YOU SILLY IDIOT

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Presented
to the Faculty of
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in
English

by
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Summer 2015
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A Project

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Summer 2015

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my tribe. To all the members of my Family—blood-kin and
handpicked alike, and to those special individuals brave enough to share their stories with the
rest of the world.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I write in an effort to understand the human condition. I would like to thank all the amazing people who have helped cultivate this pursuit.

The physical act of recording is an inherent part of how I find meaning in the world around me. Ever since I can remember, I have taken notes diligently and constantly. I picked up this trade from a particularly high strung, furiously brilliant, high school mentor of mine, Mr. Ortiz. He taught me how to effectively scan our lengthy European history texts, pretty dry stuff, for the moments that stood out to me—how to engage with the text. I began to read with a purpose.

Active reading has become second nature and, through the collaboration of many other great teachers, has developed into active listening as well. Without thinking, I inherently apply this concept of collecting moments that resonate.

Somewhere along the way, I lost my momentum with creative writing. I have pages of handwritten notes, stories that will never find an audience. I struggle with so-called writers’ block. Somewhere in high school, I started receiving a few low scores on papers. The scores were low because I had written them the day before they were due, a typical high school approach. Fortunately for me as a writer, college was different. I would like to thank professors like Kim Jaxon, Jeanne Clarke, Chris Fosen for helping me develop new approaches to my writing. For helping me reimagine what writing can be. Hesitation and second guessing are the biggest hindrances to my writing.

During my second to last year in the program, I only had foreign language classes. Without any seminars, I found myself estranged from the rest of the cohort. I hadn’t written in a
year and was pretty discouraged. One student invited me to join EGSC, through which I found my way back to the English Department community. I met new role models like Athena Murphy and Dani Fernandez, both of whom have gotten me out of bed and into the library more times than I can count.

After EGSC, I discovered Watershed Review and the wonderful mentor, Sarah Pape, without whom I would not be where I am as a writer today. She and my fellow Watershed editors introduced me to a whole new perspective of writing. I learned I truly am not alone in the struggles and heartbreak of the writing process. And I found I had a tribe, whose power I could invoke on days when this whole writing business seemed impossible.

And special thanks to these people: My mother, who has been there constantly, always reminding me that she believes in me; my father, in turn, who has encouraged me to investigate whatever it is that I find fascinating; and my Aunt Jenny, who showed me what is possible through the strength of the human spirit. I have such an amazing network of family support, all of which have demonstrated to me what will and determination can achieve. I dedicate this work to them for their love and endless support.
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ABSTRACT

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You Silly Idiot is a collection of short stories that explores the relationship between self-reflection and the transitory nature of memory as it is influenced by prejudice and time itself. The author implements the literary conventions of fiction as well as influences from the school of creative nonfiction and investigates the process of personal acceptance through forgiveness—forgiveness of others as well as forgiveness of the self. The stories are told through the lens of a maturing young woman seeking identity through conversation with prominent male figures of her past. These letters, meant to go unanswered, act as a conduit for the narrator to recognize and acknowledge former insecurities and demonstrate to the reader how far she has actually come—how far they themselves have actually come, if they think about it. The contemplative nature of this collection began as an exercise of my own personal, critical self-reflection and is the foundation for these first person monologues. The rawness of language and content from contemporary fiction writers like Junot Díaz paired with the concise and economic style of creative nonfiction authors like Joan Didion were the primary influence for this collection. As an open exploration of contemporary issues ranging from dating in the world of technology to an investigation of modern gender roles, this collection is geared toward
an audience of twenty-somethings negotiating life in college and the confusion that follows those years.
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION
You Silly Idiot is a collection of short stories that explores the consequences of restrictions and self-loathing that have become a part of our basic human condition. The collection follows a series of reflections from the perspective of an older narrator, Jenny Minor, of a few key moments in her relationships as an undergrad. Jenny, a twenty-something American girl, attempts to reconcile the events of her past by addressing two of her former “boyfriends” from her college days. These calls to the past utilize a modernized epistolary format, a series of letters, presented as informal addresses, which borrow from a combination of modern-day writing genres including the traditional letter, personal diary, and the private message used in contemporary social media. The collection is driven by internal conflict. On the surface the letters are directed toward these other characters, and yet they function primarily as a means for the narrator to investigate the actions and motivations of various versions of her past self. The content of these stories is rooted in personal experiences borrowing largely from the school of creative non-fiction. However, the scenes and characters have been exaggerated, reimagined and repurposed in a way only fiction will allow.

The bulk of these letters is directed to two men, Jack Stephens and John Campbell. Jack Stephens serves as a sounding board for the narrator as she reflects on her former incarnations. Jack acts as a sympathetic dramatic foil, a person to whom Jenny is able to repent for the pain she believes she inflicted during their brief time together. In addressing Jack, Jenny addresses the uglier sides of herself as she reveals her weaknesses to him. In turn, John Campbell’s character (a former boyfriend through whom Jenny met Jack’s character) serves as an antagonist, exposing both the vulnerabilities of Jenny’s insecure past, and the development of her self-reliance. Through the progression of these memories we learn about the girl Jenny used to be through the eyes of the stronger, more discerning woman she has become. In revisiting the
past, the narrator not only attempts to make amends for her transgressions against others, but more importantly to reconcile these failings with her expanded state of mind.

While writing these stories, I had certain models in mind, such as Junot Diaz’s *This Is How You Lose Yourself*, Yiyun Li’s *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* and Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*. Though their styles are wholly different, all three collections share a certain economy of words. Each contains a range of wonderfully crafted short stories that manage to communicate the complexity of the human experience in a very limited amount of space. I wanted to write like them.

I speak in short stories. Humans in general tend to communicate in choppy, personal accounts. We are not usually given the full story, but rather an impression of what took place. As a result, everything that I say ends up being a tangled mess of interrelated happenings from my daily observations. As I begin to describe one event, I immediately think of another that I find links up in some way or another. So in essence, I process my world in terms of these brief, everyday encounters and their relevance to, as well as impact on, one another. As Rust Hill, author of *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular: An Informal Textbook*, puts it, “A short story tells of something that happened to someone,” rather than a character sketch, in which the character reacts in a predictable way when confronted with similar conflicts (1). The characters in my work are dynamic—they adapt as all the forces of the story push against them. Whereas traditional novels have more space to devote to elements like elaborate plot, sustained metaphor, and intricate descriptions of setting and sensory detail, my stories have a more limited scope. Rather than separating these elements that unfold piece by piece, chapter by chapter in a traditional novel, these aspects are condensed, distilled so that one element works to fulfill a number of roles simultaneously.
For instance, in story 3, when Jenny overhears her roommates gossiping about her she thinks to herself, “Drown them out. I can’t just go charging in there. I have to remember how bad things have been” (16). We get the sense not only through her actions, but through the language she uses in her mind, that she is adjusting her behavior from previous experiences. The condensed but rapid quality of the short story allows me in my prose to incorporate each of these aspects of fiction from plot, to point of view, to language, all at once. This interdependency of short fiction, the melding together of complex systems of cause and effect is a projection of how my character rationalizes interactions. *You Silly Idiot* is then a reflection of what I see when people interact and how those interactions serve to change those individuals.

I learned these “telling” techniques by reading and deconstructing the work of authors I admire. Joan Didion is a prime example of this. She’s subtle. Many of the moments in *Play It As It Lays* seem so casual. I am drawn to the ease with which she simplifies these complex scenarios. After a series of disjoined phone calls with friends who aren’t really friends, Didion gives a quick summary of what happens to the character next. “That afternoon Maria had a small accident with the Corvette, received a call from the bank about her overdrawn account, and learned from the drugstore that the doctor would no longer renew her barbiturate prescriptions. In a way she was relieved” (Didion 139). Her tone is so flat here. It’s as though this sequence of unfortunate events is almost completely inconsequential.

I learned to focus on the smaller moments. The car crash and the drug deprivation are not important in the sense that they do not in themselves make a story. They are not what makes us invest in a character, but are simply surface information. Mere details. Standard consequences of a character who has checked out of life’s responsibilities. Didion doesn't care about describing the car crash, or the explosion of a scene. She cares about the two-minute
phone call leading up to it. That's where the story is. By downplaying these generally more flashy events, she is able to highlight the more intimate moments of human interaction. In connecting with up-close, simple passages like this, I began to value the importance of these tiny moments.

In *You Silly Idiot* I try to apply this distribution of weight to my stories. Through muting the larger action of each piece, I focus on how these events impact the character. So, in the seventh story, instead of writing out an exhaustive and complicated series of conspiracies that lead to the fight between Jenny and John in the blow by blow and getting sucked into the minutia of plot, I hone in on a specific instance which demonstrates the broader problem of the character’s repeated weaknesses. For this same reason, I make an effort to avoid indulging in any overtly graphic, sexual details.

Overt sex distracts from the crux of the story. It was not until I had the good fortune of meeting the critically acclaimed fiction writer, Yiyun Li, that I formed a strong feeling about the function of flagrant sex scenes in writing. Although I can’t provide a direct quote, I remember Li discussing her choice to omit explicit sex scenes from her stories, because they have a tendency to distract from the deeper action of a scene. While I see merit in acknowledging the physical, I prefer to investigate the characters’ reactions to these more corporal interactions. Therefore, my allusions to the act of sex have more of an ambiguous tone. So, rather than going into depth about exactly what transpires between Jenny and John in the seventh story to cause her to drop their fight, I simply allude to their physical relationship and focus on the effect it had on the narrator at that time. By focusing on these specific instances as a means of reflecting greater, complex themes, I sculpted my own version of Didion’s zoomed-in snapshots.

My voice in these works is my own. It is choppy, and fragmented, and far from perfect.
After reading works by Junot Díaz, I began to take pride in writing the way that I speak. His collection of short stories, *This Is How You Lose Her*, was a profound lesson in embracing the imperfections of language. I connected with his contemporary approach to narrative. His language is so vulgar. And yet there’s something about this vulgarity that’s appealing. It’s raw. Genuine. He balances modern street language by pairing it with timeless and powerful themes. He anchors the prose in larger, universal ideas. Instead of alienating his reader with passages like, “I remember Cassandra pressing the hot cleft of her pussy against my leg…” he immediately redirects our attention to “Another perfect sunny Caribbean day…” in the very next paragraph (Díaz 20). He provides a balance to this candor with hints of quaint decorum. And more than quaint phrases, Díaz delivers balance through these inspired observations.

Díaz’s stories impart a perception of humanity that offers a more complete picture. People do gross things. They have sex with people they probably shouldn’t and say words like “pussy” with surprising ease. Díaz shows me the importance of capturing the whole scene, grotesque profanity and all. I admire this signature approach to story telling, this ability to invite an audience in to this otherwise closed community.

My characters, as hard as I fought it, are based on real people from my immediate acquaintances. I tried to take Li’s advice to craft fictional characters from strangers, finding obscure news articles and developing unique individuals from imagined experiences. But try as I did, this avoidance of including people I know in my writing led to unrelatable sketches. The plots were unfulfilling and the whole of these pieces came out flat. There was nothing to them. Like skeletons with no flesh, there was no meat to my prose. For now at least, my fiction is bound to a manner of writing closer to the school of creative non-fiction. I asked one professor what she thought about it, about exposing those around you in your stories, and she cleverly
directed the question back to me: *What do you think about sharing intimate details of life experiences?* I realized something quite obvious to me now. I realized that everything, every retelling of an event is at least in part a fabrication. All our stories are altered somehow. Abridged. Combined with other fragments of related ideas. Everything we say is in some ways an exaggeration, filtered through some lens, some bias.

As a result of this realization, I began making compounds of the various people I know. This became my compromise. I changed names. Exaggerated circumstances. Omitted certain explicit details and merely tried to explain the crux of the story. Adopting this method helped me develop more complex characters with legitimate concerns and more palpable insecurities. It afforded me access to human nature without actually exposing anyone I know, because no one person is being blatantly illustrated—each character is a collage of real life acquaintances.

In a craft essay by Jill Talbot, called “The Admissions Essay vs. the Permission Essay,” she talks about the personal essay as an “artful rendering of vulnerability and honesty that create an intimate connection between reader and writer” (1). Be vulnerable. That’s what they, my writing teachers and mentors have always told me to do. As a result, my stories sound a great deal like the personal essays, diaries, letters, and memoirs of the much-debated creative non-fiction classification. The line between fiction and creative non-fiction can be fuzzy when we use our own experiences as the scaffolding of a story, so I borrowed from the personal, confessional style of memoir in order to tell my story in a way that makes sense to me.

What qualifies a work to be considered truly fiction? Can the characters have an anchor in personal acquaintances, or should they be complete fabrications—people with magical powers in alternate universes? Can the plots be grounded in actual events pulled from the author’s own experiences, or should the events simply build around the larger themes of his
narrative? I change names (most of the time), but unlike Li, I cannot break completely from the intimacy I feel in reporting real life events. It is this connection to true written accounts that led me to the genre of creative non-fiction. I find my self identifying with the candor I see in personal essays like “From This Side,” by Ginny McReynolds, that expose the universally shared sensation of displacement in society at large through the unique, personal experience of the author. Everyone knows what it feels like to be rejected. It is the task of convincingly conveying the authenticity of this universal feeling that I have found so difficult. And one mode of providing convincing authenticity is the factual retelling of actual events and what I appreciate about the personal essay. So, even though I am ostensibly unrelated to McReynolds, a lesbian in her sixties, watching and reacting to the world begin to be gay-friendly, I am inherently tied to this human experience of vulnerability. Her very specific struggle with negotiating her identity as a lesbian growing up in the 1950s and 60s is more engaging than an imagined version of the same scenario. For instance, in the telling of the confrontation with her mother about the reality that narrator is in fact gay, McReynolds is able to provide honest account of her reaction to her mother’s response. By providing specific context and zooming in on concrete details of her actual remembered experience with this struggle, this essayist provides a more compelling look into her character. I think it is the willingness of individuals like McReynolds to expose her genuine, unfiltered self that makes her story not only believable, but also truly profound. She is voluntarily vulnerable, an act that is arguably an inherently human venture. I am in awe of the humanity I see in creative non-fiction and the power it affords a story. It is this vulnerability of creative nonfiction as a means of conveying authenticity I apply to my fiction work.

I struggled with this literary dualism in You Silly Idiot. I wanted both. I wanted the raw
memories of my own experiences, but am resistant to committing to the more rigid rules of creative non-fiction. As an author, I find adhering to the kind of factual accuracy this genre requires unappealing. While I wanted to tell stories of events that actually occurred in my life, I find the demand for Truth—capital “t”—unrealistic for my style of writing. I needed the freedom to take liberties in this collection that would not be tolerated in the journal or memoir categories. Although the two supporting male characters are based heavily on specific individuals, characters like Clara are a synthesis of so many different girls I’ve encountered she merits her own invented identity. For instance, Story 6 describes a scene where Jenny’s condescending roommate, Clara, confronts her for her supposed ignorance in the kitchen. While I have had similar encounters with girls asserting their superior cooking skills as a means of undermining my competence, this scene itself is wholly imagined. This scene along with several others describes events that never actually took place in my first-hand experience. So, while I do pull from the unique behaviors of actual people, the stories themselves are compilations of multiple personalities— the product of a bank of faded memories I have of that period in my life.

As I began adding to the story that inspired this collection and rereading my original prose, I noticed I was doing a lot of telling rather than showing. I sensed that the letters were coming across more like odd, motivational speeches rather than anecdotes that depicted a certain message. I was being too heavy-handed. I wanted to maintain the first-person/monologue point of view, but I just needed a new format that permitted me to show more action than someone would in a modern day letter. Even if Jenny had written emails to him, the effort associated with doing so would have added certain connotations. Writing letters takes time and effort that our modern society doesn’t seem to appreciate.
There is a shift in contemporary writing in the epistolary genre. There is a general sense that letter narration is in constant flux in order to preserve this domestic familiarity of correspondence. Books like *Points of View: An Anthology of the Short Story* refer to the practice of formal letters as a “pale corporate vestige of the dying art of letter writing” (54), and encouraged the modernized messages that emerged here. The application of contemporary language, such as “dude” as a pronoun, and “like” as a filler-word lends a genuine tone to the prose. Given forums such as text messages, emails, and both public and private messages on a number of social media outlets, in tandem with nonverbal forms of communication (i.e. Snapchat), a giant shift has been made in the ways people communicate through text. People are receiving a higher volume of messages with what I would argue contain less information. With these messages come the added pressure of tighter time constraints and little to no context. Generally, the speaker has to communicate more in fewer words and less time than their pre-Internet counterpart. And it is in this conversion from traditional, handwritten letters to the ever-evolving genre of modern-day social media that a certain level of clarity has been lost. We are constantly renegotiating the meaning of our written discourse. The spontaneity and uncertainty of the modern message is what drew me to the revival movement of the epistolary style.

I was interested in the letter format, because I wanted an intimate narrative voice. After reading the “Letter Narration” section of *Points of View: An Anthology of Short Stories*, edited by James Moffett and Kenneth R. McElheny, I noticed a few key traits about this genre. Letters lend themselves to monologues and a relative spontaneity and, at the same time, provide the speaker with a level of distance from her audience (Moffett & McElheny 54). This distance serves to shield the speaker from any immediate consequences. In this way, Jenny is free to speak candidly to both boys without censoring herself for the sake of their feelings. However,
the traditional letter in its various incarnations was still limited for my uses.

I realized I was going to need to adapt my own stories to fit a more current and natural version of this classic trope. For one thing, young people in this culture of technology don’t tend to write out letters by hand. Private, instant messages have largely replaced this former mode of communication. Like most traditional letters, these pieces are written to a specific audience. However, there is no anticipated response from her correspondence. Given the blatant honesty of the speaker to her subjects (like in the third story titled, “Jack: You Were Short and I Just Don’t Date Short Guys”), it is unlikely she ever intends for her words to receive a response. Instead, the narrator speaks more to a version of her former self, rather than to the people named in these events. In looking back on these choices and inserting her acquired self-respecting reactions, the narrator shares her new wisdom while still admitting to some lingering shortcomings. No, she is not perfect yet, but she, like all of us, continues to be a work in progress.

I like the distance from the intended audience this monologue form affords its narrator, such as in classics like Henry James’ “A Bundle of Letters.” The authors of Points of View talk about the delayed response of the intended audience. I think one of James’ characters, Leon Verdier, puts it well, “My Dear Prosper--It is a long time since I have given you of my news… I suppose it is that when we are happy the mind reverts instinctively to those with whom formerly we shared our exhalations and depressions…” (James 29). I enjoy the detachment of the delayed address, and the freedom this allows the speaker. While Points of View suggests this distance affords time for words to be chosen more carefully, in my case, Jenny’s letters grant her the luxury of removing the filter social norms would impose were she to address her audience face-to-face. She is candid with the boys.
Whereas James’ collection functions through the combination of multiple character viewpoints into one cohesive narrative, *You Silly Idiot* utilizes one central character as she looks back at the choices she made with two individual boys. The tone of this collection is more fragmented, like our actual memories themselves. Our narrator is simply recalling these tiny moments that come back to us as we continue to encounter new pains along our journey. She is attempting to be honest about her former self. And by recalling her past transgressions genuinely, she opens the door for the possibility of reparation within herself, if not with those she has wronged.

Identifying an overarching theme came after asking myself what motivated the collection. Why did I write it? What compelled me to share these seemingly petty “white girl problems,” as my generation calls them? What ends up validating the issues of the modern relationship is that they are so pervasive in the American culture. Boys don’t call girls back (for the most part). Everyone seems to be playing this big “I care less than you care” game. Whoever cares less has the power. That doesn’t feel right. *You Silly Idiot* is an investigation into the broken system of love in the United States. Why can we talk openly about sex, but consider serious talks about love unspeakable? Weak, even?

I find the present a useful lens through which to investigate the past. Jenny the narrator is able to deconstruct her past as a means of understanding what motivated these poor, often selfish choices. By including Jack and John’s characters, the stories have the capacity to expose multiple sides of the harsh realities of dating in a college town. The male characters represent pieces of Jenny’s past. Each stands as a symbol of a time when she could have made a better decision, stood up for her beliefs, removed herself from such a toxic environment, or had a backbone. And yet, she doesn’t for some reason. She continues to reject genuine affection,
while passively accepting emotional abuse.

Most of my favorite authors tend to use third-person omniscient, lending the reader a sort of all-knowingness I find intriguing, given that our everyday access to the minds of others is so limited. But as a writer, I find it excessively challenging to adhere to this helpful, yet difficult “show not tell” guideline. So, my work with first person monologues started out as a kind of experiment with various points of view. I tried out having the characters actually respond to one another. I tried to imagine how each individual felt. But multiple lenses were not useful to my narrative. I wanted a more personal narrative voice, one that was carried throughout the pieces.

I think one of the most notable features of this collection is its consistent narration. Jenny, the narrator and central character, speaks directly to the other two male characters. I considered including multiple perspectives (originally, the 11th chapter, “Jack: And Then You Turned to Adderall” was written in third-person omniscient). I admired the added complexity Diaz provided in his collection This Is How You Lose Her by using alternating point of view including one story told from a woman’s perspective. I admired his ability to complicate the larger narrative by breaking from one frame to the next. But I quickly realized that my shift in perspective was merely an attempt at variation. The inclusion of multiple speakers was not adding to the overall story of You Silly Idiot.

Keeping my focus on Jenny’s experiences afforded me more room to develop a single character. Through observational statements the audience can see not only what the younger version of the character was like, but also the current speaker’s disposition now. Using direct questions cuts out the middleman. I enjoy the slew of benefits this voice provides. But I was not always a fan. I was initially dismissive of first person/monologue point of view. I think this
rejection came mostly from the sense that this was a stale, clichéd literary voice. The bulk of assigned reading growing up was written in either third person or first person. I remember thinking there was some clever, innovative way to avoid this tried method of narrative voice. I know now that what I searched for in unorthodox story telling was born of the core desire to make the familiar seem strange. I wanted to give my audience the same experience I search for as a reader. As one mentor, Sarah Pape, put it, “Get weird on me.” Only, I had no idea how I was going to achieve this transformation of a common experience into an alien one.

