

THE REASONS WHY WE DIDN'T

By
Sydney Narayan

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Department of English and Comparative Literature
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Approved:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pam Durban", written over a horizontal line.

Pam Durban

RUN IF YOU CHOOSE

The most important conversation my dad and I ever had began, like all meaningful conversations, with a good, stiff drink. I was graduating high school in three days and my dad, Mark, took his opportunity to pretend to be a father. My first 18 years under his roof had only gotten me obscure advice and distant parenting—

“Be home at midnight,” or “Don’t forget to use condoms,” or “I’ll be in my office if you need me. So try not to need me.”

I had gotten through my life fine with my mom and my younger brother—my removed, unemotional dad had never really gotten in the way—but I still played along and pretended to listen to him while I sipped my whiskey on ice.

“My boy...can’t believe you’re leaving me.” He sipped and his ice cubes chattered in his glass as his hand shook. I wondered if he’d always thought of me as “his boy.”

“Still haven’t figured it out, you know? But with you leaving I wonder more and more what I’m supposed to be doing here. What I could’ve done differently.” I had learned not to react to comments like this...sit...wait...look pensive. My father’s only moments of interest in me and my younger brother, Alex, consisted of spurts of negativity, timed perfectly as we exited a room or got out of the car or headed up to bed. I always thought he’d picked these moments because he didn’t need or want a response from us—didn’t need or want us at all.

I looked at the walls of his study and waited for him to continue with the pity party—dad had left his office at IBM in Pittsburgh and started working from home sometime during my middle schooling, citing boredom and the ignorance of his coworkers as the reasons for his location change.

For a computer scientist, dad had harnessed creativity in furnishing his home office. Colorful abstract paintings lined the walls, and stainless steel trinkets littered his desk, which was otherwise spotless. A sleek, black, fully stocked wet bar occupied the far corner opposite the door, pulling the room together and, as far as High School Me was concerned, giving the study its only appeal.

“I’m going to tell you about my Dad, Connor. Seems like you should know. You should know what it’s like to be a dad. You should know what it’s like to have a son.”

I braced myself for the self-deprecation, the regret that never seemed rooted in anything. His eyes always looked dark and empty when he got like this—it’s how I knew what he was saying even if he mumbled it under his breath as I walked out of a room.

“He always said he would do it. His dad did it. His dad’s dad did it. He said it was practically a right of passage as a Miller. My whole life, he seemed sad. Just unhappy. He never cried, but I can’t remember many smiles either.”

He was talking about his dad, Mark Sr. As a kid I’d wondered why he didn’t make me the third, and when my little brother was born I’d been afraid he’d get the title instead. Alex didn’t get the name either though and once I understood my dad better, or understood I’d never understand him, I realized he’d just never given it any thought.

I nodded to show I was listening and he kept talking, looking off at a corner to avoid catching my eye. I was used to being avoided by my father. “I came home from baseball practice—I was fifteen. Old enough to know not to walk into a closed bathroom door, but something was off. Too quiet. He always liked noise, you know? Said it distracted him. Said it made him feel less alone.” For a minute I wondered if dad was like that, too. I decided he probably wasn’t because his office was always quiet if you listened from the hall.

“My mom—your Grandma—was grocery shopping. I remember because when I told her she dropped a bag of apples and they scattered in every direction and I remember being jealous that they got to run if they chose.”

I only see the rest of his story in still images, snapshots—vignettes stained in red and blurred around the edges so I don’t have to see them too clearly. Images that I pushed from my mind when I could and that I let consume me when I couldn’t.

A bleached white bathroom—Grandma had always been so meticulous. A porcelain bathtub. Liquid. So much liquid. Some of it water. Most of it not. His dad, my Grandpa, dead by his own hand and not throat cancer, as Alex and I had always been told, usually accompanied by a warning about smoking. My grandpa, like my dad, failing to complete his own search for meaning in life.

“I’m telling you this,” my finished, as I tried to swallow whatever had formed in my throat, making it impossible for me to speak, “So that you know it’s totally normal to feel hopeless sometimes. It’s okay to question things. It’s okay to search for answers.” He looked at me through bright, blue eyes and I tried to ignore the nauseous feeling in my stomach because in a rare moment, my dad looked excited.

I still had something in my throat so I finished my drink. It didn't help but it gave me a head buzz, so I guess that was something. I set the glass on my dad's desk, next to a small, silver robot figurine.

"Well. I guess I hope grandpa found meaning in death, Dad. I gotta go, Mom and I are shopping for shit for my dorm room this afternoon." I didn't want to walk out, but I didn't want to stay either. I was afraid he might tell me something else. I was afraid he might keep looking excited.

Dad took my glass from my hand and stood up, walking over the wet bar, already wiping the sides to get rid of fingertip smudges.

"Don't tell your mother I told you that, Connor. It was my idea not to share that with you boys."

I didn't tell my mom, not that day and not ever. I never told anyone, but I rarely stopped thinking about it without trying. It took me four years to learn why.

I spent my allotted eight semesters at Carnegie Mellon University, attending my classes and going to parties and working part time in the student bookstore and occasionally slipping into what can only be described as periods of deep depression. I would sit on the couch for days, missing shifts and work and lectures that mattered. I'd eat shredded cheese from a bag and watch Family Guy and I wouldn't listen to the show but instead I'd let the images from grandpa's death pass through my mind. Sometimes I pictured my dad instead. Sometimes I pictured myself.

I couldn't help but feel like I should want that—want death—want to feel lost in life. My dad did, and his dad did, and his dad did, so why was I happy to live normally,

simply? Did my life have meaning? What should I be searching for? When should I start and what if I missed my chance?

Sometimes, if I got bad, my roommates would ask if I wanted them to call anyone. I thought about all the questions I could ask my dad. I wrote them down. I'd imagine his answers. Was I inevitably going to end up unhappy, questioning and searching for something that couldn't be found? Could I stop the damages of the curse before it started?

And then I'd imagine his enthusiasm—his excitement—just like that day. He would *want* to share this with me. He'd be happy because he'd know I finally wasn't. He'd be proud of me for starting my search for a meaning. So I'd pull myself off the couch, turn off the TV, live my life and stop looking for reasons to question it.

The summer after my graduation from college, I found a position shadowing a doctor at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, refusing to spend the summer at home. My parents had both attended my graduation, and we'd even had an organized family dinner afterwards, but my dad had been predictably quiet and refused to tell me congratulations until the very end of the meal.

When I accepted the position shadowing an orthopedic surgeon, I surfed craigslist relentlessly for a vacant room near the hospital that I might take over for a few months. A male pediatric nurse, Quinn, responded to my pleas for housing near UPenn—he had a roommate that had recently moved to the west coast and he was willing to let me take over the lease temporarily to buy some time so I could find a more permanent situation. Ideally, I wanted to work for a year while I applied to med school.

A doctor was something useful I could be—a job with a purpose, where I could help people, a way to measure my worth. Saving people seemed like a sure way to make sure life was fulfilling—I was hoping my periods of depression would be wiped out by my successes and I'd spare myself the sadness that seemed to inevitably exist within the rest of the men in my family.

My grades hadn't turned out that great in college—I had lost large periods of time to television binges and a complete lack of energy, never searching for treatment because my dad never did and besides, if it was genetic it probably couldn't be fixed. But the doctor I was to shadow, Dr. Barnum, had a good reputation and I hoped he'd have some connections in the UPenn medical school who might be willing to overlook my transcript.

Quinn, my new roommate, had sandy brown hair and freckles. He burned incense whenever he was home, and sometimes I woke up at night thinking the small, ninth-floor apartment was ablaze in flames of cinnamon. He was actually fairly quiet, a trait I appreciated since I had spent the last year and a half living alone. After my first few semesters with roommates I got sick of defending my need for the days where I was removed from the world, so I'd moved to a single where there'd be no need for a defense.

A few weeks into living with Quinn and listening to people talk around the hospital, I discovered that Quinn hadn't lost a roommate, but a boyfriend. He and Tom had lived and worked together for four years, both starting up at UPMC hospital right after graduating. Apparently, Quinn was madly in love and Tom was not—Tom strayed to other men, and women, and the two had spent the last six months fighting in every

room in the hospital and being forcibly moved to different departments so as not to disturb patients and coworkers.

Quinn worked nights every other week, and that was my favorite time because I only had to interact with him if we were both home for dinner. Since I'd learned about his relationship with Tom, I'd noticed different things about him: he was actually quiet, for a man who had initially seemed so overtly friendly. He watched a lot of bad TV—Fear Factor, and he didn't cook meals so much as he reheated them. I never really pegged him as mentally unstable, not at first, but I did wonder if he'd always been this strange or if it was some byproduct of a broken heart.

The afternoon Quinn chose to share his story with me, he initiated the conversation just as much as he ended it. I had just come home from a shift at the hospital and I was surprised when Quinn addressed me again after our usual cordial greeting.

"You know, you should try smiling sometime. You really have a good smile." As far as I'd been able to tell, Quinn had never hit on me before. In fact, Quinn had seemed largely uninterested in dating or sex at all. He hadn't even tried for a rebound since Tom left.

"I smile when something funny happens." It was true, I did smile and even laugh when things were funny. This was something I couldn't say about my dad, who I seen smile fewer times than I had fingers.

"Yeah, I used to, too..." Quinn looked away from the TV and at me. I bristled, sensing a confession on the horizon and not feeling like an emotional interaction was

what I needed. Emotional responses tended to start a spiral—if I listened to Quinn’s problems, I’d start thinking about my own problems, panicking if I couldn’t think of enough and wondering if I was living in an unimportant bubble. I didn’t want to start the process, I was already thinking too much—I thought about bolting for the door—if he’d let me just walk out, I could probably shake the internal monologue of questions before it started. Instead I just stood there and stared at him.

“But then Tom left,” he finished. I knew he wanted me to participate, to ask questions—I could tell by how big his eyes were and how tightly he was gripping the remote. I thought maybe we could have this talk once and Quinn would feel relieved—like he got it off his chest. Then maybe he’d go to bed and I could go back to sifting through my personal reflection.

