easily overshadow. Chris's amber hair is disheveled from the wind and sticks to his forehead with dewy sweat. He doesn't laugh at me when I fall.

Then, I see a different fun in the snowboard. I face forward, sit down in the middle of the two foot holdings, and place my legs Indian style. I ride down into the Ditch on it like a sled. Chris and Kurt take the snowboards into the treacherous woods to mimic my idea. The woods are essentially one big hill, much steeper than the Ditch and with many things to run into. I go inside to grab us some Cokes, famished with thirst and sweaty in my neon pink sausage casing. I watch Chris take a run down the woods on the walk back. He barely misses a tree by a hair and he is going three times as fast. They give me no credit for my concept.

When I return outside with the Cokes my brothers are sitting back in the bottom of the ditch, red-faced and panting. Snot runs down their noses and they try to catch it with their gloves. Their jackets are unzipped, as is mine. I feel their exhaustion. I walk down into the crater to meet them.

"Brought us some drinks, figured you were thirsty," I say.

“Thanks, Gabrielle,” Chris says. The only people who called me by my full name were my family members. It’s true I liked Gabrielle better, but people always said Gabby because it was quicker.

Kurt takes a Coke from me, twists the cap off the glass bottle and begins to chug the cold soda without a word. I open my own bottle, smiling at the delightful *psst* sound as the carbonation releases.

“Gabrielle, watch this,” Kurt says. He takes his Coke bottle in one hand and a handful of snow in the other. He pours some of the soda into the snowball resting on his glove. It turns a light brown, and he pops some into his mouth. “Coke slushy,” he says.

I think it is the greatest thing ever.

“Woa!” I say, and try it with my Coke. It’s delicious and refreshing.

The snow will melt that spring. Dangerous flooding will occur all over town. My grandmother’s mailbox will be completely submerged and roads will be closed. No one will be able to drive anywhere.

For adults, this will be a huge inconvenience. But my brothers and I will still be venturesome kids, and by some lucky accident, our Ditch will be completely filled with rain. It will be the only time it ever floods. It will look like a swimming pool, and we won’t hesitate. We will call up some of my brothers’ hooligan neighborhood friends and take out my parents’ two kayaks from the garage. Kurt will kayak a lap or two around the makeshift swimming pool and our parents will come outside to tell us it is dangerous. They will warn us that we could get sucked into the big drain, like a little girl on the news

in some other sewer system. We will silently curse their wise parental advice for stumping our outdoor creative play.

When I was seventeen, a senior in high school, I dated one of the biggest potheads in our class. His name was Jeff Hemann. He played safety for the varsity football team and won Most Attractive. I was the only shy and innocent girl he had ever been with. He never asked me to smoke weed, because he knew what my answer would be. I just didn't want to, I felt it belonged to girls like his ex, who had a Sublime tattoo on her lower back and did Xanax on spring break. My mother believed pot was a gateway drug, and who could blame her?

“After school, Kurt and his hooligan friend down the street, Evan, would come out of the woods with dip cups and a cigarette stench,” my mother told me once. “And do you know how he started smoking weed?”

“No,” I had said, oblivious to it all.

“He heard around school that Chris smoked weed. He told them, ‘Impossible. Not my brother.’ Then he found out it was true, so he started doing it,” she said.

It was hard to imagine high school Chris, the honor roll marching band star, doing something so sleazy, but it wasn't hard to imagine Kurt following along. It was another bond between them, something to do together, even today. I still haven't tried pot, a cigarette, a Black and Mild, even a hookah, purging myself from the world they shared.

THE WOODS:

I just turned seven. It's summer, the snow and the rain are gone. We are left with new adventures to be had. My brothers are not in high school yet. They do not yet use the woods as their cigarette, pot, and tobacco hidden lair. It is our palace, the kingdom we reign.

There is a trail that leads down the huge hill that is the woods with a river resting at the bottom. The trail is one large zigzagged path, so my brothers and I tie a long yellow rope to a tree about midway down for a shortcut. The rope has knots tied on it every few feet, so you can grab them and support your feet against the ground while lowering yourself down like a rock climber. Our friends come down the trail to play with us and we brag about our adolescent genius. We are inventors.

For my seventh birthday, my parents buy me a book about all different types of animal tracks and how to identify them. I assume there are creatures roaming in our woods beyond the deer we always see, like bears, mountain lions, wolves, dragons, dinosaurs. Kurt helps me use the small yellow measuring tape that came with the birthday book to calculate the size of each watery print we find in the mud by the river. He listens to my wild hypotheses about each one, keeping silent when he recognizes they are all variations of deer. I try to find old dried up tracks or imprints on rocks like the birthday book tells me so that I may uncover clues to a deceased species. We are archaeologists.

My father is pretty handy, and does a lot of the work on our house by himself. He refurbishes our basement and builds our two-tiered deck. The great part is that he

discards all the extra plywood into a pile at the mouth of the woods. Chris, Kurt, and I see the opportunity to become builders ourselves. We spend hours scouting out the best locations for forts. We tie flat arrow-shaped rocks to the ends of sticks for Indian spears and nail scrap wood together for pirate swords. We assemble a fort, incorporating the trees around us, and even make a roof. We carve our names into the piece of wood that serves as the door. Chris digs a hole from the dirt in the center of our fort, and we bury hidden treasure: Mardi Gras beads and fake jewelry from my Barbie. We are pirates.

There is a magical gigantic sycamore tree we fish off of that hangs high over the edge of the river. Like thick, swollen pythons, the roots of the tree spreads in twists and turns over the dirt below it, creating numerous little tunnels. I play house, and imagine each compartment the roots forge as a room. I hide trinkets, leaves, secrets, sometimes even myself in them. I duck down and see how long it takes my brothers to notice my absence. I come out when they don't. They are busy hooking grimy worms to their reels as they look for trout and striped bass. Chris teaches me how to cast, but I'm nervous about hooking someone's ear. Kurt catches a rainbow trout and lets me touch it. Blackish green spots are peppered along the silver fish, a faded pink streak on its side. It is plump and still wet, my fingers skim the silky surface whose color reminds me of my mother's rosy nightgown. We are fishermen.

I got a card for my fourteenth birthday from my white haired grandmother Margaret in New Jersey. Unlike my other grandmother, she didn't have much money,

and lived in a small rickety house in crummy Roselle Park. In her cards, she usually inserted a twenty-dollar bill, sometimes only a ten, but always something.

“Gabrielle, you have a birthday card from Grandma Marge!” Kurt yelled up my stairway.

I was working on a scrapbook for my best friend, Jen, documenting a summer we spent together in Cape Cod. I tossed my red-orange coloring pencil on my bed and ran to my open door. One perk of living in Florida were the surprise birthday cards I got in the mail from New Jersey friends and family, reminding me of home, of my old life.

“Let me see it!” I said to Kurt, who waited at the bottom of the stairs, waving my card. It was open, and he had the ripped purple envelope in his other hand. An immature wicked smile was painted across his face, his internal bully refusing to die.

“She didn’t leave you any money this time! Haha!” he teased me.

“I don’t care about that,” I said. So what if she had never forgotten before. I knew she didn’t have much.

Just then, Chris opened his door. His room was once again across from Kurt’s. Since they were both off at college when my parents and I moved, I got the upstairs, which had an extra closet and its own bathroom.

“Empty your pockets,” Chris said, approaching Kurt angrily. He had a sly look in his eye like he knew something.

“What?” Kurt said.

“You took the money out of the card. Empty your pockets,” he said. He tried to reach for Kurt, who lunged away, offended.

“Chris, that’s crazy. Stop it,” I said. I would have never thought that.

Chris ignored me. He came at Kurt again, this time catching him and wrestling him to the ground. They began hitting each other, Kurt trying to tear Chris’s hands away from his pockets.

“Stop it! Stop! Chris!” I yelled. My eyes frantically watched their fight, my brain trying to figure out what to do. Chris was crazy.

Then, Chris pulled a twenty-dollar bill from Kurt’s Old Navy khakis. He got up, panting, and threw it up the stairs to me. It sailed in the air and landed on the fifth or sixth step, ending the fight.

Kurt remained on the ground, out of breath as well. I saw the truth in his eyes, and it shocked me. He stole from me. It was the first time, and certainly not the last.

“Of all the disgusting things we have done, I would never steal from my little sister. I would never do that!” Chris yelled down at him. “That is the lowest thing, to steal money from her birthday card,” he said.

Chris had recently stolen every single one of my dad’s expensive power tools for drug money. I guess I felt a little warm knowing he wouldn’t touch a girl’s birthday.

SCARY MOVIE:

My parents keep a pretty close friendship with our neighbors down the street, who throw big holiday get-togethers and pool parties. During one party, while the adults converse around the kitchen clutching cocktails and getting red-faced loud, the kids are plopped in the living room with a movie. I am still seven. Our neighbors have three boys

who are all around Chris and Kurt's age, so they choose to put in a movie called *It*, about a killer clown. The clown vaporizes from the drain of a shower anytime a boy or girl takes one, and then attempts to kill them.

"You're not allowed to watch this, Gabrielle," Chris says.

"But the toys are in this room."

"You can sit on the floor next to the couches and play, but you can't watch the TV."

For the entire length of the movie, I sit pretending to play with the toys by myself while I secretly steal glances at the television. Basically, I watch the entire film. It is hard not to. I hear the screams of a naked girl being killed and see red blood swirl at the bottom of the white bathtub.

After the party, and for the next few weeks, I am utterly terrified to shower. I won't take a bath. I won't go near the tub. My mother tries to force me, and I cry. I tell her about the movie I watched at our neighbor's house. She gets angry, but doesn't offer me any solutions. I imagine the bathtub painted red with my blood and I shudder.

"Gabrielle, come here," Chris says to me after my mother went to tell my father about the movie. My tears are still wet on my face.

He walks me up the spiral wooden staircase that twirls around a big glass chandelier. It leads up to my bedroom and my parents' bedroom. He takes me down the hallway and into the bathroom I share with Kurt.

"When I was little, I used to be scared of snakes coming up from the toilet," he confesses.

“You were?” I say. He nods and offers me a tender smile.

I marvel at the similarity. His fear appears quite rational. He used to be scared of some bathroom killer too, just like me. I look up at him with eager eyes.

“So what I did, was I took some sheets of toilet paper and put them in the water, covering up the hole. It made me feel better, and then I could go to the bathroom,” he says.

I paint a younger Chris in my mind, a boy my age, tearing white squares of toilet paper off the roll and letting them sail down into the bowl, until the water is no longer visible.

We crouch on the chilly beige tiles of the bathroom floor, and he takes a washcloth out of the cabinet under the sink.

“Maybe, we can use this washcloth to clog up the drain in the bathtub. That way, the clown can’t come through. Clowns can’t come through drains that have washcloths covering them,” he says.

“Really? You think that will work?” I begin to have hope.

“Of course it will work.” He begins filling the bath with warm water.

He wets the grey, ancient washcloth in his hands and clogs up the drain.

“You can do this every time you take a bath, until you’re not scared anymore. Okay?” he says.

“Okay,” I say. He lifts me off of the tile and stands me up. He hands me a yellow towel from the rack on the wall, walks out of the bathroom, and gently closes the door behind him.

It was fall and my graduate school was having an annual blood drive. I just turned twenty-three over the summer. Since needles didn't terrify me and I got some high out of doing something helpful for other people, I headed to campus and looked for the big red buses. The line was long because it was noon and students swarmed the Student Union and the patio area either rushing to class or rushing to lunch. The process took me about two hours, but my day was pretty open.

The nurse instructed me to hold onto a stress ball, and squeeze it in small pulses. She tied a nude rubber elastic band around my arm as a tourniquet. I looked away as she inserted the needle and I felt the uncomfortable prickly sting. After all my donations, I still couldn't look at the needle. I searched the bus for distractions as I continued pumping the stress ball in my hand. I examined the jean skirt on the pasty white girl across from me, studied the backpack of a lonely looking boy in the corner. I stole a glance at the tube protruding from my arm, filled with my dark red blood. I looked away again.

When I left the bus a pint of blood lighter, I was lightheaded and hungry. I clutched my free pizza coupon and shoved it into my purse as I headed to my car. I drove to the pizzeria right away.

A silly little part of me felt a tad heroic, showing the cashier my coupon and hoping he noticed my arm. The inside of my arm harbored a petite white cotton ball tapered down with a blue Band-Aid. The nurse had wrapped over it with a white roll of sticky gauze-like material decorated with pink breast cancer ribbons.

I thought the bandage was girlish and cute, so I wore it the rest of the day.

The next day, I had a night shift at the bar to work. My arm was bare because I had showered and taken off the bandage, cotton ball, and Band-Aid. I looked at myself naked in the mirror, the fresh steam still fogging it. The skin around the inside of my arm was clear except for a purple dot, marking the company of the needle. With the spot in plain view, I no longer felt that silly heroism. I felt ashamed and disconcerted. I was embarrassed of the mark. I quickly thought of ways to cover it up for work. I could put make-up on it, or another Band-Aid, or wear a jacket over my shirt.

Were my customers going to think I did drugs? They knew what kind of person I was. They knew I would never do drugs. Right?

The tiny purple dot held some kind of colossal significance in me. It reminded me of him.

When Chris lived in a two-bedroom apartment with Kurt, he witnessed the true repulsiveness of Kurt's unusual behavior. He took pictures with his cell phone to send to the rest of us, or to show Kurt when he was finally sober again, which took days. The pictures I saw frightened me because they were real, and looking at those pictures was the first time I ever saw actual proof of what Kurt was doing to himself.

The photographs were of Kurt's sink. Just his sink, eggshell and pure. But it was adorned with his candy. There were bags of pills everywhere, spoons, and needles. Like the one that went in my arm and took my blood. He kept everything hidden in his backpack, which he never went anywhere without. Chris said sometimes he would get too high and leave everything out. He would fall asleep sprawled out on his bed

unnaturally, with a belt around his arm. I was lucky enough to never find him that way, but I imagined it anyway, let it haunt me.

He would often lose his heroin and painkillers because he would forget his hiding places when he was drugged. He would confront and accuse Chris of taking them. If Chris did manage to find any, he flushed them down the toilet.

Those beady little pills, those toys of his, were Kurt's replacements for friends, for family, for me. He cared more for them than any of us.

CRUSHES:

I first start gymnastics when I am seven years old, and I practice with a group of girls my age. One night, Chris picks me up from practice instead of my parents. He is a senior in high school and one of the most talented drummers in the marching band. He comes in wearing a varsity jacket and hair with bleached tips, a styling choice trendy at the time. His warm brown eyes search for me, oblivious of anyone else.

"Oh my gosh, Gabby. Is that your brother?" a girl named Lauren asks me. She goes to his high school too, and is in my gymnastics carpool because of how close she lives to me.

I turn to look towards the waiting area where all of the parents sit and watch their kids practice. Chris is standing by the swinging white wooden gate that leads to the blue-carpeted workout area. He smiles at me when I catch his eye.

"Um, yeah," I say with a confused tone. Then I look around. All of the gymnasts Lauren's age are staring at him, gossiping to each other, showing off their tricks for him.

All of the girls my age are giggling and pointing. Everyone seems to be affected by his presence. I realize people find my brother attractive.

Kurt's handsomeness is more hidden. He is a bit goofy, with bigger ears and a big nose. He follows in Chris's footsteps, by playing percussion in the same marching band and struggling to step out of his shadow. Still, Kurt's silliness and goofiness sets him apart from Chris, and he is just as captivating.

When I am eleven, I will learn that my two best friends, Jen and Christina, have crushes on my brothers. I will go to gymnastics with Christina and go to school with Jen. They will come over my house, blushing and nervous, and try to convince me to play pranks on my brothers or steal their boxers. I will wonder if they are there for me or for them. But they will be my best friends, eager to slumber party and do makeovers. Their interest in the allure of my brothers will be something I won't understand. I will always think of my brothers as the grimy pirates I played Shipwreck with in our wooden fort. I will think of them as the mighty Boy Scouts who taught me how to go to the bathroom in the bushes when we were too far from the house.

"Hey," said a voice behind me.

I knew right away it wasn't Kurt's, and my heart sunk, only because I would've rather dealt with him. I turned around and saw Chris walking into the kitchen, stopping in at Mom and Dad's. If I had known he was coming I would've found some coffee shop to sit in and eat my lunch. I was twenty-three, but still visited my parents' house about once a week.

“Hi,” I said, not looking away from the television.

“I just took Cosmo for a walk and thought I’d eat some lunch here,” he said.

Cosmo was our aging black Labrador. I kept watching the television, ignoring him.

“Heard you and Taylor went to the beach house last weekend, the day after I left,” I said. Taylor was my former best friend, who was dating Chris and who I hadn’t spoken to in a year. He had stolen her from me.

“Yeah, it was fun,” he said. He seemed to be brushing off my cold tone.

Our newly purchased beach house was two and a half hours away on Anna Maria Island, near Tampa. My parents usually spent every weekend there now. It wasn’t my place to decide who was or wasn’t welcome there, but the thought of Taylor sleeping in my newly furnished bedroom there, with sliding window doors looking out to the bay, made me jealous and uncomfortable.

“You couldn’t tell me you guys were going?” I asked in a bratty voice. I’m being intrusive but I poke anyway. When he answers, I feel like there are bugs crawling under my skin. His callous personality makes me cringe.

“Um, I didn’t think you would care,” he said. “It’s not your house.” I see fresh anger blossom on his face, and know that we are about to fight. He has the worst temper. I decided to go for it.

“You know what really pisses me off? You two move in with each other and I have to find out from Mom? You didn’t think maybe that was something you could’ve told me?” I asked. When I heard they were renting a house in downtown Orlando, I

knew we would slip further and further away from being anything. He would always choose Taylor over me, and she would always choose him. I didn't fit into their lives anymore.

"Listen, the world doesn't fucking revolve around you. I didn't know you guys didn't talk," he said as he picked up a bowl of pasta and slammed it back down on the table. He was pacing frantically around the kitchen, projecting a hatred I didn't even know he had for me.

The oven timer beeped. My individually sized frozen pizza was done. I got up to retrieve it, fuming with heat not from the oven door.

"Oh you had no idea we don't talk to each other? I can tell how much she misses me," I said, laying on the sarcasm.

I wondered how pathetic I sounded. I wondered if they knew how hurt I was, still.

"Well then, she's a little fucking hoe, what do you want me to say?" he yelled.

"That's nice. Call your girlfriend a hoe," I said. "You don't talk to me either. I haven't gotten any calls or texts from you in six months."

"Well excuse me for not texting you every time I do something. We moved in together last minute. You're so fucking stupid," he screamed.

I found a random plate on the counter and threw the pizza on it. My heart hammered. I was going to leave.

"Is that seriously how you talk to me?" I said.

"Shut the fuck up, the world doesn't fucking revolve around you!"

“Okay, I’m leaving. I can’t even believe the way you talk to me.”

The tears had built behind my eyelids, and I had to leave before my armor crumbled and he saw how much damage he had done.