And then I read Díaz’s *This is How You Lose Her* and was suddenly struck by the story “Alma.” Not only does it cover the theme of dysfunctional relationships that drives my own collection, but the prose also emphasizes a “highly-localized and era-specific jargon” (LeMeur) that I emulate in *You Silly Idiot*.

People don’t really write formal letters anymore. And even emails don’t tend to start “Dear (Anybody)” anymore. I had to find a way to adapt this epistolary form as it continues to evolve with the introduction of new technology and practices of communication.

I think the most obvious affordance of the first person monologue is that it enables the narrator to directly address a rhetorically figured audience. By saying things like, “You did this to me,” or, “You made sure I knew where I stood,” I give my character the authority to call on the intended audience directly. In turn, the audience gets the opportunity to experience the accusations of a former lover without the emotional responsibilities of ignoring such a plea, nor risk of responding to these demands. I want to engage my reader so that he or she can understand how Jenny feels when she is writing to Jack and John. In the action of moments like the fourth piece in which Jenny redefines the memory of how the two first met, “Yes, I remember you. And no, I am not going to respond to your texts” (29). The tone she uses here is
very one-sided. It assumes that the voiceless John character is somehow desperate or persistent in his attempts to reconnect with the narrator. This, of course, may not be the case. We don’t know how often he has been writing to her, or what actually motivates these attempts at contact. All we know is what Jenny tells us and what she is implying with the words she chooses. We are chiefly concerned with her impressions and therefore get a more narrowed and personal connection to the storyteller.

I discovered a wide range of depth within this potentially predictable narrative perspective. By presenting this series of addresses through these un-delivered letters, the audience is privy to the narrator’s unfiltered thoughts. Because Jenny has no intention of sharing these letters with the men she is speaking to, a reader can assume he is getting the most confidential look into this character’s mind. This point of view allowed me the opportunity to establish a close relationship between the main character and the reader. Given that there are no consequences outside her own experience for conveying her honest thoughts and feelings, there is no real reason for the reader to suspect the validity of her stories. There is a sense of intimacy to be gained in assuming the speaker’s authenticity. However, given access into Jenny’s private thoughts, the audience is limited to the unreliability of her faded memories and clear personal biases. Jack and John’s characters only exist as told through the filter of this self-interested speaker. Neither of the men in these stories have the opportunity to contradict or in any way fill in Jenny’s side of events. What if these men are being misrepresented here? I sacrificed the accounts of all other characters in order to craft a platform for my audience to understand more deeply one character’s personal situation.

With that being said, my characters are compounds of real people—people I actually know. Considering Li’s advice about not writing about people I know, I was a little crushed.
Real people are my primary source of inspiration. She had good reasoning, though, explaining that exposing acquaintances, friends and family in your work opens you, the author, to great criticism and hurt feelings. To avoid this, Li suggested pulling characters from news articles you identify with and simply filling in the gaps around those removed individuals. While this method insures an author’s detachment, I had to cling closer to my own experiences in this collection. I changed names. Exaggerated circumstances. Omitted certain incriminating details to spare the inspirations for these personas. But I find I am able to show more, to inhabit the mentality of my characters more accurately when they are so closely forged with my own experience.

Eventually, I narrowed it down to three central characters. I learned through trial and error to limit the number of characters in my short stories. I wanted an extensive investigation of each character. Having Jenny focus on her former love interests made for more of a direct confrontation. The stories became about engaging with the past. My character calls attention to the mistakes of her youth. She wrestles not only with these former connections, but, more importantly, with her former self.

The title itself, *You Silly Idiot*, originates from an authentic conversation I had with a boyfriend attempting to take up a gentler tone with me. Explaining that he did not actually find me idiotic, the phrase came about as a tender effort to stifle his generally hurtful retorts whenever I had done something clumsy. “You silly…” he said, drawing out the long “eee” sound while he thought of the nicest word to use. “Idiot,” he concluded, the impulse to degrade those he saw as less logical winning out over his attempt to censure his name-calling on my behalf. People I know talk like that. Some say “fuck” every other word.

I gave my characters their own voices. James Wood warns of the “problem inherent in
of authenticity in voice, and asked myself this question throughout my writing: “Do the words these characters use sound more like the words they might use, or do they sound more like the author’s?” (Wood 26). Applying this question was a humbling exercise in that it dictated the way my narrator spoke. Considering exactly how Jenny’s character might actually communicate with her peers colored much of the language of these pieces. As a result, I limited much of the prose that I considered to be academic or stiff. I attempted to structure the vernacular so that the words sounded as if they were being spoken directly by one twenty-something American to another.

In an effort to maintain this natural voice, I suppressed many of my more poetic tendencies. I used a few tricks in keeping with the speaker’s personal agency, one being that I read everything aloud. Hearing these lines out loud made me reconsider many of the more lyrical or literary phrases. There are moments when I held back. I tried to keep the dialogue as well as the physical descriptions short in an attempt to stay out of the speaker’s way. So, when Clara flippantly decides to share a piece of clothing with Jenny, I reserved my language to preserve the brevity of the exchange.

Here, she said, after about five minutes of digging through boxes hidden in the back. You can have this, she smiled, holding out a wrinkled green top. I know it’s not perfect, but it’s better, see? She held the shirt against her own form. It’s looser, she explained. I feel like it’s more feminine, you know? I watched as she continued to smile as she swayed in the mirror.

Thank you? I said, uneasily.

No worries, she said, returning to her perch. I was going to donate it anyway.
Originally, I had described this scene in much greater detail, noticing the expression on Clara’s face and the way it made Jenny feel at the time. While this information was interesting to me, I felt it overstepped the boundaries of what her character would have chosen to share with her intended audience. This abridged version is more direct.

Time and again people have told me to write what I know. In this collection I do my best to do just that and to be honest, even when it’s uncomfortable or sad. I try to get everything on the page. After years of failed attempts to invent these characters from thin air, I’ve learned my lesson. You can’t forge true substance. Your audience can tell when you are lying. They can tell when you are leaving something out—when some embarrassing detail has been omitted. Of course I learned this the hard way. I used to try to make people up entirely—wholly fabricated lives and personalities.

Given that note taking has been the foundation for much of my writing, I adopted certain methods for outlining my writing into more manageable chunks. In high school, I was taught to outline notes in a series of heading and subheadings, which I adopted here as a means of organizing my work. Because I tend to think in sporadic, non-linear circles, I took up the habit of titling each chapter. These titles not only work to break up the chaos of continuous flow of free-association, but also as a kind of signposting—a device designed to help orient the reader as to the intended aim of each particular story. The purpose of individual chapter titles is, of course, to make one’s aims clear to his reader. I’ve come across a wide range of signposts in literature, from the classic chapter title, to the plain use of a single number to indicate a new scene. The version I adopted in this collection is a bit more modern. I modeled headers like “Jack: If it Helps, I Came into Things with a Lot of Mistrust,” after Peter Carey’s collection The
I was particularly drawn to Carey’s use of headers in the story “Do You Love Me?” Under the header: “1. The Role of the Cartographer,” the narrator, a son of one of these Cartographers, describes in second person a brief background of this census work his father is responsible for compiling: “a total inventory of the contents of the nation,” for this imagined world in which they live (Carey 44). Continuing with headers like “1. The Role of the Cartographers” and “3. The Most Famous Festival,” Carey builds the complexity of this dramatic “happening” in stages marked by these explicit transitions from one scene to the next. As the action of the larger narrative progresses, the author begins to deviate from these technical, removed observations to titles with more personal word choices like “8. My Father’s Theory” and “10. An Unpleasant Scene,” in which we are invited to see a specific instance in which the narrator is confronted directly with the shame and doubt he experienced as he began to understand his own inability to genuinely connect with others and the tangible impact of this lack of true community. With this shift, we begin to see the cracks in this formerly, removed narrator as he begins to insert moments of his biased feelings that accompany these unexplained phenomena. Through the blending of this seemingly detached observation with progressively more loaded language, we begin to learn what is personally at stake for the character. The juxtaposition of these seemingly plain, scientific accounts with the intimacy of dialogue of the following sections made me a fan of this approach.

Each section of You Silly Idiot is marked by its own title. Originally, I had started each section with “Dear, Jack (or John),” but eventually realized the stiffness of this somewhat outdated letter format. They started out as tools for my outlining of the collection. I needed a clear way to envision my beginning, middle, and end, because the narrator jumps around a lot.
Using these titles, I created a timeline based on the main goal of what each piece was trying to accomplish. I liked the clarity these titles afforded to my stories, so what started out as a tool to organize my thoughts evolved into these untraditional titles. My titles are quite long compared to most. Instead of limiting myself to formal subsections like Carey’s “5. Behavior when Confronted with Dematerialization,” I went with little conversational phrases like, “2 Jack: So, I Guess I Pissed My Roommate Off Last Night.” The extended phrasing of these titles serves to establish the intended audience as well as mirroring the language of the characters in this community.

I began to include the language of my peers in my writing. I incorporate key words from the current Northern California vernacular. I use words like “dude” not simply because it’s what I hear and use on a daily basis, but because it gives my audience a more complete idea of the gender dynamics of these characters, and to demonstrate how these characters negotiate their identities through this gendered language. The way people really speak around me is embedded in the language of my collection.

Use of words like “dude” also demonstrates the spectrum of gender roles in this collection. Like many Californians, these characters use the word dude as a pronoun for both genders. Although a seemingly insignificant, bro-word, it has many connotations. In these stories when Jenny says things like, “Wonder what your live-in girlfriend would think. Dude, she is so cute. I see her now and then, whenever my friends drag me down to Bella’s Sports Pub. She works her ass off, dude,” she uses the term as a means of getting John’s attention. It is a way of engaging this former love on a more serious level. By adopting the language these young men use with each other, she calls on him as an equal. She does so also as an effort to terminate any hint of ulterior motive. By supporting the good qualities of this other woman,
Jenny breaks his perceived expectation that all women will bash one another if given the opportunity.

But there is more to “contemporary writing” than vulgarity. Many contemporary writers are brief. There is a quickness to their work. An immediacy. Unlike in more traditional lengthy prose, I have tried to adopt this economy of words I see in contemporary writers. I have a bad habit of over-explaining. At one point, this collection was nearing the 200-page mark. I admire authors like Joan Didion, who are able to tell these intense stories in such a succinct manner. Some of her pieces in Play It As It Lays are only one or two pages long. Yet, despite their length, the human element is still there. Even when her dialogue is only two words long, the phrase “So what” (48) on its own has more of an impact than if we knew all the ways that character looked and felt while saying it.

Whenever I tell stories, I have a habit of over-explaining, of including excessive details and backgrounds on secondary characters that don’t in fact have anything to do with the story at hand. I am also a huge fan of adjectives. I once had a religious studies professor tell me that I use them almost abusively. So, instead of crafting lengthy descriptions of my characters and what they looked like while they spoke, I tried to impose this economy of words on my own writing. When Jenny confronts Jack about their agreed silence in the tenth story, I kept the dialogue short,

You won’t tell and I won’t tell, yeah? I asked.

Yeah, you said. Okay.

All right, I said. Cool. Thank you. (51) Instead of an elaborate scene, I wanted to showcase the quietness of this moment. Coming into the conversation, neither knew where they stood. A quick exchange is all it took to explain that
both would hold their silence, as many people these days do without a lot of discussion or excitement. This conversation could just as easily have taken place through text messages. I think cell phones and text in particular have had a huge influence over my generation’s economy of words.

The prose is based on the everyday speech of my generation. The pieces read as though the narrator is speaking as part of a larger community. Her words are based on the dialect of her peers—of my peers. In his chapter “Narrating,” in James Wood’s *How Fiction Works*, he describes the advantages and disadvantages of the various forms of narration. Although these stories are told in the first-person, I admire the ability of unidentified free indirect narration, in which he explains, “The language hovers around the viewpoint of the character, but really emanates from a kind of ‘village chorus’—It is an amalgam of the kind of language we might expect this particular community to speak if they were telling the story” (Wood 31). Borrowing from this literary tradition, I try my best to keep my own synonym-obsessed, authorial tone out of the narrator’s more colloquial voice. I want my prose to read as spoken word. Modern text messages and private messages are less refined than prose found in traditional literature. The pacing tends to be more rapid, and in this urgency the speaker often neglects elements of style in favor of getting the words on the page. Like now.

I struggled in finding the right language to express my character’s thoughts believably without overdoing it. Many, if not most of the Californians I know use the word “like” as a constant and subconscious verbal filler. *Like*, you know what I mean? Wood talks about how it is the writer’s job to “become, to impersonate what he describes, even when the subject itself is debased…” (33). Given that my subject is largely based on me, it was not too difficult to mimic Jenny’s voice. I did, however, struggle with the male characters’ dialogue. I gained a new
appreciation for writers who embody characters outside their immediate experience, as I awkwardly attempted to impersonate the young, male characters in my stories. The individuals they are based on, along with a number of 20-something, undergraduate Californian boys tend to cuss and throw around the word “gay” and other derogatory language quite liberally. In an effort to avoid alienating my audience, I chose to omit a good portion of the original “fuck you’s” and the like that I observe from this demographic in real life. For the most part, I believe the reader should be able to reconcile the “perceptions and language with the character’s perception and language,” as Wood describes, mainly because of how closely the narrator is based on my own shifting perspective (34).

Wood also writes about an inherent risk the author takes when he says, “In order to evoke a debased language (the debased language your character might use), you must be willing to represent that mangled language in your text” (Wood 32). He suggests that this approach might also require a complete debasing of the author’s language as well. So, while I don’t allow the character to completely dominate the page, my style does utilize the vernacular as a way of authenticating my characters.

The theme of gender roles is recurring in my writing. I understand gender on a sliding spectrum. I also understand that the roles we play as men and women are just that—roles. In my experience there are no innate traits relating to character that are either fundamentally male or female. Outside of our physical differences, I see gender as a sliding spectrum rather than a scripted set of socially imposed ideals of what is inherently either feminine or masculine. I find myself typically writing from a female point of view, which felt weak for a long time. I imagine the fact that most of the stories I read growing up had male authors has something to do with my hesitation to write from a girl’s perspective. And yet, when a student asked Li how she was
able to write so effectively from the male perspective, she responded with a question. She wanted to know what made a character intrinsically male.

What qualities are there that define what a man feels versus what a woman might feel? When we were unable to answer, she suggested plainly that she imagines how an individual might feel in response to a given situation and background. People are people. I get that there are roles we’re meant to play, but I think that having written from at least a version of each gender’s perspective now gives me more confidence to write from a woman’s. These stories are important, too, and are no less valid simply because they represent my own situated-ness.

I see these stories as a kind of response to those in Diaz’s This Is How You Lose Her. While Diaz focuses a lot on the “machismo” attitude of his Dominican heritage, the patriarchal dynamic of the family unit, he is by no means glorifying it. He simply investigates the male-dominated culture. He shows us scenes in which men reaffirm the bad behavior of other men. For instance, the main character, Yunior, who in this story is also the narrator, describes a scene that is taking place after he and his girlfriend have decided to “do [their] own thing” on a trip to the Dominican Republic. Among other reasons, it seems he is most irritated with her for all the attention she is receiving from the native men there. After observing the women of the island, Yunior is instructed by some older, wealthy native men on how he should set about restoring the dominance in his relationship.

Dance with another woman, dance merengue with her, and see if your jeva’s not roused to action.

You mean roused to violence?

She hit you?

When I first told her. She smacked me right across the chops.

24
Pero, hermano, why’d you tell her? Bárbaro wants to know. Why didn’t you just deny it?

Compadre, she received a letter. It had evidence (Diaz 18).

By showing the events themselves, Diaz gives the reader room to form our own opinions on the inequality of men and women in the collection. Even though I don’t agree with the content of this male-centered discourse, I can relate to the authenticity of this dialogue.

Likewise, there are moments in You Silly Idiot in which Jenny’s current narrator does not step in to explain why she thinks a situation is wrong. For example, in the story “Jack: How I Ended Things With You,” the narrator describes a scene in which she has invited Jack over to her house late at night and suddenly realizes she can no longer maintain this secret relationship with her boyfriend’s roommate. Rather than confronting this issue head on, she retreats into the bathroom until he is forced to feel unwelcome. Everyone, the reader and Jenny included, knows she is wrong for passively rejecting this character rather than addressing the situation head on.

I must’ve been in there a while. By the time I came out, you were already in the kitchen. Waiting. Shoes on. One hand in your pocket, the other checking your phone. I knew that you knew. I could tell. I just wasn’t ready for this. For us. Wasn’t ready to be with someone who wanted to be with me. Not yet anyway.

Sorry, I said, smiling anxiously.

Not feeling well? you asked knowingly.

No, yeah... I lied. Sorry I made you come all the way out here.

No worries, you said.

Clearly, things are not being said here. Jenny has realized she has no feelings for Jack, but doesn’t have the heart or the words to tell him this. We can tell from the sparse dialogue that
while she recognizes her inability to confront Jack then, she still doesn’t quite have the words to do it now. Even the more mature narrator understands she doesn’t have all the answers. All she has is a memory of what she did to another person and the sense that this moment was, and still is, profound. I like the space this sparse dialogue affords the reader. I don’t intend to give all the answers to these problems. I don’t have them. And neither does my speaker. This brief exchange gives the reader a choice to decide what to make of her handling of the situation. You decide if she’s being honest. If her behavior was justified. If this information would even mean anything to Jack’s character now. If it would have meant something to him at the time. I don’t want a clear-cut answer. I simply wish to construct a picture of the events that took place. In this way, I am allowing my audience to come conclusions on their own.

I think the next obvious question is whether or not the narrator intends to actually confront these men from her past. I have to say no. It is not my intention for Jenny’s words to ever reach or be responded to by any of the characters she discusses in these memoirs. Her audience is imagined. She understands that the men now are not the same people they were when they caused her so much pain and self-hate, just as she is no longer the same girl who slept with her would-be-boyfriend’s roommate and lied about the affair for months on end with no intention of coming clean. She sees herself as different—as a more developed version of that vulnerable younger self.

While I would love to join the ranks of masters like Didion, Li, and Diaz, I do not imagine doing so right away. I see them as my peers only in that they each tell stories in ways that are made more complex by their brevity. I admire their honesty. I am reassured that my writing needs to be honest as well. I do not presume to have the answers. I already look back at this work and see holes and places where some audiences will undoubtedly feel alienated. My
aim is to share an experience, a feeling, and that that feeling will speak to someone else out there. Give him or her comfort. Validation.

As, I’ve said, I write what I know. The whole of this collection is borrowed largely from personal experiences. Jenny’s journey loosely follows a period of my own life as an undergraduate student without direction. These stories are grounded in a time when I performed a sort of intentional experiment with my life. Like Jenny, I chose the wrong person over and over. Her lack of control is probably the thing she grapples with most. Today, I continue to find I am constantly explaining myself to others. Why I am still in the same place. Why I am making the choices I’m making.

Writing Jenny is a way to expose myself and to learn something from that exposure. The meandering life of a young woman in her mid-20s is one that lays open the experiences of being cheated on, learning and allowing someone else to negotiate the terms of fidelity, cautiously building a discrete self-concept. None of this dramatic action moves smoothly from A to B. There are lots of stumbles along the way, retreating back and forth to the safety, the basic human comfort, of an unhealthy relationship.

Part of this writing process was an effort to define my own agenda during these younger years. There was a sort of freedom in the gut feeling that this volatile partnership was impermanent. Both parties quietly understood one another. We knew in our cores it would never work out. And it is in this implicit knowing that we forged our own private contract. Past tense Jenny knows what she is doing is wrong for her, and yet she derives a sort of power in knowingly participating in this false sense of union. There exists a sort of trade-off between these characters. His continued alliance, his contacts, his wild lifestyle, his status for her allowance to look the other way. Self-sabotage. She has forged relationships, bonds with John’s
contacts, and she withdraws her right to commitment so that she is not cast out of this fascinating network of fraternal brotherhood. In her world, leaving John is the equivalent of starting over from scratch. All contacts to the life she had before have been neglected.

Honesty is also a big part of these stories. Because John directly acknowledges he is unfaithful, he somehow manages to bypass the general rules of traditional dating conduct. Consequences… Everything is under control. I was merely biding my time. Sacrificing my own agency as a means of studying human behavior.

The present-day Jenny recognizes these once buried rationalizations. In many ways, these stories are an investigation of what it feels like when there is seemingly nothing to lose. Jenny recognizes she lived in this sort of imagined space. Denial. She remains loyal as a sort of default—a habit gleaned from former boyfriends. She writes with the intention of convincing herself, supporting herself, in the realization that this behavior is no longer acceptable. In revisiting her relationship with Jack she is forced to acknowledge the impact of her actions as they extended beyond her personal consequences. In confronting these life choices, she is both humbled and reaffirmed by her past.

Given the modern dating content, I believe my audience consists largely of twenty-somethings who are tired of being deluded by literature. My stories maintain a more contemporary voice than much of the canon, which we’ve inherited largely from the greats of the twentieth century. Issues of dating with the limited tool of text messaging simply did not exist until recently. I have realized that I personally am in search of stories that include the additional hurdles of communication through technology and the impact social media has on dating in this era in Western Society. It is my hope that my own experiences in this field can help at least offer a sense of community to others trying to navigate through this uncharted,
social terrain. So basically, my audience should consist of the same people who are especially
drawn to writers like Junot Díaz. People who are looking for something raw and real that speaks
to the day-to-day nuances of their generation (dating, politics, texting, college parties, etc.). In
addition, I think independent twenty-somethings will identify with the general shift in gender
roles addressed in these stories. The displacement that accompanies this question of personal
sexuality as a sliding spectrum is a theme that much of American youth is facing as we try to
establish an identity.