“Well, it’s only been a few months...Breakups can be very emotional. It takes time.” I pulled lines from clipped memories of lessons learned Psych 101—time takes the intensity out of emotional responses. Maybe that’s why the men in my family felt duller about life with age. Maybe I would reach that point sooner than I thought.

Quinn didn’t respond and became interested in Fear Factor. I half-hoped he was angry and this would be the end of our unprovoked heart-to-heart. I stood awkwardly between the kitchen and the living room, waiting for some kind of cue for dismissal.

Quinn sighed. “It hasn’t been four months, Connor. It’s been fourteen years.”

“You were with Tom for fourteen years?” I knew this wasn’t true but I didn’t know how else to ask what the hell he was talking about.

“I’ve been gay for fourteen years. Well, I guess I’ve been gay longer than that. I’ve been out for fourteen years.” He looked at me expectantly, like I should understand. I was confused. Sexuality had never been a hot topic around my household—I’m not sure I even would’ve been expected to “come out” to my parents.

I didn’t know the polite way to continue this conversation so I nodded. He seemed encouraged and continued. “I have two older brothers, they both stopped talking to me once they knew. Well, unless they were making fun of me. I was eleven years old. In the sixth grade.”

I felt bad for him. I had always felt like I was missing out on having a father—like I’d had a family one person smaller than it was supposed to be, because he’d never managed to be much of a participant. I’d thought it was so bad to have a family member who couldn’t care much about me—but maybe it was worse to have family members who cared too much.

“How’d they know?” I had to ask. He looked like he might cry and I wondered if he ever talked about this or if he kept it to himself. Maybe he let it bother him, just let it sit on his mind until he couldn’t take it anymore. Maybe he puzzled and wondered and tried different ways to clear his mind. Maybe he struggled to find his way out, tried to push away the pictures in his head, just like me.

“My best friend at the time found a magazine under my bed and then all of the sudden he wasn’t my friend anymore and then everyone at school knew.” He said this like he’d been in a fight with it—like he’d gone to battle with his sexuality and he was telling me about it in a ceasefire. I could tell he hadn’t won the war yet. I wondered if he ever would.

“What did your parents say?” I’d hoped he’d say they loved him—that they punished his brothers—that they told him it didn’t matter. I’d hoped Quinn would say his dad reacted strongly, but in a good way, maybe gave him a hug and ruffled his hair—unlike mine who would’ve just gone silent and expressionless until he could walk away.

“My parents are devout Christians. My mom grew up in West Virginia. Do you know what that means?” I shook my head. I didn’t know anyone from the south—I knew stereotypes, vaguely, but as far as I could tell, Quinn didn’t fit any of them.

“My parents took me to a religious therapist who told them he could cure me. I went because I didn’t think I had a choice. After a few months of two sessions a week they asked if I was still gay. I said yes and they didn’t send me back to therapy and they didn’t really bring it up again.” I felt relieved—his parents weren’t as bad as his brothers. Mislead, maybe, but not vicious. At least they were involved enough to try to help him in a way they thought was acceptable, however wrong their opinions were.

“So that’s good! They changed their minds? How are things with them now?” I hoped he’d tell me they were great, they talked every day, he was planning his next trip home at the moment, him and his brothers get together once a month. I hoped he’d tell me even when people are bad, they’re never as bad as they seem.

“I haven’t talked to my parents since I was sixteen years old and I came home from school to all my bags packed by the front door. I thought my brothers were playing a joke on me. After a few weeks of living with my dad’s sister I realized it wasn’t a joke.”

He took a gulp of air like he was coming up from the bottom of a pool. “Tom was the next thing I had that felt like family to me. Tom made being gay okay. Tom made being me okay.”

I said nothing. I couldn't believe someone's parents could abandon them like that—physically, really. I'd always dealt with the emotional abandonment. What if my dad had moved out? What if he had left us with my mom so he could pursue whatever it was he thought his life was missing? What if he'd our family looking for his Tom? What if he had found it?

For a moment, I imagined my life without a father. I couldn't picture things being much different—the same forced games of charades in the living room, always missing a fourth player and never being able to make teams. The same parent luncheons with only my mom in attendance. The same excuses from my mom when dad was too tired or too busy with work to make it to family gatherings. The same childhood but without the shadow of darkness looming from dad's office. The same childhood but without the questions. The same childhood, but a different adulthood, without the Miller family curse.

I knew the conversation was over so I shook my head and told Quinn I was sorry, then left him hugging his knees and staring at the wall in our living room. I went to my room and didn't leave again until I left for work the next morning. That night, I dreamt of a family of three—a single mother, abandoned by her restless husband, and two healthy, happy sons who lived their lives to the fullest and until the end.

Quinn was still asleep when I woke up the next morning and I felt like shit, like I'd left him to deal with his grief by himself. Like I'd avoided something because it was too big or too small or too irrelevant to my life for me to handle. Like I'd been selfish. Like I'd been like my father.

I scribbled Quinn a note on a coffee filter and made a mental note to get dinner somewhere else so that he would be gone for his night shift by the time by the time I got home from work. I didn't think he'd want to see me any more than I wanted to see him. On the note, I wrote: *"I'm sorry. If it makes you feel any better, my dad's an asshole."*

My day at the hospital was busy—Dr. Barnum had multiple surgeries and told me that I should skip my cafeteria shift to observe. I obliged, happy to have something occupying my mind besides Quinn's childhood and what he must be feeling like today. By the time I stood through three surgeries and changed out of my scrubs to leave work I was feeling much better. I was even a little flattered Quinn had shared his story with me. I got a burger and beer at my favorite bar, and ate it slowly before returning home, wanting to give Quinn as much time as possible to get out of the apartment—and sort of wanting to avoid him without feeling bad about it, too.

When I returned to the parking deck next to their apartment, I was annoyed to find Quinn's car still in the spot next to mine. Quinn was never late. He was annoyingly punctual, in fact. I planned to make a quick break for my room to hide out so I didn't have to see him and he didn't have to see me.

When I made it to the ninth floor and opened the door to the apartment I was surprised that Quinn had left the door to the balcony open. I put my bag down and walked over to close the door to the tiny deck, stopping when I saw that Quinn was out there. He was on the balcony, on the far side of the railing, standing on the ledge of the concrete with his hands latched on to the rail behind him, holding him in place as he looked down at the city. My first thought was about our conversation last night: I was sure he was looking down at his life, too.

I felt calm. I backed into the apartment and turned the TV on to let the noise show Quinn I was here. I didn't want to startle him. This was his decision, not mine. Just like it was my grandpa's decision. Just like it's my dad's. I turned up the volume until I was sure he could hear it from outside, then stepped back onto the deck, sitting down in a green, plastic chair we'd put out there just to have somewhere to sit. It wasn't a particularly good view, but sometimes the fresh air was better than the couch.

"Hey, Quinn."

He didn't turn around, just tightened his grip on the railing behind him.

"Everything okay, Quinn?"

I had no idea where I was going with this. I didn't want him to jump, but I didn't want to stop him if that was what he wanted. If that was what my dad wanted. If that was what my grandpa had wanted.

Quinn still didn't answer, but rocked back on his heels, like he might lurch forward. Like he might really do it.

I was fascinated. How had he gotten here? I'd spent so many hours sitting and thinking, waiting for answers, feeling guilty when I didn't have them, feeling guilty for living my life. My dad had never really made it out of his office, or even out of his own head. And my grandpa? And his grandpa?

What was different about Quinn?

"Quinn?" I held my breath. *Jump. Do it. I dare you.*

I imagined him letting go. Falling forward, slowly at first. His shirt wrinkling in the breeze as he made his way to the streets of Philly below, picking up speed until he

landed, a solid thud and it was over, he was vindicated. His brothers and his parents still stuck up here on the balcony with me, stuck up here with my father.

Quinn took one hand off the rail and made a swift motion. He turned around and swung his leg up and back over the rail, pushing himself back to safety, standing in front of me. He was shaking but his gaze was firm. He was pissed, I think, and rightfully so. I ruined his story and I ruined his plan to get out of everything, to leave it all behind. I wondered if that was how my dad felt, too—if Alex and I had ruined his plans. Made him stay. Made him useless. Made him boring.

“No, everything is not fucking okay. Jesus.”

Quinn ran into the apartment and out the front door. Maybe he was going to work his shift. I exhaled and sat there, on the balcony in the chair until the moon bathed the city in dull light. I ran through my mental inventory—all my hours of guilt, of trying to feel something, of dreading my inevitable slip into hopelessness like the men in my family before me. I didn’t share their name, but did I share their curse?

I wondered why Quinn knew what I didn’t. There was a way out, if I needed one, if he needed one. There was a way out for everyone, if you wanted one bad enough.

I wondered why I’d never thought of something as simple as just jumping.

At the end of the summer, I went home for a few days to visit for Alex’s birthday. My first afternoon at home, I found myself in my father’s study, toying the trinkets on his desk and reflecting on the conversation we’d had four years back. My dad hadn’t changed much since I’d gone to school, serving as a stoic image of depression and

dissatisfaction—serving as someone I'd lived in fear of, someone I thought I was doomed to become.

Before I left my apartment in West Philly to make the drive back to Pittsburgh, I said bye to Quinn. I thought about telling him to stay safe while I was gone. Our friendship had developed past strained interactions and forced politeness since that day on the balcony, so it probably would have been fine to say, but instead I just locked the balcony door before I left and hoped it would still be that way when I got back.

Quinn and I never discussed that afternoon again. I didn't know if he wanted to, but I certainly didn't. Quinn had helped me make up my mind: he didn't jump, so I sure as hell didn't need to. If Quinn could climb back on to the balcony, without Tom and without hope and without me understanding, then I didn't even deserve to think about standing on the ledge.

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Session One

“So what does this specialty really mean anyways...Relationships, Self-Esteem and Emotional Disturbance?”

“I guess that makes sense. I still don’t know how someone can be an expert in the field of someone else’s emotions.”

“Yeah, it just sounds a little like bullshit.”

“Look, I’m not trying to offend you. I’m here because my roommate Lauren thinks my boyfriend is verbally abusive and he was out of town this past weekend so it seemed like a good time to schedule this and get it over with.”

“I told her, I think Eric is just protective. She said we should let a professional decide about that. That’s where you come in I guess. If someone can even be a professional about this kind of thing.”