I got into my car as fast as I could, my steaming pizza abandoned on the counter. I was in my pajamas, with no bra and no shoes. My hands were shaking furiously and my heart was pounding out of control.

I started to cry because his words echoed in my ears as I sat silently in the driver’s seat. I suddenly felt the weight of the years of my life. I let myself feel the pain.

I had struggled, ever since I was a kid, to find relationships with Chris and Kurt. I wanted to be their friend, a sister they wanted around. I wanted to fit in.

I still didn’t. Kurt, twenty-seven, would come to the bar I worked at only to order ten drinks and bully me to pay his bill, which I would. He would look for sleazy customers who might sell drugs. He never asked me out on a lunch date or what I was going to do after graduation. He never spoke to me. Chris, thirty, I only saw on holidays or when I ran into him by accident at my parents’ house. He never spoke to me either. But I used to have them. They used to be mine. Two brothers who hooked worms on my fishing reel, woke me up every Christmas morning, gave me something to look up to, flanked my sides.

It was just my parents and me. I was an only child.

The divide between us began somewhere in the midst of all the pot smoking, trips to jail, gambling debts, and job fires. They were consumed in their selfishness, taking

only what they needed from people like me, caring for no one but themselves. I didn't know when they stopped helping me survive scary things or teaching me how to make soda snow. There was only one thing from our past that remained true today. They stole my snowboard sled idea. They stripped me of my handmade sword. Kurt pilfered my birthday money. Chris kidnapped my best friend. They cheated me of the expectations I always hoped they would fulfill. They ransacked my golden childhood memories of the three of us, and stored them in a hidden chest somewhere I would never find. They were my pirate brothers.

THE GOLD NECKLACE

The farm in America, in rural New Jersey, was seventy-five acres. My grandparents had goats, horses, dogs, cats, chickens. The barn looked like a long horizontal line with a steeple in the middle like the ones atop churches and old schoolhouses. Horse feces mixed with hay was caked on the barn's wooden floor and then on their boots. The father had a massive rusty green tractor. He hunted big game and hung dead heads in their living room. The mother taught her daughters how to pick raspberries from prickly bushes without complaining about the summer heat. The daughters would peel soft yellow apples from the tree by the side of the house and the mother would mush and crush them into applesauce. The house was brick with a white porch and was first owned by a pastor who bought slaves who slept in the attic. The father then used that attic as his office and a place to paint. There were swirls of sky and wild horses and forest pines and wooden cabins atop snowy mountains. For dinner, they ate cheese fondue, Raclette, Rösti, or the deer the father killed. This was home.

Carol Ann Schregenberger grew up on this farm with two sisters and two Swiss parents who came to America with nothing. When she was in grade school, the girls at lunch made fun of her because she didn't bring peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to school. She wore haying shirts with hoods to prevent the hay from falling down her neck and ate roti noodela. She had wild, curly brown hair that she braided into long pigtails to keep off her face. During early adulthood, her idea of a great date was going night fishing at a nearby pond, getting her hands dirty with squirming worms and toting a cooler of beers. My father fell in love with her skinny tomboy looks and simple attitude towards

life. He was from Newark, an hour drive away, and came from a poor family with many children. He married my mother and they got a house halfway between their two families. They wore cutoff denim shorts and hiking boots and explored mountaintops.

She didn't care for material things in life, but rather only cared for her family and her children, things she could love unconditionally. She hated to shop, and only bought clothes when my father and I dragged her to the mall. When we moved to a beautiful neighborhood in Florida called Lake Mary, she didn't fit in with the women who resided there, the wives of lawyers and doctors and basketball players. They all had French manicures and fake breasts, enhancements she would never relate to. She didn't dare ask the women if they wanted to go fishing with a cooler of beer.

She liked getting plants, not flowers. She didn't want jewelry, ever. She thought jewelry was a waste of money. Her engagement ring was smaller than a carat, with a thin gold band, beautiful because of its simplicity. Just like her, my mother.

When I was eight, my parents took my brothers and me on a nine-hour flight across the Atlantic on a family vacation to Switzerland. I couldn't speak Swiss yet, so when I met my relatives I used smiles and hand gestures to show them my excitement or thank them for dinner. It was the first time I had ever met family from this other world, and I was both nervous and eager for the adventure of seeing the way they lived and what kind of people they were.

My great aunt Inge and great uncle Ruedi resided in Switzerland in a small town called Scuol, where the streets were paved with cobblestones like in *Beauty and the*

Beast. The wooden walls on the outside of their home were hand-carved and glorious, and the house was one of the oldest historic houses in the city. The only forms of taxis were streetcars and ancient men steering horse and carriages. There were mountains everywhere I looked; some even had snow on the very top, even though it was warm on ground level. There were barns and cows and fishponds and everything seemed to be wildly alive.

When my family and I arrived in Scuol, Ruedi had greeted me with a gigantic teddy bear he won in a shooting competition. He just pointed to it and smiled at me, knowing I couldn't speak Swiss. It was a gift. I named the bear "Swissy." It had a green plaid bowtie and huge brown glass eyes.

Yodeling was on every single station of their television. The inside of the house smelled like cheese and old men, or how a hemp bracelet smells when it gets wet.

We had flounder one night that I wouldn't try because my thirteen-year-old brother Kurt said, "Look Gabrielle! It's like Flounder from *The Little Mermaid!*" He had an odd knack for stirring up trouble, ruining something innocent. My parents got angry with him for tainting my vision of the flounder that sat limp and dead on my plate. I thought of Ariel's best fish friend, who was loyal and happy. He was a yellow cartoon with blue stripes flanking his sides. And I didn't touch the fish on my plate. I couldn't imagine destroying something that resembled Flounder, an honest and true friend. I listened to my big brother, I let his words affect me, and I let him ruin something so pure.

There was a colossal fountain right in the middle of the square outside their front door, one in which I swam and tossed coins, each one attached with a childish wish. I

was alone; my brothers would be inside the house watching television, uninterested in this enchanted place. I was always outside by that ivory stone fountain, making wishes. Sometimes I wished for a yellow puppy or a pogo stick or a scooter. Sometimes I wished that I could swim with dolphins or that my grandfather would live forever.

I remember gazing into that sea of shiny silver and copper. The sunlight glinted off each coin. They were different sizes, and some were duller than others, but the sun danced off all their centers as I sloshed the water back and forth with my hand. I untied the fuchsia sweatshirt around my waist, threw it on the ground, and kicked my light-up sneakers off. I pitched my legs over the side and splashed my feet on the cool surface of the water. I looked below my toes and thought of all the wishes in that fountain, all the people and children who turned their back to it and flung a coin over their shoulder, wishing. I wondered how many of the wishes came true, and my childish mind told me they all did.

The coins weren't just coins anymore. I never thought of them as money. To me, they were so much more. They were weighted now, with possibility. Chance. New beginnings. Maybe a husband and wife wished for a new baby. Maybe a little boy wished to be a pilot, or a little girl wished for a kitten. Maybe a widower wished to remember or maybe a soldier wished to forget. I thought about picking one up, but I didn't want to jinx the wish of its owner. The coins had to lie right where they landed, forever. They never belonged to me, and so I had no right to touch them.

And so my family and I hiked and swam and ate fondue and went back to America. I never saw Inge and Ruedi again. My mother wrote them postcards and letters

from time to time, and she would let me look at them and help me decipher the language. I always thought I would see them when I grew older, after I learned Swiss or German, and thought of how much more we could communicate. But a few years after our trip when I was eight my mother told me the news of their passing, Ruedi first and Inge a few months later. I felt robbed of my Swiss ancestors.

My mother had a few cousins and uncles still alive there. I had a second cousin named Sasha who I met briefly. I felt our heritage slowly slipping away, shrinking in sight. My heart plummeted. My brain frantically tried to memorize everything from my trip, everything about my great aunt and uncle. They were generous and kind, putting everyone before themselves, and it didn't take me long to see that's how all Swiss people were. That was how my Oma and Opa always were.

My mother's parents, Lottie and Alex Schregenberger, lived just a few miles from us. We called them Oma and Opa. They had a hanging tapestry of the Schregenberger crest hanging over their fireplace. It was a black lion against a yellow background and it said, "pugnare et vincere." When my brother Chris got older, he had the words tattooed on his pale bicep. When my mother married, she discarded her middle name and replaced it with her maiden name, refusing to part with it. The Schregenberger name and my grandparents' farm planted our Swiss roots in America forever. But suddenly, I felt scared this would disappear too, like Inge and Ruedi.

I cried, for up until then I knew nothing of death and dying. Of losing a part of family. We were sitting on our slippery wooden staircase by my bedroom, and I cried

because they had been nice to me. They gave me a teddy bear and they smiled at me.

They were a part of who I was.

I headed into my mother's walk-in closet to rummage her drawers, looking for an appealing piece of jewelry to wear to work. I was twenty-one years old. My family lived in the house in Lake Mary, Florida. Our house looked suburban and tasteful, a clone of every house in our neighborhood. Each house had a screened-in pool area, adorned with palm trees and exquisite landscaping, and each mailbox was grey with white numbers. My father was making more money, and we moved because of his new job. We all took a while to adjust to this new, more lavish lifestyle, and my mother probably struggled with it the most. She put plants all through the house and in the pool area, hung up our Swiss heirlooms and knick-knacks about the living room. She didn't change at all, despite the more extravagant portrait we appeared to embody from the outside. I knew she missed getting muddy from the old river in New Jersey and ripping up tall weeds on her hands and knees in the sweltering summer heat. Instead, she had to watch paid pool and lawn workers perfectly sculpt her new world.

In her closet, my mother never really had anything that held my interest, but it was worth a look anyway. The first two drawers were lined with black velvet compartments for makeup, trinkets, accessories. The rest of the drawers were for clothes, running socks, rosy nightgowns. I fumbled through the first drawer.

A shell necklace. Pendants. A charm bracelet from her father. Little square photos of her children. A snippet of my hair from my first baby haircut. I tried not to think that

was weird. Her college class ring. A crucifix with no chain. A ring with a missing center stone.

I closed it and opened the second drawer. Same kind of stuff. Then I saw a gold necklace and matching gold bracelet.

Personally, I hated gold. I thought it was old-fashioned and gaudy, always reminding me of my cousin's MeeMa, a tacky pushy woman with dark beef jerky skin. I got a gold ring for my nineteenth birthday from an ex-boyfriend. It had two diamonds flanking a single pearl. I also hated pearls. It was the perfect post-breakup confirmation that he didn't know me at all. I still wore it though. It was a gift. I let my mother borrow it, and the pearl fell off while she was working out at the gym. I recognized it now, sitting in the second drawer. It sat lonely without a center stone, and I mentally reminded myself to get it fixed one day.

I looked again at the gold necklace and bracelet. They were peculiar, thick, and wide. I picked up the necklace and its heavy weight surprised me. The light in the closet reflected off the gold, making it glint and intensifying its luster. I smiled, trying to mimic the gentle, silent warmth that radiated from Inge when I met her years ago.

I slid my warm fingers against the cool surface of the gold, beamed, and put the pieces back. I closed the drawer and left my mother's closet, switching off the light and leaving her trinkets to sleep soundly in the darkness.

2004-2014. Began in New Jersey, poured into Florida. My mother likes to call them the Drug Years. They were the years either one or both of my brothers were doing

drugs, and we pasted that label on those ten or so years with dark humor. The Drug Years still continues, still lives on. It creeps back into our daily lives like a plague that won't cease. My parents bought a few safes over the Drug Years, to house their important belongings. Passports. Cash. Credit cards. Car keys. Receipts. Checkbooks. My mother's Swiss coins. My brother Kurt's medicine called Suboxone, which treats opioid dependence. Kurt broke into every single safe, stealing checks or extra dosages of Suboxone that my mother rationed for him to prevent him from splurging. He had no self-control. My father wouldn't even give him the gate code to our neighborhood. Drug dealers had used the old codes too many times. He didn't trust him with any passwords.

Three years ago, my mother and I sat down on the living room couch with fresh hot coffee in our mugs, still in our pajamas. I had slept over my parents' house, something I did usually once every other week to escape my stressful college assignments and spend some down time with my mother.

It was about 8 a.m. and we were both pretty sleepy. Her tan face featured droopy bags under her brown eyes and wiry brown curls of her hair jumped out of her loose ponytail at all angles. I rubbed some leftover mascara off of my eyelashes and yawned. My grey blue eyes were my father's, but the rest of my face was hers. She took a sip of her coffee, with a touch of non-fat cream just how I like it too. Then she sighed.

"So, Kurt pawned my gold jewelry last night," she said. Her voice was laced with resignation.

Our coffee talks were atypical, at least compared to what my imagination believes normal families talk about over coffee, but I could be wrong. Our talks were synopses of

the drama that happens in a family like ours, rather than breezy chats about my studies or her kickboxing classes.

“The ones from Inge?” I said. I had no idea my mother moved the jewelry from her closet drawer into a more secure, permanent home. I also had no idea Kurt was pawning items other than his belongings, and this disturbed me. I briefly wondered why he never stole my rings or jewelry, and then realized with distaste that they probably weren’t worth enough to purchase what he needed.

“Yes. Dad had to go to the pawnshop and pay \$800 to get them back,” she said.

I guess Kurt had gotten through that safe. It was hard to imagine my father, in his business suit and tie, going somewhere like a pawnshop. A place not meant for members of golf clubs and vice presidents of companies. His coworkers and golf buddies would never believe he lead a double life, one that involved threatening drug dealers with bats to get off his property and one that involved seedy pawnshop purchases. The man he was in the suit was the only man he wanted to be, the man who had a family that didn’t embarrass him.

I myself have never stepped foot in one, and this was why. I only thought of pawnshops as sleazy and grimy, meant for secret deals and stolen items, meant for lies and betrayal. My mother has been about three times, to buy back Kurt’s laptop every time he sold it for drug money. She left his TV and two guitars there though.

I wondered why the jewelry meant nothing to him. It was an emblem passed down to my mother, not to him. Perhaps that was why. It held the treasures of not only her aunt’s life, but of the heritage we shared, of our idea of home and where we came

from. He held no interest in these things my mother held so tightly to. On this day, I didn't know my mother connected her history to this jewelry. Blind to see beyond the surface, I thought she was merely upset over Kurt's unfaithful and wicked behavior.

It's my mother's birthday, August 27, 2013.

I drive to my parents' house in Lake Mary. I tie a bow around a gift bag, stuff my card inside, and wait for my mother's arrival from work.

My parents just purchased a beach house, and nothing is in it yet besides a mattress, a blow-up bed, two couches, and some paper plates. They are getting ready to retire from their jobs and will probably move there eventually. My father still holds his vice president position at the same company and my mother helps children with physical and speech therapy at a hospital. I buy her a set of bowls, small plates, large plates, and coffee mugs, all in a teal color with a sandy beige trim.

Her stressed face lights up as she sees the oversized bag on the dining room table. It is the first thing she sees when she comes in the house and heads for the kitchen. Like me, she always wears the stress of the workday on her features, never afraid to hide what she really feels. She always comes home exhausted, in no mood to start dinner and wash pots and pans, but she does it anyway.

She gushes over the teal and sandy color combination of the plate ware. We both always agree on colors-of-important-things. I loved how she could get so excited over something as simple as plates. After many, many birthdays, I never forget a gift for my mother. No one deserves a gift more than her.

Like most mothers, mine enjoys gifts that are homemade or from the heart. For Christmases, I go to Michael's craft store and buy wooden photo frames or jewelry boxes and paint them for her. In high school I give her a painting I did in art class of a purple and gold sunset. When I get older and have a job, I give her new gym clothes and white gold rings with little diamonds. She enjoys these gifts too, but they all hold the same weight. They all carry the same meaning.

It's a few hours before dinnertime. My parents like to enjoy a few Ketel One cocktails on the couch together before they eat. Their own home-happy-hour. My dad stands at the minibar and pours some Limeade into a shaker filled with ice, then adds a generous amount of vodka. They are pretty quiet; my mom sits on the couch looking gloomy.

"What's wrong?" I ask as I sit down to her right. I don't bother wasting time because like me, she wears her worries on her face.

"Well," she says, hesitant. She looks at my father, and starts picking at the dead skin on her feet. She sits up on her knees with her feet behind her, slouching to one side, clutching the martini glass in one hand. Her face wrinkles with tired disappointment.

"We just noticed today that Inge's jewelry is missing again from the safe. And my coins. My grandfather gave them to me when I was a young girl in Switzerland, and I was going to pass them down to you. I've had them my whole life," she says.

Her eyes look suddenly younger, and her voice is wistful.

A year later I would learn that her grandfather's name was Heinrich Herzog, a man I never met, and that there were about five coins, all worth around three hundred dollars apiece, according to my mother's estimation.

"Oh Mom, I'm so sorry." It's all I can say. The news of things going missing or being stolen is common and almost boring in this house. A guitar. Power tools. Checks. Cash. Car keys. A laptop. A television. Stereo equipment. A car. A dirt bike.

But there is something different this time. My mother doesn't just look frustrated or angry like the other times; she just looks so young and so heartbreaking, as if he had stolen a piece of her soul. "Well, did he pawn it? Can we get it back?" I ask.

"I don't want it back," my mom says forcefully. "We've already had to go get it back once and I don't want it here. All I do is think about how it's sitting in there and I worry about it," she says.

Her answer throws me. Why doesn't she want to try to find it? It is all she has left of Inge. And that is always our first reaction to theft; find it, and buy it back. But leave it? No.

I think my mother would have wanted to hold onto anything left behind from Switzerland, from our home. Like a precious black and white photograph of Inge and Ruedi, with torn burnt edges and a few water stains. Or an old embroidered blouse of hers, white with blue, red, and yellow flowers, like the ones she used to wear hiking on the mountaintops of Davos. Or the oversized rustic Swiss cowbell that used to hang in the barn of her parents' farm.

My mother is doing a pre-cry face, where her forehead creases with anxiety and her eyes swell with emptiness. I hate that this is her birthday. I hate that this is a rerun of a year past and gone, a year never to be repeated. I need to protect her, fix this, end the pain. I immediately brainstorm a plan to confront Kurt to tell me where he sold the jewelry and coins, so I can buy them back for her. But I know I can't afford it, and the way she sounded when she said she really didn't want it back, I know she meant it.

I ask Kurt to take the drive with me the ten minutes down the road to pick up takeout sushi for our dinner. I sometime ask him just for the company, to get him out of the house, more for his benefit than mine. He sits in his room all day, alone, shutting everyone out. But tonight I ask him because I need to inquire in private what happened to the gold jewelry in the safe. I need to end my mother's pain, and find a solution to this problem. I need to do it because I am her daughter and because this is her birthday. I need to do it because I love her.

I am still mulling over the right way to begin the confrontation as I slam my blue Jetta door shut and wait for Kurt to close his. It is August, and in Florida not having tinted windows is great insurance that your face will melt off onto your car seat. The heat festers at my mood slightly less than the criminal beside me.