I like working with other writers. I enjoy helping them with their work. I feel my best
when I negotiate strategies with struggling writers. The host of hardships and pitfalls I see I
have encountered in my own writing, seems somehow less chaotic, less impossible when I see
these doubts and hurdles in other writers. I enjoy helping students add to their writing tool kits
as I team up with them to confront whatever roadblock it is they are facing. Through interactive
workshops I have seen formerly resistant students begin to open up to the various forms and
possibilities of composition. Getting students to identify and appreciate the potential to develop
their own writing, exposing them to new techniques of voice and style, effective methods of
organization and outlining, and sharing new definitions of what it means to be a writer all add to
the joy I get from observing the process of a novice writer find his or her authorial identity. And
it is this journey of participating in the agency and new discoveries we both make about
language that I find most inspiring about mentoring.

For me, engaging in both the written and verbal discourse I find in the writing
workshops and lessons I have given over the years as a classmate, editor, tutor, TA, and mentor
is where I find my writing most valuable. Although I plan to pursue creative writing in the
future, I believe writing as a means of assisting others to write is my more immediate calling.
Like Didion offers in *Play It As It Lays*, I want to show some of the less glamorous sides of growing up in a disjointed America. I also think my shorter stories, modeled after these great writers, might be more palatable for a modern audience. We are accused of having a shorter attention span than our predecessors. Maybe brief pieces like these will resonate with a more distracted readership. Just long enough to get the point across. This is what I went through, a version of it at least. This is how I feel about that period now. If you have experienced miscommunication, self-doubt, self-deception, neglect, betrayal, regret, try to learn from it. You’re not alone.
YOU SILLY IDIOT
Dear, Jack.

Hey, man. How’s it going?

Long time no see, or something less obnoxious.

Well, I’ll just get straight to it:

In light of a recent break-up, I have decided to sort things out. I trust this is irrelevant news to you given the time and distance between our—what would you call it? Not friendship. We were never friends. Maybe our general association? Silent agreement?

I don’t know. We’ll come back to it.

For now, let’s just say, I am writing things down. Memories of a time I can’t seem to escape. I am a person torn apart. In this phase I cling and bite at those few things familiar to me. My room. My bike, borrowed from a roommate. Indefinitely broke. My job. My good, new friends on whom I lean heavily for moral support. I’ll cut to the chase. I’ve lost my grip.

I don’t know how I do it, Jacky. I get so wrapped up in these boys. You remember me with John. John Campbell. Cambo. God, I hated that nickname. But you remember me. I was attached.

Profoundly.

I don’t know if I smothered him. Did I smother him? I could never tell. Not that first year anyway. Either way, I was around a lot. But always invited. Text message. Almost always through text: hey. To which I would respond in as few characters as possible; hi. (always lower cased to indicate casual interest) Then, a few minutes later, the urge to know what his plans were, to secure seeing him that night would take over and I’d write again: so… what’s your ur plan tonight? Minutes would go by. Half an hour. Then all the sudden, new message: come on
over, you silly goose! He knew I was a sucker for young guys with old souls. Or at least who knew how to put off the illusion of an old soul. Casual reassurance. That whole ‘Get your cute butt down here to see me, you crazy girl! Of course I want to be with you tonight. What movie do you want me to download?’ vibe. That’s what he’d say to my face at least. I inferred that’s what he meant in his texts.

So, yeah. I was there a lot. Directly invited, or not. In the beginning that is. I drove over straight after school. Drove to his place. Well, your place. That was back when I had a car and my actual house was really more like a shitty closet. The downstairs, back room in a submerged duplex. Wall St. Or the Wall Street House. It was madness.

An island of twin houses surrounded by local businesses. A plant nursery. An art studio across the street that did some kind of custom metal work. Iron gates adorned with silver jellyfish the size of dinner plates. Lots of drugs. Like acid. Lots of acid. And you know me. I’m a three sips of beer and half-an-Adderall-to-stay-awake kind of girl.

It was overwhelming. Lovely people, but roommates with an open door policy. There was a string of unannounced homeless people offered naps in my living room. Unattended. I never felt safe. I needed a place to go. Your house felt safe. I needed to escape. To hide out. A house of built rugby players seemed appealing. Almost necessary. And it was a great house. You remember? Top floor, third story. Also, secluded by an empty parking lot, unofficial hub of the taco truck. You boys lived off those tacos. Breakfast burritos from across the street. I never tried either.

Not a huge fan of unsupervised meats.

I am presently in a fasting phase. Wake up in panic. Check cell phone. Review alerts with the intensity of something vital. Quickly tire of social nothingness. Reposted nonsense with hints
of optimism. “Refuse to be Ordinary,” written in chic, white cursive framed black. An empty call for others to take action. Embrace their identities. I fight to suppress the hard wave of loneliness that follows. I do have friends. I am independent. I can do this, I lie. Fake It Till You Make It, the last quote says before I turn the device over. I am attached. My phone keeps me connected while I hide away in my nook, mentally preparing for day one without him.

Space heater. Cereal. Make-up and bike ride to work downtown. I feel the weight of my shame as I ride my bike past responsible people, kindly waving me by at stop signs in their sensible cars. I will never have a car again. It’s been five years now. I am a perpetual lost boy. Fixated on a day job I love and can’t afford. A window to a lifestyle I can only admire from the sidelines. My energy channeled in a direction not remotely my own.

If there’s anything I’ve learned from this bitter phase of life it’s that I am hungry.

I own nothing.

I bend and stretch thin for the dreams of others. I am engaged, yet wildly disconnected.

I have a boyfriend. I know we’re broken up, or taking a break, but I feel that he is mine. I do that. Romanticize. Take the outline of a person and mold them accordingly. Reformat, if you will. This most recent one, he is a friend of mine. An ally from before. I knew him even back then. He stood by me, at a respectable, even detached distance. He’s always been somewhat detached, my current ex-boyfriend. I seem to like them that way. Loyal, but not freely affectionate. I need to be the one in chase. I can’t have them looking at me, you know. Actually see me.

I had a boy look at me once not so long ago. He was a cutie. Super tall. Blonde. Surfer-boy hair down to his shoulders. Kind, blue eyes. Had that whole puppy-dog look like he was just waiting for someone, waiting for someone special.
I’d seen him before a few times at the bar, the super sketchy one with the same repetitive 80s and 90s music nights. Same shit every week. But my friends all loved it. Let’s just go there for a minute, they’d say. I just want to dance, they’d whine—the desperate anthem of all drunk, college girls with no direction.

So, there I was. Past the line in minutes—working at a gym had its perks. We always knew the bouncers. Short dress, tall shoes, hair down, which is a feat in and of itself (an extra hour getting ready). Impatiently, I handed my ID to the rude girl as she angrily obliged stamping my opposite wrist with a sneer.

Screw you, dick, I said with my eyes, as I hastily moved through the crowd. I’ll meet you guys at the front stage! I called to my friends as I peeled away. I always have to pee. I just assume going it alone is faster. Strobe lights cast shadows on a pulse of bodies dancing awkwardly. The front stage is not for the cool kids… I thought, my chest pressed tight braced against the force of a blasting Whitney Houston song. Her image flashed around me on large screens around the room. I worked my way through white girls in matching slut costumes, as the song ended and their faces lit up to “Jump Around,” a song I know only from Mrs. Doubtfire and my childhood of VHS tapes.

After all the pushing and quick apologies, I worked my way back out to the main bar. My friends lost somewhere on the dance floor. I was confident after the last month’s shooting that they weren’t at the back bar. And then there he was. This looker. The kid referred to later as “the blonde boy.” He stood there off to the side, making small talk with the people around him. A girl I knew from class. We said hi.

I don’t know who approached first, but we made small talk and after a few minutes he offered me his hand and I followed him out to the dance floor. I like boys who can dance. He
couldn’t, of course—his body too tall and lanky for it, but I admired the effort. It says something about a man who’s willing to step outside his comfort zone.

As we walked home, he spoke about travel. Girl’s a sucker for a boy with a few Spain, sailing stories. Something about those boating shoes and that faint hint of swagger. Not for anything permanent, or anything. Swagger is and always was a passing phase of attraction for me. But the real kicker was when we got home to my place. The roommate was gone—only the one at the time. Can’t remember who to be honest, but he or she was out of town. We lay down on the couch together and stayed up until 3:00am.

A commercial for “Saving the Tigers” came on and he felt compelled to call and donate. I asked him, Really? You’re seriously going to call them? Heck yes! he replied sitting up. That’s how I live my life. If you see something you care about, you should act on it. Right then, he said grabbing my hands and looking into my eyes. I felt violated. Not sexually, just a general sense of Hi, who are you, and how did you get into my house? I felt my face cringe. He looked confused. I didn’t sense that this was a ploy per say. Like he wasn’t getting laid talking to girls about saving lions, or whatever, but it did feel inauthentic. Like he had made some deal with himself after attending some self-help conference and was now trying to sell me on a lifestyle I wanted no part in.

After three unsuccessful dials, I suggested he call in the morning. The cats will still be there when you wake up, I said, pulling his long arm off the couch and towards my comfortable room. I just want human contact, buddy, I remember thinking. Just please, play along with this and find a way to stop talking. I got into bed and he sat near the foot, removing his shoes, but deliberately keeping his tank and bro-shorts on. Ugh… I thought. What are we doing here…?

I think you’re beautiful, you know? He said to me with complete sincerity.
Oh, I said, hoping that whole human-nature thing would kick in and we could get to the whole forgetting part soon. Hey, I said. Do you think we could just cuddle for a bit? Sure, he said, hurt at my rejection to engage him. We are not talking about how pretty I am or whatever you think I need to hear right now, I thought. Can you just freaking do this for me, dude? I hissed in the form of a heavy sigh as he pulled me close.

Sure, he said. Come on over here. I tried initiating, but he simply settled into a platonic hug, his head lying awkwardly on my chest. Can you play with my hair? he asked, as I looked down in horror. Can I what now? I stuttered. My hair, he repeated nuzzling his cheek into my stomach like a child. I'll play with yours later, he hummed. Needless to say, nothing happened.

Later that night, kid tried falling asleep with his cheek against mine—as in, I was the pillow, he was the bedwetter. I don’t know why that makes him a bed-wetter, but it just does. The kid needed to be the “little spoon” and I just can’t get on board with that. I don’t need someone who can throw me into walls per se, but excessive cuddling and formulaic Romance banter have never been my thing. And that, Jacky, is why I don’t fall for boys who look at me. I was on the phone texting with John again that same morning. He may have been a piece of shit, but at least he kept me guessing.

But these days I am in survival mode. I become the rodent snacker. An old roommate pointed it out to me once. Whenever I get stressed, deadlines, disappointment at work, general sense of not meeting my own, unforgiving standards, I get lost. Lost in mindless cleaning. I have an excess of travel-sized toothpastes and expensive make-up I’ve collected over the years. In reality, I will probably never use the dried up concealer in Pale Pedal. I’ve been tanning for years now—a shameful habit only me and the overzealous sales rep with the painted eyebrows know.
But yes, I’d say I am in pack-rat, rodent snacker mode. I wake up a full hour before I’m meant to be somewhere, usually work as a sales associate. Supervisor after a month, if you can believe it or not. I’ve embraced the title, but have no idea if I’m leading up to the task. I try hard. Like way too hard. My routine revolves around over-grooming and assuming the role of everyone’s best friend. It has its perks. New clothes. New sense of identity. But as soon as I feel the slightest sense of pride, I arrive at my borrowed, beat-up mountain bike, its half-screwed seat protected by an aggressively inflated plastic bag.

I like the ride home. The trees and wildflowers in people’s yards, vacant lots consumed by nature. I let myself get lost in it. Double checking for cars my only concern. In this space, the seven-odd minutes past hundred-year-old houses and preserved Americana underneath the California sun, I am me.

At work it’s all saltine crackers and gum for the most part. Under a constant air of What should we be doing? And What else is there to say about this finely-cut, well structured, something-something blouse? , I nod and smile and push back the fear of failure. Will I ever actually graduate? Is this even a plausible goal? What are other people doing right now? Will I get left behind? What am I doing here? What would I be doing if I weren’t? I need this job.

I love it at times, when pieces are moving we’re working towards something. When I make a sale, connect a person to a piece that truly calls forth something about their aura. When I see a mousy, new secretary light up at her reflection. Admiring her assumed stature. The command of her silhouette in a structured top and black slacks, a uniform she’ll have for life. An investment in establishing her adult-self.

I smile at her small victory. She thanks me profusely apologizing for only buying the one thing—she’ll have to find the slacks elsewhere. I understand, I say. We’re all in the same boat.
there. All of us twenty-something, college-town lingerers. We live in fear, and in that lies this true connection. I love meeting these people. The ones just ahead of me or just behind. I am hungry for their stories. I can’t stand telling my own. It’s not much of a story. One more semester. Yep, all done in December. All done in May. Just smile and move forward, I remind myself. Ignore the urge to scream in public—the general tone of life most recently. Stop fidgeting, I think, fighting hard to ignore the left kink in my neck. My mind idles, indefinitely afraid of the future and universally holding my breath.

Now, there are nightmares. Always nightmares. My sleep infrequent and well medicated. There I am, little lost me, peddling away furiously on my old bike. It’s night. I have no context for how I got here. I am on edge. Dressed down riding through the back alleys of the party houses. I pass the Pink House. Avoid eye contact with the crowd of half-dressed freshmen. I flee the hoard of arrogant boys, as they lean back on their rented porches surveying the scene. Some boast proudly of shallow achievements. Recounting their max bench press in detail.

Others I see, confidently asserting themselves as the head of activities. Long arms raised in the air with a bottle and calls for Flip Cup with Jack! It’s all we got left!

Anxious girls in tight dresses oblige. Already buzzed on vodka-whatevers they shuffle over to the beer soaked plywood that is their game table.

I am afraid. I am just trying to get home. Where am I? Am I riding to your place now? I can’t seem to navigate to my place. The map of this dream doesn’t stretch that far. I find the path to your place. Somehow I am already at the top of the stairs, banging to be let in. I am inside the house. People are standing around the living room talking heatedly. I am delirious. I recognize some of them. What are they discussing? Maybe strategies. Planning it seems. Mostly rugby boys. You can tell by their short, shorts. It must be Friday. Tomorrow is game day.
Saturday’s a rugby day! The chant rings in my ears. I still get excited. I’m a sucker for fit men engaged in savage sport. I guess it started with cheer in high school. Supporting our boys out on the field. I felt some connection. I was a part of their battle. I matched their intensity with vicious ferocity. As trivial as it seems, I can’t seem to shake that primal attraction, although I can say I’ve learned to curb it.

I’ll let you in on a few things. I know we haven’t talked in, what was it, four years now? Five? But I feel like you won’t judge me. I mean, you were there for the worst of it. Everything with John. Well, not everything. But you got the gist of it.

Anyway, I am at the front end of break-up number three since then. I think. Yeah-- let’s call it three. And I need to find something to keep myself occupied. Between work, and school, and binge-watching period-dramas, I still have too much time to obsess about why this one didn’t work out and …

My lovely mother, in her well-meaning and hard-earned wisdom, suggested I write a letter to myself. You know, get my thoughts down on paper. Figure out how I’m really feeling and why it is I feel that way. But the thought of journaling at twenty-six seems outrageous to me. Super cheesy, or something. So, I’m not doing it.
Hey, dude.

You’re never going to believe this, but I was foraging—yes foraging, people can say that—through the stacks of old notebooks and used folders in our houses’ cluster-f—k of an office and I came across a letter I had written to you nearly three years ago. So, couple years after John, couple years before now…

Reading through it, I get the sense that even then I wasn’t there yet. Even with these two-ish years worth of forging new paths, making the extended, awkward effort to form bonds with real friends, like actual, loyal girl friends instead of “Yeah, sure let’s go out and take pictures and then—Oh, hey! I know that guy. We’re just going to go dance for a second—never see you until I need someone to wingman again” friends.

And from the context, I think it’s fair to say I was ‘single’ here. It wasn’t easy, being alone. I sure tried though. Turned off my phone. Stayed home some nights. Went to work at 2:00am-6:00am a couple times when co-workers wanted a night out. I’d stand there dead-faced. Hating myself for being where I was. Spite chewed me up under those florescent lights as some forty-year-old, bald man walked at an unimpressive rate on the treadmill. I stared at his tall, white socks as he cheered periodically at one of the six cardio room TV’s. Sports! I would say indignantly as he threw me a nod and double-air punch, because “SPORTS!” and who cares…?

But it wasn’t all bad. I had date nights with the roomies. Cooked homemade mac’n’cheese. Made forts in the living room. Fought hard to carve out this new stronger version of myself everyone kept telling me I could be. But to this day, I fear these periods of being alone. And even then, after all he put me through, these bouts of responsible and wholesome single-
dom proceeding the era that was John Campbell, I was clearly still prone to back sliding. And I was especially sensitive to the possibility that at any moment some incident would happen, some trigger, some subtle slight dressed up as an innocent comment, a simple observation,

Hey, hun… have you noticed how high PG&E was last month? I know we’ve all been trying, but would you do me a favor and—[insert obnoxious, passive aggressive demand here]. And I used to get so hurt. Living with the constant tension in my neck that if I let go for one moment, stopped filtering and appeasing some of my more needy friends, then I would lose them all. I would open my mouth. Put her in her place. And in an instant, sever all of my female relationships…

Begin Found Letter:

It’s crazy when you hear people talking shit about you. Like, when you can actually hear the shit that’s being said, a seething playback of some event you were a part of. A sequence of events that seems familiar, and yet somehow strange. Distorted versions of the party you were at the night before last retold out of context.

And then Jimmy Calhoun shows up, one voice says. The mean one. And, like keep in mind she is trashed by this point. Girl can’t even walk from the couch to the kitchen without knocking ten things over.

Then, you hear it. A giggle. The warm laugh of a close friend. She gives a giggle you recognize. You can just see her, seated at the foot of your other friend’s bed, arms wrapped attentively around her knees. Eyes wide and attentive. An innocent gesture you’ve provoked many times before with your own stories about other people.

Peering through the stacks of clean, unfolded laundry, you listen. Quietly you strain to string together the muffled fragments of gossip you have the vague feeling are concerning to
you. You haven’t been the best lately. With the weight of grad school and an increasing over-
commitment to odd jobs around campus, you’ve kind of been retreating from the outside world.
Ducking out whenever you hear the front door open. Sending obnoxious “reminder” texts
whenever bills are past due. Neglecting any and all cleaning. Basic punk-ass shit. And you feel
bad, you do, but it’s safe in your room. No one judges you there. Hours of the first voice
continues. The Giggler, open-mouthed with those bright grey eyes, built to scale for the face of a
much larger creature, nods her on.

Your sweet cherub is against you. It’s not a big deal. We all talk. Everyone talks. Furious
scratches scurry across your ceiling. Squirrels from the massive oak tree outside. You stare up at
the high whitewashed ceilings above and notice that they form an imperfect V where they meet
the walls of the main structure. An attachment. At twenty-six, you are still living in a three-
bedroom rental house, trapped in the college town you graduated four years ago. Imagining lives
far better than yours through pictures and brief stories from strangers. Beautiful, young families
passing through town on their way back from the mountains. Cute moms with fit bodies and the
patience of saints.

How do you do this? I scream at them from behind dead eyes. I’m tired. Perpetually so.
It’s hard enough convincing myself it’s time to sleep. I get so sucked into these well written
shows. The banter. The witty solutions and clever answers to everything. For a time, I live there.
Lend myself to these dramatic plots and ingenious plans. I could be a lawyer, I think. And then I
yawn, lawyers don’t watch seven episodes of a series at three in the morning—no respectful
human person does.

I can’t imagine having the time to dress up. Not just yourself, but other, smaller human
people. To keep them alive. Keep them safe. And on top of it, these hot moms find time to do
other stuff. Get ready, like really ready. Work out. Eat enough to work out. Like lift weights and gain muscle workout. Maintain a social life. Make food. Real food. And then physically feed people. Little people with needs and tears and independent little souls. Like, *How the hell are you doing this?*

My panic-driven, hyper fasting has emptied my strength. I cannot possibly conceive of this woman. Her straight cut hair, her eyes light and contented. There’s assurance there. She feels protected. She feels safe. Like, how do you do this?

I ride my bike home. I turn on a show and am asleep in minutes. One pillow beneath my left shoulder, arm extended. I escape my worried mind. I dream of an ambush in the Amazon. It is wild and every angle is in first person shooter. Darts and spears whiz past me. The giant, tree-person I’m meant to protect is hit. His long dark hair and tribal tattoos sink into the river that is my fear. Piranhas. Vicious water snakes. Crocodiles twelve feet long drift past, their beady black eyes fixed on the sinking man-child that was my sole means of carrying forward.

A clanking sound jars me awake. A muffled voice speaks back to another as I turn my mortal body towards the kitchen door. A giggle sounds. I push back towards the river, towards sleep.

Another giggle.

You roll over. Face the wall. Stuff a worn cotton pillow, still cool, against your ear as you try to think. To block them out. To remember…

At first there is nothing. Gas seeps into your empty stomach, the lining chewed away by years of grain alcohol. Your teeth hurt. Lashes break. Black clumps cake in dried creases of tired eyes.
I feel sick. Why…? You groan, half hoping they’ll hear you in the other room. But you’re not quite ready for that. The voices continue. People do not like confrontation in this house.

The smell of stale vomit drifts over you from some unknown location. Nothing you can do about it now. Desperate for water, you just lay there studying the floral pattern of the purple, cotton comforter. Everything in your room is childish. The stuffed bear on your white wooden vanity staring back at you, eyes made of black plastic contempt. *What? What is this?* it asks. *It’s so… so sad. How old are you?*

Shut-UP. You-j, you… you bear! Ugh, you grunt, chucking the empty water cup across the room missing your foe by several feet. Silence. The toy sits stoically as if it’s made its point. And, I’m a child, you say, burying your face once more as you wait. Wait for the sake of waiting. For the general feeling of shame to find its way back to where it started.