“I’m still skeptical, sorry Michelle. Is it okay if I call you Michelle?”

“Well, no. I don’t think I need to be here. But Lauren threatened to tell my parents if I didn’t come talk to you, and the town I’m from is too small for anyone to be calling anyone else any kind of abusive.”

“My parents love Eric. They’ve known him since he was a kid. I told you, small town. And I have a great relationship with them. They like that I have a long-term boyfriend. Commitment and consistency are important, you know?”

“Yeah, they always encouraged me to go to college. It wasn’t really negotiable, but I would’ve applied anyways.”

“Eric never cared as much about school as I do. I’m at ECU and he’s at Pitt Community College, so it works out fine.”

“I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do so I applied to the nursing school and I got in so that’s what I’m doing now.”

“I’m from Mercer County. We only refer to it as a county. It’s too small to distinguish between towns.”

“My parents grew up there as well. And Eric’s parent’s. And both sets of our grandparents.”

“I have a younger brother. He’s finishing up high school this year. Eric has three brothers, all older. Their family is really close. His brothers all work for his Dad. They own a building company. Burstead Builders.”

“I guess Eric will work there after graduation, yeah. I mean that’s the plan. He’s always said that’s the plan.”

“No, it’s my plan, too. I meant to say that. It’s just, it was his plan first. But I’m doing nursing and I can do that anywhere. So there’s no reason not to move back.”

“We’ve been dating for 4 years, so yeah, when I plan my future he’s a part of it. We have a future together.”

“He’s in class right now, and I haven’t told him I’m here. I don’t think he’d like it.”

“Well, why would there be something I’m not able to talk to him about? We’re supposed to be able to share everything with each other. Why should I have to come talk to you? That’s why he wouldn’t like it.”

"I'm not telling him, sorry. But yes, I'll come back next week I guess. Can we do the same time?"

Session Three

"Look, I don't really want to be here, Michelle. I think I'm wasting your time."

"I know I made the appointment to come back but it just seemed like the way to end a counseling session. What is this going to do for me?"

"Fine, I mean I'm already here now."

"After last week I....had lunch with Eric. And I still didn't tell him I was here and I don't want to hear anything about it!"

"I know that your job isn't to judge me, I just want to make sure you aren't."

"Oh, um. Wow. I can barely remember how I started dating him now. I guess it just kind of happened. We used to hang out at football games in high school."

"Well, he's one year older than me, and when I was a sophomore he asked me to prom. Sort of out of nowhere."

"Duh I said yes! Almost no sophomores got asked to prom. He said he thought we'd look good in pictures together. We did."

"He brought me takeout Chinese to lunch at school that day, which was weird because like I said we had only flirted at football games. He sat with me and my friends at our table and kept hounding me to eat my fortune cookie."

"I know, it's so cheesy, but yeah the fortune said 'Prom?' and you should have heard my friends squeal. I asked him how he did it later and he said he got it from the

Chinese place, broke it apart and put the prom fortune in. Then he got the cookie wet again and used his mom's hair straightener to melt it back together."

"I was surprised by the hair straightener, too. I never found out if he lied about that. I would've said yes anyways. But it was nice to think he tried so hard."

"Yeah, I guess he's into do-it-yourself stuff. He's worked for his dad forever. He definitely knows how to use a hammer."

"I mean he buys me stuff! But what kind of gift would he *make* me? Oh, okay, yeah I just remembered. Last fall, he built my roommate and I a bar. It's in our apartment now"

"We had gotten in a fight the night before, I think he was trying to be a suck-up, but anyways, we still use it."

"No, no, he didn't plan it. That's why it's so fun. He found the wood on the side of the road outside a frat house. Re-stained it and everything. I told you, he's a good guy."

"Do you want to hear this story? We were just going home from watching a football game so that Lauren could change into something to go out in. She's always doing that. Changing into something smaller and darker. She's popular with boys, though, so. Whatever."

"Ew, no. Eric likes the way I dress better. He's always saying Lauren looks like a slut. She's not though!"

"They get along fine, I guess. Well not really. I usually just spend time with them separately."

"I don't want to get into this right now. I told you, Lauren thinks he's too aggressive when he talks to me. And he's not. Just like she's not a slut."

“No, are you just waiting for me to say some trigger word so you can nail down the problem and fix me? I’m not broken. I can stop coming if I’m boring you.”

“Okay, then. I’ll see you next week.”

Session Five

“I’m sorry I got upset last week. I know you’re just doing your job. I’ve been feeling bad about snapping at you.”

“Okay, thanks. I was afraid you’d be mad at me.”

“Just because I was rude to you. I don’t know. Anyways, you know it’s a little early in the year for you to have those poinsettias on your steps outside? I just noticed them on my way in.”

“My mom. She says its white trash to put decorations out too early or leave them up to long.”

“Yeah, well, you should go for a drive through the trailer park mid-January and then let me know what you think.”

. “Fine, fine, I was just letting you know. My weekend was fine. I stayed at Eric’s and we did homework and watched movies. Well, I did homework. He doesn’t have that much schoolwork.”

“Oh, Lauren is fine if I’m gone. She has tons of other friends. She likes to have fun.”

“I mean she goes out a lot and drinks a lot and stuff. She’s like a normal college student.”

“Well, no, I don’t think I’m abnormal.”

“Eric is my best friend. We’ve been together for a long time. And Lauren is my best girl friend. And that’s really enough for me.”

“Plus there aren’t a lot of college kids who understand my relationship with Eric. We just got it right early, you know?”

“Um, Eric and I go out together sometimes, yeah. He has good friends. They like to have boy’s nights. I usually just paint my nails with Lauren or watch Netflix or something.”

“I don’t like to go out without Eric. It makes him nervous, so it makes me nervous.”

“He just doesn’t like it. We get in fights.”

“Okay, do you swear that you aren’t allowed to tell anyone what I tell you in here? Under any circumstances? I mean it, even if you think you need to? You can’t tell anyone?”

“No, I don’t want you to sign anything. It’s fine. “

“Lauren and I went out without Eric at the beginning of this semester, a few months ago. It was the end of August, still warm enough for Lauren to wear her skimpiest ensemble and make me feel like a church girl next to her in my black v-neck and dark wash jean shorts.

She ditched all her other friends when I told her I’d go out—I was just in a good mood because it was so warm out, and I didn’t want to be bored the whole time Eric was with his friends.

Eric was having a boy’s night with his roommates that night—the four of them are all from Pamlico County. They’ve been friends forever. You know what boys night

means? Beer, blunts and video games. I know. They're the worst. But, most importantly, it means boys only.

Lauren loves to try to give me makeovers. Sometimes she tries when we're just sitting around watching movies—makeup is 'her thing.' So she made me a giant drink and I sat there and drank it while she fixed my hair and did my makeup.

I was drunk by the time she finished her masterpiece, and I thought I looked a little bit like a porn star already but I strapped on Lauren's black wedges anyway and wobbled next to her because I had already agreed to girls night. Besides, Lauren and I hadn't spent that much time together over the summer, and I knew she had missed me.

Bars in downtown Greenville are swarming with boy—the ratio is nuts. Everyone is always trying to buy you a drink—if you're a girl, I mean. Do you ever go downtown? It's kind of gross. Anyway, the first guys who hit on us bought us drinks—Lauren made sure of it. We took shots that were glowing blue and tasted fruity and one of them grabbed Lauren and pulled her away to dance. Guys are always trying to dance with Lauren. Something about her ass, I think.

So I got left awkwardly with the wingman who'd been left behind too, and I let him ask me questions for a while before I got bored and missed Eric. I sort of stopped paying attention to what he was saying, which you would think would have made him want to leave me alone. But this guy apparently can't read social clues, right?

Before I know it, Mr. Chatty Ken had threaded his pointer finger through the belt loop on my shorts, and was trying to pull me towards him to dance with me or kiss me or something and I got grossed out so I walked away. Of course, when I finally found Lauren she was all sweaty and pressed against a different guy than the one she had left

the bar with. I tried to convince her that it was time to leave, but it was only 12:30 and she was not having it, so I went to the bathroom to try to decide what to do.

Bar bathrooms are disgusting. They are always overflowing with drunk girls telling each other they're beautiful, or fixing their makeup, or adding airplane bottles of liquor to their drinks before stumbling back out onto the dance floor. Anyway, I couldn't even pretend to be half as drunk as these girls, and I wasn't sure what I was doing there at all. I wasn't drinking. I wasn't dancing. I wasn't interested in drinking or dancing unless Eric could be with me. Hell, I wasn't interested in drinking or dancing with him, either. "

"Eric...doesn't like to dance. And he gets a temper when he drinks. So I avoid it, usually. Can I finish my story or do you want to interrupt me some more?"

So, you know what happens when I try to go out without Eric and I hate it? I turn into that girl. That girl who calls her boyfriend in the bathroom of a bar before 1 a.m. and begs him to pick her up.

I'm not sure how much you know about boy's nights, but let me assure you, from experience—drunk girlfriends are always ruining boys nights. Additionally, pissed off boyfriends are always coming to do damage control on girls nights. Eric picked me up a few minutes after I called him and asked where Lauren was three times before he threw his hands up and said 'fuck her.'

I climbed in Eric's car and tried not to look at him, because I knew he was pissed, because he didn't kiss me or even hug me or hold my hand when he saw me. Eric drove down the street and took a right on Matrix Ave. before he pulled the car onto the side of the road. He turned the car off and slapped me three times."

“No, It didn’t really hurt, not that bad. Just kind of stings, the physical part. But it I still got a little teary-eyed after the second hit.”

“I mean the physical part is one thing. It’s not that bad. Hurts for a second and it’s over. The emotional part...that’s what keeps you up all night...makes you cry...leaves you feeling like you have a hangover from hell even though you never got drunk.”

“After that he turned the car back on and we drove back to his apartment and made eggs and pancakes and even though I wasn’t hungry it was a nice gesture so I ate them. And then we went to sleep.”

“Yeah, so now you know why I don’t go out without Eric.”

“Well, are you going to say something?”

“Yeah, I actually did ask him why he slapped me that night.”

“He said he lost his temper. Because I make him crazy. Because he loves me so much.”