He is stuck with me now. A car is the best possible environment to trap someone in, because they have no choice but to sit next to you and listen. We are barely out of the neighborhood when I begin my offense.

I roll up to the red light at the mouth of my neighborhood and bring the car to a stop.

“So, Mom and Dad just told me something. I’m going to ask you about it because it’s going to be easier telling me than it will be telling them,” I say.

He is quiet. He looks straight ahead. I wonder if he knows I trapped him.

The light turns green, and I accelerate.

“They noticed Inge’s jewelry missing from the safe. And also some Swiss coins of Mom’s when she was younger,” I say.

He sighs heavily, like a kid who has been caught. I feel like his parent, a feeling I grew accustomed to lately. Always driving him places, lending him money. I lectured and scolded him. And, like a child, he listened to none of it.

He says nothing.

We cruise along the main street, and I take a left down the road that leads to the plaza.

“Did you take them? It’s important for me to know, because maybe we can go to the pawnshop and get them back. Did you pawn them?” I ask.

He says nothing, but sighs again. My irritation builds. He has played this game before. He pretends I am not even speaking to him.

We sit in silence. The light into the plaza turns red. I stop. The still car makes the silence louder. I will not speak first.

“I don’t want to talk about this right now,” he says finally. The light turns and I approach the restaurant parking lot.

“Well, we only have about five more minutes to talk about this. I have to know what you did with them,” I say. If he doesn’t tell me, how can I fix it?

I am the good cop. I don’t understand why he doesn’t open up to me. My parents won’t be as forgiving.

“I can’t talk about this right now!” he says, louder now. If only there existed time-out for adults. He is too embarrassed, or too something, to tell me.

I pull into a parking spot and get out of the car, hoping he won’t follow me. I don’t want to have to worry about him looking over my shoulder as I put in my PIN to pay for the food. I hear his door slam behind me.

I give him the food to carry to make him feel useful. I pay and we both get back in the car without speaking.

I change my game up, and sink into the sweet, consoling sister.

“I’m not mad at you. Just please tell me what you did with them. I’ll believe you if you say it wasn’t for drug money,” I say, rocking his emotional cradle. But I won’t believe him, ever.

He says nothing. The baby face is plastered across his features again.

I start the car back up and Kurt starts talking.

“One day when I went through our neighborhood gate on my motorcycle, the guard told me I don’t have to come through and show him my I.D. every time,” he says.

Dread washes over me. I know where this will lead. My brain jumps to the story’s conclusion: the guard tells Kurt the entry code.

I have no choice but to drive ahead and listen to his tale unravel.

“The guard told me it was no problem I didn’t know the code. He just looked up my last name and told me what it was,” he says.

What a stupid guard. Ever since the neighborhood committee increased security within the past two years, the guards were stricter. They were not allowed to give out codes, ever. But of course, a guard who knew nothing about my brother and nothing about how our family works would’ve thought so little of the consequences of this.

“They were four numbers I’ve never heard before,” he says. There is a spark of amusement in his voice, like he is surprised after all these years my parents learned to change their habits and favorite numbers.

All the stoplights on the way home are green. I race back to my parents, back to normalcy.

My parents always use an array of the same numbers for passwords and codes. They either use the last four digits of our old New Jersey telephone number or the four digits of our garage code. These numbers are used for passwords to Wi-Fi or to order \$3.99 movies on HBO, never for anything crucial. My parents are smarter than that. For our newest entry code, which even I don’t know, my parents had picked new numbers.

I pull into our neighborhood. I drive by the scanner and the yellow wings of the gate open.

“So I went inside, and tried them on the safe. It worked,” he finishes.

I speed through the tiny snake streets, inserting my rebuttal. I give him the view through my eyes, through a sober person’s eyes. I wonder if it will even make sense to him.

“See that’s your problem right there,” I argue, “why did you even do that?”

There has to be some explanation to why his mind works the way it does. But I never did drugs and so I guess I’ll never understand. I accept his addiction, see it as a disease, but it doesn’t change what it did to us. I never wonder what the code of the safe is, or the gate, nor do I care. I am too busy worrying about hiding my car keys in my underwear drawer and going to the bank everyday to deposit any cash I have on me.

“I don’t know,” he says, “the mind of a drug addict works differently than the mind of someone else.”

I am quite certain I never want to know what it feels like to be him. Regardless, I don’t like the way he uses that as his life vest, his ticket out of guilt and consequence.

I pull up our driveway and put the car in park. I am not finished yet, so I hope he will still stay now that he is no longer trapped.

“What did you need the money for? Where did this money go?” I ask. I figure it is gambling, the twin sister to his drug addiction. The cousin to his alcoholism.

“I went to Daytona to gamble and I lost. And then I thought I could fix it but I only ending up losing more. So when I got into the safe I figured I could use the money from the jewelry now, and then make more to pay back later,” he says.

A quick fix. An illogical justification. Even if he made the money back, the jewelry would still be gone. Only the profit from the gold would exist. The part of who we are would be lost, in my mother’s mind and in mine.

I realize he never had the intention of seeing it again.

And the jewelry and coins of my mother, of us, will cease to exist. I start to wondering about what will remain after we were dead and gone, all of us. We can't even keep things in our family, can't hold onto them long enough to pass them down. Is our family ruining Switzerland, ruining the Schregenberger farm and ruining our ties and our values? I began to think we were.

Later that night, I am lying in my bed upstairs reading a book. My parents got high from redecorating and had turned my room into a guest room. I sleep upstairs whenever I visit, but the mattress is too firm and I don't have my navy body pillow with moons and stars.

There is a knock at the door.

"Come in," I say, slightly annoyed that I have to put my book down.

Kurt walks into my room and sits down on my bed, looking small and dismal. He sighs.

"Can you take me to go get cigarettes and to get Mom a card?" he asks.

It is 9:00 p.m. He has had all day to think of this, but I knew this was coming. He never thought of any of our birthdays until the last minute, and he hardly ever got anyone anything.

I often did drive Kurt to get cigarettes, because he was always too lazy to take his motorcycle and he needed someone to pay. I always caved, could never say no, but sometimes my father would make a strict point to inform me not to give him money.

Those were the days when my father would find money missing from his wallet, or when he knew Kurt just got a fresh paycheck.

“Kurt, Dad told me not to give you any money. Why don’t you just make her a card? She loves that,” I say. I am secretly happy to have my father to pin it on, because I know I would’ve said yes. It might be a little odd for a twenty seven year old son to take a piece of printer paper, fold it in half, and write on it in colored pencil. But my mother would love it.

Kurt ponders my suggestion.

“Yeah, okay, I might. Do you have any change for cigarettes? I’m so stressed out,” he says, looking like a child again. He paces around my room, combing his fingers through his short greasy hair.

“I have no cash on me, Kurt,” I say, fighting the urge to pity him. “It’s your fault you feel stressed. If you don’t like the way this feels, stop doing what you’re doing. I’m here for you. But I am never going to think it’s okay what you did,” I say.

He starts crying. He gets up and goes downstairs. Kurt uses crying as a tactic, always, to get what he wants. Perhaps a small part of that is emotional release, maybe even frustration, but he always has an agenda. And for that, I can’t sympathize.

From my bed, I can hear him scrambling for change and loose coins in his room, like a dog scrambles for crumbs under the kitchen table. I want to throw my arms up, run down there, and take him to the store. Because for how much I judge my brother, for how much I resent him, I still can’t see him struggle like this. My face is hot with

embarrassment, embarrassment at myself for sitting up here in my room with plenty of money on my debit card to help him.

But I know this is what he wants me to do. The reason why he makes his coin-hunting so loud. I hear him empty a jar of them, throw them on the desk, count them again and again. I hear some fall to the floor, followed by his grunts. Every time a coin raps on the desk it pushes me and pushes me. The repeating sound cracks my exterior, eats away at it. I just sit there, letting it crumble.

Thirty minutes later he comes back. I am on the phone with my coworker Tony, chatting about tips and drinks and customers.

“Do you want to come for the drive with me?” he asks.

“No,” I say. I figure he just wants me to pay for his purchases.

He does not put up a fight, which is out of his character. He usually complains or cries or gets angry until I or someone finally says yes to whatever he wants. He is irrevocably relentless when it comes to his wants and needs.

“Okay,” he says, and he walks back down the stairs.

I smell freshly sprayed cologne and strong mouthwash. It clicks in my head. He is probably going out to some bar to bum a cigarette off someone since he can't afford a pack. I am sure he realizes the coins didn't add up. I brush off our brief interaction as if it was one of the many others in our past.

It's almost time to eat dinner.

Kurt, out of guilt, unloads the raw fish and Wasabi from the white Styrofoam boxes and lays the food nicely on our sushi platters, adding chopsticks and dipping plates adjacently. As I look at the table, I acknowledge the beauty in the circular pattern of the little black plates. The plates are adorned with small white Japanese flowers. The chopsticks lay on an angle towards the plates, almost like a line drawing the plates to their smaller dipping plates. The whole arrangement looks like a big, enlarged necklace. The plates sit there, silent, and mock me. I stare darkly at our perfect marble table that is set for a happy family to eat sushi.

Jewelry doesn't change over time. It can be a gift. It can be passed down. It can be discovered shiny and new in a black velvet box with a tied ribbon or found dusty and forgotten in an old vanity dresser, but it stays the same. It is the same stone, the same shape as it once was. The giver of it will always be the giver; the owner will always be the owner. The markings or engravings will still be legible and they will still hold the same message. The ruby will still be red and the emerald will still be green.

After Kurt stole, my childhood fear for the Switzerland in us to disappear grew stronger; our vintage treasures no longer there to remind us. And to my mother, there is nothing special about jewelry. It no longer holds the weight of home. The only magic it ever had was stolen and pillaged. She doesn't want to pass down coins to her daughter or go buy back a deceased aunt's necklace anymore. She just wants to say goodbye. It is now only one thing: a burden, a worry. It lies in our drawers and we think about it, wonder if it's still lying there.

FIGHTING FOR SOMETHING

Eight in the morning is early for me, but I was incredibly thirsty so I zombie-stuttered down my hall and into the kitchen for water. My fuzzy slippers made *pat pat pat* sounds on the floor. I stood at the fridge sleepily, pressing my cup up to the automatic water dispenser and yawning as it slowly filled. I looked down the short tiled hall that lead to the master suite of our peach colored three-bedroom house.

The door was ajar.

I saw the familiar paleness of Taylor's naked butt.

I was only used to seeing my roommate naked when she climbed out of the shower, or right before she got dressed. I would sit on the closed toilet seat as she washed her hair, telling her about my night, too anxious to wait for her to get out. She listened to me through the noise of the shower, adding her insight. Or I would sit on her bedroom floor petting our black hairy puppy, Dakota, as she rushed to get dressed, trying to squeeze in the moments of my week she missed before she headed off to her morning internship. Dakota's hair would be all over her clothes, and mine, but we didn't care. We loved him more than anything, and he symbolized the love in our friendship. We adopted him from Save A Life, and we split all his costs because he was ours together.

But that morning she was sprawled out on the bed, the wrong way, head where the feet go. She was tan from days at the beach. The black tattoo on her upper back crooned at me, told me I was right, that I knew this would happen. It was a quote from Eleanor Roosevelt: "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." I liked the quote, but remembered rolling my eyes at Taylor when she came

home with it, an impulse in response to her high school boyfriend no longer wanting her. Some things she did were irresponsible, and getting an impulse tattoo was one of them.

My face burned with betrayal as I looked at it now, the black cursive font seductive and ruthless.

My brother Chris opened the door the rest of the way, dressed in preppy work clothes and a bag over his shoulder. He was a little chubby, mostly in his belly because he didn't work out and ate Zingers from Alehouse. His hair was amber brown and uncombed. His eyes were the best in our family, hazel. He had always been like a second father to me. He saw me and looked slightly surprised.

"Hey," he said, caught off guard.

I took a moment to answer, pursing my lips and cursing my mother for not giving me a sister. A sister wouldn't have been entrapped by her sexuality, tempted by her allure.

"You going to work?" I asked.

"Yep, I'll see you later," he replied. He closed his bedroom door on Taylor's nakedness and headed for the front door.

"See you," I said back. My voice was dead and defeated.

I opened a pale white cabinet and gathered the cream and sugar to start my morning coffee. I turned the Mr. Coffee on. I had been planning on going back to sleep, but I wanted to be there in the kitchen when Taylor walked out. I wanted her to be embarrassed, to see how I noticed she hadn't slept in her own bed.

This wasn't like her 21st birthday, when she tried to sleep with her friend Aaron and woke up on her carpet in her own pee, a story we laughed about the next morning as I helped her spray Resolve onto the smell. This wasn't like the tailgate where I lost her and then found her six hours later, after she slept with Edward and drunkenly ate chicken nuggets. This was in our peach colored palace, where we blared Rihanna and swapped outfits and shared makeup. And this was my brother.

When my coffee finished brewing I sat down on one of our green fold-up chairs and opened my laptop on the white kitchen table we ate and studied on. After a few hours, I heard the bedroom door open. I was immersed in Googling artwork to make note cards for my upcoming Art History test. I looked up and waited.

Taylor was now wearing white and teal striped pajama shorts and a slim tank top. I wondered why she even got dressed. Perhaps she had heard me in the kitchen. Her hair was disheveled; the locks that were usually perfectly flat-ironed were frizzy and wild, their natural state. She looked scary, like she always did after a night drinking. She rubbed her smoky purple eyeliner eyes and walked past me to our hallway, towards her bedroom. Her room was right next to mine. She either didn't see me or tried not to see me.

I sat there, heart pounding and patient.

But nothing happened. She said nothing.

Her bedroom door closed.

It struck me as ironic that they were both capable of closing doors, just not when it mattered. I wondered if they even cared that I saw.

The week before recruitment in a sorority is called Spirit Week, but I like to call it Suffer Week. Everyday from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., every Tridelta girl comes to the Tridelta house to be trained on how to clap and sing and get other girls to like us. The house looked like a mansion, with beige trim and massive windows. It had fifty rooms, a long dining hall, a tile foyer, a living room, and an upstairs TV area with fuchsia couches and polka dot pillows.

We would come to the foyer dressed in our most horrible pajamas, hair wet from a late shower, no makeup on our faces. The real us. The us we were before we put on fake eyelashes and pretended to be something other girls admired. The days were exhausting. Coffee, Red bull, and candy were our compulsive salvations. Tootsie Pop wrappers littered the tile foyer where we planted ourselves to memorize the reference girls. After the first few days, the candy was replaced with Airborne, lemon tea, and cough drops. Round rings of moisture and tea spills stained the white tile floor and wooden tables. A voice coach would drop dead if he or she saw how loud we had to scream the same five songs, over and over, day after day, ruining our vocal cords for the next few weeks.

At the close of Suffer Week, preparations began. Spray tans and manicures were mandatory, fresh highlights and hair extensions encouraged. I've never seen women put so much effort into their appearances for the sake of *other women*. I never knew these things really mattered.

When I rushed a sorority, my toenails were navy and chipped. I went for comfort because I knew we would be walking a lot, so I wore my dirt and sweat stained pink flip flops. I looked at the girls around me, in their bejeweled gladiator sandals and French manicures. It even rained one day, so I showed up to Kappa Delta with a wet messy bob of hair, ensuring I would never return to that house once the five-minute meet and greet ended. Even though Tridelta had just as many dolled up girls as the rest of the sororities, I felt a calm knowing it chose me, that there was something more to it, that it could see the girl I was despite my chipped toenails.

I knew I wasn't the typical sorority girl, and I never really found someone who I clicked with perfectly. Someone who was more like me, who could make a joke out of the stuff other girls cared so much about. My brothers, Chris and Kurt, had both been in fraternities in college. But Kurt dropped out and Chris got the boot for smoking weed in the house. For me, I just wanted to make some friends. I wasn't interested in landing a frat boyfriend or being a leader for the other girls, a Barbie wrangler.

Once real recruitment started, each day before line up we took pictures with each other to document our matching outfits and general hotness before the potential new girls arrived. I, being unphotogenic, usually snapped a few and moved on. I posed with a few girls here and there, no one I was really close with. The third morning of the week, I first spotted Taylor when she was talking to my friend Ellie, one of the most popular girls, mostly because everyone feared her. She had dark black skin, a skinny waist, and pretty brown eyes. She had connections everywhere and knew everyone. I just thought she was

silly and fun, so we got along well. Everyone was gathered in the foyer by the front door, ready to line up at a moments notice.

That girl has a great body, I thought, looking at the girl next to Ellie. I had never seen her before, even though this was my second year in Tridelta. I was a junior. She was big-chested and womanly, traits I'd always envied from deep inside my skinny, curve less body. Her hair was auburn brown, her skin shimmering bronze, her face sporting two dimples on her round, full cheeks.

And just like that, I waltzed up to her and Ellie to take some pictures. An easy icebreaker. She was Ellie's "little sister" in Tridelta, meaning Ellie took her under her wing and showed her the ropes. Since I already knew Ellie, Taylor and I became fast friends.

I realized very early on that Taylor and I were a lot alike. She dressed almost like a tomboy and like me, didn't fall into the pressure and shallow crap of our sorority. We both knew how to take the best from it, to bond at tailgates and dress up in silly costumes at socials, but leave the drama to mean girls like Pledge Class '08. We made matching flight attendant outfits for the "Fly in the Sky" social with Sigma Chi, tying pink scarves around our necks and writing our names in black Sharpie on makeshift nametags. Meanwhile, the mean girls stole each other's shampoo and clothes without asking, left cruel notes on each other's doors, bullied the girls who were different from them.

Taylor was a year younger than me, a sophomore, but I never felt that separated us in the slightest. She always had my back and I always had hers, and that would never change.

We sat in the dining hall one night, eating leftover stiff French fries from meal plan and mulling over genius ideas. The heavy black oak tables were pushed aside against the walls, the chairs with fabric pansies scattered behind them. Dance practice for a charity event had ended an hour before, so the hall was clear, wooden floor shiny and empty. Taylor and I sat Indian style on top of a table, the Styrofoam box of food between us.

“It’s pathetic. I’m always so embarrassed in the morning. I tell Jeff I love him sometimes,” I explained dramatically.

“Um, I’m sure you didn’t seem as crazy as I did the night before last. I texted Edward about ten times in a row inviting myself over,” she said.

Edward was the name she gave the most recent boy she hooked up with behind his back. She called him that because she thought he looked like Edward from Twilight. I never knew his real name, and it never mattered. He was only around for a few weeks. I enjoyed the nickname.

“It sucks because I used to leave my phone in the car when I went to the bar to drink, but it’s too risky in case my ride leaves me or I lose who I’m with,” I said.

“And deleting their numbers is no good, I know Edward’s and my high school boyfriend’s by heart,” she said.

“Damnit,” I said, defeated. We loved putting on a fake air of dramatics. It made us laugh.