*We went out,* you start. *First, we went to Macy’s. She took forever. Still has that shirt from the other week. Never seeing that again. Gay. We had shots there,* you continue checking your phone. Nothing. No messages.

Cool, you say, as you scan through photos. Mostly unfortunate selfies.

Unloved, you submit to the nausea. A mosquito hawk dances spastically over your lace curtains, pinned into the wall with borrowed thumb tacks. The front door slams. Those little *bitches,* you hiss, realizing the voices have gone to brunch without you. Everything aches. Resent. You wholeheartedly resent yourself. For drinking, you hate drinking, for complaining, for feeling this miserable over whispers, over what you’re sure is nothing. That’s it. There it is. There’s your shame. Last night. That boy. The one that means nothing. The one you met through a friend of a friend. Who never seems to you remember your name. The one you can hardly stand to look at.
So, I guess I pissed off my roommate last night. The current one, the mean one I moved in with last fall with the OCD and the god complex.

I woke up this morning to that familiar sound of spite slipping under my doorway. Squinting, I stifled my heart as more whispers came through. Sharp consonants of contempt. Drawn out vowels of disdain grip my lungs, as more and more filter in and out of the sheet thin walls of our humble college home.

How does someone just forget to change their laundry? Like really, sweetheart? Every week? You’re telling me you can just start a load of laundry on Monday and then three days later still not go out to check and see if it’s done?

I know, right? Like I’m sorry, but some of us have work in the mornings and I need to be able to wash my button up and my work pants without worrying about pulling out your soaking wet underwear and mildewing towels at 6 a.m.

I know, r-right?

Figure it out, girlfriend.

Bitter words to welcome the day with. My first impulse is confrontation. To hop out of bed and move so fast through those doors that their slander still sits thick in their mouths before they even realize I’m there. It’s the face I imagine my friend Dom to have had when his disabled grandmother finally caught him stealing cash from her sock-drawer emergency fund. She would’ve given it to him had he asked, but some people prefer to do things the sneaky way, simply because it’s more convenient.
It makes me sick. I feel my throat tighten as I listen for more accusations to pour through the gap, glowing indecently through my door and the soft, white carpet. I stare down the light, this unwelcomed intruder, as my breath grows shallow. My teeth clench hard as I absorb the flow of spite. The abrasion of glare melding into these hushed tones, spiking now and then with the indelicacy of those not trained in the art of discretion. Illuminating the truth behind what, until now, I believed to be a safe haven. A home. I am reminded of why I renounced the company of women all those years back.

They want you to believe they’re kind.

Oh, my gosh, I have the cutest top you could wear with that skirt. It’s way too tight on me, but it should fit you just fine, they say.

Oh, wow. Thank you, you say, surprised. You yourself have never been good at sharing. Older sibling syndrome.

The curve of your hips they so desperately wish for only to distract from their profound jealousy. Once again they are exposed. In the din of this shallow light I see again true colors of my sex. Bear witness once more to our innate inability to truly love one another.

But then, reach out an arm. Turn on my fan. Drown them out. I can’t just go charging in there, you know? I have to remember how bad things have been. That one roommate I had when I met you and John. The violent one. She was never my friend, Jacky. Girl was a psycho.

Things could be worse.
John Campbell: I Remember You, John Campbell— but Not Like You Think

Yes, I remember you. And no, I am not going to respond to your texts. Not because I hate you, but because I know better. Come on now.

hey (Always with the lower-case everything, because taking the extra millisecond to hit shift on your phone would be outrageous. You’re not desperate.) had a dream about you last night. u were saving me from the jellies. thank u!

That shit is loaded and you know it. You were dreaming about me? That’s cute. Wonder what your live-in girlfriend would think. Dude, she is so cute. I see her now and then, whenever my friends drag me down to Bella’s Sports Pub. She works her ass off, dude. And she’s, what--twenty-two? Twenty-three? Bartending already? And what do you do? Do you even have a job yet? Or are you still getting by off selling weed and Adderall to freshmen? Yeah.

Dude, and it’s so awkward. Every time I see her. I like have to prep myself. I try not to stare at this button-nosed, blonde child, with her sloppy “I work too hard” bun and smiley away with those cute, baby dimples so she can pay her half of the rent and get you free drinks in the process. And every time I finally work my way to the bar, she looks straight through me with that same bitter grin you taught me to wear. And you know what, I don’t blame her.

I feel bad.

I can’t believe you came over to “drop off a sweater” like a year after everything on the day you two moved in together. I would kill you. Jesus, John.
Okay Jacky, so I know it’s been a while. Like what now, two months? I don’t know. You’ll have to excuse the negligence. I had a few things I needed to say to dear John. But I have to get this part out, bud. And please, forgive me for saying this… I know you must know, and it’s probably going to come out wrong, but you were short and I just don’t date short guys. There. I said it.

Ugh. I hate myself for that, man. Like even now, it feels bad to say, but it just needed to be said. I don’t know what reason I gave you back then for why things didn’t work out between us, maybe because of John, or because I was just not ready for something serious then, or whatever shallow people tell themselves to justify what they do, but that was it, Jack. You were short and I wanted someone tall.

Let’s look at this kid I’m dating, not dating now. I’d give you a name, but I’m not quite there yet. It’s been, what, three days now, and I still haven’t heard shit. I mean, not really. Sure, I’ve gotten the occasional one-word answer thing you guys, even you nice ones, like to throw out there to string us along. Messages like: “fine,” and “?,” following a particularly long string of questions, admissions and heartfelt apologies from my camp. And then there’s my special favorite of these half-human, non-responses “k.” No capitalization or grounding context whatsoever. Just the stupid, lowercased half of an already inconclusive agreement, as if merely to say, I am detached. You are lesser than. Just know that I win. You deserve nothing more. He has cut me off for the umpteenth time leaving no more than these inanimate breadcrumbs of life for me to suck on until a later decision proceeded by more waiting, further groveling, and an excess of compromise on my end can be determined.

Clearly, Jacky, I have come a long way.
So, instead of focusing everything I have on not reaching out, not caving in over unnamed homeboy of today, let’s look back at some things. Let’s look at my decision with you. Let’s see if we can’t get to the root of this thing. My choice of him over you. I think, I mean, it makes me sad to say it, in light of everything that happened, but I feel like a major, overriding part of it came down to my needs. The physical ones. You know, the most important things.

I wanted someone big, you know? A great, big beast of a man with massive shoulders and tree trunk thighs rooted to the earth by powerful Viking calves. The kind of man who lived in workout clothes simply because his godlike form mandated he play a sport. The sort of man you’d follow into war, not that that’s immediately important in my everyday highly suburban, American lifestyle, but still. I wanted it all the same.

Someone all the other men looked up to, not simply because he was the tallest, but also because he was clever and understood not only how to strategize, but more importantly what it takes to run a team. A man who led by example. Who took hard hits on the field and crushed lesser men with his drive and his skull.

I had a while to think about it, to envision this ideal man. Ever since I was little, I had crushes on boys. I even had a boyfriend in kindergarten, Matthew Smith. I thought he was French, because he had moved away when we graduated to some place I’d never heard of. For the longest time I thought we might find each other, meet up at some swanky party in a loft in the city. Brought together again through fate and friends of friends. I remember the last day I saw him, my kindergarten sweetheart, the boy I stole cookies for and hid them down my underwear, the boy I kissed behind the tree before either of us knew what kissing actually was. He was handsome.
Dark wavy hair, and big brown eyes that matched mine. He was wearing a white button-up shirt he had untucked despite his mother’s constant warnings. I didn’t like her much. She watched him too closely. We agreed to meet out front after the ceremony. Who has a ceremony for six-year-olds? Anyway, we found our moment. Both raced to the front door of the converted Baptist church out into the sweet air of the wild apricot orchards. Easily, I took him to the ground. Slamming his bony shoulder into the grass, I worked my way on top of him. He laughed and kicked in protest.

It was our favorite game. Whenever we could, we found ways to sneak off to wrestle before our parents came after school. The teachers and yard duties forbade it, the game my grandma always referred to as grab-assing. It was our secret, and he always let me win. I was so happy then in the dirt and the innocent physical contact. Nothing sexual, not overtly or consciously so. Just two kids showing affection for one another the best way they knew how. And Jesus, were we punished for that. His mother was furious. His shirt ruined. What kind of young lady was my own mother trying to raise here? What was she thinking letting me embarrass myself like that? I had no idea what she meant. I was being a kid. We were having fun. He just looked at me. Didn’t say a word. Nothing. I never saw him again.

I was abandoned. He abandoned me. My best friend. Gone like it was nothing. We’d done everything together. And just like that, I was left to fend for myself. I played alone a lot after that. Invented games with chalk on the pavement. Climbed trees and watched the other kids chase one another through the weeds. We were different. I didn’t know them. They didn’t get me.

And I don’t know, I just sort of made up my mind one day not to care. I don’t know if it was an active decision, but I noticed myself slowly shutting down. I would accept invitations to
other people’s houses, sleepovers, birthday parties, playing after school, but I never invited them to my place. My parents didn’t like having too many kids over, or my little brother freaked out if it was too loud. I’d invent little lies, exaggerations. Anything to keep my life and their lives separate. It was through this I think, the separateness of my private life from the rest, that I began to invent this new best friend.

My own special someone who existed for the sole purpose of knowing me. Who listened, who shared my dreams, who showed me new things. Instead I had friends like Jackie Burnsdale. She pushed me down on the concrete. Taught the other kids a song about me and how gross I was all because I didn’t know how to play tetherball.

She had been my best friend the week before. Shared her Capri Suns with me. But then something happened. I offended her. Made her look bad. I don’t know. But they all found ways to leave me somehow. And each time this happened I took notice. Built better walls. Invested less in my relationships with others. Put more energy into my imaginary prince, for lack of a better word. I was a child of the Disney generation, after all.

So, I let his idea grow. This perfect, handsome man. And he was real. I was sure of it. Someone designed specifically for me. Someone I could keep. Someone out there somewhere who had the capacity to love me for all the quirks and neuroses I developed locking myself away for so many years.

But I grew up. Grew out of it. Let myself make new friends, friends that were girls. I went to slumber parties and practiced kissing boys with partners chosen at random. It was whatever. All part of the weird process of growing up I would play at, yet never fully comprehend. They were my friends. We hung out. Told each other secrets. Stole cigarettes from the worn leather purse Kenzie’s mom would leave out on the front room recliner. We’d pass one
around in a circle out back by the elementary school playground that backed up against Kenzie’s back yard.

    How many boys have you kissed, someone would ask me.
    I don’t know, a couple I would lie.
    Oh yeah, Kenzie would say, well I let my brother’s friend from college finger me.
    We all looked stunned. Tomorrow night he says he’s gonna show me what a blow job is, she bragged. We were eleven.

    Over time I learned to shut down completely. To turn off all the fun, solitary games I played as a child. They made me weird. Weird was bad. I couldn’t handle the punishments that came with being myself, so I adapted. Changed my tastes. Forfeited all those qualities like love and being heard in favor of the tallest, meanest jocks I could find. They broke my heart every time. Humiliated me publically. Dumped me the day before my birthday for another cheerleader. Jaylyn was taller and... blonder. But mostly she would put out.

    So, that happened. And instead of hating him for being shallow, I just ended up hating myself. I changed, Jack. Made myself in the image of all those pretty girls who dated all those terrible boys. So, then I met you, this handsome boy with all these cool stories, who listened, like really listened. Made eye contact and held it. I’d never seen that before.

    Despite everything you did to work around it, your height was very much a part of who you were. And I know you’re not like short-short, Jacky. Really, I do. And I promise I’m not saying this to be mean. I just think it might help explain where I was coming from. Why when you asked me to choose all those years ago, to pick you or him, why I think twenty-year-old Jenny went with the asshole instead.

    It’s not character judgment, just a general... observation. That’s all.

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And please, don’t get me wrong here. I mean, you’re cute. Totally cute. Especially now.

DJ Jack Knife? Working in real clubs in the city? You’re living your dream, man. I’ve seen pictures. You all dressed up. I mean, button-ups and blazers? Don’t get me started. I’m sure you’re doing just fine for yourself these days.

Not entirely sure why a DJ would ever need a tie, but still--you clean up nice, kid. Really grown into that whole life-long boyish-face thing you got going for ya.

I remember when we first met. I hadn’t even slept with John yet. I think. Yeah, I’m pretty sure he just invited me over to watch a movie, or something. You said your Life goal was to see the Himalayan mountains. I like your flags, I said once, early on. Invited into your room. It was a cool space, man.

You had those dual monitors that were connected somehow to work on your graphics and beats. I know that kind of set-up is much more common now. But back then, back when I was still rockin’ a piece of crap PC, seeing those brand new, wide screen Macs, a desktop and laptop just chillin’ on your Ikea, special order, bamboo desk set--or no--your desk was glass. I remember now. Everything was so clean. State-of-the-art on such a casual, understated display.

When I think about it now, after getting to know you that wild year all that time ago, there was probably nothing casual about it. You were nothing if not meticulous, bud. Especially back then.

I mean, come on. That hair? Even back then you were sporting that fine-combed, fifties throw-back. The kind of Elvis Presley look, minus that ridiculous poof-up top. It was nice though, your hair. Nice and neat. Preppy, kind of. Short on the sides, longer on top, parted to the side.

I’d see you get ready sometimes, totally by accident of course. Well, I guess not totally, if we’re being honest. I mean, we can be honest now, right? Who really cares at this point, you
know? It’s all over anyway. People have said all they can say. John lives with his new girlfriend. Blonde girl? Younger. She’s super sweet, actually. I’d met her before through someone else.

Kelly, maybe? I don’t know. She seems good. I’m happy for him, which may seem fake, but it’s true. Wish that guy all the best.

Or maybe I’m just happy for me. Mostly because I have so much extra energy now. I can be productive. Map out my own future. Spend my efforts working out real problems.

The world’s so much bigger now. I can commit myself to more. I don’t feel so used up. So desperate. I don’t hate myself. That girl I was with him. The pathetic scavenger sitting there alone in the dark. Awake at four a.m. I don’t find myself scratching that obsessive itch for the answer to unknowable questions. Where is he? Who is he with? Are there girls? Are they pretty? Does he think they’re pretty?

I’m no longer that whimpering troll so determined to find evidence. Some clue. Some hard data to confirm his betrayal. Scrolling through his texts. All of them. Listlessly searching for some. Studying the names. Looking, hoping even to find one I didn’t know. He got smart. He really did, Jacky. Devious.

Started using boys’ names to store suspicious contacts. Girls disguised as friends, so he could prove I was crazy. It was all in my head. I was making it up. Of course he wasn’t cheating. I was the liar. The …

But back to you, Jack. My bad. I remember wanting to see you. You started leaving the house earlier. Going out for a run before the sun rise. I would hear you come back. Wake up to the front door slamming shut. The sound of accomplishment. I knew I had to act quickly. There was just that one bathroom and I needed to get there before you rushed to the shower.
So, I would pop out of bed, frowning at John as he snored. Visceral pig-raping snores. Anxious, I’d poke my little nose out the doorway. If the kitchen light was on, that meant you were cooking breakfast and I could take my time getting dressed. That house was freezing. If it wasn’t, that meant you were skipping breakfast. Protein shake. And I had about five minutes to go pee and come back while you changed and laid out your outfit for the day. I used to think it was so cute, Jack. The way you picked out your clothes before showering.

There were times back before everything happened, when I observed this sweet ritual. In fact, I think that’s what got me in the first place, now that I think about it. Yes, you were short. But there was something about the way you were after the gym. You used to go after class, too. That’s when you were doing two-a-days. You were ripped.

And yes, when you had to jump to grab the protein powder from the top of the fridge, I remember cringing at the thought of being touched by hands roughly the same tiny size as mine in any intimate manner whatsoever—I jump to reach stuff off the fridge. Me. And I am little… But that somehow that detail faded in the next moment. Your shirt came off and I was a mess. My insides felt exposed. Like your body, clear across the room had a hold on me. A direct channel to my most private thoughts. All my petty ideas about height blurred into this elaborate fantasy only suitable for Nineties movies and bad porn. I feel like a creep saying that, but you’ll probably never see this, so I guess it doesn’t make a difference. Besides, you were the one changing with the door open.

Anyway. I’d see you standing there from my spot in the living room. Not bad, Jacky. I see you workin’ on that eight-pack, I’d say with my eyes, that is until you turned around and we both looked the other way. But it was never about the eight-pack with you. Those eyes, dude. They spoke volumes. One of those raised brow, Joseph Gordon Levitt, Who me? smiles was
what got me in the gut. You were innocent, dude, and as much as I love me some cocky-dickhead, I am a sucker for authenticity, even more. At least I am in my head. Not really how it worked out though, is it?

But all the same, I scoped you out. Informally of course. Woke up early, well relatively so. I looked down at his face, unshaven and covered in the acne of a jock who doesn’t shower after he binge drinks. Kid wasn’t exactly a pretty sleeper. After reviewing my choices, staying the night one more time with a dude who couldn’t seem to remember his way home that last night, let alone the fact that he had a girlfriend. That stupid phone kept lighting up with unanswered texts from God knows who until late into the morning hours. With this in mind I’d hop up.

Fuck this kid, I’d mutter. Why am I with you again? I’d ask, shoving his arm on his stupid side of the bed, as it flopped back over in my space. It was pretty clear even then, that was always his bed. Slipping into my clothes, that kid always insisted I sleep naked. I know, you probably don’t want to hear that, but it speaks a lot to our relationship to one another. He knew I was insecure about my body. Little tummy and a chest like a surfboard. Put him in the power seat, as if he needed a physical reminder.

Selectively I’d creep down the hall. I didn’t know why at the time. It wasn’t for John. That kid slept like a rock on Xanax. A snoring, rock on Xanax. But I tip-toed anyway. Down that creaky hallway, careful to set bare toes over open spikes, uncovered in patches of carpet missing after the boys drunkenly dragged all the furniture from Robbie’s room. Do you remember that? He came home from break and all his stuff was out on the deck, carefully reconstructed to resemble its layout in his actual room.
I had to walk lightly though. You were so jumpy, Jack. Like a cat. Anytime I paid you any sort of special attention, talked to you about your work, asked what you thought about something, you’d play along for about two full minutes. Then, this internal timer would go off in your head. You’d get this look on your face, eyes suddenly wide like you sensed some disturbance in the force, and before I could say anything, you’d bolt. You were out, son. It was actually kind of cute.

And then you had John. He was such a peacock, man. It’s what I liked about him. He was happy being the center of attention. I wanted that. To feel comfortable like that. He was loud in all the places I was quiet. I liked that. He was comfortable in his skin. I swear that boy never had a shirt on, and why would he, frankly? Regardless of how you feel about him, you have to admit John Campbell is yoked. And honestly, as shallow as it sounds, that probably had a lot to do with me choosing him in the end. He was confident. He’s He Man. I hate to say it, but let’s be real. And yet he was lacking. And there you were with those dimples talking about all these wild ideas you had about how you were going to evolve what we know as music through visual arts. I saw you with that big brain of yours tucked neatly beneath that immaculate hair. Like Elvis, but light brown and less dramatic. Tighter.

And even back then, back at the way beginning, I knew there was something. Back when everything was pure and my betrayal was nothing more than this strange twinge in my stomach that I was giving something up. A mild pang of guilt when I laughed too hard at your jokes, especially if John didn’t understand. Even back then I knew.

I wish it didn’t matter that you were short, Jacky. I really do.
If it helps, Jacky, I came into things with a lot of mistrust.

Now, bear with me. This is going to take a page or so, but I think it warrants discussing.

It begins with girls.

The girls growing up, they never liked me much. Girls like Adriana Ramirez, the mean-eyed, light skin Mexican girl who started shoulder-checking me in the hallways back in the eighth grade. She claimed it was for disrespecting her. Apparently her friend’s boyfriend liked me. Said I had a nice round ass—for a white girl anyway. And there it was: I was different. Kept my eyebrows bushy and refused to sneak off campus to go do God knows what in these vacant playground sheds with the rest of them. We were in the sixth grade. Sixth. Yikes.

And slowly but surely, parents started pulling their good girls out of school. In a year, I lost three of my best friends, girls I’d known since the first grade, to alternative schooling. Better district. Private, all-girl Catholic school. A charter school that meant my best friend down the street car-pooled an extra 45 minutes each morning and came home too exhausted to hang out at night. I was left to fend for myself.

I know it seems silly, but I was isolated. Just this lost, little, tan child with no definitive, ethnic heritage to speak of. Not like the other girls who looked like me. The Mexican and Filipina girls with the big families—dozens of siblings and cousins to support the. I envied them with their tight, social networks. Binding cultural traditions.

I looked like them though. Dark features set inscrutably against petite, olive frames as though drawn with careful intent by the same genetic artist. But I wasn’t one of them. I was mockingly referred to as “hey, yo, white girl” until I moved away for school. I had no inherent,
national tribe to cling to. Just a scared-punk, white girl with no to warn her against over-plucking her eyebrows when she got the itch to go for it.

Sure, I met people. Found comrades among the obsessively studious. The socially awkward. Girls with frizzy hair and an affinity for punctuality and powdered donuts. But it was never quite the same. My confidence. These girls were only friends by default. Something shifted in me. A switch turned. I remember standing there, as class let out for lunch. A wave of nausea washed over me. A sudden panic.

My friends, my pack, I thought, they are never coming back for me. They had moved on. I could see them on birthdays. Graduations maybe. For now, I thought, I am in this alone. Standing there at the edge of the quad, my over-sized backpack weighing down my scrawny-chicken legs. I saw a girl from the volleyball team. I forget her name now, but we had been close when we were both chosen to play that year after not making it the previous season.

I caught her eye. Gave her a smile of relief. She sneered quickly. Then, looked away.

Fine, I thought. Girls don’t like me. That’s cool. It’s whatever. I could never trust them anyway. Not anymore. Clearly the friends I had had never truly loved me, not like I had loved her. Words like “sisters” and “best friends” lost their meaning. Empty promises.