“Of course I believe him. Who the hell else am I going to believe?”

“What do you mean how did that night make me feel? Like shit. It sucked.”

“Because you know what sucks worse then getting slapped by your boyfriend? Not having a boyfriend to pick you up from a bar when you’re having a bad night. Not having someone to make you pancakes and eggs you don’t want. Not having someone who cares about you. Not having someone who loves you.”

“He really does love me. He really does care.”

“Of course I know. Because he tells me so all the time.”

Session Eight

“Eric and I got in a fight last week.”

“No, he didn’t touch me, Jesus. Calm down. He just asked me where I was that day and I was here and I told him I was on a run with Lauren and he didn’t really believe me.”

“Well, probably because Lauren doesn’t run. But it’s sort of my fault for not thinking of a better excuse. I didn’t really care if he was suspicious. I don’t know why.”

“It was kind of nice, actually. To see him be suspicious. I usually try so hard to please him.”

“Well, because it makes me happy to make him happy. But I’m just saying this is different. Coming to talk to you is something I do for me. I shouldn’t have to explain it to him or lie to him about it or even tell him anything about it at all.”

“Thank you.”

“Yeah. Listen, I know I’ve been avoiding talking about Eric again since I told you about the time he picked me up from girls’ night. It made me feel guilty to tell you.”

“Because I’ve never told anyone, and because it feels like I’m betraying Eric. Or myself. Or something.”

“But that’s the thing. I don’t feel guilty anymore. I feel relieved that you know now. I want to tell you something else. Do you want to hear it? Okay, just making sure!”

“Our first fall break home from college was the first time Eric hit me. He has hit me more than once, in case you hadn’t figured that out. Anyways, we were drinking in our friend’s garage and all of the sudden there were cop cars in the driveway.

So everyone was underage and Eric’s family knew the cops and he said we’d be fine, but I just wasn’t sure! I didn’t want to get in trouble. It was my first semester. I

didn't want to fuck up. So I ran and he stayed, even though he told me not to leave him. That's something we say a lot, actually. That we'll never leave each other.

I left him with the host, in the garage hangout spot, with the cooler and the beers and the still-burning bowl and the cops. He found me 30 minutes later, hidden in the bushes alone, waiting for the blue lights to disappear. He was fine and the cops were leaving, but he was really, really pissed at me. I told him not to be mad at me because I was already in trouble because of him.

Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you, the weekend before that my mom had caught us naked in my closet. Don't laugh! It was better than my dad catching us—but still, she was really pissed! Image is everything where I'm from.

Anyways, Eric was really pissed at me and he didn't seem to care that I was in trouble because he still didn't speak and he wasn't smiling or frowning or anything he just looked kind of...scary. Calm, maybe. He has the bluest eyes, so I was looking at those and his sad lips and I thought for a second maybe he was going to kiss me, an apology for manipulating me and pressuring me to have sex and making me become imperfect in my mothers eyes that day in the closet. For making our relationship imperfect.

He didn't kiss me, but he pulled my hair back, hard. And I guess I kind of looked up, it was a knee-jerk reaction. I was just looking up at the sky, not really at him, and I still wasn't sure he would hurt me. I just love him so much. I just trust him so much.

But he kept pulling until I yelled for him to stop. It's hard to keep your balance like that. He let go, and I thought it was over until his fist connected with my cheekbone and I saw the blue lights all over again.

Eric says I didn't pass out, and I guess he would know, but I don't remember walking back to our friend's house or getting into the guest bed or Eric getting in with me or falling asleep.

What I do remember is waking up with his arms draped around me, with his soft breath and warm body. I knew he couldn't possibly have been the same boy, the same man I loved who hit me six hours before. He couldn't, could he? God, I don't know. I do remember untangling myself from his sticky embrace and I do remember looking in the mirror, at my jaw bruised red and already a little purple around the edges."

"What did I think? I thought the bruise was ugly. And I couldn't believe how quickly it formed."

"Oh, about Eric. I thought he had lost his temper. I thought we had had a bad week. I thought it was a one-time thing."

"That's easy to say if it's not you. Has anyone ever hit you?"

"Has anyone you loved ever hit you? Has anyone who loved you ever hit you?"

"That's what I thought. The thing about being hurt by someone who loves you, is that after they hurt you, they hold you. They kiss you. They make it right."

"When they're being your person, that person you love, that person who loves you, you can pretend the whole thing never happened. You can pretend it will never happen again. You can get really good at pretending. Especially when he wakes up sleepy-eyed and promises he never meant to hurt you, and promises he'll make sure nobody ever hurts you again."

Session Fifteen

“Hi.”

“I’m fine, how are you?”

“I really, really don’t want to be here today.”

“I had a long week. And I hate you.”

“I told him. Like we discussed. I told him I had been coming here.”

“No, he didn’t hurt me. Didn’t touch me at all. Couldn’t even look at me.”

“I think he looked sort of, sad, actually. Sad like I’d broken his trust. Like I hurt his feelings. Which I’m sure I did.”

“I shouldn’t have ever come here. It’s put a strain on our relationship. I can feel us growing apart every time I see him. I don’t know why I did this to us.”

“I DON’T FUCKING KNOW. I DON’T FUCKING KNOW WHAT TO DO NOW. HE HASN’T TALKED TO ME SINCE I TOLD HIM. I HAVEN’T SEEN HIM. THAT WAS SIX DAYS AGO.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me how I feel about that?”

“I feel like I fucking hate you. I fucking hate myself. It feels like someone is taking a straight razor to my heart. It feels like someone is taking a straight razor to my fucking life. It feels like hell.”

“No, I don’t need to take a deep breath. I need to find Eric and I need to apologize and I need you to tell me what I can say to him to make him believe me. You’re the one that makes people see things ‘differently,’ aren’t you? So what should I say to him?”

“This isn’t going to get better. This isn’t going to get easier. I’m not talking to you about this anymore.”

“Because, if I can’t be with Eric then I’ll be completely alone. I have no plans. He is my plan.”

“That’s not the way the world works, Michelle. That’s not the way my world works, anyways. I can’t come back here, I’m sorry. I don’t want to do any more sessions.”

“I’m sorry. No, I can’t come back next week. I’ll be fine. Me and Eric will be fine.”

“If we’re not fine? Well, I don’t know. And I guess you won’t know either.”

MAKE THEM REGRET IT

First, you fall in love.

Well, there are some steps to get there, too. But your heart and your mom’s careful, persistent advice will guide you. She slipped bits of this stuff to you throughout your adolescence, but now you’re a senior in high school and you’re heading to college next year so it’s time to make sure you’re ready to catch your first husband.

This is how it goes: your first date is at a movie theater. He holds his car door open for you and you slide in and you smooth your skirt down so your legs don't look too big pressed up against the seat. You only think about this because once when you were younger you heard your mom whining to her best friend, Lisa, about in on the phone and after that all you saw when you looked down at your legs in the car were sausages attached to your hips.

It's the middle of July, so even though your skirt is positioned just right to hide them, your thighs will still stick to the seat and you'll hope the dampness isn't visible when you get out because the seat is tan leather and that would be embarrassing.

At the movies, he puts his hand on your thigh and you slide your hand under his so that you can intertwine your fingers. Your palms start to feel clammy all pressed up to his and you wonder if he would rather just have his hand back, but neither of you let go. You stare straight ahead but you don't pay attention to the movie because you hear him breathing beside you and his hand is on your leg and your hand is touching his and you wonder if he's going to turn his head just a little, stop watching the movie and kiss you. It's making you nervous because your mom came in your room while you were getting ready for your date to tell one of her many guidelines for catching a man:

Every good relationship starts with a good first kiss.

After the movie you can only think that he hasn't kissed you yet. You brainstorm all the reasons why he might not have, but then you run out of potential reasons so you start brainstorming ways to initiate a kiss yourself. You dread having to tell your mom that, no, he didn't kiss you goodnight, but least you'll be able to tell her that, yes, he did pay for your movie. Another guideline.

If he doesn't pay on the first date he wasn't raised right.

You make a mental note to avoid mentioning the popcorn he paid for as well so you can avoid her reproachful look and her familiar lecture about nighttime snacking.

By the time you pull into your driveway you aren't even nervous he's going to kiss you anymore, you just want to get the recap with your mom over with and get upstairs so you can call your best friend Claire and embellish the details of your evening, hoping your mom will be in a position to overhear.

He puts the car in park and you take off your seatbelt. He looks at you and you tell him you had a great time—the best time—the best night—practice for your conversation with Claire. He leans in and his lips are on yours, his tongue presses against your lips, your lips part and his tongue is in your mouth, roaming and darting and too wet and too hot. You stay like this and he strokes your hair, touches your face, grabs your waist and eventually grazes the outside of your bra, finding your nipples through the fabric.

You pull away because you can hear your mom in your ear telling you

Always leave them wanting more.

You grin as you walk up the driveway, loving that your panties are wet and your breathing is hitched and your mind is racing with a desire. Mostly, you love that you didn't even see the kiss coming, and that it was him who wanted you all along.

In a few months you make him your first, or maybe he makes himself yours. But you know he's not really your first because you gave Billy Sanders a blowjob at prom last year and your mom told you once you've had oral sex you're not really a virgin anymore anyway. He fumbles with the condom and it only hurts a little and you don't

have an orgasm and he does, but when you talk to Claire about it later you tell her every single mind-blowing detail. You want to make sure she is impressed because as your mom always said,

The greater the number of girls who are jealous of you, the greater the number of boys who want you.

He kisses your forehead while you cuddle after sex and a few months later he tells you he loves you. You realize you love him, too, and you don't care how young you are. You spend afternoons together doing homework and weekends getting a little buzz and a giant stomachache from Mike's Hard Lemonade you steal from his parents' garage. Your mom tells you she's happy for you and lets you stay out way past your curfew as long as you're safe, with him. You graduate high school and you go to the same college and a few weeks later he breaks up with you because he says he doesn't have time to treat you the way you deserve.

He leaves you alone in your dorm room, knowing you should have seen this coming and wondering if crying would make your chest hurt less. You stare at the white bricks of the walls of your room and wish you had decorated them. You call your mom and she cries because she says she's so upset for you, but before you hang up she makes sure to ask you why he ended things. She tells you this:

If they won't take you back, make sure you make them regret it.