We ate some more fries while a loud group of girls stumbled into the side door, drunk and tripping over their heels. They walked sloppily into the dining hall for toasted

bagels with cream cheese, everyone's favorite drunk salvation, the only food we had at all hours.

"I know! Oh my God, I've got it!" I said.

"What?" Taylor asked.

"Well, we need our phones in case of an emergency. So we have to take them out with us. But, we could *switch* phones at the beginning of the night. That way, we both have important numbers, like Ellie's and our other friends, in case we need a ride. But all of the boys will be different. We won't text them because we won't know them!" I felt proud, as if I had just solved a Rubik's cube in less than five minutes.

"That's not a bad idea," Taylor said, laughing.

The goal of that first year of our friendship was to have as much fun as possible. Sure, sometimes living in a house with fifty other girls drove us crazy. But Taylor and I tried to make every minute of college unforgettable. It was us against the world.

The Genius Drunk-Texting Plan actually worked pretty well. But once we got home from a great night out, we would exchange phones then instead of waiting until the morning. Enough said.

But it never mattered that the plan didn't work. All I remember was how much fun it was to create and invent these things with her. The other girls thought our plans and bets were silly and hilarious, looking at us like a goofy duo, a package deal. We weren't in a secluded clique like the mean girls, we were just us. Inseparable. Making it through girl world together.

It was summertime, and my senior year was over. I sat at my boyfriend Christian's house, computer on my lap and a cup of freshly brewed coffee in my hand. He lived with a male roommate, and they both drank too much Coors Light and watched football everyday. The house smelt like sulfur water, and there were always beer cans and empty toilet paper rolls adorning the sinks. We had been together for about a year, but he had only been calling me his girlfriend for the past two months. He was afraid of commitment and I, who loved him too much, had waited patiently for the title. I rocked back and forth in his roommate's brown corduroy reclining chair. It was 7 a.m., and I was only up because I had a Photography quiz due at noon and hadn't read the chapters yet.

I was currently enrolled in the five summer classes I needed to graduate by August. Living in Tridelta my junior year had given me reason enough to want to find that house with Taylor. I'd spent all of my time in the room she shared with Ellie, ordering Dominoes and sharing lotions and perfume, wishing we had a house together to ourselves. So when move-out time came around, we found a cozy three-bedroom home in Oviedo and recruited another Tridelta, Katie, to be our third roommate. The year went even better than the last, with more wonderful memories than I could count and a best friend I knew would be by my side forever.

I remember coming home from serving at Carrabba's, my face tear-streaked and my heart broken. The hostess, a wretched blonde girl everyone hated, had pulled me aside after work and told me she'd slept with my crush, the bartender. I had been sleeping with him for eight months. Taylor and Katie were right there when I got home,

and immediately started up some margaritas and played Drake's new album on laptop speakers. I wouldn't have been able to stand the pain without them.

I remember when Taylor was sad over her high school boyfriend. They had been intimate throughout college but he no longer loved her how she wanted, how she needed. I often think how different a girl she would've been if it weren't for him. I bought her a massage gift certificate and left it on her dresser with a card. I wrote to her how special she was, how great of a friend she was, how I hoped this would cheer her up.

I remember the grey rainy tailgate when no one knew where to go or what to do. The weather was frightening, rain poured from the sky and flashes of lightning struck every few minutes. But Taylor and I didn't let that stop us. We put on black tank tops and tucked them into high waisted shorts. We curled our hair and put big pink matching bows on one side of our heads, just for kicks. Even though they made our stomach hurt and we knew it, we drank Mike's Hard Cranberry Lemonade and took a taxi to a cheap college bar. We ordered shots of tequila to help us dry off from the run inside. It was a great day.

Everything about our lives in the peach palace was wonderful, even the bad times, because we had each other.

I rocked my chair back and forth. My head cocked towards Christian's room. I was jealous he was still asleep.

My phone rang. It was a number I didn't know, but I had a feeling I should answer it, so I put my coffee mug down and picked up.

"Hello?" I said.

“Hi, is this Gabrielle?” a female voice said.

“Yes, this is she,” I said.

“Hi Gabrielle, how are you? I’m Linda calling from the UCF Health Center. I have your Pap smear results and I wanted to share them with you,” she said.

My breathing slowed. *Oh no*, I thought. *Oh crap*. They only call you when it’s something bad, otherwise you never hear from them.

“Okay,” I said, nervously.

“We got your tests back, and it appears you have an abnormal Pap, with precancerous cells,” she explained.

I didn’t know what this meant. I didn’t want to have an abnormal anything, especially in that area. I felt embarrassed and ashamed. I felt dirty.

“Okay,” I said.

“There isn’t anything to be worried about yet. A lot of women get abnormal Pap smears when they’re in their young twenties, especially on their first one, like yours. We are just going to have to schedule another appointment, so we can take a biopsy and test the cells,” she said.

Now I know what a biopsy is, and I knew the part of my body we were discussing, but somehow at that point I didn’t put two and two together. That’s probably why I didn’t freak out until the actual day I went to the health office a few weeks later with my mother, who watched as they clamped my legs open and scraped skin from inside of me.

My mother had sat on the white plastic chair to my right, but far enough away to give me privacy. I was lying on the ugly blue bed in my crinkled napkin dress, feet perched on the stirrups. She seemed to be brave, which made me brave. But when I felt the scrape I flinched, and out of the corner of my eye I saw her face flinch. Our pain was always felt together. Afterwards, she took me to Pei Wei, the Asian diner that had the best Dan Dan noodles ever, and we had a nice lunch and chatted like it was a normal day. I knew she was trying to distract me, make me feel better, normal. I did.

I felt comfortable telling my mother about my Pap smear, and even having her there, but she wasn't who I called on the day I found out. There was someone closer to me, someone I needed more, someone who knew every single thing about me.

"Okay," I said, my voice beginning to lose control. I could feel the tears behind my eyelids. I didn't even know why I was upset; only that this wasn't good and that I was scared.

I quickly scheduled my next appointment with the receptionist, letting her walk me through it kindly as I fell into a daze. I hung up and dialed Taylor's number. I was crying now.

I got up from the rickety chair and opened the front door to walk outside. I didn't want Christian to see me crying if he woke. I had to get a handle on myself before I told him. My heart pounded when I thought of telling him, something I knew I had to do, for his own safety. I would be embarrassed, but it was the right thing to do.

I stood barefoot on the front patio, avoiding the cobwebbed wooden chairs with holes in them and the small mountains of cigarette butts. A bee landed on a growing pile of empty pizza boxes.

When Taylor answered, I sobbed into the phone. I didn't speak.

"What's wrong?" she said.

I told her about the phone call. The word "precancerous" frightened me, even if someone referenced the innocent freckles on my shoulders from the sun. I imagined myself having uterine cancer, being sick and not able to bear children. I put a hand on my lower stomach, protecting a baby that didn't yet exist.

"Oh, no," Taylor said in a calm voice. She was always more calm, probably because her problems were usually worse. "What do you have to do?" she inquired.

"I have to go back for a biopsy," I said.

"I'm sure it will be okay. I think a lot of people get abnormal Pap smears," she said.

"Yeah I think so too. I remember my mom telling me she had one her first time," I said. I had asked my mother some questions before I went to the biopsy.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I have herpes," Taylor said.

She said it bluntly and without emotion, like we were discussing the weather. I didn't know why she felt this would help me. It only destroyed our future.

After a string of fate-filled events that led me to give my 29 year-old brother Chris permission to move in with me, Taylor began her pursuit.

Katie was gone for the summer, at an internship with St. Jude in New York. Her master suite was empty.

My other brother Kurt, who was twenty-six, recently received a promotion at work. He and Chris lived in an apartment together. They were both data analysts at XOS Digital, and Chris had gotten Kurt the job there shortly after he got hired. It was generous of Chris to live with Kurt, because no one else wanted to. He didn't cook, clean, or take care of himself. He didn't manage his money well. But Chris was always picking up the slack for Kurt, acting as his secondhand father, a position he resented and I admired. I couldn't do it.

Kurt had been clean from drugs for a little over a year. The promotion, a symbol of his hard work and maturity, was ironically the catalyst for his relapse. He wanted to celebrate.

Living with Kurt on drugs is unbearable. He steals money, accuses people of taking his pills, and leaves needles in his bathroom sink. Chris refused to continue living there, and Kurt refused to move out. They were at a standoff. I wanted Chris to be safe and happy. It wasn't his fault Kurt chose to do this to himself and our family for the millionth time.

The next week, Chris moved into Katie's room. I said it would only be until he found a new place. A few weeks, tops.

I stood in the garage of our peach palace, switched the light on, and watched as Chris backed his red car into the space to unload. It was a dreary, rainy afternoon. I

stayed dry in the garage, which was empty aside from a Swiffer, a recycling bin, a yoga mat, and a can of leftover pink paint from my bedroom wall.

“I’m so excited!” I shouted as he stopped the car and opened his door. I jumped up and down. I had never lived with Chris on my own before. I’d always yearned to be closer to him, my oldest brother. I started to think of all the things we could do, all the new memories we could make.

He used to make me listen to the trendy bands he liked and would buy me wine when I was underage and wanted to try it. When I was older he invited me over his apartment for pizza and beer, and I dozed off on his couch while we watched a movie. I was impressed by how he did the grocery shopping for himself and Kurt, how he decorated their apartment with drums and Bob Marley posters and candles. He even invited my parents and I over for a family dinner one night. He set the table and cooked food for us. He and I had a closer, better relationship than my one with Kurt, who was too out of it over the years to develop any kind of bond with me.

“Yeah, thanks for letting me stay here,” he said. His face looked exhausted from the stress of the last few days living with Kurt. I knew he would appreciate the blunt contrast of living with me.

“Here, let me help you get your stuff out,” I said.

We unloaded his things from the trunk and carried them into Katie’s room. We carried the heavy items first: his stereo equipment, guitar, and laptop. He had told me he wanted to get everything out of the apartment that Kurt could pawn for drugs. Then it

was just his work clothes and a few pictures he wanted to hang. He had left everything else behind.

“Wow, this room is big,” he said.

“Yeah, she has the master. She wouldn’t live here unless she got it. Kind of a diva.” I shrugged.

He started unpacking his things. I looked around. The room really did look great. I had scraped the poster tape off the walls, vacuumed, cleaned the spots on the carpet, bleached the shower stall, dusted the inside of the Jacuzzi tub, scrubbed the toothpaste residue off the sink. Katie was messier than any boy I’d ever met, and I wanted him to be comfortable and happy here, away from Kurt.

“Well, I’m going to start dinner. Taylor and I like to make this pasta thing. Its just linguine with a vegetable, like peas, and then chicken. But we put white sauce on it, like the kind from Kobe. We are obsessed,” I explained.

“Yeah, cool. I’d love some,” he said. He smiled.

Later, Chris went to Publix and brought home some assorted beers I’ve never heard of. The mix and match six-pack. We all ate the pasta I cooked, then put on a movie and cracked a few open. It was easy and relaxing. No drugs, no drama.

“I can already tell it’s going to be fun living with you,” Taylor said to Chris.

I still remember the first few things that ran through my mind when she said “herpes.”

What?!

Why hasn't she told me before?

When did she get it?

Who gave it to her?

How in the world is that supposed to make me feel better?

And finally...

What about my brother?

I wonder how long the pause was as I shouted the questions in my head. I speculated the consequences of this. Chris could get it. He could have it now. And it wouldn't be from a random girl in a bar who wasn't careful; it would be from my best friend.

"What?!" I said into the receiver.

"Yeah," she said. Her voice was almost bored.

"Why are you just telling me this now? How long have you known? Who gave it to you?" I stammered. My tone of voice was laced with betrayal. We didn't keep secrets.

She sighed.

"I found out a few months ago. Logan gave it to me. He had a bump on his penis. He had been sleeping with other girls the whole time I liked him," she said.

"Well, you guessed he was doing that. But, that's disgusting. So, what, do you have anything on you now?" I asked, curious and horrified, a wild combination that I had never felt before. It was like a car crash I couldn't turn away from. I wanted to know more, to know everything, but also nothing, nothing at all.

“I have a bump. It’s on the inside of me. It hurts. But I’ve been taking this medicine from the pharmacy and it’s basically gone now. I haven’t gotten another one. Sometimes you only have one outbreak in your life. But you have the disease forever,” she said, now a little sadly.

“Yeah, I know,” I said, thinking about all those posters in the doctor’s office. The statistic printed in bold letters that an estimate of 50% of all sexually active people would get HPV at one point in their lives.

I didn’t know how I felt. Shocked, judgmental, grossed out, sad, and the most terrible thought for a friend to ever have: feeling like in a way she had this coming.

Taylor’s sexual habits differed from mine. It was probably the one thing we didn’t have in common. She had sex with all her guy friends, with people she’d just met, with old boyfriends, with other people’s boyfriends. She repeatedly cheated. Her affairs were unemotional, detached, and distant. I felt awful thinking it, but I’d long known one day she would probably get an STD.

I remember one night in our palace, over neon gummy worms and Ben and Jerry’s ice cream, she asked me if I had ever let a man ejaculate inside of me.

“Ew, no!” I said, covering my mouth with my hand and squealing. Not only did I want to avoid an unwanted pregnancy, but the thought of someone else’s liquid dripping out of me made me shudder. Gross. “Have you?” I asked.

“Of course. With every guy. I even did it once when I wasn’t on birth control,” she said casually. She picked a green and blue worm from her mint ice cream and popped it in her mouth.

I remember thinking how irresponsible she was. I remember thinking how intimate you must be with someone to want his liquid inside of you. I remember not understanding how she could do that with everyone.

Her choices were wild and unpredictable, and she was careless with who she shared a bed with.

What about my brother? I thought again, panicking.

It took no time at all for Chris to be fully welcomed into our world. We had our Roomie Routine down pat. He followed along with our antics harmoniously, like a new addition. He came home one night on his day off, and filled up our cabinets with food. He had been with us for about a week or two.

“I want to help out around here. I got dishwasher soap, paper towels, some other stuff too. I can help pay the bills,” he said.

“Wow, thank you so much. I meant to get to the store today for dishwasher soap and forgot. Thanks,” I said, my voice surprised and grateful.

Taylor walked into the kitchen as we were unloading the groceries. She was in her Victoria Secret Pink workout clothes with headphones dangling from her ears, attached to the black iPhone she held in her hand. Even in a white sports bra, her breasts bulged out. She still managed to look sexy in a loose tank top.

“Hey. Do you guys want to do Mexican Monday? Make some quesadillas and margaritas?” she said.

“Um, yes?” I said in a do-you-think-I’m-crazy tone.

“Okay, I’m going to do a class at the gym. I’ll be back soon.”

“Chris and I will get the food started then. Can’t wait!”

I raided the fridge for anything Spanish. I threw tortillas, sour cream, salsa, shredded cheddar, and lettuce on the counter. I dug out a package of chicken breasts from the meat drawer. Chris found some green bell peppers.

“Fajitas?” he asked, holding up the peppers from the fridge drawer and looking at me.

“Yeah! You work the grill though. You’re better than me. I’ll put these toppings in bowls on the table,” I said, loving that I had the easy job. I hid my sneaky smirk as he headed to our back porch to heat up the grill.

I grabbed a bottle of Jose Quervo Silver from the freezer, thanking myself that I had picked it up a few days prior just for kicks. I put my heavy-hand bartending skills to good use, filling up the blender with full ice, half tequila, half margarita mix. My frozen margaritas weren’t exactly the easiest to drink, but you never needed more than one or two.

I heard a buzzing. I looked at the phone on the counter. It was Chris’s, and Taylor’s name was on the screen. He was still outside.

They text? I thought.

I think I knew right then. She had gotten to him. He was no match for her perfectly crafted breasts and relentless sexual appetite. He’d had three girlfriends over the past few years, all pretty unfortunate looking compared to Taylor. Two were fairly overweight and blonde, the third had bad teeth and wore huge gages in her ears. One of

the overweight girls was a horrid, nasty person. Chris never strived to find the kind of girl I thought he deserved. He seemed to just be lazy and settled for whatever laziness could get. He was no match for Taylor's young and wild sexiness.

It wasn't long before Taylor's view of our trio changed.

"Gabby, can I make out with your brother?" Taylor asked me one afternoon.

I had just got home from work, the lunch shift at Carrabba's, and was kneeling on her floor like I always do, telling her about my day. There was some girl I never met curling Taylor's hair with a straightener, wrapping frizzy sections around the barrel and pausing for the shape to mold. They sat in front of her full-length mirror, mascara and eyeliners decorating the floor in front of them.

I loosened the navy tie around my neck. My khaki pants were too short. I played with their hems.

"What? No?" I said, trying to laugh it off as a joke.

Taylor was drunk. She had wanted to spend the day with me at the pool, but since I had work, went with Chris and some Lime-A-Rita's instead. It was the first time they ever hung out without me. I felt left out, sad, and a little suspicious. I guess I expected Taylor to catch up on some homework or for Chris to play guitar alone in his room. I never thought they would take their friendship into their own hands, to places I couldn't supervise.

The hairgirl behind Taylor laughed with me. She seemed to know the situation already. It irritated me. I glared at her.

“Where are you going?” I asked Taylor. It wasn’t like her to party at night if she partied during the day. Besides, I was determined to get us off this forbidden subject.

“Downtown. With some friends. Taco Tuesday!” she roared, punching the air above her head with her fist.

“That’s fun,” I said, smiling. We rarely did anything apart, but some nights I would hang out with my high school friends and she would hang out with hers. I was Lake Mary, she was Oviedo. We always invited each other to be polite, but really we didn’t mind these nights apart. They were the stories we told each other in the bathroom brushing our teeth or during the *Friends* episodes we watched late on Nick At Nite.

“Yeah. So when Chris and I got back from the pool, we sat on the couch to watch TV. We were a little drunk. I asked him if I could hold his hand,” she said. She hiccupped and giggled at the same time, making a funny noise.

The girl behind her laughed again. Taylor was determined to keep us on the subject.

“That’s weird,” I said, trying to hide the change in my voice. But it was too obvious.

I still can’t explain why it bothered me so much. Maybe other girls would be fine with their best friend dating their brother, but I just wasn’t one of them. I didn’t know if it was because I knew so much about Taylor. I didn’t know if it was because I felt like I was losing her.

I just couldn’t imagine it. Taylor, younger than me and my most trusted and best friend, with Chris, a brother seven years older than me who I’ve looked up to since as

long as I can remember. He was there for me when my father wasn't around, when he was off traveling on business trips to Australia and Singapore. He taught me how to make grilled cheese without burning the bread. He told me the truth when I asked him if he smoked weed, told me he could lie about it to my parents and to everyone else, but not to me. He wasn't perfect, but I still looked up to him. He never betrayed me.

It was just, weird. Wrong. I thought about his thirty year old coworker, Rob, who told me I was cute once. I wonder how Chris would've felt if I dated Rob. If he would've felt the same protective jealousy, the same distaste. But I never would've thought to date Rob.