I saw how they really were and it was fine. I learned real quick. I didn’t need them. I wondered over to the snack bar. Ordering my usual soft pretzel and nacho cheese, empty American-lunch I realized I had spent my money for the week. Sighing desperately I turned to see my buddy, Conner. He slapped a bill on the counter and grinned.

I got you, he said. And he did.

We ended up dating, this nice boy, Conner, and me. High school sweethearts. And that would’ve been fine I think if I’d had any real sense of unconditional love— a foundation of
kinship outside of a romantic relationship. But alas, all I had was Conner. He and a slew of temporary girlfriends. Girls good for gossiping and studying with. Still, I learned to trust them. Valued the comfort of their alliance. All of who were most eager to see me go, false tears cried in as a token to reach out to my love, to comfort him the instant our hugs were released and I was on my way to start school. False allies. False friends all along.

Now, this is where you come in, Jacky. My whole “mistrust of women, over-dependence on men” thing that lead to mistakes like the ones I made with you. All of that has to have, in part, started here. This seemingly insignificant experience, this random middle school girl’s rejection, compounded with the much greater loss of changed me. The hard denial of a simple plea for acceptance coupled with the impeccably good timing of a nice boy reset my understanding of how things worked. I was undesirable as a friend. I wasn’t enough on my own.

Suddenly, everything was up for grabs. Friends’ brothers, their crushes, their boyfriends—all of it was fair game. I only flirted. Laughed a little too keenly. Teased playfully. Formed inside jokes. Grabbed forearms. I was never trying to hurt anyone. I simply learned how the game was played. When it comes down to it, all people are really interested in is “Am I getting what I want?” And I get that. I mean there are ways to explore this seemingly selfish mindset and find meaning in it. If I am happy, then I can work to make others happy, or something like that?

But I never quite bought into it. Not until I met John. Sure I was tempted. An overactive imagination and quick access to slutty boys my age made staying faithful a challenge growing up. But I was strong. I had a good person to be strong for. I tried my best to be loyal. And I think I was. On paper that is. I never kissed anyone else. Never f—cked them, that’s for damned sure.
But I did send secret texts. And I did pine for the affection of others, even though I claimed a perfectly loving individual just in the other room.

At the time, I remember thinking it kept me safe this sharing of my attention. I could spread my heart out, store bits and pieces in a portfolio of potential loves. In this way, I would be shielded. Protected in case my main person ever tried to leave me…

I’d keep everyone at arm’s length. Only discuss my feelings in vague obscurities. Yeah, there was this one guy this one time… you don’t know him. Anyway—Let’s talk about you! How have you been? You look great… And in this way, dawning this mask of pleasantries, they couldn’t hurt me if I never really cared in the first place, right? I’m sure that’s what they all say—the lost ones.

And that’s how I was just before you found me. Or I found you rather. I clung to strangers in those first days. Spent weeks searching for something, someone who felt like home. I did my best to smile through a series of unpleasant, and often excessively boring human interactions. People like girl-with-braid-past-her-butt. She was a nice enough, braid girl. Always saved me a seat. Took great notes. Told long stories personal stories. Whined. Mostly petty roommate stuff. I tried to relate—we’ve all been there. But it wasn’t enough, Jacky. I was looking for something else, something better in a friend. More interesting. More substantial.

And then one day, she didn’t show, my non-friend with her long braid. I was really alone. I sat there, crowded stadium seating staring at the white board ahead of me, that day’s lesson plan mapped out in messy, old man chicken scratch. I sat and I listened. Happy sounds of girls gossiping. Papers rustling behind me.

Shit, do we have a test, the girl to my right asked sliding in to the red head’s vacant spot just as the professor shuffled in.
Not ‘til Thursday, I said, smiling my biggest _please love me_ grin.

Oh, thank God, she said, rolling her eyes dramatically. Holy shit, are those your notes?

Yes, I mumbled, leaning back to distance myself from whatever it was she saw.

Those are uh-mazing, she said like those preppy, rich girls I thought only existed in bad reality TV.

Oh, sorry, she said giving me a knowing look. We talk like that sometimes, me and my friends in the dorms. That’s my “Paris Hilton” voice, she said, pushing out her lips and cocking her head to one side.

Oh, I said. Gotcha.

Want to come study at my place? asked a girl in my Astronomy class.

Yeah, yeah. Totally, I agreed a little too enthusiastically.

Great, she said, looking back at the girl to her right.

I was quick to meet new people. Make connections. I clung hard to those first signs of friendship.

Finally, I thought. What felt like weeks into Freshman year, I had made two new best friends. Well, they were already best friends and equally stunning, and equally tall. They met on the first day. So, I suppose I made friends _with_ best friends. Melanie and Clara pronounced Cl-\-air-\-a with a soft -\-ar. _Clara_, She corrected people. It was a common tendency. She was never wrong. I learned early on to let her have her way, let her educate me. Some tips were useful. How to hang dry bras so they lasted longer, or cook things on the stove. I haven’t used a microwave since.
Here, she offered. This one’s perfect, she said, pointing to a picture of the two of us standing in overly exaggerated sexy poses. I’m pretty sure we had bras over our shirts. Our tongues were out. We looked like the spoiled brats we were. I liked it though. We looked happy.

Even then, I think I sensed something was wrong. When we went out, for example. Both girls would always have to approve the outfit I was wearing. I mean, I know girls do that. My friends and I helped each other pick out dresses for prom and stuff like that. But never to this extent.

What is that? Clara would ask when I walked through the door. I stood quietly as she called Melanie in from the kitchen. Mel, she said, come look at this!

Hi, love, Mel said, sauntering in the room with those long legs of hers. How are you? she asked smiling. She was always so nice to me. Even though she did pick Clara in the end, I always appreciated that. What are we looking at here? she asked.

This, Clara said, gesturing to my person.

What’s wrong with this? I asked. They’re just jeans. You wear jeans all the time…

Yeah, but I wear light-wash, Guess jeans, she said. And when I do, I pair them with something like that, she said pointing to the floral top Mel was wearing. I would never wear them with something like that.

It’s a T-shirt, I said, mostly to myself as she hopped off the lofted dorm room bed, and ran to her closet.

Here, she said, after about five minutes of digging through boxes hidden in the back. You can have this, she smiled, holding out a wrinkled green top. I know it’s not perfect, but it’s better, see? She held the shirt against her own form. It’s looser, she explained. I feel like it’s more feminine, you know? I watched as she continued to smile as she swayed in the mirror.
I knew she was a jerk, even then. But I just sort of went with it. Let her have her way. It just seemed easier, you know? Less conflict. Everyone’s happy.

No silly, she would say, why are you doing it like that?
What? I asked, holding a pot under the faucet. I’m boiling water for my noodles?
Yeah, well, I know that, she said, rolling her eyes. Why are you using hot water?

You don’t use hot water when you cook. You know it’s been sitting in a tank all day. Gross. Here, she would say, grabbing the pot from my hands as though I were a small child, just let me do it.

Sure, I said. It wasn’t worth the argument.

And that’s how that was. I didn’t know a lot of other people. It was easier that way. We just did everything she wanted to do. She was always going to be right anyway. Grammar was the worst, though. I mean, you know me. I have an impulse to correct people, too, but I remember her constantly interrupting to do so. I remember the first time I noticed it.

I think you mean you couldn’t care less, she said while Melanie was telling her story.

What? she asked, caught off guard.

You could--n’t care less. Because if you could care less, then that would mean you do care at least a little, right? Both our faces went blank. I hate you, I thought, as she continued applying her mascara, a particularly expensive brand.

Hey, where did you get that, I asked.

Oh, this? she said, No, yeah, you can’t get this around here, she said not looking up from the mirror. I have to order it online. Sensitive skin, she explained, knowing neither of us could afford it. I’d seen her let Mel borrow it sometimes. Not for free, of course. It was usually in trade
for something, like borrowed clothing or other small favors. I was never to use it. I don’t like sharing eye makeup, she said. It spreads bacteria, you know. Pink eye.

Right, I said, backing out of the room, my best impression of someone who didn’t care.

I waited a few more moments as the quiet thickened between us, filling the small apartment bathroom with its Seventies style double-sinks, a space where we routinely met after classes to share stories as one or all three of us got ready to go somewhere else for the night. A place that later turned into an awkward battleground after the eventual falling out between Clara and me, a conflict which was never truly explained to me. At least there was no specific catalyst I could point to. I know she never really liked me. Not then I mean, but I do now.

She just sort of subtly started ignoring me. Not answering questions when I asked them or saying an extra special, Bye my beautiful Melanie, when she left the house to let me know where I stood.

I was so confused. Hurt. She was my best friend, wasn’t she? Why was she doing this?

I’d ask Melanie, the nice one. You could tell she was home when the house smelled like lavender. Dryer sheets were her one indulgence. She let me borrow some whenever I ran out. I did so sparingly. She was a good citizen. Washed the dishes. Took out the trash.

Yeah, she sighed, as though she’d been expecting this, I don’t know what happened. Sorry, I can’t be more help, she said.

Yeah, I said.

I’d just suggest avoiding each other, you know? Just pretend like she’s not there. We only have another month on the lease.

Okay, I said, slowly realizing what was happening. These were not my friends. She had chosen her side long before the thought had even occurred for me to ask. I went to my room.
Clara came home minutes later. I could tell it was her, because there was always this sudden banging sound. Like she had shouldered the door hard only to realize it was locked. Then, a panicked scratching. Metal against metal as she frantically tried to claw her way in. She had this way of entering a room as though she was being followed. Especially at night. This was mostly because she genuinely thought people were after her. By the time she figured it out, realizing the top bolt was never locked and moving down to the handle, she would burst through the door panting as though she’d been holding her breath through the whole ordeal. Running through the house to the bathroom, her self-proclaimed tradition.

Despite her efforts to be dainty, the flowing dresses and baby doll voice she put on, there was no denying it. She was a brute of a girl. And she was mean. I started referring to her as the *moose*, even if it was just in my head.

I deleted myself from social media. I just wanted to hide. Made friends with the boys downstairs. A private nest to hide out in after shit hit the fan. It was hard seeing new pictures of my friends together. I wasn’t in them. And they seemed happy. Happy together, without me. I found myself becoming obsessed. They were just old pictures. Nothing special.

We girls making stupid faces in the bathrooms of strangers. Clara and I posing up close with Melanie on the toilet flipping us off in the background. We did this frequently. Leave parties for like forty-five minutes at a time just to be drunk and silly together in the bathroom. We didn’t care how much it annoyed other people. We were having fun, weren’t we? I felt like I was missing something from these photos.

They became foreign to me. All those images of laughing eighteen-year-olds in short-shorts, shot-gunning Keystone Lights on the porches of the older boys I now realize were just
egging us on so we’d be too drunk to walk home later. The faces seemed strange. Took on a sort of sinister quality. Were those smiles genuine? They couldn’t be. Not after I heard everything.

I came home late. Saw the lights on. Made it up the stairs without anyone noticing. Front window was open. I stood by the door. Voices gossiping. Annoying faces I made, bad habits, ugly clothes, and weird things I said. I heard everything.

All at once, things were different. So many good memories I no longer knew what to make of. Is a memory still good if it was made with the people who secretly hated you?

And that’s how I came into your life, Jacky. Hiding out with the slew of different boys I knew. I’d given up on girlfriends all together. The few that I had were superficial. Girls I used to get into parties to meet more cute boys. Simply utility friends, nothing more.

I came to love one group of boys the most. The downstairs neighbors. They were so welcoming. Embraced my weirdness. Invited me to see theirs’. Finally, a place to drown. They didn’t judge me. And I was taken. They knew that, I was back with Conner by then and they respected my boundaries. Invited me to come hang out. Watch movies. Draw in the living room. I came to love them so dearly. I was a part of something. I was safe. I had people to confide in.

I had made the mistake of confiding in the girls before—Mel and Clara. Conner and I were together, but we were stretched pretty thin. Long distance. Navy. But I was loyal. I had always been loyal. He’d been my best friend. Conner James. Total sweetheart. Worshipped the ground I walked on.

But we’d outgrown each other. I was faithful. Why shouldn’t I be? But it had been months. No touching. One phone call a week. The occasional letter. All caps. I think they had to. Then, there was this kid. This new boy. I’d see him in the laundry room sometimes. Late. After
midnight. We never said anything. Just smiled knowing. Sometimes he nodded. We worked around one another in cautious silence, both wanting to reach out, make a connection, a gesture, but ultimately failing to pull the trigger.

I imagined he was shy. Or too respectful. He was very courteous. Held the door open. The first time we met I was outside the room digging through every pocket of my dirty jeans trying to find the key. I looked like a ragamuffin. Hair in a greasy bun, clothes and makeup from the night before. He smiled. Big old, dream-boy dimples formed at the corner of tan cheeks.

That did it. I was in love. A handsome stranger. No name or background. A blank slate. All I needed was that smile. I could fill in the rest. He didn’t need to say a word. He was perfect.

I told Clara. Told her everything.

Oo… someone has a crus-shh, she said. What’s his name?

Josh, I said. I don’t know, actually. I just call him Josh in my head. I feel bad though, I said. I would never do that to Conner… It’s just--

Mel, get in here! she yelled. Jenny’s hooking up with some Mexican guy!

What? Melanie yelled.

Jenny’s been having sex with some rand0 in the laundry room, but she won’t admit it.

No… I said.

What? Melanie, repeated now standing directly over me. You little slut, you, she said grinning. She wasn’t judging, but that didn’t matter. Tell us everything!

But I’m not—.

See? Clara asserted.

Oh, my gosh— she is… Melanie said. I couldn’t tell if she was teasing. I felt terrible.
I ended things with Conner that same day. She was right. I was being unfaithful. Disloyal in my heart. It was the next day that I came home to that intimate, shit-storm of all my most intolerable qualities. Vain. Narcissistic. Slut. Attention whore. Too sarcastic. They tore me apart. The whole group. Even the guys. They all took part as Clara instigated each new line of accusation.

To this day, I don’t know what it was that I said. What about me disgusted her so deeply. But I did learn a healthy suspicion for women. And in turn developed a mean dependency on unavailable men. She hurt me. So, I stole Clara’s crush. Took him in my room.

Made sure she could hear.
Jack: John Didn't Like Me Having Guy Friends, So I Got a Boy Roommate

One summer night, back when I was still dating the idiot, I was enjoying the solitude of my apartment. Eating cereal. Watching a movie that I actually wanted to watch. I was happy there by myself all sprawled out on the living room floor, not giving a hoot. I remember that night. It was one of the few times when we were dating where I felt secure.

John and I were actually together-together, I think. Like officially boyfriend and girlfriend, at least I’m pretty sure, but it’s hard to say. He had asked to come over and I had turned him down for once. No, it’s okay. I think I’m just going to bed early. He wouldn’t know what to do with himself. I never said no.

And there I was, hair all messy, no makeup shoveling my fourth bowl of cereal down my throat when my phone went off. A text. I was sure it was him. Begging now are we? I said, all proud of myself for finally gaining the upper hand. Oh, hello, Jillian Palmer, I said, reading the name. What do you want at this time of night?

Hi, sorry, it’s so late, the text started. It’s just not going to work out. Sorry to back out so last minute... Good luck! The… fuck? I said, staring down at the screen.

I think it’s safe to say I went into a full panic. Pacing around the house, half cleaning random things like behind the sink before getting distracted and looking for my spare key I was sure was lost somewhere under one of the couches. I called my mom. She always knew what to do. Had a unique ability for listening to me when I got frantic.

I mean, what was that? I said. Who does something like that? Really? Like what kind of piece of shit person are you? I asked gesturing as though I might actually confront this poor girl, a friend of a friend who had no real ties to me.

It’ll be okay, sweetie, she said. You’ll figure out something.
Will I? I said. I have four days, Mom. Four. Like what the hell am I supposed to do now?
You’ll find something, sweet girl.

There weren’t many candidates. I had already done the whole Craigslist thing. No thank you. But what else was there? I posted an ad anyway. Got one greasy, nineteen-year-old kid who claimed to be a pharmacist. Really? At nineteen? I was actually considering, until he text later that day.

*hey iz it coo if i dont hav like a bank account? like i got $ just not like an actual account.*

No, bro. That is not coo.

It wasn’t until the day before, one of my managers suggested, Hey, have you asked Kyle yet? I hear he’s looking for something.

I don’t really know Kyle, I said.

Oh, Kyle’s a total sweetheart, she assured me. He’s moving out of his parents’ place. You should ask him.

He moved in that next day. John was pissed. He didn’t even like me having guy friends.

A guy? he asked when I told him.

Yeah, I said. I mean, you’re not exactly asking me to move in with you.

Right.

What do you want me to do?

No, I get it, he said.

This was during our second round, you know, after he found out about you, so he was dumping me like every other Friday, or so. That way he could keep me on the line, broken-hearted and crying over him at home, while he got to have these guilt-free, hook-ups on the
weekend. Then, when Monday rolled around, he would hit me up like, _Hey, I think we should talk._

And I fell for it. Took him back every time. Something about those piercing blue eyes and the way that he hugged me. Big all-consuming hugs that made me feel like I was home. Everything dissolved in those hugs. My face smeared with black, snot warm and wet from full body crying was all wiped clean as he used the sleeve of his shirt to dab away the tears he had carelessly put there.

That smell was what got me. Just strong and powerful, like how men should smell. He had me, Jacky. I was all his. Despite hours of counseling from friends reminding me of all my strengths, my intelligence, my will, it meant nothing when he hugged me. I wanted sex. To be touched. To be beautiful to someone I found beautiful. I wanted love, I just didn’t know what that meant yet, you know?

But hey, I’m the jerk that fell for it, right?

You had already moved away… yeah? Yes. You would’ve been back in the city by then.

Can’t say I can recall the _official score_ at that point. He slept with that Brittini girl, first. The one from the pink house. I only found out when I found evidence. Two cheap, hoop earrings forgotten on his night stand. I thought we were exclusive. We’d been sleeping together for months by then.

I called him out. You were there. I woke up in the middle of the night. I guess I’d been sleeping off a hangover. You two were up. I could hear you talking down the hall. I sat up. Grabbed the earrings. White plastic. I would never. I snuck down the hallway. Listened. Yeah, I mean, John said, I had fun with Brittini. She’s sexy, don’t get me wrong. But I think I’m gonna try to make things with Jenny.
Oh yeah, you said skeptically.

Yeah, he said, Jenny’s cool. Plus Brittini’s just a friend, you know?

I was livid. Hi, I said from the doorway.

Hi, beautiful! he said sweetly. You wake up from your nap?

We need to talk, I said.

I left that night. Had a co-worker, this guy Ivan come pick me up. Ivan was a good guy. There in under ten minutes. Let me stay at his place. Offered me his bed. He took the couch. No questions asked.

Thank you, I told him.

Don’t worry about it, he said. Just promise not to call him, for me, yeah? That guy sucks.

Yeah, you’re right, I said. I texted him instead. We were back together the next day.

The earrings were only the first offense. There was a string of neglected lip glosses and unfamiliar hoodies, abandoned by other hook-ups. I always asked. There was always an excuse.

That’s yours, he would say. Or, Oh! Shelly has been looking for this, I think. Shelly his best girl friend since kindergarten. He had a story ready to go. And I took it. Only too happily. I trusted him. I wanted to stay. Thought we’d worked it out. But then, we had that break. Still he was nice enough when the guy moved in. He was younger. Blonder. Not quite as tall, but pretty fit. Had his shirt off a lot. I wasn’t interested. John came around more often though. Mark his territory and stuff. I liked it at the time. Thought it meant he cared.
Do you remember how we really met?

You always used to tell it like it was some serendipitous, universes colliding, predestined, life event. This beautiful phenomena that you re-invented and made more meaningful, more exaggeratedly precious each time.

Romantic comedies, man. I swear they’re not giving just the women of our generation a false narrative--you boys buy into that garbage, too.

The whole “meet cute” thing. The preoccupied girl dropping her books in a rush to get to class and then encounters the charming boy who stops to help her gather her things, to interrupt her otherwise productive life with his presence, to in a sense pick herself up off the floor and somehow magically show her how to live her life.

Why? Why do you people keep pushing that shit?

Do you remember how I met you, John? Do you remember how we really met?

We had a creative writing class. There were like three dozen girls and maybe all of three guys in the class. You were a tall rugby player who made hard eye-contact with me from across the room. The professor had us write out our names, e-mails, hometowns, and hobbies on little, green sheets of paper. Scrap paper.

The instructor dropped mine. A slip of paper fell on the ground as twenty-eight kids were all frantically pushing towards the door to get out into the sun after a late Thursday class.

I saw the paper. You saw me see the paper. You reached down to hand it to the professor first. You were a kiss-ass. She let you come late to our meetings every week. She praised you for
even showing up at all. Some BS sob-story you made up about “family issues” that never existed.

You handed her the slip and as you did it, I realized it was mine. I pointed this out to you. We laughed. As we were walking down the stairs I asked for your and your friend’s number. Didn’t want to come across desperate.

A month later I called you. It was late. I don’t remember what I said. The gist was that I wanted you to come get me from a party. I do remember it was raining out and well after two a.m. Whomever I’d come with had managed leave with whichever guy she dragged me there to see and now it was time for me to go to bed—a textbook booty-call by any man’s standards.
I admired your Aryan privilege. I studied it. Watched your most simple interactions with a close concentration I wouldn’t notice until years later. Small moments when you and your rugby roommates would talk casually about plans in Tahoe that weekend, as if weekends were as good a reason as any to spend a month’s worth of rent on casual trips to the snow.

Hey, Campbell, Robbie called from the living room, you comin’ this weekend? I held my breath bracing for your response. Robb-ay! you yelled back. Cam-bull! he would answer even louder. What do you want, you fa-ggot? you would say pronouncing each syllable. I cringed visibly. What? you’d mouth to me, as you climbed into light jeans. I hated those jeans, I thought. Most boys I dated in high school would hate them, too. They were too light, feminine. They weren’t fitted.