You go to class and to the library and back to your dorm room and you try not to feel, but you feel everything all the time and you only wish it would stop and you could feel nothing at all instead.

Two months later, you find out he cheated on you, first on graduation night and then on many others, with your best friend, Claire. You realize no matter what, it will always be you who regrets him.

Next, you get lost. You feel betrayed—used—confused. You see him around campus, but what you feel towards him won't be identifiable. He's not the person you loved, and you don't know where that person went, so you pretend he's dead. You don't know who you are, or why he ever pretended to love you, and you realize you're jealous of him for getting out of this on top. You wish he had to pretend you were dead, too. You wish your mom had told you about this—you wish there was a guideline for being screwed over by your best friend and first love at the same time.

Claire is a newly proclaimed psychology major at a college out of state, but she makes time for a Skype date when she hears that you know about the betrayal. After a minute of distracted apologies and comforting she's all business. She's few months into Psych 101 and she suggests that you need to go through the five stages of grief.

"Well, I'm sorry Caroline but what's done is done. We can't take it back. You really need to go through mourning. It's like you lost someone," she says. She's said she's sorry and that it shouldn't matter since it's in the past and you two are broken up anyway.

"I did lose someone," you remind her. You lost everyone. You lost the only one. You lost her, too.

"Okay, good. So we've bypassed denial. Next is anger."

"I'm not angry. At either of you. I'm not anything. I'm shocked, maybe, but I'm not angry. I'm just here." And he's not, and you're not and neither of you ever will be again.

“Okay, maybe you skipped that, too. Have you been bargaining with yourself? Like, maybe if you had been better in bed he wouldn’t have decided to hook up with me?” She means this as a joke, but it hits home, hard. You marvel briefly that your mother didn’t beat her to asking.

“No, I hadn’t been thinking that, but thank you.” Maybe you’ve thought it once or twice, or all the time. But you aren’t going to admit that to Claire. You want to strangle her through the computer, but she’s the only friend you really held onto since you started your relationship, and you don’t want to lose her, too.

“Come on, you know I was joking,” she says, and you feel relieved to hear the guilt creeping into her voice.

“I know you were joking,” you assure her, and you mean it and you wish she was here to hug you but you know that hug might turn into your hand clenched around her throat if she was standing in front of you now.

You cry when she has to hang up because you wouldn’t let yourself in front of her and you know you never want to talk to her again. To distract yourself you research the stages of grief on your own. You try to diagnose yourself with depression, but you realize you have way too many feelings and none of them are numbness—not even close. You call your mom and tell her you might need to see a therapist.

Your mom listens and understands. She hears you—tells you to keep your chin up and get back out there. Tells you to learn from this for next time and that moving on is your responsibility. You wonder if she has a fucking self-help book open in front of her and is reading off all the answers—until she offers you her wisest opinion on your therapy options:

“Honey, a therapist is just going to prescribe you anti-depressants,” she says. “Those are proven to cause weight gain—and then you’ll really have something to be depressed about.”

You decide you don’t need therapy after all and you channel your feelings into a new workout plan instead and lose ten pounds. You go shopping for new jeans, a size smaller than the ones you already own. You decide the freshman 15 is a myth. You discuss your new diet with your mom on the phone and she murmurs her enthusiasm as she scribbles notes in her planner and swears she’s going to look as good as you do by the end of the year.

Eventually, the feelings seem smaller and your life seems bigger again. You wise up and you vow to never fall in love again. You don’t even listen when your mom tells you “You’ll be single forever if you don’t meet your husband in college. It’s the only place you’re surrounded by so many eligible people your own age!” You don’t listen and you realize you don’t even have to, because everything she has to say is bullshit and no matter how much you follow her rules for being the perfect girlfriend your boyfriend will still cheat on you with your best friend.

You meet a boy at a party your first night back on the scene with your roommate and some girls from down the hall. He has a sweet smile and he’s too short for you but by the time he gets you your third drink you forget your height and his. He holds your hand and touches your hair and most importantly, gets you upstairs so quickly you never even have a chance to think this through.

Upstairs he tells you that this is his house, and he shows you his room and he kisses you with more practice and urgency than your ex ever did. He pulls your hair and bites your lip and you sigh. He unbuttons your shirt and unhooks your bra and you don't stop him even when your mother's warnings about "easy girls" ring through your head. You feel wanted—full—desirable just for little while, and when it's over and he says this:

"So...uh, I promise I never do this. But what's your name again?" You don't know it yet—you haven't seen enough—but he does do this, all the time.

"It's Caroline. And it's fine, I actually don't know if I told you." You told him three times, and he was in your Biology class last semester. You wonder briefly if he ever saw you come in late, eyes red and head down so no one could tell your pre-class bathroom trip was because you couldn't stop crying.

"Caroline...really? Hm. Well, uh, are you going to stay here? Or like, do you need to?" You pretend he's asking you to sleep over instead of asking you to leave.

"Yep, really. And no that's okay my dorm is close. I'd rather sleep in my own bed." You momentarily forget about how much you love to cuddle and how you were on your way out tonight.

"Wait, let me get you a cab. You shouldn't walk." His protests make you feel stronger—he's worried about you—he cares. The surge of confidence moves you to your feet, to find your clothes in the darkness, to head for the door before he makes another attempt at dismissal.

"I'd rather walk than ride in a cab at 4 a.m. wearing this. Thanks, but no thanks." You get a moment of inspiration as you step into the underwear you barely remember taking off. "Um, wait, actually what's your name again?"

It's Jeremy, and you already know this even though he never told you and you just overheard one of his friends say it while they were playing beer pong.

He sits up and looks genuinely offended. "It's Jeremy?" A question.

His face makes you feel in control, in charge. You don't need him. "Right, Jeremy. Well, see ya!" You leave quickly and by the time the door to Jeremy's room slams behind you, neither of you remember whose idea it was for you to leave.

On the walk home, your feet hurt and it's be chilly out and you have to dodge a few sprinklers, but the night is clear and crisp and you're be mainly alone on campus. You marvel at your confidence—you aren't scared. You stumble home to your tiny, poorly decorated dorm room, a champion of the night, a woman in charge of her first one-night stand. You feel empowered.

In the moment, still wearing your heels and trying to tiptoe so the clacking doesn't wake up your roommate, you use your phone light as a guide to find a pen in the dark and scribble down the rules that are going to save you from the future, from men, from betrayal, from best friends, from heartbreak. For some reason, even when you wake up with a hangover and a bad taste in your mouth, you remember the rules, you read them through again and you follow them.

The key to keeping up your reputation is to keep your mouth shut.

The girls who get called names—the girls who no one wants anymore—the girls who are used up are the ones who couldn't fucking keep their stories to themselves. You have a few friends of course, and you have plenty of acquaintances. But your life is your business and it'll be easier that way.

By the end of your sophomore year you develop a routine. You spend your weeks focused on school because whoever decided you couldn't party in college and have good grades obviously didn't have your mother riding their ass to make sure they did both. You talk to your mom on the phone a few afternoons a week, and by the time you hang up you're rubbing your temples and wishing you'd popped a Xanax before the conversation.

"Hey, honey. I'm just picking up a few things for dinner and I saw Mrs. Thomas in the grocery store and HAD to call you—did you know Rebecca Thomas is engaged?"

"Yeah, yeah I think I saw something about it on Facebook."

"Right, well her mom showed me pictures of the engagement. Her ring is HUGE. I showed it to your father and reminded him our anniversary is coming up," she laughs when she says this, but it isn't a joke.

"I'm sure you did, mom. What are you making for dinner?" You'd be shocked if your attempt at a topic change worked, but you're desperate enough to try.

"Just this recipe I found. Anyway, have you talked to Rebecca recently? I didn't even realize her and John were so serious!" She doesn't want to give this up.

"No, I haven't. We haven't been friends since the sixth grade, mom." You try to be patient as you remind her even though she already knows.

"Well, I was just wondering. And I'm also wondering when we're going to see a ring like that on your finger!" Another laugh, and still no joke. You clench your phone in your hand tightly, hoping to accidentally press the "end" button.

"Probably never, mom." She sighs and you get a little satisfaction from the pathetic noise. "I have to go."

“Wait, Caroline! Are you going out tonight? Take pictures!” You press end and shake your head, not wanting to hear another encouraging speech about how going out is a “great opportunity to meet people.”

But it is Saturday, you remind yourself as you clear your head of your mother’s shrill voice—and it isn’t a successful Saturday evening if you don’t wake up with a boy in your bed and your clothes on the floor Sunday morning.

You recruit one of your roommates to accompany you for the night—it’s Saturday, after all, so she doesn’t take much convincing. You drink vodka mixed with water and a splash of lime juice because alcohol has enough calories as it is. You choose an outfit that shows either leg or cleavage—but not both, because the only thing that ruins a reputation faster than a big mouth is a slutty outfit.

You arrive at your favorite bar a little past midnight and you don’t have to show your fake ID to anyone because the bouncers already know you. You buy your drink and face your friend so that you can pretend to talk to her while you scan the bar for a face you won’t mind looking at when you wake up tomorrow morning. You notice a tall, blonde guy talking to a girl by the bar and you wonder if they’re dating, even though you don’t normally like blondes.

He looks away from the girl and you catch his eye. His smile tells you that he is not dating the girl. You smile back and he looks away. You keep looking until he looks back at you and you smile again. Interest expressed.

He leaves the girl he was talking to and walk over to you, and you feel a flurry of satisfaction because you’re already winning since he’s made the first move. Your friend knows to walk away so that you can be alone with the blonde who you wouldn’t

normally like, but he has green eyes and his arms look defined so you know he spends time in the gym and he'll be able to toss you around a bedroom. You fix your lips into a frown and get ready to act distracted because you remember the rules and

Whoever cares less, wins.

"I'm Patrick," he says. He looks straight into your eyes and his confidence is disarming, but you pretend not to notice his self-assured stance or the perfect shape of his lips.

"I'm drinking," you say, pleased with how well you're playing the game. He fakes a frown and you fix your gaze on him and stare silently so he knows you aren't dismissing him, but you're not giving in, either.