That night, I slept at Christian's. As I lay in his bed with blue sheets and not enough room, trying to ignore the ESPN he forced me to watch, I couldn't help but feel a little worried for when Taylor got home that night. She would be wasted. And Chris would be home in his bed, alone. I wouldn't be there, and I wouldn't know. She could crawl into Chris's bed, in some skintight black dress, and he would let her, wouldn't resist the temptation she radiated.

"What about Chris?" I said into the receiver of the phone, horrified.

There was a pause. A mosquito flew from the ceiling of Christian's porch and past my ear. I swatted at it.

"Well. I really like him, Gabby. Can you please, please not tell him about this? Chris is a good guy. I need someone like that," she said, pleading.

Yeah, I know he's a good guy. He's too good for you.

Taylor was a great person, and an even better friend. But I had never seen her as someone's girlfriend. She just wasn't the type you date. She was untrustworthy. She lied, cheated, drank too much, fooled around too much. She didn't care about anyone's heart but her own. And it didn't matter who she set her sights on next, she would do the same thing to them as she did to the others. They weren't special. They were just next in line.

I never lectured her on morals or felt sympathy for the men she slept with who I never knew. I was her friend and her choices were never my business. But now, suddenly, they were.

"Taylor, I don't know. This is a big deal. I can't put him in danger like that," I said in disagreement.

Who comes first, family or best friend? I didn't know who to choose.

"Please promise me you won't tell him. He isn't going to like me if he knows."

"Have you even hooked up yet?" I asked, still in denial.

I wasn't aware if they had hooked up or not. After the first few initial attempts at explaining to Taylor how much it hurt my feelings, how much it bothered me, I just stopped trying. I would wake up in the middle of the night to get a drink or snack, and there they would be, cuddling on the couch. I didn't want to know.

"No, not yet," she replied.

I felt a little bit of relief, but only a little. She did say "yet." It was only a matter of time.

“Well, listen,” I began, “I will promise not to say anything to him. You have my word. But you have to tell him yourself. And if you do hook up, you have to use protection. Okay?”

“Okay,” she said. “Thanks, Gabby.” She seemed more relaxed.

“I’m going to get back to my homework. I’m sorry this happened to you. I wish you told me earlier,” I said, still wanting her to be comforted despite everything.

“I didn’t want to tell anyone. I was so embarrassed and sad. But thanks. I’ll see you when you get home,” she said.

I felt sad too. Regardless of how I knew this would happen, how I knew she would get some disease if she wasn’t more careful, I didn’t want this for her.

“Okay, bye,” I said.

I heard the beep-beep of the iPhone call disconnection. I still held the phone to my ear.

Then I put it in my pocket and walked inside silently.

I was lying on my carpet by my bed, crying and trying to eat a peach fruit cup, the only thing I attempted to eat in a week besides one chocolate pudding and two blue raspberry Go-Gurts.

I was miserable.

I had gotten my wisdom teeth out recently, and though I wouldn’t know it for another week, had an exposed nerve called a “dry socket.” The most painful post-surgery

complication for wisdom teeth removal. Everything I ate or drank, including just water, killed me. Eventually, I stopped eating. Eating was associated with pain.

Someone knocked at my door.

I ignored the knock and kept crying.

Chris slowly opened the door.

“Hey. Is there anything I can get you?” he said, voice worried. He looked down at me in pity.

“No,” I said back, angrily. “I just want to be left alone.” I hoped he knew how much I meant that.

“Okay,” he said, a sting of rejection on his face. I felt bad, but only for a second.

He closed the door.

A minute later, my phone vibrated on the floor next to me.

It was a text from Taylor that read, “Wanna get some Jerry’s with me? It will make your mouth feel better. Nice and cold ☺.”

Jerry’s was what we nicknamed Jeremiah’s Italian Ice, our favorite place to get a Mango Vanilla Gelato.

I texted back, “No,” without saying thank you or anything else. I felt bad, but only for a second.

They were both trying to be there for me, make me feel better. But all I could think about was how they were out there in the living room, cuddling on the couch. All of the fun moments Taylor and I had on a daily basis were now pushed onto Chris, and his onto her. All of the things they needed me for, they now found in each other. I was

losing both of them, and they were happy about it, happy together. This was only the beginning. I felt like screaming, but even if I did, would they have heard me?

I pulled up to my parents' driveway in Lake Mary and grabbed my purse and keys off the passenger seat. It was a sweaty August day, and I was about to graduate from college.

My phone vibrated in my hand as I opened the door and stood up.

I knew what it was about the second I saw the name: Chris. I stood there in the sweltering sun with my hand on the open car door and I answered.

"Hello?" I picked up, ready for the tornado. He hadn't spoken to me in weeks, and was only consumed with Taylor. I felt stupid for thinking our living arrangement would bring us closer, would be a good thing. We had never been this far apart.

"Gabrielle?" he said, accusatory and livid.

"Yes," I said, calmly and surly.

"Do you mind explaining to me how you knew about Taylor and didn't tell me?!" he screamed.

I stayed calm. I had been waiting for this moment. I made the mistake of venting to my brother Kurt about the Taylor-Chris love saga. I told him not to repeat anything, but Kurt had an infamous big mouth. I wasn't surprised he broke our promise. I didn't necessarily want Chris to find out, but I knew I wouldn't be too upset if the truth finally came out either.

“Look, I told her to tell you. She asked me not to, so I promised I wouldn’t. But she should’ve told you. She’s an adult,” I argued.

“Well she didn’t tell me!” he kept yelling.

I knew they’d had sex by now. Because this was after I saw Taylor’s naked body on his bed. My heart dropped in shock and dread.

“Are you okay? Did you get tested?” I asked. I felt horrible, but also really pissed off. I trusted Taylor to tell him, to be a woman and admit to the realities of her situation. She fooled us both. My blood pumped faster under my skin.

“No, I haven’t gotten tested. Kurt just told me today,” he said, bitter.

“I’m sorry okay. I tried to keep this from happening,” I said. My voice sounded frustrated and hurt. My eyes sprouted fresh, angry tears.

“That doesn’t matter, Gabrielle. This is my health. You should contact me if it has to do with my health,” he said.

“Well, did she ask you to use a condom?” I asked, skeptical. I remembered her promise to use protection.

“No,” he replied.

He hung up on me. I had never betrayed my brother before. And now he was angry with me, not with her. I started to realize the hold she had over him. He blamed only me, the one who didn’t want to be involved, the one who liked her palace before he came into it.

And then I just cried. Hand on the door, in the driveway, sweat sticky on my neck. I let myself finally crumble and I cried.

I cried for moving him into my house, for trying to protect him from Kurt, from Taylor. I cried for trusting her to do the right thing, for wishing she cared more about my feelings than her next male conquest. I cried for the danger I put my brother in, for it being my fault too. I cried for the whole thing.

I'm sitting on the couch in my beautiful apartment. The two-bedroom I decided to rent with Taylor and our dog, Dakota, before everything fell apart.

It's quiet. The only sound I hear is the hum of the heating system, which I turned on this morning. On the bookshelf there are old pictures of us in black and white frames. There are purple candles, fake dandelions in a glass vase, and wine glasses with rhinestone Tridelta letters. The kitchen table from our old house is here. So much of this apartment makes it seem like we are still the same.

There are signed lease papers on the counter, finalizing our move out date two months from now. It's been a year of this awkward living arrangement. Taylor is a senior and about to graduate at the end of summer, like I did. I just completed my first year of graduate school.

We are texting each other pictures of Dakota back and forth. Nowadays, he is our only thing in common. He is napping soundly next to me on the couch, as I am his main caretaker now, the one who is always home. Taylor sleeps at Chris's townhouse every night, and I never see her, or him. Chris and I will never be the same again; because of the line that I shouldn't have crossed. In the future, it will be only holidays and accidental

run-ins where we force a conversation and act like strange ghosts of the siblings we once were.

This is not how I would have wanted things to happen, for all three of us. But I remember that time, that time when I was so careful then scared, frustrated then hurt, angry then resigned. I remember being young and immature and stubborn. I remember trying to hold onto the best part of my life. I fought against what I knew would destroy us. So, maybe I would do things a little differently now. But I know I fought for something, even if it's something I'll never have again. I know I fought for something.

ON THAT TIME IN HIGH SCHOOL

I remember my first day of high school. My father walked me to the bus stop in our neighborhood, but turned around on the last street so the other kids wouldn't see him taking me there. I wore white Adidas sneakers with teal blue stripes. I wore jean Roxy shorts and a blue shirt that said Jamaica in black letters over a graphic sunset. I carried an oversized pink and white Jansport backpack, with just enough compartments and zippers to classify me as a nerd. I wasn't one really, just unsure of myself.

The last time I went to school, the last day of eighth grade, was at Hillsborough Middle School, in New Jersey. I rode the bus with my cousin Alyssa and my best friend Jen, and we sat in the back with the cool boys: Rich, Ricky, and Tucker. Like everyone else, I didn't like Tucker's mean cousin Caitlyn, who sat a few seats ahead of me, so before her stop I would prank her seat, spreading toothpaste or shaving cream onto it, things I brought from home. Everyone thought it was hilarious, and watched me get secret revenge on the freckle-faced girl who bullied everyone. I'd spent sixth and seventh grade trying, and failing, to fit in with the cool girls: Jill, Lindsey, and Darrian. When eighth grade rolled around, I decided to spend my time more wisely, so I hung out with Jen and Alyssa and actually enjoyed my last year of middle school. They are still my lifetime friends.

I had a great group of friends on my gymnastics team, Paramount Gymnastics. We had been training together since the second grade. My best gymnastics friend, Christina, would sit across from me in a straddle split on the floor exercise. She had dark brown hair and olive Italian skin. I would be in the same split pose. We would be in

time-out, because we had too much fun. But it wouldn't be time-out for us, because we would find a crumb-sized piece of foam or lint on the floor and flick it back and forth. We would make football goals with our hands and try to make the lint soar through the middle. We loved time-out. Christina is still my best friend, of sixteen years.

I left everyone familiar and fun to go to Florida, 1,102.8 miles away, for my father's new job. My parents thought it was perfect timing since I would be transitioning to high school, but that only made the move scarier. I felt as if I was just getting to know myself, just getting comfortable in my skin, when my life was uprooted. Lake Mary High School was two stories; brick walled on the outside, jail colors on the inside. There was a jumping ram statue, bronze and frozen, in the front of the school. An American flag waved on its pole. The football stadium bleachers were painted black and red, the school colors. I was twenty minutes late to a class I couldn't find. The map looked like a confusing atlas of auditoriums, hallways, and cafeterias. It read like gibberish.

Too shy to make friends, too far away from Christina and Jen and the foundations I built for myself back in Jersey, I didn't know what to do when lunchtime came. There were two cafeterias, separated by a wide hallway. The cheerleaders sat together, the potheads sat together, the soccer kids sat together. I stood in the hallway, looking from one cafeteria to the other, contemplating. I didn't see a group like me. So I took the lunch my mother packed me, a salami and mustard sandwich and an orange in a brown paper bag, and I went upstairs to the bathroom. The entire upstairs was empty, because the school had two timed lunches; upstairs classes first, downstairs classes second. I

locked myself in the big handicapped stall and sat on the toilet in my clothes. I ate my lunch alone.

Petrified with the idea of walking up to a table of strangers and introducing myself, asking for their permission to sit down, I ate lunch alone in the bathroom for a while. I did it whenever I wasn't in the mood to sit with the weird misfits at a table in the front of the cafeteria. They seemed to be a random group of people, so on the days I sat there I didn't speak to them. I just sat there, silently thanking them for appearing to be my armor of friends, and ate my lunch.

I started up gymnastics again at Brown's Gymnastics in Sanford, and practiced five hours a night after school. I didn't have much of a life. I would come home from the bus stop with fifteen minutes to spare to change into my leotard and eat a snack. When my mother picked me up from practice, she would have dinner hot like meatloaf and mashed potatoes in a Tupperware container on the passenger seat for the ride home. When I got home, I would do an hour of math homework and instant message my New Jersey friends on AIM (AOL Instant Messenger) until it was time for bed.

Sophomore year got a little better; I met Christie in English class and she introduced me to Bianca. I ate lunch with them, actual friends, for the first time. I quit gymnastics, the thief of all my time and energy, and tried lacrosse. I stopped lacrosse after a few months. I had a crush on Matt Dees but when I told him, he said he didn't feel the same. I would instant message him on AIM every night but never say a word to him when I saw him everyday in art class. Bianca, Christie, and I grew apart the next year.

Junior year I dated David, my first boyfriend, a blonde surfer boy in my neighborhood. He started driving me to school because he was a year older than me and so I stopped taking the bus. He was the first boy I kissed since my first kiss, in eighth grade by a boy named Damon Pappas. I started wearing fashion necklaces and Abercrombie and straightening my hair. I learned what bronzer was. David and I lost our virginities to each other. I ate lunch with Heather and Chrissie, other girls who lived in my neighborhood. I never felt like I fit in with them, though they were nice to me. They got French manicures and knew how to crimp their hair. They made me listen to Ashlee Simpson and Jesse McCartney.

Senior year, like my last year of middle school, I began to start figuring out who I was. I joined the cheerleading team because I missed gymnastics but didn't miss how taxing it was. I ate lunch with Alli and Alaina, two blonde cheerleaders on my team. They were fun and silly and brave, people who I knew would finally break me from my shell. I drove a silver Jetta. I wore open toed white wedge sandals. I learned how to drink Bud Light. I dated Jeff Hemann, a football player, the most popular boy in school. I don't know why he picked me, I was still shy. When he met me he thought I was the new girl in school. He said I was innocent, and it drew him to me.

I had always thought of it as very black and white, either it didn't happen at all or it happened in a dirty cement basement with one dangling light bulb like in a CSI remake; where the girl is battered and beaten and barely makes it out alive. I never thought it could happen in my pretty pink room, on top of my yellow hibiscus pillows, with a boy

Alli spoke so highly of. Someone who had a lot of friends and who cheered me on when I played beer pong. Someone popular, attractive. Someone so, normal. I realized I had made a serious lapse in judgment. I looked around at the glass dolphins and stuffed dogs and teddy bears. I silently begged for their help.

He heard me crying under him.

Then, just like that, he stopped.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed.

He lay limp on my body. I wasn’t sure if my tears confused him, or if he finally understood I didn’t want this all along.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

There had been a party the night before. Fresh from my breakup with Jeff, Alli was determined to get me out of the house and exploring new people.

The crowd was fairly unusual, mostly guys from the neighboring high school and the rebellious kids from ours. I recognized some of the pothead girls with bad reputations.

The house was grimy just like the crowd, with beer-sopped wet tile and a room with a black light and weird mushroom posters. I felt uneasy at once, but Alli flew through the swarm of tipsy people like a social butterfly, clutching my hand and weaving us through the teenagers.

Sure, I wasn’t eating lunch alone in a bathroom anymore, but I still hadn’t rid myself of all my awkward shyness. I thought Alli was good for me because she forced me into parties and people, things I was too uncomfortable to do on my own. She had

golden blonde hair that stopped at her shoulders and blue eyes just like mine. She was far more sexually experienced than I was, but she hid it well, so she had a fairly good reputation at our school.

“Hey, you!” Alli yelled from the kitchen to a random guy assigning beer pong partners.

“Yeah?” the scruffy teenager responded, balancing his red cup between his arm and torso as he walked two Miller Lites to the table in the living room.

“We’re up next!” she said loudly. She looked at me and smiled.

I gave her an encouraging nod and let my eyes wander to the fridge the Miller Lites came from.

“Oh my God,” Alli whispered, suddenly at my ear and clutching my arm.

“What?” I whispered back, ready for the cop raid and prepared to run.

“That’s Anthony Defalco. He goes to Seminole. He is so hot,” she said, wistfully.

“Where?” I asked, uninterested.

“There, playing pong. On the left. Oh, he’s so hot. I’ve always wanted to hook up with him. But I’m with Josh. You totally have to. I would rape that boy!” Alli squealed. She was speaking way too loud. I looked around us, embarrassed, checking if anyone heard.

“Oh my gosh, shhh,” I said. Alli was pretty vulgar for a girl, and didn’t care if people knew it or what they thought of her. Girls didn’t really judge her because she was funny and a good friend, and guys didn’t really judge her because they were trying to get lucky most of the time. Personally, I thought the stories of her sexual escapades were

wild and entertaining, considering I was usually home watching *One Tree Hill* while she was sneaking boys into the neighborhood pool to skinny-dip.

I looked at Anthony. He was a cute boy, with dark brown eyes and hair. His shirt was plain white and he had a muscular build.

“He’s cute. I wouldn’t exaggerate quite as much as you did though...” I said.

“Oh come on, I’m going to introduce you. You have to flirt with him,” she said, whisking me out of the kitchen and into the bigger room. “For me,” she added.

“Ugh, but I really don’t...” I started. I didn’t want to talk to a boy, especially a stranger. I probably wouldn’t have wanted to under normal circumstances, but I was hurt and missing Jeff, so now I really wasn’t interested. Boy hunting was Alli’s pastime, not mine. It gave me no satisfaction.

It was too late. We were in the living room and staring him right in the face.

“Anthony, this is Gabby. She just dumped her boyfriend and I told her she just had to meet you,” she said.

My face grew hot and I began to see why it was hard for guys to ignore her aggressive attitude. She didn’t really leave you much choice.

Anthony laughed and looked at me. His eyes were kind, and I was glad he was relaxed and comfortable, not making it awkward.

“Hi, Gabby,” he said, reaching out his hand.

“Hi,” I said, laughing a little. I shook his hand.

“I’ll call you tomorrow okay? I want to take you out to lunch,” he said, kissing me on the cheek.

I nodded silently. Lunch? What a joke. Let’s do this again sometime, yes.

My parents’ garage door was right behind him. I was so close to never seeing him ever again. Just a few more seconds.

He hugged me goodbye.

I stiffened. My arms remained at my sides, unwelcoming.

I opened the door for him and clicked the garage opener. It made a low grumbling noise as it slowly lifted, revealing the darkness of the late night.

I didn’t watch him go. The second his head was clear, or almost clear, from being hit by the garage door rising up, I clicked the button for it to slug back down again.

Like a zombie, I walked up the stairs to my bedroom and went to sleep.

Alli and Josh were playing against Anthony and me in beer pong. We jokingly yelled back and forth about bad sportsmanship while chugging our cheap beers.

“Gabby, c’mon. I have to go to the bathroom,” Alli said. She walked around the table and I followed her down a short hallway.

She closed the door of the bathroom behind us and rushed to the toilet. I fixed my hair in the mirror and started washing my hands, just for something to do.

“So, you like him huh? I told you he was great!” she said.

I didn’t really know him yet.

“I’m not sure. He is fun, and he makes me feel special.” I decided to go with that.

“See? There are lots of other people out there,” she said. I think she thought she found my next boyfriend or potential hookup, happy to play social matchmaker.

“Brad is having a party at his house tonight too. We should stop by there. Party hop for a little,” she said.