You clearly didn’t care about what other people thought. Not my people anyway. Not the clean-cut, white boys the few that we had at my high school. The ones who were in the minority. Who wore expensive, limited edition Jordans because that was what the athletes wore and most of our athletes were in fact black and dictated the fashion of their peers. No I don’t think you would’ve liked the pecking order that our white boys were forced to adhere to.

Although, come to think of it, you’re an amazing athlete. That sort of trumped everything at our school. You would have adapted. You’ve always been pretty good at that. Assessing a situation. A room of new people, the first time meeting a girlfriend’s parents. I see now why you never made the effort to meet my dad. Not that I told him much anyway. But my silence was reason enough not to like you. But that’s beside the point.
Your had three pairs, dress Oxfords handed down from your father, which you wore to rugby award banquets and court that one time for an unpaid speeding ticket. You were so put out when I drove you that morning.

I don’t understand this shit, you said. You weren’t used to consequences, especially when you had the option to talk your way out of something. Law enforcement isn’t for people like me, you said.

Don’t… I warned.

What, you asked, don’t act like you don’t know who the police are really there for.

Jon-a-than… I said, pulling up to the courthouse, a nice-looking building across the street from one of the elementary schools, I forget.

Law enforcement is for…, you persisted in a sing-songy voice I can’t believe I used to find charming, for…, you continued.

I’m not saying it, I laughed uneasily. You knew how I felt about your selective racism. Buy you were persistent. It was a joke. Mostly. Yet it still got to me. Your button pushing.

But it was okay, I guessed. I wanted you and you knew that. Let you get away with comments about how most prisons are filled with black people, a sign in itself that somehow proved to you your blonde and blue superiority. It’s not like they don’t have the choice to become better people, you said.

What? I asked shrilly. What are you even talking about? It was these battles I chose. They weren’t a choice. I could let the implication slide, although it left me sad. Reaffirmed I was with the wrong person. Alone even when I wasn’t.
But then you would push it. Get into the why’s of your reasoning. Start explaining things to me. Started justifying. Come on, you said. Don’t act like you’re better. You know you’re scared of black people.

I am not scared of black people, actually, I said, bluntly in my most sincere “Minnie Mouse” voice, the kind I picked up in customer service to let people know that I was choosing to be polite, but it would be a good idea for them to go ahead and stop talking right about now.

Yeah, right, you insisted. You’re telling me you wouldn’t cross the street if you saw some black dude coming at you alone at night.

John, stop it, I said. You’re late, I gestured to the clock in my old Toyota Corolla, back when I had a car. It was ten minutes fast, a fact you never seemed to remember despite constant reminding.

You know you would, you said, as though that settled things.

Go, I said. Not mad. More annoyed than anything. I knew where I stood. Knew I was right. That I was better than you. That I was doing enough. You were openly racist, John. I mean, sure you had a friend here and there, some token East Indian kid you cheated off of in high school. And you always did like Asian girls. I remember waiting for that special look you’d get every time Amy from across the street pulled up in her cute little Honda, the new one with black rims and a giant Hello Kitty sticker, a memento she’d no doubt slapped on the back window the minute she’d hit the mall—a big fuck you to mom and dad for not buying her the BMW like she’d wanted.

Hey! you shouted when you thought I was inside.

Oh, hey you! she yelled back, sharp dimples beaming back at you.
What are you doing? I called from the porch as I see your tall frame stiffen as you recalculate, stealthily altering your directive as you pivot. How is this dude going to spin this, I wonder, eyes locked on your expression, now completely doe eyed--seemingly smitten with my presence.

Nothing, babe, you lied, looking quickly over your shoulder as Dimples shut her door.

I felt my body grip. Jaw drop in amazement. The gall on this dude, I thought. I am standing right here.

What’re you doin’ up there all alone? you asked, cheerful and mischievous to divert my attention. Moments later you were up the stairs with me against the wall. It didn’t take much with us.

What is it about cute Asian girls? I asked later, as you found us a new movie that wasn’t out yet. I waited as you let the question sit, watching the blue light’s reflection shift as you kept your eyes on the screen.

John, I said.

Yeah, babe? you asked.

I said, shifting my weight against the wall to face you, What is it with you and Asian girls?

Nothing, you said, leaning back against the back of the bed. I just… you paused, as if racking your mind for a genuine answer. It’s like, don’t be mad, you said, cupping my thigh with a firm hand. What can I say? you asked, your words slow and deliberate, I have a type. You shrugged and grinned at this last word, as if admitting to taking the last of the milk.

Excuse me?
It’s like they say, you laughed, all Asians look alike. I guess I like Asians… because they all look like you? you said grinning big as you reached for my cheek my. Now, stop bitching about stupid Asian girls and give me that ass! you exclaimed, flipping me over to wrestle away my worries, my heart felt convictions.

*I guess this is okay*, I heard an inner voice saying. *I guess this has to be okay*. It felt too good in that moment, my tan arms pushing against your pale skin. Too good to not be better. Too good not to be interrupted by petty worries of harsh consequences. Collateral emotional damages sure to come.

It didn’t matter how I felt later, as long as there was this. This immediate connection. Your confident hands leading me in what felt to be a deliberate and practiced performance. It was never the actual act itself. Not the vulgar moments even now I fight to tune out. But the comforting process, the loving gesture of your hand bracing the nape of my neck, in those moments I felt wanted. Felt present. As though I was fulfilling some greater role, my character enacting her destiny. I had won. I was a part of something bigger than myself.

But it was never real, was it? We both felt it in the sharp inhale afterwards. I could see it in your face as I searched it fiercely for some sign of life. It wasn’t there. The it. The thing. In that space I squinted hard, hoping there I’d find my match. A secret soul would reveal itself in the pause between the animal act and the fall back to earth.

I saw nothing. Only eyes, blue and foreign staring back at me. Daring me to expose myself. And there I was, a vulnerable stomach of air on borrowed time trying to comprehend this person in front of me. And then there it goes, just as swiftly as it came. The moment passes as a sort of blankness washes over me. A dull numbing sensation.

I am alone, I realized. Profoundly so.
But I do believe you wanted me. In some way or another, you liked having me around. You were always grabbing my ass. It made me furious at first. Livid. Don’t fucking touch me like that, I’d say. Not while we’re in public.

You like it, you’d say and double down on the PDA. I was yours in this way and I guess I grew to like it, to need it. The reaffirming. The affection. The devotion that I wanted to be there as I glanced across the room to see you lean hard in to the neck of some pretty blonde thing, straight Dutch hair against a neon tank. There was nothing to be done. I gave you the eye as you waved me over.

This is Stephanie, you said, extending an arm of invitation as if to say, Look here, silly girl. I’m not hiding a thing. Hi, Stephanie. How is the rest of your night going? or something to that effect. Why am I having this conversation? Analyzing this poor girl as though she’d stolen my insides. My jaw locked into a visceral smile. You’ve been with my boyfriend, I’d scream from behind kind eyes.

You can’t have him tonight, I’d imply, grabbing his wavering hand and holding tight as his eyes wandered over her skin. You have to give it to her— the girl is five-eleven with a beach-worn tan and legs for days. What am I supposed to do here? I’d wonder. Run away, a voice would whisper, hard at the back of my gut as I watched other unofficial couples talk over one another, their terrible Top Forties roaring.

Walk away, the voice would say. Leave him to it.

And so, I did. I let them have it. Go ahead, I’d think.

I’ll find my power elsewhere.
And I would for a second. Cozy on up to one of your friends. The big one with the stupid nickname I don’t have the energy right now to remember. Hey! I said. Desperate smile. Feigned interest. Touch his arm. Ask about his chest, his leg, one of a dozen body parts clearly injured in the game that day. You played great out there, I said, glancing back your way.

Thank God we have boys like you on the team! And there it was—that got your attention, I’d think as you excused yourself from baby girl and swiftly headed my way.

What’s up over here? you said, that deep “I’m a man” baritone resounding from your chest.

Not much, I replied taking a sip from my victory red cup as Tribal Tats lost his attention elsewhere.

Hey, I said, catching your glance back at the blonde across the room giggling with her model-thin friends. Can I talk to you for a second?

Sure, you said, half distracted. What’s up? Nothing, I mumbled reaching for your hand.

Can we go outside?

We found a quiet place on the porch. A bright, uncovered light swarmed with night bugs constantly straying into your cheek. Attacking you from all sides. I braced myself against the railing. Chipped paint cut into sweaty hands. I shook as I began.

Are you seeing that girl again?

Wh-at? you asked disgustedly.

Dude, I said.

Jen, you said, your voice stern—a warning. Not this again.

I saw it, I said. I saw them in the sink.

Wait, what? he asked, a smile of genuine confusion across his face.
I said, The pan man, right there in the sink. You couldn’t—you couldn’t even clean them up, you idiot.

Wait, he laughed, What in the hell are you saying right now?

I found the mashed potatoes, John. They were just sitting there in the big, silver pot. You shifted your weight onto the slouching wall behind you. I saw that shit in the sink, John Campbell, I hiss. They were there, I hear myself repeating for the umteenth time. Just like she said they would be… I say rubbing both palms hard against closed eyes.

Dude, you said. Stop.

Me stop? I asserted more than asked.

Dude, you repeated slowly. Calmly. I seriously have no idea what you are taw-l-kee-n uh-bow-t.

The mashed po-ta-toes, John. I snapped. When was the last time you cooked, huh? You eat burritos. You microwave things. Who the fuck is cooking you elaborate-ass, garlic and chive, fucking potatoes?

These were the questions. These petty-ass, psycho-sounding series of inquires that are the irritating symptom of a much larger problem. I am and will forever be in “the instigator.” Whether it was something small like reconsidering the selfish practice of waking your significant other at three in the morning to the inconsiderate sound of some obnoxious YouTube video, or something big like the accusation of infidelity and the utter lack of personal morality as a human being, I was and always will be the one to address the issue.

And even now, with this dude who shall remain nameless. It always seems to end up the same way. In my limited experience, why is it that we, be in the are the one who always have to
ask the hard questions? Where is this going? I cannot stand to ask that empty question a single more time and yet moments ago, years after fighting my way through humiliatedly sacrificing myself on the altar for you, why am I still reduced to repeating and prying and being the needy, girl stereotype? Do I seek it out? Men who cannot possibly reciprocate or simply display emotion?

Conversation verbatim:

Me: Well, so I know you hate talking about this…

Him: [Silence.]

Me: It’s just the last time we talked, you suggested that maybe… well, it seemed like maybe you were wanting to move to Oregon.

Him: Yeah, I said that.

Fast-forward thirty minutes:

Me: I just want someone who wants me. Who wants to be with me, you know?

Him: [Silence.]

Me: Hello?

Him: Uh, God… [Exasperated sigh]

Me: What?

Him: It’s always the same sh— with you! Why does the conversation—literally every time we talk—come down to the same thing? You’re so ANNOYING.

Me: [speaking as softly as possible] It is not always the same. Last week, maybe three days ago, you said you wanted to move to one place, correct?

Him: Yeah…
Me: And now you are saying you would like me to possibly move up there to a different place? Is that correct?

Him: God, yes! UH. What do you want me to say?

Me: I want you to say something nice.

Him: [Silence.]

Me: Hello?

Him: I have to go [cocky annoyed voice—picture a just lovable sweetheart transition into a dejected trust fund baby, you know, playing video games while having serious conversation about the next big step].

Me: [Hangs up phone]

Me: [Calls back immediately—realizes I have learned nothing since you].

Him: What’s up? [Arrogant silence]

Me: [Blanket apology followed by furious renege of apology] I am tired of apologizing. I am not being petty here. I think it is fair to want to know where this is going after two years. Do you not?

Him: What do you want me to say?

Me: Can you just God damn (hate saying that to him: it’s extra offensive and feels as if its slander has undercut my whole plea)?

Him: I love you.

Me: [brief pause of contempt] I love you, too.

[Both simultaneously hang up]

Disappointment.

It’s that same disappointment. Suddenly, I am back on that porch with you, John.
I’ll be right out, Jim-bo, you called, deciding you’d won the contest. What? you repeated.

Nothing, I said.

Okay... you said smiling.

You knew I had little self-control, especially when it came to voicing my opinion. By now, I had learned to pick my battles. We had so many. I could keep quiet when we were in public. Most of the time, anyway. And we were mostly together in public. You were always with your friends—all of whom were decidedly yours—and I was always with you. We never got to finish anything. I think that’s why the fights got so bad. We were all backed up. Months of unresolved tension released in my screaming and hitting away your systematic venom. Hours consoled on the shoulders of pitying strangers at parties through my hysterical, nose-running sobbing.

I was so exposed. No one ever saw your words bite me. Just the blithering aftermath of my endless rage.

I learned to keep my thoughts to myself around your friends. They weren’t all white, but they knew the rules. Boys win. Girls lose. That’s pretty much it. I’m not saying all your friends were bad. I liked most of them, in fact. Like Tommy Jensen. Everybody loved Tommy. He was so sweet with his chubby, little face, and round keg-like body. Remember when he used to take off his shirt and sing to everybody? Like pull the cord on the stereo and stand up on the counter slurring gibberish at us until we all paid attention?

Err’y buddies listen, he would say (That’s right. “Err’y buddies listen.”). Have I godd’a song-ferr-yewww! as he drunkenly launched into “Sweet Caroline” for the third time that night. I
loved Tommy, John. I adored your friends, and no not like you’re thinking. But they all had a code. Even Tommy.

They all knew what you were up to. All of them did. They kept quiet about girls coming over when I was out of town. About that blow-up-doll of a whore, Stacey, with her absurd aftermarket tits and those ridiculous fake nails with all that rhinestone crap glued all over them. She was trash, John. Not trying to start anything--I’m just saying. I knew what was happening, but I couldn’t prove it. I couldn’t get you to admit the real stuff until months later when you could safely convince me, *It was a long time ago, Babe. None of that stuff matters now.*

And they were all there with you. Your boys. All there to back you up. To pretend as a group that you’d all gone to see some movie I know you never saw. I don’t know where you were, but Brady was terrible at timelines and Cayden was shit at lying. He always left the room when you started listing off your montage of cleverly crafted bullshit.

I get it, though. They were your bros. Brotherhood dictates that they back up your story, regardless of its confused timeline and weak plot points. We got home around one ‘er two. Headed back out to Miller’s place after that. So-and-so bought a thirty-rack, code for: I was obligated to drink more and therefore unconnected to my actions thereafter. Eyes averted, confirming head nods from the peanut gallery. Those things might’ve happened, but there were holes in the story. The phrase, *it was just the guys,* never really meant what it claimed. But there they were, just the guys, sitting around the tattered upholstery, thick white legs draped over broken chair arms, hair-of-the-dog beers in hand nodding along and to your words, eyes on the screen of whatever game was on that day. And I get it. The silence. Secrets kept. This was college. You deserved to live out your glory days in private. It’s all part of the privilege, isn’t it?
The bonds between women are weak. Girls hate each other, you would say. The men on this team are my brothers. They will never be loyal to you. And they weren’t. The girls weren’t either. You made damn sure of that.

I knew what would happen. I never won when you opened our debates up to the floor. I hated that word as though winning some secret contest only you knew was in effect. That was your tendency, though, to make a competition out of the smallest occasions. But you were in good company. All of you boys were in constant, open battle for posturing. The hierarchy was transparent.

Calling shotgun for instance: See the guy I date now, or whatever you want to call it, people I’ve dated since, have always let the girl, whoever she was, have the front seat. Maybe that’s not fair though. I was usually dating, seeing, years of ongoing flirting with these modern-day, would-be gentlemen. A group of four-five people decide to crash newest action movie. All get outside to realize I am the only girl, a fact I am decidedly against taking advantage of, at least in situations with spatial constraints. Hey, guys, I usually say, I’ll take back-middle. I’m the smallest—just makes sense. At which point my boyfriend, or the dominant head-runner for the job, quickly darts eyes to each of his boys indicating to refuse this arrangement as reluctant cohort move to the back of said vehicle.

This has been my general experience, excluding time with you, of course. Sure the guys growing up, sweaty, selfish high school boys anxious to assert dominance over the weaker-willed pacifiers of the herd would fight for positioning. Race out to their hand-me-down pickups or souped-up Rice Rockets (their words, not mine). But these kids were fighting for the driver’s
seat. An extension of their imagined, sexual prowess—their constant *Bitch, I’m a boss* mentality. They were showing off for us. Driving was still a novelty. Girls the main objective.

Not you though.

Your group sought to ignore our gender entirely. I mean, fuck. We were lucky we got to ride along at all, am I right? Boys all dressed in some derivative of the fraternal uniform. Rugger shorts or worn khakis. Neon tanks over tanned biceps. All kicking shins and hooking ankles in those damn boating shoes. I stood back idly as you grappled over who sat where. Arms crossed, I waited back on the threadbare front lawn as this cute, Asian couple pedaled home from school.

I forced a smile at the girl as she waved hesitantly, nearly hitting the curb. Your boys laughed, as you gestured for me to hurry up.

Sit on my lap, babe, you said, patting your thighs. I saved you the best seat.

Up front? I asked.

Yeah, silly, you said. You’ll just duck down if we see cops. It’s fine. Trust me.

I wasn’t just a second-class citizen in the car, I was barred from public debate as well. And while I’ll admit it was unlikely intentional that you all chose to bicker about sports I had no interest in researching—I’ve never been that kind of girl, the pseudo baseball fan who flaunts her fitted jersey and posts generic “This girl LOVES her (insert team)!” updates to social media. No. Just no. I mean, I’ll do a lot of things for attention from boys, but the parroting ESPN highlights in short-shorts and a child’s tee makes me…. uncomfortable.

And then there were the more serious talks. Abortion. Gay rights. Gun control. Racism.
I found it was best if I kept predominantly quiet during these interactions. In the beginning I spoke, don’t get me wrong. Raising my voice to finish my sentence, only to be sneered at sideways. Overruled.

So, adapted. Laughed when the situation called for it. But for the most part, I sat dormant. Stretched out on the floor. Black yoga pants under your oversized team sweater. I lived in that thing--smelled like you. Instead of talking, I watched. Examined faces. The Gay Issue seemed to get a lot of airtime in your living room.

Jimmy, the dumb one, made a claim: I don’t care about faggots goin’ around humpin’ each other in their butts, or whatever, he said opening the conversation to the room. They all knew my mom was gay. At this Brett, the fat dickhead as I like to call him, looked down at me daring me to speak up. I knew that was pointless in this arena. I was the only girl after all--they expected me to voice my liberal, self-righteous opinion. I refused them the satisfaction. I switched legs in my stretch. Silence, or rather indifference, spoke volumes. Don’t engage.

And I didn’t have to. I knew you’d have something to say. Even if you did argue both sides of that particular issue, adjusting for audience of course, you knew how strongly I felt. You gave my thigh a little pinch as you took the floor.

What bugs you so much about the gays, Jimbo? you asked. Your daddy touch you when you were little? The focus shifted, the boys joined in on clowning Jimmy. And there it was. Redirected. Might not have been how I would’ve put it, but it was appreciated. Unspoken agreement. I kept my politics to myself, and lived my victories through you. You were special. diligent guise of honor. You worked hard at it. Name dropping and intermittent historical references. Quotes from articles you skimmed online just minutes before. Statistically blah blah blah. make them believe. To convince them all you were a true elite. Recounting past hunting
excursions, the kind involving foxes and horseback, I imagined. Old money, English traditions and cropping whips. Detailed nonsense later came to recognize as exaggerated word vomit.

Your professors who afforded you special privileges. Excused absences. Pushed back due dates. All because you wore the same brown corduroys and button-up flannels they remember wearing to class back in the late seventies. They saw you as a kindred spirit, not a cheap-ass with an eye for sturdy hand-me-downs found raiding your uncle’s when you helped him move back east.

Make everyone see you a certain way. As a man. A white man. But not just that. It was much more than just proving your whiteness. Any one-toothed, sister-loving redneck could do that. But you, you had that sandy blonde hair. And those eyes… If there was ever a doubt, ever a question in any man’s mind about where you got that yacht-tanned skin, you could just flash him those Christ-blue eyes of yours and he’d shut up about any Cherokee nation he thought he might have seen in you.

But it wasn’t just your master-race coloring that gave you Aryan privilege. No, it was much more than that. It was in your character. Or lack thereof.

I’m not saying white men lack character. I know that’s what you’d say if I were to put it to you face-to-face. No, I am not accusing white men of any inherent evil. Just you and your warped personification of this American tradition. This reimagining of our cultural past to fit your norms. Plantations were these big, Romantic symbols of a better time, a simpler life now lost to the bitching and moaning of the entitled, black man and feminist, left wing sympathizers. You hated them. Hated everything you thought they stood for. Hated anyone who got in the way of your exclusive, Confederate flag-waving, American dream.
And despite my majority white heritage, despite my openness to every man’s opinion, even those with whom I did not agree, despite you dating me, you always counted me as one of them. One of those freedom-hating, lesbian types, who wanted to take away your guns and your God given right to extra-marital affairs once your first wife lost her tight body after baby number two. You hated me, John. I was everything you were against. And you wanted me to know it.

You wanted us to know it. To know you were better. Inherently so. Came from pure-driven, finely cultivated, good old American stock. You were established, God damn it. And you believed in Him, too when the occasion called for it. I watched you work them, Johnny. Anyone who challenged you. Some guy in a bar questioning your offhanded claim about the role of the U.S. in the Middle East. The gears were constantly turning inside you, I could see it in your jaw, forever chewing over your options. What historical reference you could make next to add credence to this ignorant claim of yours? You didn’t care if he was right. It was the principle of the matter, you said to me.

And when your limited supply of stock, historical examples ran out, the same four or five examples we all learned back in the eighth grade, the ones you made it a point to learn key dates for and would reference in any verbal confrontation, when those didn’t work, you channeled other Nordic gifts.