"Well, I'm not one to interfere with that," he says, and motions the bartender over to get you both new drinks. You down your almost full drink, grateful that you don't eat carbs so that there is very little preventing you from being very drunk very quickly.

You chat at the bar for the while—What's your major? Where did you grow up? What do you want to do when you graduate? You answer, but don't ask him any questions, because asking questions is a quick road to getting to know him. At some point, he notices this is more of an interrogation than a conversation, and stops talking. You know it's time to make your move because you need to

Catch them off guard to maintain control.

Your head is cloudy and your body is buzzing so you put your hand behind his neck and pull his face towards yours. He doesn't resist your lips on his, and when he pulls away his eyes will be two shades darker and he doesn't release his grip on your

waist. You feel the familiar rush, adrenaline or control or something more carnal and the confidence that comes with it.

“My place or yours?” You ask and he looks surprised for a split second before remembering his ego and grabbing your hand to lead you out of the bar.

His house is nearby and his living room is littered with beer cans and video game controllers because him and his buddies pre-gamed at his place tonight. He gives you a tour of the house, stopping to kiss you in each hallway and unbuttoning your top a little each time.

You stumble into his room and just barely remember to take in your surroundings because your head is swimming with liquor and lust. His bed has sheets but no comforter and one, maybe two pillows if you’re lucky. You’ve learned that boys struggle with interior decorating.

You lose your shirt and fall backwards on his bed as he throws his own shirt to the floor. You notice how muscular his shoulders are as he bends down to kiss your stomach, then moves lower to unbutton your jeans.

He doesn’t go down on you, but you suck his dick for at least three minutes before he pulls you back up for a sweaty kiss and thrusts into you while you sit on top of him. You bury your face in his neck as you ride him because if you look at him he might be looking back, or worse, he won’t be. He flips you on your back without pulling out of you, so you know he’s at least as practiced as you are. He thrusts hard as he comes and then he pulls out.

“I’m assuming you’re on the pill,” he’ll mumble, half-question, half-accusation, before he throws his arm around you and falls asleep. You give yourself a few seconds in bed for your breathing to steady before you remember the most important rule,

Never, ever have a fucking sleepover.

Wait for his breathing to even out, or don’t, and make your escape. Get a cab home if it’s far or walk if it isn’t, but if you’re walking you better be walking in the shoes you came in. A walk home in heels in the middle of the night means you partied too hard, but a walk home holding those heels means you just got fucked, and most likely, fucked over.

He doesn’t want to wake up next to you any more than you want to meet his roommates in the morning, and neither of you needs to deal with the awkwardness of morning sex. These things are better left in the dark—and morning comes all too quickly.

When you get home you take a shower, exhausted but glad you won’t have to worry about dealing with hours old cum in the mix of your inevitable hangover. You tiptoe to your room, but you realize you woke your roommate up anyway when your phone PINGS to life in the darkness of your room:

YOU OKAY, C?

YEP. I’M GOOD. LET’S TALK TOMORROW.

Jayne is your most nurturing roommate—and you hate her because you know she’ll probably be a good mother some day.

DID YOU WALK?

She's persistent, even at this hour. You consider lying to her and then decide you don't owe her anything.

YES, AND I'M HERE IN ONE PIECE. GOODNIGHT.

You turn your phone off before she has a chance to say anything else to make you feel guilty.

You grow to hate Sundays because they mean the end of the weekend. You spend too much time at the gym and you shop for things you don't need. You study in the crowded part of the library to avoid spending time alone. You text Kyle, and Sam, and Taylor and Michael and Jeff and Scott and Chris and Matt and Keegan and Riley and Brandon and any other guy you've ever actually given your number to because your phone chirping every thirty seconds will mean there is no possible way you are alone. You are sure to observe the final rule,

Don't reuse and don't recycle.

You stop talking to them the second they try to make plans. Seeing them again could be the start of something and you aren't interested in anything at all.

You forget to eat sometimes because you are too busy keeping yourself occupied. When you go home for breaks, your mom tells you that you look great. Your dad doesn't comment on your appearance. You think he's too scared to address it after years of self-consciousness from your mother. Your little sister will take you with her to a high school party and you will sleep with a high school senior who looks like he's 25, but only after you make sure he's 18.

One weekend, you see Patrick out again. He's smiling at you from across the room and you smile back out of habit. He approaches you again, and you get a rush as you think about the different ways you can blow him off.

"I realized I never got your number." It's at least a month after your first encounter.

"I realized I never gave it to you," you say back. He gets his phone out and hands it to you so that you can type it in. You stare at his hands and wonder why he doesn't just try to take you home again, and you almost suggest it because he was good in bed, but the rules are the rules.

Instead you enter Jayme's number in his phone and save it under the name of the bar where you met him. You're momentarily amused as you think about Blonde Patrick trying to sext Jayme later, but you keep yourself from smiling as you scan the bar for your next conquest.

One weekend, your mom decides to come surprise you at school. She's booked you a girl's day at a spa in the area—she's lost 7 pounds and she deserves it. She doesn't tell you she's coming, and Jayme lets her in when she knocks on your door Saturday morning, even though Jayme knows you just got in from a night out a few hours ago. Your mom lets herself into your room and perches on the edge of your bed in the darkness, trying to wake you up gently.

"Caroline, sweetie! It's me! Ready for a spa day? I have it all set up. We need to leave soon!" It's 9 a.m. and you just want to tell her to fuck off. You almost do, but instead you just groan and refuse to open your eyes.

“Carol—wake up. You smell like a bar. You need to shower.”

You open one eye and look at her, “You look ridiculous.” She’s wearing a sundress and heels. It’s still early March so you know she’s freezing. Her hair is blown out so particularly it looks like she’s already come from a spa. Her lips are perfectly red and you think she is wearing a new jewelry set.

“Are you and dad having marital problems?” You’re joking, but you know this is the shit she would pull if they were: *look amazing, always. Lose 7 pounds. Get the kids on my side. Be the happier divorcé.*

Your mom looks at you and rolls her eyes, ripping the covers off and telling you to get in the shower. You glance in the mirror and realize you look ridiculous—you didn’t take your 4 a.m. shower and your hair looks like it could have something living in it. In the shower, you brainstorm ways to get out of spending the day with your mom. You doubt “I’m hungover and I need to eat something greasy and lay in bed with the lights off,” would go over well. You resign yourself to a day of facials and avoiding questions about boys and walk back into your room wrapped in a towel.

Your mom is still sitting on your bed when you return to your room. She is holding a condom wrapper in one hand and it looks funny clutched by her tastefully manicured hands. You forgot to throw that away after you kicked out last night’s guy. You give yourself a mental pat on the back for disposing of the used condom, at least.

“Condoms? Do you have a boyfriend you didn’t tell me about?” She thinks her dream is coming true, it’s written all over her face, and you can’t wait to take it away from her. You think about laughing at her but then realize she is fucking insane and you are fucking furious. You try to keep your voice steady but you’ve made up your mind.

“No, Mom. I do not have a boyfriend.” You don’t care what she says next, you just want her to leave.

“So...is this yours?” You run through a mental list of people you could blame it on, but you’d rather throw this in her face and end the conversation once and for all.

You squeeze the water out of your hair and take a deep breath. “Yes, it’s mine. He’s just not my boyfriend.” You think about stopping there, but you feel vicious. Lethal. You want to cut her deep, like all her rules and expectations have cut you. “I actually don’t even know his name.”

She looks like she might throw up. “You are making a huge mistake. You don’t even care about finding someone. It’s like you don’t even want to have a family. No one is going to want you if you’re just giving it to everyone. Have I taught you nothing? Do you even care about your future?”

“Do YOU care about my future mom? Who are you thinking about here? Is it you? Because it’s sure as hell not me.” You are breathing heavy and you feel dizzy. You need water and Advil and your mom gone and another several hours of sleep.

“Of course I’m thinking about you. I just want you to be happy Caroline. I want you to have someone who loves you.” She’s yelling so you don’t hear her words, you just hear her shrill voice and her stupid fucking guidelines and her relentless probing into your relationships, your life.

Now you are laughing at her, and she looks pissed. “Well, Mom, if I need someone to love me so badly you probably could’ve started by trying to help me love myself. But you’ve screwed that one into a million pieces, haven’t you?” It’s true. She has been

helping you hate yourself since day one. She has spent her life trying to fix you, make you better, until you were sure you couldn't be anything but broken.

She doesn't respond, just stares at you with her mouth wide open and her pink nails pressed against her lips in horror. You're annoyed because she looks pretty even though she's angry and you know she would love that. You put on your bar face—the serious one, the uninterested one. You become the person who can't be hurt.

"You want me happy, mom? I'm happiest when you leave me the fuck alone." You mean it. You want her gone and you don't want to go to a spa with her and you don't want to see her again anytime soon.

She opens her mouth to speak and then grabs her purse, leaving quickly and not saying goodbye. She catches one of her heels on the welcome mat by the door and she trips a little before she closes the door behind her but she doesn't fall all the way. You wonder if you're a bad person for wishing she did.

As she drives away you feel confident: you're sure she is the one who messed this up, no matter how many of her own guidelines she follows. This doesn't feel like a loss—not like your ex and not like Claire. This feels like your choice. This feels like a win. This time, you are sure, she'll be the one with regrets.

WHY WE RUN

When he glanced up from his drink to prepare for another wave of \$2 orders from too-drunk kids, he stopped for the first time all night. His sister had died when she was sixteen, almost four years ago now, but she was standing in front of him at the bar in a twenty-something year old form.

“What can I get you?” Charlie wanted to look away like he always had, but he searched the girl’s eyes for signs of recognition, hoping he wouldn’t get them. He

couldn't shake the familiarity—her long, dark hair, the clear, green eyes, the thin mouth that didn't seem to take any shape other than a smile.

The Girl pushed her black hair back from her face and glanced towards the dance floor. She held up two fingers to a girl standing pressed up against the wall across the room, talking too closely to a guy way too old for her. The Girl's friend nodded and grinned and she turned back to Charlie to order.

"Two beers, I guess, then. Not that she needs anything else to drink." The Girl giggled and rolled her eyes.