“Um, okay, yeah,” I said. This was more action than I was used to for a weekend night. Alli and I both had 11:00 p.m. curfews, making it difficult for us to go to parties, considering they always started around 10:30. She may have been wilder than I was, but her parents weren’t. She found the loophole by usually sneaking out. I always stayed home.

When we got out of the bathroom, we found Josh and Anthony were more than happy to jump ship and accompany us to Brad’s.

At the party, the boys did shots. The girls sat at the island counter and gossiped.

We couldn’t stay long. Anthony and Josh both walked us out to say goodnight when Alli and I had to go back home. As Josh and Alli made out eagerly next to us, Anthony and I awkwardly looked at the night sky.

I remember how vivid the sky was that night. The stars were out, and we both looked up at them together in silence. I felt his hand touch mine tenderly, so I looked at him.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked.

I felt the warmth from the palm of his hand, saw the kindness in his eyes.

“Yes,” I said, shyly.

I smiled. And I let the starry night above us bless me with my first tender kiss in weeks.

His weight strangled me and anchored me to my bed.

Shit, I thought. Oh shit.

I couldn't scream. I couldn't yell.

My whole family was asleep downstairs.

I wasn't allowed to have boys in my room, especially not with the door closed.

I would be in so much trouble.

I was still their little girl, the baby of the family.

They wouldn't banish me, but they would never look at me the same again.

He had pushed me down as his tongue pushed into my mouth and his lips worked aggressively to swirl around mine. I tried anxiously to come up with a polite way to stop kissing and perhaps sit upright again. Air rushed out of my mouth and into his.

I wish it had ended there. But now he was three hundred pounds and I couldn't move.

I tried to recount the shots I saw him take, wondering how drunk he was, wondering if he would cross the line I feared he would cross.

In the midst of all my thinking and panicking, I noticed my jeans were off.

When did that happen? I hadn't felt him take them off. I was distracted with all my thinking. I had never been in this situation before. I frantically tried to consider what Alli would do, but then I knew, she would want this. She would do it.

I made Jeff wait weeks before I let him finger me, and even that felt too soon. I remember he did it too hard, his fingernails scratched the inside of me, and there was blood on my underwear the next day. He laughed when I told him, but it only made me feel worse about moving so quickly. The blood made me feel violent and grown up, things I wasn't ready to feel yet.

He moved my pink cheeksters aside. His fingers searched for me desperately. I was frozen inside, contemplating my options.

“Mmmm,” he breathed into my neck.

“No,” I said, knowing I should've spoken sooner.

His hands became more aggressive. Moving over my stomach and gripping the insides of my legs. His face was buried in my pillow, but I could hear his fast breathing and moans through it.

His penis was fully out of his boxers now, but since I had not moved my hands an inch from my sides, his jeans were still on. I hadn't so much as caressed his hair.

When did he unzip? I was distracted again, thinking.

“No, stop,” I said again, a little louder. I couldn't speak any higher than a whisper because someone would hear us. Someone would catch me, and they would be ashamed of me.

I cursed my stupidity. I was alone in my room with basically a stranger, upstairs, too mortified to shout out for help. I pictured my rash tempered brothers grabbing the bat from the downstairs closet and beating him to hell. I gulped.

“I can’t believe he kissed you! I’m so happy!” Alli said on the car ride home from the party.

I let her gloat. I looked out of the window and replayed his affectionate kiss in my head, seeing my smile in the window’s reflection.

I don’t know why Alli decided she didn’t have enough action for the night.

She took out her cell phone and dialed Josh’s number.

“Hey,” she said into the receiver.

I had no clue why she was calling him. We were minutes from my house and she could’ve waited until she got home. She lived two streets away.

“Gabby wants you guys to come over her house,” she said.

I spun my head around to face her.

“What?” I said. She hadn’t consulted me at all. “Alli, no,” I said.

“Alright, see you in ten minutes!” she said, ignoring me. She hung up, looking satisfied with herself. She flashed me a tempting smile and raised her eyebrows.

“Alli, why would you do that? I can’t have three people over my house, my parents are asleep,” I said.

“We can just hangout, open some beers,” she said casually.

“In my room? Alli, seriously, no. We would get caught. There is no way we can be quiet enough,” I said. I didn’t necessarily want the night to end either, but it was curfew and I was ready to be home. This was where Alli and I differed. She was brave, she took risks. I didn’t.

She pulled up to my house and swung around the curb to drop me off. She put the car in park.

“Ugh, okay. Fine,” she said. She took her cell phone back out and dialed Josh again.

I sighed, relieved. I wasn’t in the mood to push my luck with my parents. And she practically invited a stranger to my house without asking me.

“Hey, Josh. Listen, Gabby doesn’t want her parents to catch us in her room. So, you come to my house. And tell Anthony to go to hers,” she said.

My mouth dropped open. What?

“Alli, what the hell,” I said. “I don’t want him in my room!”

“Oh c’mon, lighten up. You might have fun.”

“Oh my gosh. Give me his number.”

She handed me her phone and I copied the number over to my cell phone. I opened the car door.

“Goodnight,” I said, annoyed. Thanks for putting me in this awkward situation. I walked away before she could mess up anything else.

“Goodnight! Have fun you two!” she said.

Her aggressiveness had crossed over from her dating life into mine. At first I was happy for the push, but this was an unwelcome invite. I would never have a boy sneak into my home late at night that I just met. If that was a part of being cool, I didn’t need it. I was happy without it.

I opened the garage door to my house and went upstairs to my room. I felt sick to my stomach, and kneeled by the toilet in fear of projectile vomiting on my beige carpet. I only had a few beers, but the dread of Anthony coming up to my room made me uneasy and nervous. I didn't know what to do or say to him. I got off my knees and paced around my room.

Ten minutes passed, in which I silently debated with myself whether or not I should call him and tell him to just go home. The longer I waited, the more I realized how bad of an idea this was, how much I didn't want him to come here. I picked up my cell phone and called his number.

"Hello?" he answered after a few rings.

"Hi, Anthony. This is Gabby. Listen, I'm really sick and I don't think you should come over. I just threw up, so I'm just going to go to bed," I lied. He can go ahead and think I'm a lightweight; at least I wouldn't have to see him again tonight.

"No, I'm right outside. I'm here. Please, can I just say hi to you for five minutes?"

Crap. He was here. I cursed myself for not calling him earlier. Maybe he was lying. I walked up to the window seat in my bedroom and slid the blinds open. A black, sleek BMW sat idle at the curb. I can still recall how malicious it looked, sitting there waiting for me.

"Please," he said again, since I hadn't said anything.

In hindsight, I should have gone downstairs and outside to meet with him. He could have easily said hi to me there. But I only thought of this afterwards.

"Okay," I said. I didn't want to be rude. *Damnit, Alli.*

I hung up and went downstairs to open the garage. Opening the garage used to be the telltale way to wake my parents up, but since my father had replaced the noisy mechanical door with a quieter one, the process was now lethally silent.

His head popped in under the open space and he walked up to me. I stood on the front step barefoot, clothes from the party still on. I felt uncomfortable imagining myself in my pajamas around him.

“Hi,” I whispered.

“Hey,” he said back.

The head of his penis touched me now.

I got scared.

“Stop it. Don’t,” I said, frantic. The octaves of my voice rose and rose with each demand that went by unnoticed.

I participated, as a one-woman act, in the “No, Stop, Don’t” game. I don’t know how long it was. It could’ve been three minutes. It could’ve been a half hour.

My petite body betrayed me. I was molded into the bed like someone buried me in the sand. I was drowning in his body, which engulfed mine. I tried putting my hands on his chest and pushing upwards. He didn’t budge. He was stone. I was putty.

The whole time, he was in me.

All I could think was, I’m so stupid. I trapped myself like a kid in a maze, only there wasn’t a way out. I could think of nothing but to lie there and let it happen, after my feeble attempts failed me.

I felt a sudden and ironic appreciation for my father's rules, and then immediately shuddered at the thought of him ever finding out what happened with his little girl, a mere few yards away from him. I had to protect my father, and the rest of my family. Protect their image of me. They could never know the truth.

So as my body deluded me and my room allied against me and my vocal commands failed me, I gave up and succumbed to powerlessness.

I started to cry.

It was the only thing I knew left to do. I didn't think it would make him stop, no of course not. I was just defeated. My only release was in my tears; it was the only thing I could do successfully.

How stupid of me to assume the most obvious thing of all, that something like this would not happen to me.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Come in," I said through my pillow. It was the next morning, and I hadn't gotten out of bed, though I'd been awake for hours.

Alli opened my bedroom door and walked in.

"Hi," she said, hesitantly.

"Hey," I said.

It was quiet. Neither one of us knew what to say.

I was a little angry with her, but I never told her. Of course I never told her. I put most of the blame on myself, for not being able to bring myself to say what I needed to

say. My shy awkwardness from middle school poured over my time in high school, even until the very end. I paid the price.

Alli put her shoulder bag down and migrated towards my vanity mirror; picking up my perfume bottles and smelling them, turning on my straightener, tightening her ponytail.

“I was really sad today, for some reason. And then I figured out why. It was because of you!” she said casually, excited to have found the alchemist the emotional imbalance of her day.

Oh, Alli. Of all the things you could say to make me feel better. My incident had affected a small part of her life, of her day. It had changed both of mine forever. If this was what it took to be cool, I think I got more than I bargained for.

I lay silent in my bed, head perched on my orange Hawaiian print pillow. The bright yellow hibiscus flowers were pissing me off, not matching the glum of my mood.

I didn't really want to talk to anyone. But she had called to come over on her way to a date and I agreed.

She started putting on a nude lipgloss.

I just lay there. My eyes stung.

“What's that?” I asked, though I was pretty sure I knew the answer. I pointed to a dirty white sock on the floor at the corner of my bed.

Alli looked down at it.

“Not mine,” she said. “Yours?”

“No,” I said. We looked at each other, realizing together.

“Ew!” she said.

A sick feeling blossomed in my stomach, violent and powerful.

I thought the bloody handprint on my sheet under my pillow was the only thing left, other than the memory. I hid the print well, not daring to move my head or my pillow. It didn't stop the feeling of it beneath me.

Apparently he had left that night with one bare foot in a sneaker. I wondered when it had fallen off, or why he didn't notice. He was more drunk than I thought.

After she left, I used a Ziplock bag as a glove, a trick my mother taught me in picking up dirty things, and picked up the sock to throw in the trash. I went downstairs to toss it in the kitchen garbage and not my own. And, finally, he was gone.

Alli left my house unchanged, her life undisturbed. I envied her that. Nothing seemed appealing about being cool anymore, not the beer pong tournaments or the cheerleader lunch tables, not the shot taking or the sneaking out. I learned to find my way on my own, like that last year of middle school, without the popular kids. I learned to speak up, to make my own choices. And that, was the coolest thing of all.

PORTUGUESE AFFAIR

Jesse Ting was someone I wanted to marry.

When I dated Jesse Ting, I went to church with him every Sunday morning, even though I closed the bar late Saturday night. His family moved to Florida from Pennsylvania and didn't have much, which made them humble and pure-hearted. They were some of the best people I had ever known. He had two brothers and one sister, and they were all married with new babies. His mother, who had a short black bob and vivid aqua eyes, looked at me like I was the girl to complete the family. I thought I was too.

Jesse Ting loved to fish. He used to say, "I wish we lived this life years ago, when men had to hunt and fish for food and money didn't exist." I remember smiling when he said that, because it perfectly described the kind of person he was. His enthusiasm for life and for fishing radiated out of him, onto my family and me. He made me go deep sea fishing once, for nine hours, where I tried to ignore my sea legs like a big girl and keep my lunch down. He even got my parents fishing again, something they hadn't done since they were newly married. He helped me pick out two new rods for them and gave my father some advice on the best boat to buy. He seemed to rub off on everyone.

I loved Jesse Ting two weeks after I met him. He was Mexican and Asian, which gave his skin a russet tint and his eyes a slight pull. He had big, plump lips and he always kissed me so softly. He was a gentleman, a loving son, a loyal friend, an angel. It was impossible not to love him. I flew us both up to New Jersey for a weekend, to meet my aunts and uncles and cousins, my toughest critics. They adored him, just like my parents.

They asked me when we were going to get engaged. I was smug about having found someone they could all be proud of. I wanted approval, from everyone. I thought of how cute our wedding pictures would be, how healthy our baby would be, how nicely I would decorate our house. I remember telling myself I couldn't mess this up, that this was my chance at happiness, my perfect future. Jesse Ting was who I thought I should be with.

It's not difficult for me to admit that if I were sure of myself this would have never happened. I thought I knew the kind of person I was, but I found myself wanting something bad for myself, something wrong. I found myself wanting someone else.

His name was Tony, which annoyed me because I already had enough Italian relatives named Tony to keep track of. He was thirty-two, a solid nine years older than me. I bartended with him every weekend; we split the bar and split the tips. He was the best bartender I had ever seen, which intimidated me both because he was always right and because no matter how hard I tried he was never satisfied. I remember how intrigued I was the first time I heard him speak Portuguese to a customer. He spoke quickly, his tongue rushed the syllables, the language was magnetic and tempting. He was a mystery to me, a mystery I needed to see more closely. The first time he gave me butterflies, he leaned into my ear to tell me to check on a customer, and wrapped his hand subtly around my waist. The second time he gave me butterflies, I was wiping Windex off tables with a rag and heard him play my favorite song on the jukebox: "Gravity" by John Mayer. Then I started getting butterflies everyday.

We would hug each other after work every night in the parking lot. I would breathe in his Curve cologne and grab the back of his neck with my right hand, weaving my fingers in and out of his black hair. He would put his hands under my shirt and graze them up and down my lower back, giving me goose bumps. Our hugs lasted about ten minutes; we never wanted to say goodbye. I saw a little piece of myself in him; a piece I wanted to discover, to explore.

Our relationship was the opposite of my relationship with Jesse Ting, which was what both pulled me to it and pushed me away. Tony and I fought constantly, never agreed on anything. His selfishness, cockiness, and bad manners frustrated me, gave me the assurance that we would never work as a couple. But I didn't know why I couldn't stop. I still found myself calling that number, searching for that one thing that was missing from what I already had: the indubitable and all-consuming passion for someone completely wrong for me. After our numerous fights, we wouldn't speak for a few days or maybe even a week if we could manage, then we would come back to each other like long lost lovers separated from war. We could never stay away from each other, no matter how brutal our relationship was. But when we did get along, I was wild, happy, and alive. Being together felt like recess from my relationship, like summer break when school's out. It was far from easy, but it was rampant with unpredictability and therefore more spirited, more real than anything I had ever known. I could never explain him to my parents or my friends, I never felt like anyone but me would understand him. Understand us.

We had been working together for about six months when I finally let him kiss me. Jesse Ting and I had been dating for about seven months. I remember one of the nights around that time at Tony's house. One of the rare nights I only let happen every once in a while, because I couldn't stand the guilt of lying to Jesse Ting.

We lay together on Tony's navy couch that was too small, in his one bedroom apartment that was too cold.

"Don't push me off..." I said, grabbing hold of his arm as he tried to roll me off the couch.

"Oh are you lucky this thing is here," he said, using his hand to pat the footrest wedged between the couch and me, holding my back up. His green eyes sparked with amusement.

When he said that, he laughed and slowly slid it to the side, causing us both to crash down to the floor in a landslide of arms and legs, previously intertwined. The crash was more graceful than I thought, and we lay on the carpet, letting the romance of the stunt overpower our laughter. He was on top of me now, and the innocence of his playful act immediately turned to sexual desire.

He wasted no time. He propped himself up on his elbows and grabbed my neck. I felt the jagged purple calluses on the inside of his hands that I had kissed earlier. A result of twisting off beer bottles for customers. They scraped at the sensitive parts of my neck, which I liked. He grinded his torso up and down my body. I could feel that he was hard through his sweatpants.

I arched my back and craned my head up towards the ceiling, so my chin was in his face instead of my lips. I moaned as he grinded against me. We were like teenagers, getting aroused with all our clothes on.

“I have to go home,” I said, scrambling for any excuse to get up. I was exhausted. I would have slept there if I could, but it was too risky chancing someone seeing my car in the parking lot. Catching me where I wasn’t supposed to be. Catching me walking out of his apartment. Catching me cheating.

I glanced at the clock on the oven in the kitchen. The glowing neon numbers read 7 a.m.

I groaned, and nestled my face into his armpit. His skin was pale and white, his armpit smelt like natural musk veiled by Gillette deodorant. I liked the warped combination, and breathed it in. I fought my sleep, but secretly wished it would come so I could be with him a little longer.

“Stay,” he said in my ear, “stay with me.”

I sighed. Snuggled into him harder. Thought of the morning’s eggs and turkey bacon we could share together. Just like the first time I ever slept over. My fingers drew lines on his biceps, up and down, bouncing over the tiny ridges that were his pimples or moles. I paused at each one and circled over it. Like all his imperfections, they only made him more beautiful.

Two arms came under me, scooped me up like a little girl, and carried me away. Honeymoon style. He knew my weakness for old romantic movies. I smiled, kept my eyes closed, and let him take me.

“Ouch!” I said, just barely above a whisper, “you just nailed my elbow.”

He laughed, so I laughed too, even though my arm did sting a little from knocking against the side of the doorframe. My eyes were still closed when I felt the supple cottony warmth of his bed beneath me.

“Mmm,” I said, and burrowed myself into his body once more.

He stuck his hands down the back of his gym pants I wore, grabbing onto my ass. I wore a white lace thong, so his chilly hands had access to my warm skin.

“Why are you touching that? It’s not yours,” I said, trying to put up a stubborn front, knowing it wouldn’t work. I looked up at his face, my grayish blue eyes provoking him. I embraced a childish attitude.

“Because I want you,” he exhaled into my ear. That seemed like his answer to everything. “Kiss me…” he said.

“No,” I said. “Notice how I don’t ask you to kiss me? We agreed you wouldn’t kiss me again until I ask you to,” I said.

“I know,” he said. His voice was spiked with frustration. He was wistful of the times he would just force his lips upon mine, and after initially fighting back, I’d eventually kiss him too. My control only held out for so long.

I smiled, gloating about my newfound power.

“Okay, you really should go. I don’t want you to get in trouble,” he said.

My eyes were closed again and I was trying to sleep, hoping he would forget I had to drive back home into the safe zone.

“I’m always in trouble,” I said airily.

He laughed and I laughed in return. I loved the moments like these when we were silly and immature, and not arguing over whose fault this all was. Moments before the guilt hit me driving home, moments before he got jealous when Jesse Ting visited me at work, moments before he slept with a girl out of loneliness and made me cry.

I kissed his rough, hairy cheek. The bristles from his scruffy neck grazed my soft lips. I did it again and again, holding and squeezing him tighter. I knew I would miss him over the few days until we worked together again. I wanted him, but I was afraid it was only the danger I wanted, the allure of the forbidden. I was afraid my parents wouldn't approve of him or my cousins wouldn't understand him. I was afraid to love someone so risky. And so I kept dating Jesse Ting, and I hid these stolen moments and all of my confusion about love and life deep inside of me. No one knew.