What was the best stance you could take against his challenge with bulked shoulders held high, feet planted firm, squared straight on with your opponent, so if your words failed you could simply take him out the old fashioned way. Regardless, you had the upper hand.

A lot of careful considerations went into appearing to belong to an elite order of the white upper class. Old money, but not the kind Gatsby was after. West Coast, Bay area elite. Newer
money, less social doctrine, adopted traditions from family back East. More to prove—equally racist.

A circle you were born into, but whose parents’ declining success was marred greatly by the market crash. Pressured them to cash out, to under-sell the million dollar mansion in the hills, modest for that area. Your childhood home in marbled counters and crown molding you took for granted until later. Your inherent prowess stripped from you as a result.

This all happened right around the time I met you. Or rather, around six months later, when things had gotten serious. You took me home with you one holiday, I think Christmas. Supposedly we went to meet your parents. Before we left you reminded me they had sold the house a few weeks earlier. A decision that forced them to relocate to the family yacht, where we’d all be staying. I’d never been on a yacht, I said.

What do you think? you asked when we arrived at the marina, dusk and cold enough to see our breath.

It’s nice, I said, disappointed at the modest vessel nestled closely between other similar ships.

What? Bigger than you think? you asked, taking my bags on top of yours and easily climbing aboard. Something about the way you stepped, apt in those leather shoes trained for slick surfaces called forth a memory. I had been on a boat before. My dad had friends that went sailing, guys he’d met in the Navy.

Is there such thing as a catamaran? I called up, unsure if I was meant to follow you or if you’d be back to help me cross the gap, the black water lapping softly between the step and the dock. We watched each other in silence, the water and I. It beckoned to me. I imagined the quick panic as my foot slipped. Sharp cold sinking in as my heel broke the surface. A hard snap as my
leg cracked against the platform, plunging the rest of my body into the murky depths. I gasped
there alone on the dock, watching helplessly the mess of frenzied bubbles as they escaped my
mouth in muffled screams.

Hey you, you said, leaning over the deck. What’re you doing?

Nothing, I said. Still fixed on the darkness of the gap.

Just climb up, you said. You’ll be fine. I nodded. We gotta get you some Sperry’s, you
said, holding up your worn, leather shoes. The character stitching a symbol of this sacred artifact.

You lived in those shoes, man. I began learning quicker. Actively observing from within
your shadow. You never forced me there. Not outright, anyway. I gladly hid and took in all the
scripture, every ritual studying under your social status could afford. I found sanctuary in quietly
cataloguing the special traditions of your people. But it wasn’t until the shoes that I noticed it.
My reverence at those foul old moccasins.

You wore them like tattered badges of honor. Worn smooth from summers on the Delta,
the worse they looked, the more they faded and warped the greater their value grew. Discrete
symbols of confederacy. I watched as you shared a moment, an old man nodded to you once at
nice restaurant you took me to once for my birthday.

What was that? I asked. You shook your head, your chin covered in those gross red hairs
you insisted on growing out. They looked trashy, I thought—clashed with your blonde hair. You
shook your head and finished your beer in one go, slamming the glass on the counter as if to
close the subject. Acknowledgements were made, ones I could never fully comprehend.
I bought myself a pair of Sperry's. I wanted plain ones, but the only ones in my size at the store by my house were leopard-print. Probably designed for kids. I sent you a picture right away, couldn’t wait to show you. An hour passed with no reply.

*What you don’t like them?*

*no, they r fine,* you replied.

*FINE?* I wrote. *They’re awesome! Aren’t you happy? I got real boating shoes! Now, I can fit in when we go visit your parents on the little boat this summer. I thought you would like them…*

*LOL. they r not just boating shoes, u silly idiot,* you replied. Silly idiot. Remember that? I can’t seem to picture first time you used it. The context is lost. It was something I said that made me seem dumb. You were trying to be nice, to hide that side of you that demanded you bash people whenever they misspoke. But in your efforts to suppress this impulse you began, *You sill...y… i-d-i-ot.* We both laughed. I knew you were trying.

Now, the phrase, a term of endearment coined post-Jack, when we decided we were going to make it through anything, stick together no matter what, still carried some sting with it.

*Oh, haha. My bad,* I wrote, instantly humiliated. I scowled at the mirror by my door, disgusted with the ignorant girl it so delicately framed. I growled at her as I rewrapped the new shoes. Why? I said, moaning at her angry face. What were you thinking? You have no money, you idiot… I scolded, tucking the lid back into place before sliding the box under the bed. I would return them later. It was better like this. The new leather was cutting my heels anyway.

Like many of the efforts I made to adapt in those days, the shoes were a tell. A big, leopard-print fire alarm that shrieked *cheap imposter* and exposed my endless ignorance to the ways of the elite. I was not on the inside. For you, the shoes were a confirmation. A badge of
your worth. A standard designator recognized by your fellow upperclassmen. An inherited vestige you held claim as heir of your great Aryan lineage.

Wild-maned Viking forefathers fought gallantly to slay dark-haired heathens in order to pass down their Nordic heritage. They raped the women of lesser villages just for you. Speared the babies of weaker men so that you may wear their fair-skinned genetics. And man were you proud. One of the first and only people I have met in California who still believes natural, blonde hair comes bound with a superior cunning.

Gave you the right to call black people the “n-word” and drive your dad’s old truck around tailgating old ladies in your strategically short, above the knee khakis. But the khakis were just a fraction of the overwhelming catalogue of ornaments and ritual that went into crafting this guise of your continued status. A seamless toolbox of totems you held sacred in order to gain passage to the better things in life.

But like I said, I saw you. Saw through the cracks. All the way down. I saw your darkness and I let it be. Kept your secrets. Built a space where your demons could hide.

But you were good. I watched you work, work hard each and every day to craft this established, self-assured persona. Each morning you woke up just ten minutes before your first class, usually scheduled no sooner than noon. You drank a lot in those days—I imagine you still do—liked to give yourself plenty of time to recover before school.

I would wake you. Gently rubbing your arm, careful not to seem too urgent. Mornings weren’t exactly your strong suit. The smallest offense could set you off. Not that you yelled. You rarely yelled. You were obnoxiously quiet. Hatefully so. No eye contact. Just a hard scowl at the wall ahead.
I came to expect it, the raw contempt. Each morning, I woke with a jolt. Looking frantic, as though lost. The sensation of running, of being chased. What did I do? How could I have done something already? How could I fix it? I couldn’t. I was already in trouble. Each day I began in guilt.

I was deeply depressed at my not being enough. I felt it coated deep within my chest, this thick contempt that lingered long into the day. Maybe you’d ignore my first few calls that night. You did that a lot, you know? Just one form of unspoken punishment for whatever my offense was that day. I learned to tread lightly. No matter what I did, I was a woman. And that is, after all, the original, unforgivable sin, is it not?

And yet, despite this seeming passivity, you managed to put on quite a good show. It was like you were a different person. One second you loathed me down to my very core and the next you were light, and cheerful. Ready to start your day, all on your terms of course. I’d watch in awe as you slid out of bed, scootching like a little kid on your butt from under that green blanket of yours.

It’s a comforter, you corrected me once. I learned to cherish that worn flannel, a part of your inheritance. Some name brand, Tommy Hilfiger or LL Bean, you’d had since high school. Way too pricey to buy in this economy. A symbol of your family’s position in life. Greater than.

Oh you can take the inside out? I asked once as I watched you make the bed, readjusting the contents inside.

This way the feathers’ll stop poking ya in the face, you answered, tapping my nose with your forefinger. I never liked down pillows growing up. The feathers are sharp; tiny thorns jutting out of the fabric. Made my skin itchy all over.
Aw, thank you, babe, I said, always taken a little off guard whenever you went out of your way to accommodate me, even more so when you noticed on your own accord. Usually, I had to bring something up more than a few times for you to take notice. Could you not turn the lights on when you got home from the bars?

Yes, it was your home. But it wasn’t quite fair. I stayed there most nights. Packed my life away into an overnight bag, forced to anticipate the needs of both that evening: toothbrush (I didn’t trust that I was the only one using the one I’d left there), deodorant, hairbrush, clothes for school, books, computer, charger, makeup (in a separate bag, because heaven forbid your roommates see what I actually looked like. If they had, all would surely point you in the direction of more beautiful and attentive female alternatives—hey, it had happened before), phone charger, snacks, and whatever else I might’ve left in there from a previous night.

You never stayed at my place. We’d stopped discussing the possibility by then.

And I was trusting, Johnny. Pretended to be cool with it whenever you text me an hour later than you’d promised. Sure I’d be fine if you stayed out at the bars with your friends. I knew most of them hated me at this point. Would dare you to pick up other girls. Touch their butts just to see what would happen. And I encouraged it. Not the butt-touching, but the brotherhood part. I wanted you to feel free. I could worry about how I felt later.

Silly girl.


All the while the doubt swelled.

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Is this shirt good? I inspected my figure. It’s not the shirt. The shirt is fine.

It was me. I was not enough. Sharp pangs of doubt began to blister in my gut. They spread, burrowing deeper into my being. Faster. Towards my chest. Spreading, they began to poison me completely, filling the open cavity with sadness and cold night’s air. But I had to come home early. For sleep. For work. Homework. Grooming rituals.

I knew we had different rules then, Johnny. You made sure I knew where I stood.
So, I don’t remember everything about our time together, but I do remember waking up that first morning. I remember coming over drunk. John was out of town. Hooking up with his ex-girlfriend. I found out. I wanted to hurt him. I called you.

I woke up to you kissing me. I went with it. You got lucky.

It happened again a few times.

Once I woke up naked and asked, Did we do it?

You laughed and said, No, of course not.

Why am I naked then?

You were throwing up… a LOT. You wanted to take a shower. I wrapped this little blankly around you. See?

Ha, I laughed. Blanky?

I can’t tell you much more. I honestly don’t remember. I can tell you that you’re a good soul. You really are, Jacky.

I had been in relationships before. Why was this so different? John was by no means my first rodeo. I remember making a decision, an agreement with myself in the beginning. I guess maybe I’d just always been the boss before. I’d become a firm believer in the idea that somehow with the right words, with the right body, you could somehow make a person love you. But it wasn’t working. Still nothing. And now there I was. Alone. It amazes me how lonely I felt back then. Especially when we were together.

At least when we were apart I could imagine you better. Fill in some of the blanks with more agreeable alternatives. In your absence at least I could pretend you were missing me. Assign extra meaning to the words that you wrote. It’s sad how much I cherished those
messages. Powerful little notes I could keep forever, private documents in my possession alone that somehow eternalized the bond between us. Our secret connection made concrete by the tangibility of these offhanded promises of affection. They validated my obsession. Proved some bet I’d made with myself that day in the car. I was going to win this thing. Not that day, but some day. I would show you. I would beat this thing, this game of who wants who less, this ache in the depths of my stomach every minute I waited for your call.

But I was never going to win, was I? I see that now. I set myself up. The game was rigged from the start. And I just remember lying there, nauseated with neglect. More lonely than I’d ever felt asleep in my own bed. But I stayed. Held on violently.

I wasn’t ready for good yet. I was young. Still... I don’t think I ever loved you. Not really. Just saw something. Something different.
I woke up this morning and felt something nagging at me.

I can honestly say, I don’t remember exactly how I ended things with you.

I mean, I know that I was the one who did it—the one who pulled the trigger. Sure you had tried to put some distance there. Stopped answering my frivolous texts. Well, let’s just say you didn’t answer them all, or at least not right away, anyway. You were doing the right thing. It was pretty clear what I wanted out of this. But I, for the life of me, cannot recall specific details.

All I remember was that I did and that you were, well, not compliant, but you agreed to keep things quiet. I didn’t know then, know that someone else knew about it, about us. I guess I should’ve known. Boys are like little kids when it comes to sex. They can’t wait to show off to their friends the lizard they’ve just caught in a jar, even if it does die a week later from neglect.

So, I guess it made sense then, you agreeing to not talk about it. Because I guess I wouldn’t want to talk about losing my new, pet lizard either if it shed its tail, its prized appendage, simply as a means of escaping your grip, of getting away. Not exactly something to go bragging about.

I don’t know what you said to Ted, but he didn’t talk either, not for a long time at least. After that last time we hung out, the last time we met in private, that winter break all those years ago. It was the first time you’d been to my place, the only time, in fact, but that’s not surprising. I hated that house, the one on Wall Street. I swear it was half the reason I stayed with John so long. That place was disgusting, and underground. I remember thinking that I should feel embarrassed when you came over, but I was too drunk to care about what you thought. I felt so
powerful at the time. I don’t think we’d spoken in weeks, and I was definitely back in contact with John. You had to have known that.

I honestly can’t recall if I’d slept with him in between our two previous trysts, or whatever you call them, but I’m fairly certain I did. At any rate, I felt like a boss. In control. Beautiful. Desirable. I feel bad now saying it, but I was so proud back then. For getting you to answer my texts. I didn’t even have the decency to call. For convincing you to come meet up after some party. I swear it was raining, and I vaguely remember you showing up on your bike. You’d be drinking, too. Had come all those blocks in the cold to my shithole duplex, with its dingy carpet and ratty, old couches. You were so sweet, Jacky. You just looked at me. Smiled. Kept your thoughts to yourself. Tried your best not to stare at our torn oversized bean bag, sad and sagging to the floor.

I walked you through the maze of hallways to my closet of a room and unlocked the padlock my roommate, Cody, had installed outside my door. There was no lock on the inside, which made sleeping alone scary. The boys next door sold a lot of drugs and my roommates were always inviting unsavory people in and out of my place with no consideration or warning. One stumbled into my room once. I glared at his swaying, hopeful silhouette. Wet, heavy breathing permeated the childish closet of a room. Both hands braced against the doorway, the figure lifted a leg to cross the threshold.

Get the fuck out, you faggot piece of shit, I barked.

Ah, he yelped, fumbling for the handle as he quickly closed the door behind him. I listened quietly as confused footsteps echoed off the sticky linoleum of the kitchen floor until I heard the front door open and slam.

I screamed into my pillow.
The next day, there was a note and a handful of wildflowers on the kitchen counter.

What’s that about? Cody asked.

Your stupidhomeless friend tried to come in my room last night.

Who? Houston?

Is that the gross one?

He’s harmless. Everyone got pretty messed up at the neighbors’ last night.

I don’t care. I don’t want him in here again.

What? No... Cody said. Come on… he teased in this sweet cartoon voice he used when he knew I was being unreasonable. Come on… he said and octave higher. Kimmm innnn… he continued, poking his stubby fingers around my neck and actually into my ears.

Stop it! I laughed. Cut it out, you filthy nakedmole-rat! I shrieked, batting him away.

He’s too scared to apologize in person, he said pushing the flowers with a persistent forefinger.

Yeah, well, he should be, I said, crunching the note as I dropped it onto the pile of overflowing trash spilling out of the neglected container. Are you ever going to take this out? I demanded, changing the subject.

I felt bad. Cody was right. Sure, the guy had absolutely no business coming into my room. Freak. I was very guarded there. Didn’t say much to the endless company of dudes that came through that place. They learned quickly. Don’t talk to me. Don’t look at me. Just don’t.

Come to think of it, you were actually the only guy I did have in that room. I was so proud of myself for getting you there. So proud that I was getting even with John. That I was being sneaky just like him. That I could be bad, too. It gave me a buzz. All that power. I remember sitting there on that white-iron daybed, sprawled out across the floral covers, the same
ones I had in high school. I remember sitting there and going over all the ways I had beaten John. How crushed he would be if he ever found out. How we would fight. How he would realize what he had done to me. See the weight of his own actions. Feel the aches of his own betrayal. How he would change.

I was so busy sitting there plotting in my little short-shorts, nothing special I picked for you, just what I happened to have on already to go to sleep. I was so busy thinking of all the clever things I’d say to John when he inevitably confronted me, that I forgot all about the fact that you were actually coming over.

It startled me when the phone rang.

Hello? I said, confused.

Hey, I’ve tried knocking, you said.

Oh, I said, Yeah, I can’t hear the front door from my room. I’ll be right out.

I panicked. I was so caught up in my plot for revenge, I kind of forgot about the logistics of the whole thing. The part where I was actually going to have to entertain you. You know, sexually. My buzz from the party earlier was long gone by then. I had been drunk the previous two times. So drunk. I hadn’t considered what it would be like sober. What we would do.

I remember us just sitting there. I took my sweet time answering the door. It wasn’t remorse I was feeling, more like regret. Like I didn’t want you, I realized in that moment. I could see you too clearly there, alone in my tiny, little room. I offered to smoke a joint, or you did. I can’t remember. And then, we sort of sat there, side-by-side, making small talk as I tried to think of a way to get you out of there.

I like your paintings, you said.

Oh, yeah, I said. Thanks.
Are your other roommates home? you asked.

Not sure, I said. I think so. Uh, I don’t know. Yeah, maybe.

Ride on, you said.

Then, silence filled the air. I felt you as you stared, looking me over trying to figure me out as I kept my gaze forward, eyes fixed on the door. You rubbed my back for a while. I kept my hands on my lap. You kissed my cheek. I turned to you. Gave you a peck on the cheek. The neck. Your ear. Tried to get into it. You shifted your weight. Repositioned yourself.

I have to stop! I said, pushing your hands off my shoulders.

Oh, you said.

No, I said apologetically. Nothing’s wrong. I just have to pee.

Oh, you said.

I’ll be right back, I said. Roll yourself another joint, or something, I suggested, making sure to shut the door tight behind me.

I didn’t have to pee. I tried anyway. Stayed locked in the bathroom as long as I could. Stared at myself in through the toothpaste caked on the mirror. Opened the white medicine cabinet behind it. Looked through the drawers under the sink. Found some odd pills stashed away in an old Tic Tac container. Found dried out weed in a used Advil bottle.

Fuckin hippies, I said.

My roommates were hippies. Wild ones. No shoes. Lots of drugs. The place just looked shady. Four rooms, lower unit, half underground ceilings Pungent. One, the tamest of all, brought home a new girl every week. When I first moved in, I met three separate girls all within the span of a single night and a day. Each one was entirely unique from the last. From neck tattoos and dreads, to ultra-preppy, to expert-level slut-bag—he had the whole range covered.
I remember him introducing me to each girl as though she were the one. His sincerity was baffling, as though he truly believed this two o’clock girl could be it, the real thing. I never said a word. I can’t say why, but I respected his game. He never lied to the girls. Never explicitly promised them anything. Yet it still felt like a lie. The way he made them lunch or dinner. False advertising, or something. And he was the nice one.

I doubt any of them knew who you were, let alone the significance of my sleeping with you. Not that it would’ve mattered, had they seen you. No one cared. Maybe you were my new boyfriend. Maybe you were the old one. Maybe I had met you that night on the street. I don’t think they actually ever met John. Like ever. In fact, I can’t remember him even being there. Like I can’t picture him that living room. I don’t see him sitting in that ratted blue couch, one arm broken before I ever moved in. I can’t see him sitting there waiting for me to get ready or something on that nasty blue couch under that over-sized DEMOCRATS banner Cody stole from some event.

You know the one. You came over there. It was just the once, but I bet you remember that sign. It’s kind of hard to forget.

Either way, it didn’t matter, now that I think about it. No one cared. The roommates all had their own things going on. Traded sexual partners with the neighbors and their extended group of friends every other week. They were indifferent to John’s absence, at best. One less body to crowd the cramped space.

I didn’t care at the time. Or at least I didn’t think I did. I was embarrassed to bring people in. Had most friends wait out in the car. It was only temporary, I told myself. Great rent. Just a place to keep my clothes. And you know he didn’t care. John had friends. He wasn’t interested in meeting mine. Plus, he loved your place. He was the boss there. All his stuff was there. Plus, he
could tell me to leave if he wanted. Win-win. For him, anyway. Not a super sustainable way to live your life, though.

I was always at the mercy of his plans. Met him at his place. Your place. Ate wherever he wanted to go. Blew off plans with the people I cared about. Hung out with his friends. People who made it very clear to me from the start that they were in fact only his friends. Unless they were drunk, of course. Then, it was like walking through a gauntlet of handsy, over-sized children. Easily tricked into leaving you alone. Why don’t you grab us more shots from the kitchen, I would ask whenever I found myself cornered on the way to the bathroom. Suggest more booze. That usually did the trick. I don’t know why I went to those parties. I didn’t like many of the people there. Those I did like tended to leave early, or simply converted to douche bags after an hour or so playing beer pong, or the more direct "No one leaves until everyone’s blacked out in the kitchen" game.

I did what John did. And John did what was convenient. Weighed his options. Would his friends be there? Would the alcohol be free? Could he walk home after? Could he pass out on the porch couch if he couldn’t make the walk home? But what I wanted, my friends, my people, people I could actually talk to, people who played instruments, who read books. People who encouraged me to talk instead of cutting me off half way through a story, yelling, Ay! Who’s down more flip cup?

All of my people weren’t good enough. Too weird. Too far away. Too obnoxious. My support system was too inconvenient for John. And I allowed it. Forfeited my support group in favor of shitty, second-hand conversation from whichever rugby boy was waiting his turn in the next game of “please let me get so drunk I fit in.”

So, I would say, how is your night going?
What? he would yell, keeping his eyes on the girl across the room.

How’s your night? I would repeat louder, drowned by the sound of bad Top Forties blasting through five-foot speakers.

Crazy, right, he would say, doing his best to be polite.

Oh, yeah, I would nod, smiling at his obvious bluff. I want to kill myself, I would say, nodding enthusiastically as he unwittingly did the same. Have you seen John?

What? the guy would yell.

John? I would mouth.

Who?

Campbell! I would correct myself, finally spotting John from across the room.

Jenn-ay! he would call. Let’s go.

Well, it was nice talking to you, I would say, shaking the hand of confused boy as I made my way past the makeshift table, warped plywood with a thick coat of Keystone Light.

Finally, I would say, kissing John as he reached for my shorts. He was constantly grabbing me or smacking my ass as I walked by. Reclaiming what was his.