Charlie grabbed two pints and filled them with the beer that was on special, hoping The Girl would pay with a credit card so he could find out her name was Molly or Hannah or Courtney or anything else other than the name of his dead sister. He hadn't seen her in over four years, at least not for any respectable amount time, and after all his running from her and her illness and all the despair that came with a teenage Leukemia diagnosis, he certainly wasn't ready to be caught here, tonight, at the place where he'd been hiding semi-successfully.

He handed her the beers and accepted her \$10 bill, thanking her when she told him to keep the change. As The Girl fought her way through the crowd and back to her friend, Charlie fought his way out back to smoke a cigarette and clear his head, wishing she'd leave before he returned.

* * *

Charlie had attended his classes for the majority of his first year at Wisconsin—but then Susie's condition was pronounced terminal, and he started working 6 nights a

week as a bar-back at Wando's, a three-floor bar known for its dim lighting and drinks served in fishbowls.

The job provided little in the way of income but plenty in excuses—he worked whenever he was asked and he used “Sorry, I can’t, I have work,” whenever he needed. Wando’s soon provided a better distraction than school, so he stopped showing up for that, too, putting his enrollment on hold, not sure he’d ever unfreeze it.

A few years later he was old enough to legally pour liquor for customers and loyal enough to be given a bartending position. As far as Charlie was concerned, he was set—work was always an excuse not to be able to make the two-hour drive from Madison to his childhood home in Milwaukee, and a bartending job made booze readily available.

Tuesdays at Wando’s were always off and running by 11 p.m.—drinks were cheaper, so people showed up an hour earlier. Wando’s was divided into three floors with three different bars and each level had a reputation—level one was for an older crowd, grabbing post-dinner drinks and chatting about their workday.

The second floor was mostly college kids but still moderately tame, as long as it was early in the evening. The third floor was the dance floor with the D.J. playing music too loudly to allow for conversation and forcing drunken students to interact with their bodies instead.

Tonight, Charlie was stuck on the third floor so he had to make a break down all the stairs to get outside for some fresh air and his cigarette—and to get away from The Girl. Charlie ducked his head out of the back door and scanned the ally for signs of drunken entanglements before stepping out and inhaling the crisp, night air. April in the

Midwest was still chilly, especially when the sun was down, but the students of UW-Madison made the trek to bars in rain, shine, blizzard or black ice.

If Charlie had stuck with it, he would have graduated last May, almost a year ago now. Instead he'd put his enrollment on hold and traded coffee and textbooks for whiskey and a smoking habit. He still hadn't removed his hold on his enrollment—in fact, he was pretty sure he'd have to reapply at this point.

Charlie lit his cigarette and inhaled deeply, wishing he'd packed a joint for the night but congratulating himself for at least remembering to pick up a new pack of cigarettes on his way in.

He closed his eyes and leaned up against the cold brick wall, trying to remember the last time he'd talked to anyone about Susie. He'd avoided going home since her funeral, except for Christmas and even then he usually made it a two-day trip. Truthfully, he hadn't been around much since her diagnosis. His mom had told him, over the phone. She was crying and he hung up as quickly as possible, refusing to talk to his dad or Susie and going out with his friends that night as planned.

When Susie died a little over a year later she was 16. She hadn't gotten her driver's license. He'd never let her drive his car without a license or helped her sneak out to meet her friends without waking up their parents. They'd never really fought, as far as he could remember, and she'd never gotten a chance to get mad at him for being healthy when she was so sick.

He'd never told her that he was sorry this was happening to her, or that he would be there for her always, or that he wished he could take her place.

When they were younger, he and Susie had been close. His parents had always been bragging to their friends—their kids loved each other. They never even fought. They played made-up games with imaginary rules in the giant backyard of their modest, two-story home in the warm months, insisting on being outside barefoot the moment the temperature rose above 50 degrees.

And when the wind chill dipped below negative ten and the weather advisory warned everyone to “Stay inside unless your outdoor activity is absolutely necessary,” Susie and Charlie had bundled up in so many layers they had to waddle around. They’d built snow families in the yard and brought the hose out to wet the ground so that they could “ice skate” in their ski boots until the snow had dampened the last of their impossibly many layers and they couldn’t stop their teeth from chattering anymore no matter how much they gritted them.

The back door opened and music pulsed through Charlie’s thoughts as someone scrambled out of the bar. She tripped a little and laughed, pushing her dark hair out of her face.

“Oops, hi. It’s a wreck in there.” It was her, with her dark hair and green eyes that would’ve been too big if her other features weren’t big enough to give her face proportion. She smiled at him and he looked away, letting his cigarette dangle from his lips while he searched in his pocket for another one.

He found it and held it loosely in his hand, refusing to look at The Girl but finally saying, “Hi.”

"You hiding out here? I don't blame you." She spoke too loudly, like she thought she was still inside and had to compete with the music, but even her voice reminded him of his sister the way he remembered her—young, happy and unapologetic.

"You aren't allowed to use that door," Charlie said, hoping it came across as a dismissal. He didn't want to know this girl. He didn't need to know her. He hadn't known her for years and he was still standing here, alive and well.

"Says who?" She asked, but she was smiling like she thought he was trying to flirt with her.

"Me, obviously." He turned to look at her and regretted it immediately. She looked even more like Susie under the outside lights and out of the dimness of the bar. She looked comfortable and not at all offended by his attempts to be rude. She looked like she knew him well, like she'd be a good listener—like if he wanted to, he could sit out here all night and tell her everything he could remember about Susie, and she'd just sit here and nod and never interrupt.

Susie had been like that, too. A good listener—to him and to everyone else. His mom had always joked with them if she ever had to commit murder, the only person she'd tell would be Susie, because she knew how to listen, and how to understand and how to keep secrets.

"Well, if I'm going to care about your rules, you should probably tell me who you are." Susie had been bold, too. The Girl spoke without reserve, not looking away from him and still smiling even though he knew he was being rude.

“Are you drunk? I’m a bartender here. I just served you.” He winced as he said it. He would never have spoken to his sister like that. *Your sister isn’t alive, Charlie.* He needed to get back inside. He needed to get away from this girl.

“I know *that*. I meant what’s your name.” If he told her his name, would she respond with hers? At this point, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know it. It was easier not to know. That’s how he’d handled Susie’s decline. Susie’s death. His parent’s grief, his parent’s lives since Susie’s death. Ignorance is bliss.

“Oh.” Charlie swapped his first cigarette for the one he still held in his hand. “That’s not important.” He moved closer to her on his path to the door, and he inhaled sharply as she put her hand on his chest to stop him. She smelled like coconut—or sunscreen—or maybe both. Not a smell typical of a Wisconsin “spring” with snow still sticking stubbornly to the ground and nighttime temperatures still dipping into the thirties.

“If you’re trying to be mysterious, it isn’t working. I could ask anyone working inside what your name is.” Her hand was still on him, and he forced his mind to wander away from her touch, refusing to feel any kind of allure for this girl who had come in and ruined his night and stirred up memories he was usually so good at ignoring.

He shrugged her hand off, careful not to touch her back, and decided to concede on this point. “I guess you could. Fine, it’s Charlie.” He stood still for a moment and wavered between wishing she would say her name back and wanting so badly not to care.

She didn't make him choose. "Well, Charlie, do you have a cigarette for me or are you going to smoke the whole pack by yourself before you actually go back inside and do your job?"

He handed her a cigarette and his lighter and put his own out against the brick wall before heading for the door. "You're right. I do need to go do my job."

He dipped back into the crowded first floor of Wando's and wished it was 2 a.m. already so he could turn all the lights on, make everyone leave and make himself a drink stiff enough to wipe out his thoughts.

He closed the door behind him and wondered if Susie would have smoked at The Girl's age, or if she would've been smarter. He wondered if she would've come to Madison like him, or stayed in Milwaukee and gone to Marquette and lived with his parents, like they wanted him to do. He wondered if she would've made it farther than her first year, and what major she would've chosen.

He wondered if, if it had been him who got the terminal diagnosis as a teenager, if she would've told him she was sorry, or that she'd be there for him or that she wished she could've taken his place.

* * *

All the bartenders fought for the first floor—better tips and fewer fights and less chance of being forced to clean up broken glass or vomit throughout the night. On Tuesdays, they played darts at the beginning of the night to decide who got to stay on the first floor and who had to brave the second and third levels of doom.

As Charlie waded back through the bodies and up two flights of stairs, he wished he hadn't been late to work tonight. He might have missed The Girl. He might've avoided

her. He might've avoided these memories and thoughts and moments, like always, and he might've just had a normal night.

But Charlie had been late because he was struggling to find a ride and he hadn't felt like walking. He had missed the whole game of darts and got stuck on the third floor with his least favorite co-worker, Ransom. When he made his way back to the third floor, already upset by his interrupted smoke break, he was unpleasantly surprised to find Ransom talking to a blonde and ignoring the line of drunk, angry students grumbling about their empty drinks.

"Ransom, you want to help or no?" Charlie was the second-longest standing employee at Wando's, after the owner who refused to work on any of the nights they had specials and generally just came and went as he pleased.

"Sorry, sorry." He turned back to the girl and winked, getting an eye roll from Charlie and a kiss on a cheek from the blonde.

Charlie managed to serve about half of the crowd around the bar before being interrupted by a girl he thought he vaguely recognized.

"Hey Charlie." Blonde. A little too skinny. Big eyes. Not his type at all, but she still looked familiar.

"What can I get you?"

"Vodka soda. No lime." She slurred her words slightly, but he nodded and made the drink, trying to decide if he actually knew her. He handed her the drink, "2.50."

She threw a five at him. "Hey, do you know where my friend went? She got us drinks from you earlier."

Charlie frowned. This was The Girl's drunk friend. Now he wished he had refused to serve her and cut her off instead. Then they might've left. "She was just outside."

"Outside? Why?" Her eyes looked even bigger when she asked questions.

"How am I supposed to know? She was bumming a cig off me."

The girl laughed and started walking away. "She doesn't smoke," she yelled behind her as she started down the stairs.