The other girl Tony slept with was a girl named Jessi who he called his best friend. I always rolled my eyes when he used this term, because I never slept with my best friends. To me, a friend was a friend. She was thicker than I was, and only a year younger than him. She had blue eyes and never wore makeup or tried too hard.

One night, she confronted me about Tony. She told me she knew. Jesse Ting and I had been dating about eight months. I was terrified of the consequences of my actions, terrified for Jesse Ting would find out I had kissed someone else. For him to see I wanted more than what he gave me, an impossibly selfish and ridiculous notion. As if he could ever not be enough for any girl.

I felt betrayed by Tony, furious that he would tell someone our secret, that he would confide in someone I barely knew, someone I couldn't trust. Logically, I knew my disloyalty to Jesse Ting was my fault entirely. But I felt at ease knowing Tony lied and kept secrets too, knowing he was willing to be as dark as I was. And now he had left me alone on one side to go be honest on the other.

The night after her confrontation, which took place at work where I couldn't escape and had to serve her Miller Lites with a synthetic smile, I was in my bed reading. I was ignoring Tony's texts and calls. We were in another typical standoff after one of our fights. I wouldn't crack, I was so angry he'd betrayed me.

The only light in my room came from the string lights adorning my windowsill, which I had put up to make it always feel like Christmas. I wrapped my legs around my navy body pillow with printed stars and moons and my pajama pants bunched up around my knees. I was busy with Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, a book assigned for one of my classes. It was memoir based on a young woman's relationship with her father. Her father had obsessive-compulsive habits with decorating and furniture and had inappropriate affairs with teenage boys. The narrator, Bechdel, grew up and realized she was a lesbian, something she felt bonded her to her disturbed father, who eventually killed himself shortly after she came out.

While I read, I kept wondering why the family stayed together, why the mother didn't leave the father, why the daughter didn't hate him. He seemed to have so many deranged qualities; there were even hints of physical abuse towards the children. He went to court for serving an underage boy beer and tried to hit on a male babysitter. He

later developed alcoholism and continued to show no affection towards his wife or kids. He made horrible financial choices, eventually driving the family into debt. I couldn't understand how the narrator could still love such a person.

Tony was texting me again, asking me to give him one more chance. I was too blinded by anger.

After Jessi confronted me, I talked to my boss about not working with Tony anymore. I would give up my weekend night shifts to a new girl, who I'm sure wouldn't meet his standards of bartending either. I would just work one night a week, Sunday, and I would work alone. I was not trying to be dramatic; I think I just knew I would never move on if I always had to see him. I didn't want to lie to Jesse Ting anymore. I didn't want to crave something I couldn't have anymore. I just wanted to be a good person, to just be happy with one other person.

When I told Tony I was planning to give up our shifts together, he immediately drove to my house and pleaded for me to stay. He told me he would be different and not fight with me anymore. I didn't know whether I could believe him or not. I kept a stubborn façade and told him I would think about it.

It was then in *Fun Home* I came across a quote from Albert Camus's first novel, *A Happy Death*. Bechdel mentioned it as a book her father had read, and in it he highlighted one line: "He discovered the cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love- first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage." And I felt deceived by Tony. He had deceived me to feel something for him, to feel the way he felt.

He had met Jesse Ting. He had shaken his hand. He knew that Jesse Ting was the best thing for me. And he still tried to carve himself into my life and into my heart.

I texted Tony the quote from Camus's novel.

Fifteen minutes later he responded.

“A dream you once were, a dream of all my realities, a dream I can no longer strive for in the wake of my manly betrayals.”

That's what I was: a dream. And him too, a dream of mine. But these dreams scared me, and I didn't know how to leave my reality. I didn't know how to leave Jesse Ting. I couldn't trust dreams.

An hour later I sat in class thinking about the book, not understanding the characters or their actions. I just stared at my white sandals. Then a girl named Devin, who had pale skin and brown freckles, spoke to the class. I looked up at her.

“The father is a man with so many faults and mistakes in his life. And it got me thinking, how there can sometimes be so many opposing forces in one person. There are times they are good and loving, but also times they are terrible and hurtful. And those forces somehow come together to fit in one person,” she said.

I wasn't surprised by whose face came into my mind when she spoke. No matter how hard I worked to consciously keep him out of my thoughts, he always came back to me. I stared at the stale blue carpet of our classroom, transfixed in revelation. Tony was so far from perfect, so irritating and so demanding, but he fascinated me. He connected to me in a way I had never experienced before. I yearned for his soul, for the piece of me that resided in him.

“You love them anyway,” she said, “you can’t help it.”

I was beginning to fear I would always want him, and I would never be able to control needing him in my life. But I put up a stubborn façade and tried anyway. I tried to just be happy with Jesse Ting.

A few times a week, whenever he wasn’t too exhausted from working at the Audi dealership, Jesse Ting would sleep over at my apartment. We would share one of our favorite bottles of wine together, like Apothic Red or *Ménage à Trois*, while watching *Taken* or *The Town*. He would always spoon me when I asked him to, and in the morning I would iron his clothes and make him breakfast: turkey bacon and scrambled eggs. He didn’t snore or fart. He gelled his hair. He always looked put together. He never made me cry, not once.

On Valentine’s Day, two months into our untainted relationship, I came home to find him hiding in my room, surprising me. There were one hundred hearts cut out of colored construction paper taped all over my walls. Each one had a hand-written reason why he loved me. I read each one out loud, laughing with him and giving him thank you kisses. I walked into my closet and found a brand new flat screen TV tied with a bow. I had whipped around to face him, my mouth wide open. I told him I couldn’t accept it, that it was too much. He just tucked a piece of my brown hair behind my ear, smiled, and said, “Do you like it?”

We went on a road trip to New Orleans in July, before Tony and I ever kissed. Jesse Ting was the best man in the wedding of our friends Kyle and Erin. I stood up with

the rest of the crowd as Erin walked down the aisle, a modern lace veil pinned to her curled hair. I looked at Jesse Ting instead of her; saw his proud smile and handsome dimples. I imagined how he would look standing there as the groom, with me walking towards him. I relished the image, because at the time, I thought it was what I wanted. A fairy tale.

Jesse Ting and I were so alike, so compatible, it was almost too easy. We never got in a single argument. We spoke in low, level voices when we disagreed, which happened rarely. He never broke my trust or went behind my back with other girls. We had the same morals and the same wishes for the future. We were going to raise our children in the church and teach them how to become good people. But when I met Tony, I began to get this sinking feeling I never got before. This sinking feeling where I asked myself, "Is this it?" And then all of the complacent comfort and compatibility I had in my relationship with Jesse Ting began to feel like a nightmare rather than a fairy tale. I was scared I was going to wake up one day, married with children, waiting for the other shoe to drop. My parents would be happy. My friends would be happy. But would I be?

It was noon and I pulled out a dusty rolling chair from the dented wooden table in the back room at Finnegan's, my workplace. I still hadn't talked to Tony, and I still hadn't made up my mind about working the weekend shifts with him. Jesse Ting and I had been dating for about ten months.

We were all gathered there for a staff meeting and I was bothered because I had to see Tony, who sat across from me on the old-fashioned leather couch. I grinned at the way my coworker Chrissy's head blocked him from my view. I didn't really notice how old she looked until I saw her wiry unkempt bleached hair and saggy face without makeup. I had never seen her in the morning, only at night with black eye shadow and short shorts. I stared at her for something to do, avoiding his eye contact.

We sat as silently as we could, biting our tongues and waiting it out. Our boss Eddie droned on and on about sales, jiggers, cleaning, bands, ways to promote. Like all our meetings, it was pointless. From time to time Chrissy would shift positions, or get worked up about the fact that we didn't have a cleaning crew and start waving her arms around, talking loudly to Eddie. I would catch a glimpse of Tony here and there, and one time he was staring right at me. We never smiled or looked happy when we shared these awkward stolen moments in public. We always had the same blank look, eyes wide and emotionless, just frozen in time. I often felt as if we participated in a mute conversation, a hidden declaration of everything we felt or didn't feel, everything we said or couldn't say. Even those meaningless looks meant something, bonded us together.

I got up to get a coffee. I had started it before the meeting but forgot to retrieve it. I strutted casually toward the door in my beige cowboy boots and jeans that were so tight I was hardly comfortable. I hoped he was watching, he had to be. I came back in less than a minute, sat down in my seat and kept listening. A while later, he got up to use the restroom. I tried not to look at him as he walked away, but I couldn't help it. He was wearing grey sweatshorts and a red t-shirt. His butt looked nice, like always. It was big,

but muscular, and sat high and plump. The t-shirt pulled at his biceps. His neon green and grey sneakers completed the look. He was clearly going to the gym after the meeting. I knew he would be right down the street working out, so close to my parents' house, so close to me. My heart ached. He returned from the bathroom and the aching didn't stop.

What the hell was wrong with me? I had to stay away from him. I had to keep pretending I was mad at him for betraying me to Jessi, even though I really wasn't anymore. I just used it as an excuse to distance myself, to bring myself back to Jesse Ting. After the meeting I would go back to my apartment, finish my homework, and go to class. Then he would be gone for a week. To a wedding in Connecticut. And I wouldn't miss him at all.

My anxiety built. Something I've only had a few times in my life, maybe once or twice. It was unfamiliar, and came quietly for odd reasons. I didn't recognize it or knew what it meant. It was full-blown now, trying to send me a message I couldn't decode. Eddie wrapped up the meaningless meeting and everyone rose to go his and her separate ways.

"Gabby?" a male voice asked from behind me.

It wasn't him. My heart slumped.

"Yeah?" I said, turning around and seeing Ben, the barback I never worked with.

"Do you think you can give me a ride again?" he asked.

I almost rolled my eyes but fought the urge. He'd asked me after our last staff meeting, the previous week, and his house was kind of far. He didn't ask me until the end of the meeting, when I was impatient and ready to get home to finish my homework.

“Sure,” I said, not really striving too hard to hide my displeasure. I’m sure he could hear it in my voice.

We headed out the front door, where my car was parked close by. Ben said goodbye to Chrissy and Jody, who were starting to set up the bar. Then he said goodbye to Tony, who was standing next to a guy named Bill who worked on the games in our bar from time to time. I made a point to say goodbye to Chrissy and Jody, and kept walking.

“That girl is pretty,” I heard Bill mumble to Tony.

I strained my ears to hear his response, but Ben and I were already out the door. I wondered what he said back, if anything. It bothered me that I even cared.

“So Gabby,” Ben said as we got in my blue Jetta and I started pulling out, “what’s new with you?”

His small talk was always harmless, but he liked to gossip so I usually made careful choices when we spoke.

“How’s everything with your favorite bartender?” he asked.

See.

“Um, he’s been good lately. He asked me for one more chance to prove he can be better to work with. But he is just overdoing it,” I said.

“No way,” Ben said, laughing. I could tell he loved the weird relationship between Tony and me, always wanting to hear more of it. It was either that or he had a conspiracy of an affair between us and was trying to uproot it. I was careful with what I said. “Well, you know he is always going to go back to his usual self,” he said.

There was a good possibility Ben was right. That was my first thought when Tony got on one knee at my apartment and pleaded for me to stay. I actually thought he was going to cry, which he's only done once or twice ever. He knew what I was doing, knew I was trying to rid myself of him. I tried to compose myself as I sat up there on my bed, clutching my glass of red wine and wearing tiny denim shorts to piss him off. But as he kneeled below me, I softened. His hazel green eyes were begging; he didn't need to use words. They called out to me. I wished so much that he remained hardheaded, remained selfish, so I could finally untie myself from him. But I knew he would be on his best behavior at work from then on, not wanting me to leave. And I knew I would stay.

"Yeah, probably," I said, not interested. It was hard talking about Tony when there were a hundred things no one knew.

Ben's directions were to a different house this time; the first one I took him to last week was his sister's. This was both good and bad because his house was a lot closer, so close that it was right by my parents' house. So close that I could quickly drop in for some lunch there and maybe just study there. I could do my homework for the day there. And then head back for class. I could be in Lake Mary and close to Tony because he lived in Lake Mary too.

I dropped Ben off and found myself turning into my parents' neighborhood. I was hungry. Just a quick lunch, and then I would head back. My anxiety lingered, grew stronger.

I got home and didn't change my clothes. Normally, I walk through the door and throw on pajamas no matter what I plan on doing. I hate wearing jeans or tops or anything that isn't pajamas. I stayed in my clothes so that I would eat and leave. I would get up and go back to my apartment where I belonged. Where my books and homework and classmates waited on me. Where I was good and organized. Where Jesse Ting wanted me to be. Where my life made sense.

I ate a sandwich, put my dish in the sink, grabbed my keys and sat on the couch. I just sat there, holding my keys, looking at them. My heart drummed in my chest. My anxiety peaked.

Okay, I could just open my book and start reading. What's the difference if I read here or there? I could get it done as I sit and figure out how long I want to stay.

I still didn't change my clothes. My tight pants suffocated me. But I still didn't change.

I opened my book. Each page only had Tony on it. The more I read, the less immersed I became. The more I started to only see him.

Okay, I could just text him. I have to text him or I'm never going to get this done. I'm never going to stop thinking about him. I have to do something.

I typed out "I miss you" in a text message.

No.

I erased it.

He's been calling and leaving voicemails. I've ignored them all. I was doing so well.

I went back to the book. Back to him. Back to the book. Back to him.

Okay, I could just tell him I need to come over. Make it seem like something important. I don't care. I have to see him.

My heart beat loudly; egged me on, told me I was right. I needed to end this anxiety. This utter agony. I needed to see him, now. And so once again, I let that ounce of me inside of him draw me to him. I let that inner doubt, that "Is this it?" cloud my head. I did something Jesse Ting wouldn't have wanted his girlfriend to do.

I texted him and asked him if he was busy and if I could come over. He immediately thought something was wrong, since I had been ignoring him. He agreed to see me in two hours, when he was done at the gym. I finally let myself really breathe for the first time all day. Just two more hours. I could make it until then. I opened up my book, and finally started to really read it. It was effortless.

An hour and a half later, I knocked on Tony's door and let myself in.

I felt the cold air of his apartment engulf me and cause furry goose bumps to rise on my arms. I was still wearing my sheer white blouse with gold buttons and dark jeans from the staff meeting. He was sitting on his couch watching television, so I walked over to him and sat down.

"Hey," he said.

"It's freezing in here, can I have a sweatshirt?" I asked. My voice was a little shaky and I spoke too loud. I was always nervous the first five minutes or so of being around him, which altered the stony unemotional persona I usually tried to embody.

“Sure,” he said as he got up and went to his room. He returned with a royal blue sweatshirt and I threw it over my head and stuffed my arms into it.

“So, what’s going on? What do you have to tell me?” he asked impatiently.

“Wow, relax a little,” I joked. I silently tried to concoct an excuse in my head. “I, um, I think I don’t want to work with you anymore.”

I hadn’t really made up my mind about the weekend shifts with him, but I figured he would believe me. I just needed a decoy, a reason for my need.

“Are you kidding me? C’mon,” he said. His face looked angry but desperate at the same time. He begged, in denial.

“Just stay, just stay,” he said. He shook his head back and forth. My heart jumped at the words, because I imagined them meaning something else entirely.

“No,” I said. I acted as if my decision were final.

We sat facing each other on the couch, our legs colliding and fighting for the bigger half. My bare feet were freezing and I could feel his were too. I stretched my legs out further and shoved my toes between his torso and the couch, under his back, in pursuit of warmth.

He took my feet in his hands and started rubbing them. I was addicted to contact with him, any at all. I think we both looked for reasons to touch each other, even subtly, even at work.

“You told me this now on purpose. I’m about to leave for my cousin’s wedding in Connecticut and now you’ve ruined that trip for me. I’m going to be thinking about this the whole time,” he said, almost whining.

“No I didn’t. How is it going to ruin your trip? It’s not a big deal,” I continued to lie. I felt bad now because he believed me. I had to think of some way to take it back.

“Stay. Please,” he begged. He looked at me with eyes that yearned, either for me or for me to change my mind. Whichever, they consumed me. We sat there, staring at each other. I wanted him to look at me like that every day.

I pulled out my book from my purse lying next to the couch. The one I struggled to read earlier at my parents’ house.

“I need to finish this book for class tonight. Don’t distract me,” I said. I had about fifty pages to go, and I had to leave in about an hour to get back to my apartment and to class on time.

“Okay,” he said. He looked at the television.

I read the same page five times.

I never did get past that page.

“I’m tired, can I take a quick nap?” I asked, baiting him. We always called it that. Baiting. This toying around we did to each other. It was both fulfilling and self-destructive, and we knew it. We did it anyway.

“Sure,” he said, getting up. An addict, just like me. He followed me to his room.

We got in his bed. I lay down on the left side and wrapped myself up in his baby blue sheets. He pulled the navy comforter over me. Countless lumpy, flat mismatched pillows adorned the head of his bed. I chose one with blue stripes and buried my face in it.

For about twenty minutes, I tried to sleep and he tried to kiss me.

For about twenty minutes, I held my ground.

His face was so close to mine. The bridge of his nose grazed my nose. I kept my eyes closed, but I felt his long eyelashes brush my face. His lips tickled mine as he held them as close as he could without kissing me. He waited for my reaction.

I was afraid to speak in case my breath smelled. I started to make a sound, a hum mixed with a purr, in response to his touch. His hands gripped both of my arms firmly, like he didn't want to ever let go.

I gave in.

Another sweep of his teasing lips across mine, and I pushed into him, completing the kiss. He didn't waste a second. His tongue and mouth were frantic, rapidly kissing me as hard and as fast as possible, like he would never get the chance again.

He got on top of me. I loved the weight on me.

I began to feel hot. The sweatshirt now strangled me, restrained me, held me back.

"Take this off," I whispered in his ear.

He undressed me like he kissed me, impatiently and without hesitation. Once my sweatshirt was off, he ripped my blouse open, a gold button flying into the air.

"This is my roommate's shirt," I said in my best was-that-necessary tone.

"Oops," he said, not sounding sorry at all.

Every time we kissed each other it was like we had been separated for years. Because a couple weeks or a month did feel like years. I would spend those weeks making Jesse Ting his morning coffee or going out to lunch with him on his breaks at work. I would be the kind of person Jesse Ting deserved.

I would hold out for as long as I could until the addiction crept back in, and the relapse was incredibly wonderful. Wrong, but wonderful. I wish I had known myself better. Perhaps I would have been able to figure out if I wanted this because it was so unattainable or if I wanted it because it was what was missing?

When I began to feel the kissing getting out of control, I'd end the joyous event like a prudish referee.

"Okay, stop," I said, gasping for breath.

He moved from my lips to my neck, not stopping.

"Stop," I said again.

He stopped kissing my neck and looked at me, his heavy breathing matched mine.