Charlie made a few more drinks and forced himself not to think about the fact that a girl who didn't smoke had just asked him for a cigarette. He watched girls dance too close to each other—they always touched their hair a lot. He remembered when Susie started losing her hair—his Mom sent him a picture with his little sister smiling, with braces and teary eyes and a bald head. He never thought about her like that, when he thought about her. He still saw her fourteen and awkward with hair too long and big for her little body and her teeth, made bulkier by braces and way too big for her mouth.

His dad had shaved his head to support her. Charlie had stopped getting his cut and let it grow into the unruly, curly mess that he was told was "adorable." He hated it now, but he couldn't cut it, because it felt like it was taking something else from his dead sister.

Would he have done things differently if she got sick now? Four years should have been enough time for him to have grown—to be a better person—to help his sister fight her battle instead of running away from it as fast as he could. But he knew he'd still run. He was still just as selfish, and just as angry and just as scared.

Charlie's last conversation with Susie had been on her sixteenth birthday. He'd called her to wish her happy birthday, after his mom called to remind him. He had

remembered but he just hadn't picked up the phone to make the call yet. Truthfully, he couldn't remember if he was planning on making the call at all. Hearing her voice had made him picture her—bald and weak and hurting, the way he had never wanted to see her.

He was on his way to work when he'd decided to call. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to her, but something made him press her number and when her voice answered, shaky but happy to hear from her brother, he'd felt just a moment of relief—a release of the guilt he normally hid from himself so well.

He had walked to work that night because it was nice out and because it was Susie's birthday and he'd felt sick all day because he'd known deep down it would be her last, and if it was her last he'd have done nothing to make sure she knew he loved her, he'd have done nothing to make this easier, he'd have done nothing to help share her pain.

So he'd walked and he'd called Susie and when he got to work he told her he had to go and he'd talk to her later, but he kept walking and he walked all the way to the Capitol building and up to the observation deck.

At the time, Charlie hadn't been a smoker, but thinking back on that night he wished he'd had a cigarette up there. He'd put money in the binoculars on the ledge of the observation deck—the ones for tourists with bratty kids who insist on being held up so they can look out at the world through a giant lense, those kids who are unable to be satisfied by just seeing the world the way it is.

Charlie saw the world the way it was, or at least he had since Susie got sick. Charlie knew if he researched Lukemia he'd be able to find anything he needed to know.

He knew if he went home he'd see it all first hand. He knew his sister's days were dwindling and he knew he'd avoided seeing them come to a close. He knew if he went home, if he stayed with her and was there for her, he'd walk into a deep trench of sadness and grief and hopelessness. He knew how hard trenches were to get out of.

He knew the way the world looked—cold and blue and vast and unforgiving. But that night he'd wanted to see something different—see something up close—see something with clarity and without question. Charlie wanted to see the world the way he used to be able to see Susie.

At the top of the Wisconsin capitol building you're supposed to be able to see the whole city, but that night Charlie wouldn't have been impressed even if he'd been able to see the whole universe. He needed to see magic. He needed to see the galaxies, and little people living on them. He needed Susie to call him back and tell him she had gone into spontaneous remission, *Happy Birthday to me!* He needed to see a miracle.

He spun the binoculars left and right—used every quarter he had in his pocket—tried so hard to see the outlines of Lake Mendota and Monona and the city sandwiched between them. He tried to see the people moving around, maybe a shooting star or someone sprouting wings and flying over the city of Madison.

But the lakes looked like giant puddles of blurry ink and the city was just a bunch of scattered lights so he lay down on the cement floor of the deck instead and closed his eyes and counted to sixteen over and over.

* * *

It was almost 2 by the time The Girl and her blonde friend came back to the third floor and Charlie had almost convinced himself that she was gone and that he could go

back to his usual tactic of forgetting. He had made a drink and was sipping it fervently behind the door of the fridge when they came barreling back up the stairs, laughing and apparently running from something or someone.

“Hey, we need two shots RIGHT NOW.” They screamed over the bar, still laughing.

Charlie poured two waters and handed them over. “If you drink all of these first.” He told himself he was just doing his job. He didn’t care who they were or weren’t, they were too drunk for shots.

“We don’t want water!” The Girl’s friend pouted and held out her money to Charlie, but The Girl grabbed her hand and pulled her away.

“He’s right,” she said, “we should have some water. Let’s dance.” Why had she been so agreeable? Why was she being so friendly? Why couldn’t she just ignore him, and let him ignore her and let him hate her for bringing up things he didn’t, couldn’t think about?

Charlie watched them for a moment and saw The Girl mouth “Thank you” as she twirled her friend around, off tempo and spastic. He nodded at her, finding himself wondering why she wasn’t just as drunk as her friend. Maybe she was older than her friend, or maybe she had a test tomorrow or the next day. Maybe she didn’t drink much at all, maybe she was too smart for that.

He started brainstorming questions he would ask her if she came back to talk to him and began cleaning up, wiping down the liquor bottles and washing glasses and vowing not to serve anyone else who ordered a drink in the next 10 minutes. Maybe he could know this girl. She couldn’t be Susie. He didn’t have to run from her. She was here,

living, breathing and dancing in his bar. Stealing his cigarettes. Taking care of her friend. She didn't need him to take care of her.

The Girl sat down at a seat at the bar as he was clearing out the ice cooler and putting the bottled beers back in the fridge.

"I guess I have to thank you for two things now," she said, resting her elbows on the bar.

"And what do you need to thank me for?" Charlie was still weary, but he was starting to think he'd be more upset if The Girl left than if she stayed. She was pretty. She pushed her hair behind her ear and he noticed a row of piercings. Susie had never had her ears pierced—as far as he knew. She'd always been too afraid of needles. He wondered if that had changed with all her treatments. Maybe she'd pierced them when things got rough—a little piece of pretty to help balance out all the ugly in her life.

"Well, for my cigarette that you abandoned me with. And for not giving Kat another shot." She nodded her head in the direction of her drunk friend, sitting alone at a table in the corner, nodding to the music and switching between drifting off and sitting straight up to chug her water.

They laughed at the same time watching Kat, and Charlie looked at The Girl, noticing her teeth—they were a lot smaller than Susie's had been. Her eyes had freckles of brown in them—and he liked looking at them. He didn't think he'd looked at a girl's this much in four years. He didn't think he'd even talked to a girl this much in four years, unless you count ordering and filling a drink as a conversation.

"Here's your lighter by the way." She pushed his lighter towards him across the bar. Her nails were long and painted black. Susie had always been painting her nails in neon pinks and greens and driving their mom crazy.

"Thanks." Charlie resumed restacking the glasses. "You know it's five minutes 'til two?" He wondered if this sounded like a dismissal.

He was sort of trying to invite her to stay around while he closed. He just wasn't sure how to say it out loud. Maybe he could ask her all the questions he had thought of. Maybe they could go get food after this—they could sneak into the Capitol building—he could show her all the things you can't see through the binoculars at the observation deck. They could laugh about it.

"You and all your rules. Fine, fine, I'll go collect Kat." She started to stand up and walk over to her friend—she had assumed he wanted her to leave. Did he?

She wasn't Susie. She wasn't dead, or dying, or even sick. She looked healthy and happy and strong. She was all the best parts of Susie, all the things he hadn't had to run from—or maybe she was none of her at all. Did he want to know her? Could he?

"Wait." He put his towel down on the bar. He decided he could try to know her, or at least not run away. For The Girl. For himself. For all the times he hadn't tried when Susie was still alive. "Why'd you ask me for a cigarette if you don't smoke?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "Why do you think? I was trying to get you to talk to me. You don't seem friendly—and I'm usually good with people!"

"I'm very bad at people," he responded cautiously, not wanting to lose her interest but knowing that he had waded in too far to be dishonest with her now. "I don't really spend a lot of time with people, anymore, I guess."

“You work in a bar...you don’t think that’s spending time with people?” She looked at him skeptically and he shrugged.

“Making drinks for people who are drunk or who are well on their way to being there does not require much in the way of relationship building.”

“Okay, well you said anymore. Does this mean you used to be good at people? Did you used to have people?”

Charlie thought about her question...really thought about it. Had he ever been good at people? He couldn’t possibly have been. Not with the way he shut down, left Susie, left his family. He was bad in the worst possible way. “Even when I had people, I was bad at them. Then after a while, I got even worse. Now I just don’t ever have to think about it, and I usually like it that way.”

“But now?” She looked at him, expecting. He wanted to know why she was still talking to him. He guessed now was the time to ask, with her still standing here and him letting her stay.

“Look, there’s nothing different about me now than there was two hours ago when you came outside. There may never be anything different about me. Sometimes I don’t think there is anything to know about me. So I have to ask you this: why did you want me talk to you in the first place?”

The music went off and the lights went on, and Charlie saw The Girl wince a little at the brightness in the room. She looked at him and didn’t say anything, and he looked back, making himself take note of all the things about her that were different from Susie. An inventory. She had freckles on her nose. She had streaks of light brown running

through her dark hair. She was sexy, curvy—no traces of her awkward teenage years left on her body.

“You remind me of someone I know.” She paused, as if she was mulling something over. “Well, I guess it’s someone I used to know.”

He stared at her, suddenly ready for her to leave again. He didn’t want to know who he reminded her of—who she’d lost, who she’d grieved over—or even worse, who she might have run away from. “It’s two now.”

“God, you really are just like him. Fine, I’ll go collect Kat.” She hopped off the bar stool and headed for the corner where Kat had fallen into a full-fledged nap with her head on the table.

“Do you need help with her?” Charlie felt sick, and held his breath, afraid she might say yes.

“Nope, she’s a champion. C’mon Kat.” Kat sprung up and then collapsed again. This happened a few times before she stood on her feet—wobbly but seemingly capable of movement.

“Have a good night, Charlie.” They headed for the stairs.

“Wait.” He had to know. She turned and looked at him, and for a minute he saw Susie’s face again, smiling and strong and healthy. “What’s your name?”

She smiled. “It’s Sarah.” She waved and grabbed Kat. As they walked down the stairs, Charlie squeezed the empty beer bottle he was holding until it broke, letting the pieces of the bottle fall to the floor and welcoming the specks of blood that appeared on his hands from the shards—tiny cuts from tiny slivers of glass—so tiny he couldn’t even see them until the blood was already there.