Our clothes were still on. This was the most we had ever done. I felt like our kissing was almost nearly equivalent to sex anyways, and I preferred to not add the extra guilt. I felt it fed me enough to last the few weeks until the next time.

I looked at his face, which I cradled between my two hands. I stared at him and slowly, methodically, traced his features with my fingertips. I started with his eyebrows, charting their black thickness, the distance between them. Then I mapped his jaw line, circled over to his nose, and finally landed on his lips. I put my hands down and lifted my mouth to kiss his eyelids. His eyes had that magnificent touch of green that you see so rarely in people's eyes. I envied his eyelashes; they were thick and long.

"By the way, I was just kidding about the work thing. I will still work with you," I confessed.

"Oh my God, c'mon!" he said loudly. He threw his arms up and rolled his eyes.

“I just wanted an excuse to come over here and I knew if I made it about work you would give me your full attention,” I said. I was embarrassed to admit my silly lie.

“You’re crazy,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said. He put his arms back around me, forgiving me.

We lay there in silence for a while, holding each other.

“I have to go. I have class at 7:30,” I said, looking at the clock on his floor. It was six o’clock. I hadn’t finished my book or done my homework yet. “Great. I don’t even think I’ll have time.”

“I don’t want you to be late. If you leave now, you’ll be fine,” he said.

I silently debated skipping class. I would have time to get there, but I wouldn’t be prepared. Students are always allowed one absence a semester. I never ever used mine. I always saved them for sick days that never came. Could I play hooky just this once?

My eyes searched his for any sign that he wanted me to stay. We were still fairly sweaty, my leg was hooked around his torso, and his hand was on the small of my back. If I skipped class, I could stay here for hours. Maybe all night even.

I had never played hooky for Jesse Ting. He probably would’ve looked down upon it and wanted me to go to class. He was too responsible to ever call out of work.

I got up and headed to his couch.

“Can I use your computer?” I asked.

“Yeah, for what?” he said.

I took his laptop off of the floor and opened it. I logged into my email and wrote to my professor that I wouldn't be coming into class. I felt a small tinge of guilt for informing him so last minute.

"I'm staying here," I said. I felt dangerous, adventurous. The night was now full of possibilities.

The bed squeaked as Tony got up and walked to the couch from his bedroom. He smiled at me.

The rest of the night I felt free, relaxed, happy. We went to get a Redbox movie and ate greasy fast food that we knew we'd regret later. We drank some Smirnoff Whipped Strawberry that he had leftover in his freezer. No one knew where we were, or that we were together, and we did whatever we wanted.

"Will you fall for me one day?" I asked him as we clinked our shot glasses together in a cheers.

"I think I already am," he said.

He took the shot and I stood there holding mine. I smiled at his words, and my stomach lurched. He had never said anything like that before. He had always told me he couldn't give his heart to me while I was with someone else. He couldn't fall for me when I was not his. But still, I wanted him to so badly, knowing how selfish I was.

We watched *The Great Gatsby*, which had been one of my favorite books in high school. The story reminded me a lot of ours, and I rooted for Daisy and Gatsby to run away together.

I couldn't deny that Tony's existence in my life only made me more unsure of myself, more vulnerable, more indecisive, and even more immature. It was like I had become the portrait of our actual relationship; I let it consume me, become me. I felt myself moving further and further away from Jesse Ting, and to the girl I was with him. The girl I thought I was.

Thus, I began to think of my relationship as an anchor, the only true and concrete thing keeping me away from Tony, and from the girl I was with Tony. The girl I wanted to explore, but couldn't. I resented my relationship, felt the weight of the agony it caused me.

Jesse Ting and I had been dating a year. An entire year, in which only the first month or two went by untainted by Tony. I decided to do something, to finally take action. Sick of all of the ups and downs, I knew I had to see once and for all what I really wanted, before another year passed. I was sick of all the questions: *What if I'm supposed to be with Tony? What if he is what's missing? Would I be healthier and happier if I stayed with Jesse Ting?*

My conversations went something like this—

For Jesse Ting: I haven't been myself lately and I'm not happy anymore. I don't know what the problem is but it's not you. I need some time to try to figure it out. I would like a week where we don't speak so I can clear my head.

For Tony: Look, I just want you to know I think I'm going to break up. It has nothing to do with you; it's just something I want to do for myself. I'm not promising anything for the future. I would like a week where we don't speak so I can clear my head.

The week ahead was crucial because it was the opportunity to decide whom to choose. What girl I wanted to be. What image would be my future.

And then, two very influential things happened.

One—

I sat on the corner of my bed, facing Jesse Ting.

I was trying to be cold and final.

Jesse Ting sat on my bed with his head leaning against my light wooden headboard, the one that would rock back and forth when we made love. His face was blank, but anger lingered on his features. He pursed his soft, round lips in denial. He looked at my black and white flowered comforter and said nothing.

“Look at me,” I said. I was searching in his eyes for something, something that told me he cared.

“I can’t look at you. I will break,” he said.

I stared at him in silence and waited for him to look up into my eyes. I figured these were the last few moments we would ever share in my bedroom, and I wanted to look at the gentle man who I had loved for so long.

Finally, his vacant chestnut eyes met mine. He spoke his second sentence in a half hour.

“It’s just, all I do is love you,” he said. His voice cracked and broke on the words and his face crinkled into the most pained expression I’d ever seen. “I don’t know what else I can do to make you love me back.” His eyes folded fast tears down his perfectly shaved cheeks. They skied off of the dimples I loved.

It was the single most awful moment I've ever shared with Jesse Ting.

I wanted to scream at him:

I do love you back. I love you so much. But I've done terrible things. And I refuse to hurt you by telling you. So I'm going to leave you. Because no explanation at all is better than explaining the truth. I am a coward. You would've left me anyways. I will not let you remember me that way.

I didn't know how to keep loving someone without them knowing so much of what I've done. Without them knowing a whole other half of me, a darker half. I lived everyday only showing one side of me, the side that Jesse Ting loved and would always love.

He deserved more, and maybe I deserved to be with someone as selfish as me, someone like Tony. He was just as ugly as I was, and somehow, that comforted me.

That day, Jesse Ting's eyes were so hurt and so breathtaking that they knocked the wind out of me. They made me wonder if I was doing the right thing. He got up to leave, and I grabbed his hands and dragged myself on my knees across the bed to be near him. My throat and chest suddenly emitted violent cries, sounds I've never heard come out of me before.

"Please, don't go," I said. I hadn't cried during our conversation but now, I choked on the air I tried to breathe between sobs.

I just couldn't watch him walk away. And this surprised me. I couldn't go through with it. So we decided to not do anything rash until we figured it out. We were neither broken up nor together.

Two—

Tony went to Connecticut for the wedding.

“I showed everyone a picture of you and told them you’re my future girlfriend,” he texted on the second day of his trip.

Normally, I would have been thrilled by this. But I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t know what I was going to do. And I wasn’t sure what girl I should be.

“I miss you,” he texted.

“Look, I hope you have a good time there. I want you to have fun with your friends and try not to think about me. The week isn’t over,” I said, reminding him of our deal.

When he got back, he was desperate to see me. The trip had made his need for me more immediate, more frantic.

“I don’t want to see you yet. I’m not ready. I’m still trying to figure this out,” I texted him.

“I have to tell you something. I will drive to your apartment, tell you, and then leave,” he said.

I had a sinking feeling I knew what it was.

“No, I’m going to bed. I don’t want to know,” I said. I knew it would make it harder. Make my decision even more impossible.

“Fine, I won’t come. You want to hear it?” he said.

Before I could answer, there it was. The only thing that would undoubtedly tie me back to him.

I love you.

“What’re you doing after this?” I asked Tony as he closed out his tabs on the computer. We were doing our weekly shift change on Sundays. He just got back from Connecticut, and my decision week was almost over. Time was almost up.

My surprise unwillingness to leave Jesse Ting and Tony’s surprise *I love you* threw some chaos into the mix. Into the confusion in my head. Into my uncertain heart.

“I’m just going to go home,” he answered. He was sporting his usual Sunday look: Jets jersey, glasses, and unkempt hair. He looked silly because he traded his slick black slacks for khaki shorts, which made his legs look stumpy and little. His socks came up too high above his sneakers, so he looked like a teenage boy who’s mother dressed him. He looked so young for his age, he could pass for twenty-one. I smiled.

He closed out his register and came to sit on the other side of the bar, right in the middle.

“You going to have a shift drink?” I asked. I baited him, hoping he would spend more time there with me.

He contemplated for a second, looking at me.

“Yeah, pour me a Stella,” he said.

I poured him a beer from the tap and placed it in front of him.

Nine hours later, I crawled into my bed, utterly exhausted. It was five thirty in the morning; the orange sun was just peeking in through the trees, ending one of the worst nights of my life.

In summary, Tony got completely wasted during my shift.

He tried to start a fight with a man he just met. He later threw his keys at a car, thinking the man was in it, but it was the man's girlfriend's car. I had to run out to the parking lot and give the girlfriend Tony's information. There were four dents in her car.

Tony would steal shots from customers, shots that I had just poured. I would have to pour them fresh ones and charge them to the bar.

Tony spanked a girl's ass in front of me.

At two in the morning when I started closing the bar and cleaning, he threw up on himself outside. I took a water bottle and tried to help him wash his mouth out. He spit it out, sputtering with his eyes closed. His vomit smelt like grape bombs and chicken. It coated his arms and soaked his jersey. He kept smacking his hands in it by accident.

A few girls tried to get him in their car to drive him home. He fought back, slapping his hands around and waving his arms like a windmill. One of the girls picked him up and threw him in a bush. The other girl told me he punched her in the face, whether it was an accident or not, I never knew. The girls finally got him in their car. He jumped out as it drove away, pulling one of the girls with him. They rolled out in a jumble of limbs. He called the girl a *cunt*. He wouldn't get in the car with them.

I asked him if I could take him home, which was the last thing I wanted to do. He nodded calmly and got in my car. He hung out of the open window, his feet up on my dashboard leaving scuffmarks. I held onto his jersey for dear life. The girls followed in the car behind me and helped me carry his half-sleeping body up to his apartment.

He began undressing at his front door, while one girl fussed with his keys. I took them from her and opened the door, but he was already naked. He ran for his bed.

I threw his sodden vomit clothes into his foyer. I wrote him a Post-It on his counter telling him how he got home, signing it with *screw you*.

Then I went home and went to sleep.

I felt more snug the next day than I had been in a long time. Anger pitted in my stomach, hurt filled every space of my heart. But I knew that this was it, that my decision was made. He had done this to me before, many times, made me take care of him like I was his mother. I think his drinking was the one con that outweighed all the pros. It was something I was smart enough to know I couldn't tackle, couldn't change.

He called twice. I declined his calls.

He didn't call again.

With my bad luck, I got called into work the day shift that Friday for Mark, who had to take his girlfriend to the hospital. Since Eddie was on vacation, guess who had to unlock the bar for me?

Friday afternoon, I sat on one of the chairs outside and waited for Tony to get there. The sunlight glinted off of the cars in front of the Winn Dixie. A warm breeze rustled the landscaped trees. A few minutes later, he pulled up to the lot. He got out, walked to the front door of the bar and unlocked it, not looking at me or saying a word.

I stood up from the chair and followed him. I went inside, turned the lights on, and began my opening duties. He asked me to count the two cash drawers he brought out from the office and I nodded yes.

I handled the dollar bills methodically and slowly. My face was stone.

“They’re both okay,” I said after counting them.

“Okay,” he said.

He stood at the end of the bar by the sink and looked at me.

I walked away.

I went behind the bar and started setting up the bar mats. I heard him rustling around in the back. Then he went around the bar, taking the stools down for me. He turned on the pool table lights and neon signs. He went to the back and brought the trashcans in for me.

“I can do that,” I said. I didn’t want any favors.

His expression looked rejected. “I’m just bringing them in,” he said.

I said nothing and went back to the bar mats.

“Okay, are you all set?” he asked.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said, not looking at him. I was too disgusted by the previous Sunday.

He stood at the end of the bar, hesitating. I wondered if he was going to bring it up. I tried to look too busy to notice.

“Sorry,” he said after a minute.

It sounded like one of those apologies that a little boy says to a girl after pulling on her pigtails, or tripping her on the playground. An apology that his mother forces him to say to the little girl as she stands over him, monitoring. The little boy sounds as if he doesn't mean it. He's embarrassed and rushes it out, hoping for his mother's approval so he can go home.

"Kay," I said, mirroring the same tone.

He stood there another minute and then headed out of the front door silently.

I didn't watch him go.

When the front door closed, I stopped setting up the mats and stood in place.

I went to my computer and grabbed my cell phone from the register. I couldn't help myself, like all the other times. I just had to keep poking, keep searching for answers.

I texted, "Was that all you had to say to me?"

He responded less than a minute later. "No, but from what I've heard I'm an asshole and I would understand if you never wanted to talk to me again."

I quickly pondered the scope of what those girls who tried to drive him home might have told him. I knew he wouldn't remember anything on his own.

Eddie had already informed me that Tony had to pay four hundred dollars to fix the dents in the car he hit. The car of that man's girlfriend. A regular told me Tony lost three hundred dollars in tip money from working that day, it must have fell out of his pockets in the bush. So he had lost money, dignity, customers, friends. Me.

I went back to work without texting him back.

Several hours later, it was almost five o'clock and I was pretty busy at the bar.

He texted, "Check your email."

Immediately, I got the sinking feeling that this would pull me back in. Another apology. Another weapon to tear through my perfectly crafted armor.

Every time we fought or he messed up, he would send me something to soften me. The lyrics to our favorite songs. A letter confessing how much I meant to him. Journal entries of how he spent his days when we didn't speak, how many times I crossed his mind. They were what kept me addicted, what kept me remembering. The words from his apologies would echo in my head everyday until I forgave him.

This unhealthy pattern didn't exist with Jesse Ting. And though it made me furious and miserable, it also made me ecstatic and happy. The juice was almost worth the squeeze. The only things I had with Jesse Ting were contentment, peace, and the ease of a simple love.

I texted, "I won't read it."

He texted, "Please."

I went back to work.

When the time came for our shift change, he walked in, put his food in the fridge, and put his keys on the register. He began washing glassware.

I noticed right away something very different about him. He had this look on his face, one I've never seen before, like endless sadness and disappointment. I made eye contact with him only once, when I asked him if the bar was clean and stocked enough

for his shift, and instantly wished I hadn't. His look broke my heart, made me pity him.

Somehow, *I* pitied *him*.

I quickly made a shift drink, Pinnacle Raspberry with soda water, cranberry, and a lime squeeze, and headed to the back room to relax with the regulars for a while.

Subconsciously, I really wanted to sit down and read the email. I shouldn't have read it, but I did. And like the look on his face that I saw earlier, it broke me.

Gabrielle,

First off I wanted to write a letter in my own handwriting but my penmanship is horrible and there would be too many erase marks and so forth. Also I am not a writer so please bear with me.

I am truly sorry for the other night. My biggest fear was that I did something to harm you physically. I was a nervous wreck because I had no recollection of what happened after I took that last shot of Crown. It's no excuse though, I am a grown up and being drunk does not excuse my conduct. I have been having bad dreams and unable to eat or do anything all week because of that night. However that is neither your fault nor your problem, I brought it upon myself.

I have realized that I definitely know I am in love with you because I want you to be happy. And at this moment, I don't know if that's with me, it kills me to say that, but I can't promise a night like last Sunday wont ever happen again. Believe me that I will try to prevent it, but I won't make a promise because I have in the past and broken it many times over. I don't care about the money it has cost me, but the ultimate price I have to endure is losing you. I think that I would've saw you after work that night and we would've spent all day Monday together (it would've been wonderful). We probably wouldn't of been able to not text, call or see each other after that either. I really want you to be happy, and if that's not with me I will live with that. Jesse is a great guy, and he will never hurt you. I love you and won't ever not love you. I think about you every day and what could've been. Our little inside jokes make me smile and I cherish them. I will let you be because you deserve that much. You are a great girl and will make someone immensely happy one day. I think about that person being me daily but also the thought of me missing that great opportunity accompanies that lovely thought. I hope for your forgiveness but I don't necessarily expect it.

You're always in my heart and on my mind.

Love always, Tony

I could feel my control slipping and slipping away from me. My mind was screaming how angry I was, but my heart ached. It ached, pitied, and yearned. It betrayed me, always chose his side, never obeyed what I wanted.

It was then that I began to think of *The Kiss*. It was a book by Kathryn Harrison I had read in school that semester. I became obsessed with it. The narrator was trapped in an addictive, vicious relationship that emotionally diseased her. One line from her book struck me again and again, so much so that I was awed at its resemblance to Tony and me: “For we are in love with that, too: our suffering, the anguish of the unrequited. Or if we don’t love suffering, we don’t know who or what we are apart from it.”

It was true. We didn’t know what it was like to have each other. All we knew was the anguish of not having one another. But we were in love with that; we were in love with our pain. Perhaps if there were no pain, we wouldn’t be in love with anything at all.

We only knew the tortured, thirsty versions of ourselves. The versions that lied and that stole. The versions that justified it all by the binding passion that surmounted our morality.

A few nights after the day I read the email, I sat alone on my couch and watched *Country Strong*, a depressing movie choice. A bottle of red wine stood perched on the tray of my ottoman; half empty, feeding my loneliness. I reached for it every time Tony crossed my mind, until it was depleted.

The blinds covering my porch window were drawn back, and every few minutes a car would drive through the complex, their headlights distracting me. My eyes desperately focused on the model of each car, searching for one that was blue or a Honda.

Every car that drove by was his.

My phone vibrated next to me. I opened it and saw a text from him.

It read, "Look outside."

My eyes frantically looked at my front door.

I texted, "I won't open the door if you're here."

A minute later he responded, "I'm not I promise."

I rose from the couch and shoved my feet into my blue and green striped fuzzy slippers. I tip toed slowly toward the front door, not trusting him. I peered through the peephole. There was no one there.

I opened the noisy door a crack and looked down at the welcome mat. A single red rose wrapped in cellophane lay there. Another apology. I scooped it off the ground, walked inside, and put it on my counter.

In the morning, I threw it out.

I often wonder if I would have ever ended the affair. How long would I have let it go on, unnoticed, growing stronger, behind the back of my wonderful Jesse Ting?

I can't help but feel thankful for all the little horrible parts of Tony that broke me away. Perhaps they were what I needed to finally let go. Somehow, I managed to find a way out of the kryptonite darkness, the lustful greediness I felt for him.

From then on, I knew my life would be sober. I would find my day-to-day living uneventful and uninteresting. I would be happy and content, blind to fear, pain, and loss. I would be with Jesse Ting, the man who I always thought I deserved, but the man I really didn't deserve at all.

But that doesn't mean I don't still feel the addiction, feel it lingering there. That doesn't mean I don't still feel Tony. A part of me will always be waiting for him, waiting for him to come and meet me, like Daisy and Gatsby.

A part of me will always be in that affair.

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