You ready for some of this? he would say, licking his lips in a joking manner. He wasn’t joking, but it seemed okay with me if he exaggerated the suggestion. We hooked up a lot.

Ew, stop, I would say, smiling as I pushed him, admiring my hands, made small by his big shoulders as we moved out the door.

You know you want this, he would say, doing his best impression of a girl seducing a man.

Yeah, yeah, I would say, rolling my eyes. Even when you’re gross you know I want you. And it was true. He was foul when he wanted to be. But I didn’t care. Needed the attention.
So there I was, in our narrow, white bathroom looking at myself look at myself back through the mirror and wondering exactly how I had gotten here. Of course, this wasn’t the first time I’d had this talk, nor was it going to be the last. All my questions, doubts, fears, emotions, guilt, desire, sadness, contempt, pain, anger consumed me at once. I was overcome with the distinct feeling of villainy and disgust. I was the bad guy.

It was me who kept this going, who lured you here with false promises and sweet nothings. I was the jerk in this scenario. It was me who coaxed an innocent heart into keeping secrets, into betraying deep friendships. It was me who brought you here, Jack, took you down with me in my sorrow, into the belly of this savage cave where demons sleep and hopes go to die. I was the bad guy. I was the one who would cause months of quiet tension between roommates, who facilitated your hard depression, who created an environment so poisonous you would feel forced to run away.

For years I blamed it all on John. He was a dick. He really was. I was a good person. I was justified. Exempt from the standard rules of morality. They no longer applied to me. I was just trying to survive. So, I was loyal. Distastefully so. I knew about the betrayal. I knew. I could always count on new evidence. A stray text at three a.m.. A strange, forgotten hoodie draped over his chair. Definitely not mine.

Who’s is this? I asked, holding out an obnoxious shade of neon-pink lip gloss.

Yours? he suggested.

No, I said, inspecting the sticky tube. JUICY it said in bold letters. A brand I’d never seen.

It’s yours, babe, he would say with complete confidence. Who else’s would it be?

*Wait... Is that mine?* I would think. *No. Absolutely not. Almost got me, little fucker.*
I knew, Jacky. I knew who he was even then. What he was doing. But I stayed. Earned my place. Invested myself fully for access in this secret society. And in this, I paid for my sins. Redeemed my unfaithful displays of devotion. I stopped seeing certain friends. Party girls he didn’t approve of. Cut ties with the guys I knew. My friends. All for this idea of a person who didn’t really exist outside of my creation of him and the little acts of kindness he let slip here and there.

Guys and girls can’t be just friends, he said.

Except for his friends, of course. He’d known those girls for years. They were different. I accepted this. It was a gesture. A proof of my new, easy-goingness I’d worked so hard to cultivate.

But I clung to my loyalty. My endless dedication to this monster. It purified me. Rendered all my crimes void. I could flirt openly, because he was secretly sleeping around. Could scream hate and spit vicious slander. I was only defending myself. It was him. The face of all my pain, the cause for all my sadness. I was not this person. He was responsible. The infectious root for all my misery and self-loathing. But that was only marginally true.

People like John are not malicious in nature, not generally speaking. They simply don’t care. Quite simple creatures, when you think about it. Total lack of inhibitions. Grabs the ass of his best friend’s girl right in front of the guy. Not because he’s making a point, asserting his authority. But simply because Janet has a particularly nice ass, and just happened to need a beer from the cooler, and John Campbell saw the opportunity.

Sure she got upset and called him out on it, but come on, what was her boyfriend going to do? They were teammates. Ruggers. Brothers. *He didn’t mean anything, babe.* Sure he didn’t.
There was no malicious intent there. Simply a shiny object, a piece of tinfoil placed in the bottom of a hollowed out log and left by a patient hunter for an unsuspecting raccoon.

Like in *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Did you ever have to read that one? Well, essentially, the raccoon grabs the shiny object and is too dumb to let go of his prize. Too fixated on the shiny thing, in this case, Janet’s ass, to let it go. The John Campbells of this world do bad things. They sleep with ex-girlfriends and kiss random party girls in front of their current partners because they lack self-control.

At some point a switch flips, the light in their eyes flickers off and all of a sudden they’re gone. All that stares back at you are those black, heartless shark eyes. Bloodlust. Liquor and flesh. Chew spit and sex. Utterly unconsciousness of the impact they have on others.

It was me who lacked the understanding. The willpower. Who refused to change. To see. Everything was out there, Jack. Right out in the open. John was pretty clear with me. Maybe I didn’t know *who* he was sleeping with, but I knew it wasn’t just me. I had the power. Could’ve made it stop right then and there. Right when I saw those cheap hoop earrings on the night stand. But no. I stayed. Choices, right?

Maybe that’s what I was doing in there all that time when I said I had to pee. Going through my options. A series of choices. I knew what I was choosing, what I was getting myself into. But I can’t say why. A social experiment in torture maybe. I don’t know exactly what happened in there, but whatever it was, whatever transpired in that grungy, hippie bathroom, in that vacant space of time, I changed. Made a decision. Made up my mind.

I must’ve been in there a while. By the time I came out, you were already in the kitchen. Waiting. Shoes on. One hand in your pocket, the other checking your phone. I knew that you
knew. I could tell. I just wasn’t ready for this. For us. Wasn’t ready to be with someone who wanted to be with me. Not yet anyway.

    Sorry, I said, smiling anxiously.
    Not feeling well? you asked knowingly.
    No, yeah… I lied. Sorry I made you come all the way out here.
    No worries, you said.

    I was back with John the next day. Like the very next day. He’d come back early to surprise me. The next time I saw you I was sitting on his lap. We were on your new couch. The one you two had just picked out together. He suggested you go with the beige. And of course John had already spilled freshly made chew spit on the light cloth. He never told you though. Just flashed you a shit-eating-grin and flipped the cushion over. But that was just the way things were, wasn’t it?
Jack: Then, Everything Went Back to Normal

Oh, man, Jacky. Today has been a long day. This entire semester feels like one long day though. I can’t even remember what was going on the last time I wrote you. I was probably tired though. Lonely. Disappointed. They all bleed together. Late nights. Binge watching crime dramas. Nice, neat little bow at the end of each story. Sure, there’s usually a cliff hanger in there. Detective stumbles on something big. New forensic evidence. A delayed eye-witness report. Whatever. One thing leads to another and the main character is granted the means with which he can make some greater connection just minutes earlier he was unable to see.

Wouldn’t that be a nice way to live? Making greater connections that allow you, the main character of your life, to press forward—to see the world for its true potential. Speak in clever, well-rehearsed quips. Guy better have done his homework, ‘cause we’re comin’ for him, or something less cliché. I don’t know what it is exactly. Why I get so sucked in to these hollow murder mysteries. I feel tethered to these fictional lives. Tethered to their skeletal sketch of the real human experience.

I don’t know, I must be clinging to something. Passing youth. My sense of immortality slipping away with each morning greeted by chronic back pain—I am too young for this nonsense. But am old enough for the constant questioning. What do you do? Perfect strangers violate my privacy with perfect ignorance that their questions are like little pebbles placed steadily on my shoulders until the weight drags me down to bed by the end of the day.

But I find small reliefs here and there. Set small restrictions on my TV binging. Lying on my bed now surrounded by used tissue and unfolded laundry I force myself to read. Dystopian novels mostly, I hate to admit. Doesn’t feel very noble reading about a young, female protagonist as she fights for the freedom of her people while I piss away more precious time staying home.
sick and in my last month of graduate school, racking up debt with compulsive online shopping as my peers defend theses or post pictures of destination weddings.

God, I would never spend so much on a wedding. Years of debt and stress all squandered in the pursuit of documenting the ideal version of holy matrimony. A single day. It blows my mind. The hours spent researching and collecting various tokens: personalized invitations, hand-crafted center pieces, home-grown baby succulents the maid-of-honor spent growing on her back patio for the better part of a year, and don’t forget the whole host of pre-ceremony, mini-ceremonies!

The engagement party, bridal ceremony, the compulsory bachelorette party in Las Vegas spent in the company of a mixed bag of friends from different circles all with varied personal agendas ranging from obsessive-compulsive taking of highly staged “candid” pictures to reflect on later to getting blacked out by five o’clock each night in order to escape the banal existence being lived out in the immediate years following their undergrad. All of these events I see, participate in to one degree or another. Recognize their design as a means of weeding out the less loyal friendships.

I hang back. Resist the urge to take on this added pressure. Sure I want to get married someday, Jacky—just not as the furious bride, twisting the blade of an ultimatum into the gut of some resistant, long-term boyfriend. I know I could find someone to agree to all of my terms—an adult version of my high school sweetheart. Someone who forfeits their life dreams to work as their own boss, to come and go as he pleases. There are a dozen boys I could name of the top of my head, or at least there were this time last year. Now, that number is likely cut in half.

But who wants that, you know? What am I ever going to do with a man who doesn’t see fit to chart out his own destiny? So I wait.
It is with these heavy thoughts that I make busy my idle hands. I get up. Gather the tools I need. Eyeliner, under eye concealer—they’re practically purple from listless nights spent numbing my brain to sleep. I nod to my reflection. Not so old as some might expect. Tight facial features, sharp cheekbones give off the illusion that I still belong in a three-bedroom one bathroom college house with limited privacy and no real plans to speak of.

Carefully, I sculpt my eyebrows. Wet the brush in the lid of my bottled water. Fill in the missing patches—patches likely rubbed away from wearing so much face paint in the first place. I want them thicker. More defined. People seem to respect me more when I do them this way. See me as more polished. More put together. Maybe they won’t ask me so many questions when I go in today. Maybe I can continue to hide out for just a little while longer. My cocoon phase.

It takes time, you know? Time to get back on your feet. Stop obsessing over petty details. No car. Thankless dayjob. Inferiority complex founded in minimum wage. Just enough to pay bills. Eat decently. Take out from expensive local restaurants. No one to eat with, or at least no energy to keep up appearances. Straight home to my cave. Heavy backpack biked six blocks down, ten blocks over. I really do enjoy those rides. My solitude.

But I’m pushing. Making little strides each day. Force myself to bed a bit sooner each night. Usually have to take some medication to do it. A laundry list of little white pills kissing my eyelids good night—a parting gift from the university’s health center. Little by little my paycheck dwindles. I start eating in. Stealing stray eggs and English muffins from the roommates. Milk the cereal and frozen food for all it’s worth. It’s a process, you know?

Got to work my way back up to the big works. Start reading new novel after work, I promise myself in my daily to-do list. Yeah, yeah… We’ll see how that goes, I think to the girl in the mirror.
But other than that, the constant guilty feeling I get in my chest when another season of “Who Gives a Fuck?” is over, other than not knowing where I am going to live when my lease is up in June, other than those petty trifles, things around here finally start to feel back to normal. I think where we last left things with my current boyfriend things were not looking good.

I had asked the big questions. Where do you see this going? Why should we fight to keep things together? All answered with silence or marked disdain. But that wasn’t the end of the conversation, nor the relationship for that matter. Two hours after I wrote that particular letter, after he and I hung up no closer to resolution than before, he called me.

It must’ve been nearly four a.m. I know because I always have a hard time sleeping after fights like those. Like I’m holding my breath until the next time we talk. I’ve gotten better over the years, at holding my breath. I don’t text as much, in the interim that is.

Nonetheless, I had been hurt. Felt the panic of another two years devoted to an indifferent individual. But there it was, a late-late call. His voice once gritted, now softened with affection.

Him: Hey.

Me: What’s up?

Him: Nothin… Hey, listen. I’m sorry about earlier, okay?

Me: Okay.

Him: You are important to me, you know?

Me: I know.

Him: And I’m sorry I don’t have all the answers. I just don’t want you to make that move just for me. Like I want you to have your own reasons for being up here.

Me: [Nods quietly]
Him: I want you to be happy, you know? I want us to be together, to live together. We’re in this okay?

Me: Okay, bud.

Things feel a little better. At least for now. I remember having this feeling before though. Temporary relief. It doesn’t always mean things will stay that way.

Like when John came back. This was back during round two. He’d been gone over break and was finally home for spring semester. I know because he called me the night before he left town. I ignored the call. Not because I was over it, not by a long shot. But you were over, the first and only time that ever happened. And I remember feeling conflicted as a devilish smile drew across my face. But it didn’t last. Moments later the guilt set in and I asked if you wouldn’t mind sleeping on the couch. Not a problem, you mumbled, I understand, you lied with sad eyes. I’ll just head home now.

My bad, I said avoiding eye contact. I’ll see you around…

And I did.

You two were still living together. I’d made my decision. He was the better option. A more suitable candidate. Plus you were chicken shit. You would’ve let me go if it came down to it. Chosen brotherhood. I knew what I was to you. Or at least what I was compared to him. He was your best friend. You wouldn’t have jeopardized that. Not for some chick, anyway.

I waited until he went across the street.

Hey, he said, I’m gonna go to the liquor store. You guys need anything? You could always count on John. Like clockwork. He was there at least twice a day. Kid had to have his dip. I caught you in the hallway.
Hey, I whispered. The other boys were home in their rooms.

We have to be done, okay?

You sure? you said, eyes locked on mine. Fully done. Ended. Severed. It was my call.

Never happened.

You won’t tell and I won’t tell, yeah? I asked.

Yeah, you said. Okay.

Alright, I said. Cool. Thank you.

No problem, you said, walking back to your room.

Everything went back to normal—we even watched a movie your room. Do you know the time I’m talking about? One of the first Bourne movies. Something with Matt Damon, I remember that. Lots of suspense and running and shooting. You would’ve thought all that noise and jerking camera motions would be distracting enough. Make us forget for those two hours that I wasn’t sitting on your bed, curled up in his arms. Your best friend’s arms. Wow. Dude. Right there.

Right there, sitting on top of the blanket you wrapped around me, the one you covered up my naked wet body with the night I came over so I’d have someone to babysit me while I wasted all that vodka soda water back into the drains of your prison cell shower. And I thought I had limits. But we agreed. Nothing happened. So, I gave myself over to it. To the lie. There was no wrong doing. We were fully dedicated to that double-life. We were committed, man.

People like that will always find each other. People like Campbell. The ones with nothing to lose. They hold themselves to a higher standard. *What can you do for me?* People like that are always looking for the faults in others. Digging at your flaws, your insecurities. Something will always come up. They’ll find it. Too fat. Too shy. Too demanding.
People like that are always looking for a reason to leave. To keep things tentative. Fragile. On the cusp of ending, dissolving back into nothing but common acquaintances. People they recognize in the hallways, but choose not to acknowledge. Which works out just great for people like us. People like me, constantly searching for the good. Remember times of feeling happy. Happy with them. Those brief moments when I felt seen. I would always hold on to them. Constantly searching. Waiting for just a little more. I was so sure I would find them. More happy moments. Any tiny gesture. A look. A nudge. Any hint of effort. I was open. But then again, people like me always are. While they’re looking for an excuse to leave, we’re the ones always looking for a reason to stay.
Boys aside, these past few semesters have been rough. So much pressure to decide. Decide everything. Decide now. Like right now.

A girl from my old cohort came into the shop today. Stacey Baker. We had several classes together, but she never liked me much. I think, well actually I know, it had to do with a boy. But this story doesn’t, I swear! Anyway, she never cared for me much always talking over me in class, or baiting me into a subject I had little to no understanding of wherein she would crush whatever suggestion I was making by way of a condescending laugh preceded by her well-crafted opinion on the matter.

My sharpest memory of this girl, this unintentional, and rather temporary adversary happened years ago in some lit class or another. I had my mind on something else. Probably boys. Who knows? Let’s just say, I spent most of that semester sketching classmates across the room hoping the talkative hipster with the beard would run out the clock and I could head home early.

So, there I am. Sitting in my usual spot, one of those outdated, economically cramped desks, the ones with the metal armrest on the right hand side—so fuck you if you’re left handed. My friend Mason, a funny, articulate little cuss with sweet dimples I enjoyed, was my only source of entertainment in these three hour lectures. He was always doing the reading and catching me up on important themes and general talking points before class.

Why do you never seem to do the reading? he asked.

I don’t know, I rolled my neck. I’ve never been a big fan of Victorian lit.

Yeah, me neither… he teased, having done all the supplemental reading as well.
Yeah, right, I said pushing his elbow of the metal rest. I guess it just feels... stuffy? You know, like the things those characters were going through aren’t super relatable to me. They just don’t feel relevant.

And why is that? Stacey Baker interjected, her voice shrill and unsettling.

Uh, hey, I said, shooting him a quick look of confusion. I don’t know. The circumstances of those stories feel so... dry? Like no one is allowed to say how he or she are actually feeling until it’s too late… [Brief awkward silence] And, I mean, even if they do get a second chance they don’t end up taking it because they are too proud, or something like that. I don’t know.

No totally, she said leaning forward to meet my gaze. I mean, do you have a specific example.

Not really… I said, looking to the boy in between us for support.

Huh? he asked, giving me a slight grin, clearly enjoying the spectacle.

Well, she persisted, which authors specifically are you talking about?

Uh… I stalled, Well, okay-- who’s that one chick? I asked, nudging my friend’s arm as he smiled mischievously as if to say, No way. You’re not gettin outta this one. Jane Eyre, or something? I offered.

You mean Jane Austen? she corrected.

Sure I said, sheepishly. That’s the one.

You do re-uh-lize, she said, over pronouncing each syllable, that one is a person and the other is a character, right?

And it is with this same attitude two years later she came in to peruse my store. To poke around. Lift up at dresses. Inspect blouses. Feel the cashmere of fine sweaters neither one of us will be able to personally afford any time in the near future. But it didn’t matter that she couldn’t
afford them, because to her she had already won. She had managed to get her stuff together much sooner. Taught a few classes in her final year. Graduated on time. Secured a teaching gig at the local community college. Talked about getting her PhD.

And just when I had exhausted all my efforts to entertain her presence in a place it is mandatory that I be—my work—she started in on the questions. SO… what have you been up to? I see you’re working here? Is this what you plan on doing then? Are you still living with the same people? Where are you living next year? Are you done with school yet? Weird, I thought you were done already. How much longer do you have? What jobs are you looking in to? As I squirm and fidget in an effort not to fidget, I try to explain myself to her.

Through gritted teeth I responded to this unwelcome, yet painfully familiar line of inquiries. Oh, you know, I would say, almost done now... Just wrapping things up with my project. Yeah, I had to take a break from writing. I was just too close to it. Needed to pull back. Focus on paying back some of these student loans (LIE). I am living with the same girls, well, a couple of them anyway. Yeah, I really like our little house. We’ll all be moving out soon, so that’s kind of sad. But I’m ready to try something new. Maybe live on my own for a little while. Not sure what other jobs I’m interested in yet. Something to do with teaching, or mentoring… or something.

Wow, she said a bit louder than either of us expected. Sounds cool. Well, it was good seeing you.

Yeah, I said, tucking my hair behind my ear, good seeing you, too.

I let out a tense sigh and counted to three before running to the back room to take half of what I’ve come to refer to as my “calm down things.”
I think back to the fact that there was a time before I ever even realized self-medicating was a thing. I remember the first time I ever really observed this American pastime was right around the time you began to self-destruct. After a few months of John and me, doing what I realize now as constant bombardment of your personal space.

We stayed up late. Made giant messes. Consistently stole food and rarely did dishes. We took over the common space. Cuddled obnoxiously, my head tucked under his chin on your brand new couches the two of you had picked out together back when you were inseparable. Not only was I stealing your home, but I had taken your best friend away from you. Inserted a secret in the space where trust once existed. You had no one to confide in. I mean, I know now you told some people, but never the person who mattered the most.

And it was then that I realize now you had turned to Adderall. Closed off the world. Retreated into your addictions.

Adderall had been there for you in high school. I remember an offhanded conversation one day when John and I bought from you.

She was there to open my mind, you said. Sharpen my senses.

Yeah, but why do you always smoke after? I asked ignorantly.

What the weed? you laughed shooting John a knowing look.

This stuff makes you crazy after a while, John said. Jacky takes these pills like every day, he explained. Uses them to stay on top of his game and has the weed there after to bring him back down to Earth. Get those creative neurons firing again, right bud?

Really? I said, looking back and forth between you two. I’ve just seen how people are after they smoke. It just doesn’t make sense.
This stuff, you said, holding up your humble joint, the kind I saw you with nearly every day until your breaking point. Immaculately rolled and meant to be shared. This stuff, you repeated with a deep inhale, helps me think, helps the mind form new connections. You choked as you exhaled, a reaction I learned was the desired effect of holding your breath five counts past your comfort.

Yeah, I need it, you said. Together. Allows me to take something familiar, an old beat for example, and make it weird, you know?

Take the mundane and make that shit strange, John chimed in.

Right, I said skeptically. You two have clearly had this conversation before.

Despite my hesitation, I came to understand this lifestyle. I don’t know how you guys did it. Weed and uppers were fine on their own, but the combination gave me severe anxiety coupled with lasting paranoia. But you were different. Knew how to control your thoughts. Overpower your anxieties. It did something beautiful for you. Allowed your practical nature to play with the curious, little boy inside your head. Together they melted into one another producing these insanely creative beats. You were making “dubstep” years before it became a fad for our culture to hate. Eerie melodies hung behind intricately timed kick drums and bass lines all building up to these nasty drops people back then didn’t even have the capacity for yet. Who cared what you were taking? Those beats were beautiful, man.

I remember watching you absently. The routine. As you weighed out and ground the weed, took pinches to sprinkle evenly across the thin, white paper, wetting the edges, meticulous in your execution. John never let me roll the joints. Even after everything fell apart with you two, he still held me to that standard.
But that time was different. That was before. When I still felt comfortable complimenting you. Back before I felt like a lying whore whenever we spoke. Before even the smallest acknowledgment, a tentative, Hey, followed by an obligatory, What’s up? made me feel icky.

I felt just fine when you weren’t there. Could justify my actions. John had been sleeping around. He started it. My sleeping with you was just an unfortunate product of his betrayal. But we talked about it, you and me. Decided nothing happened. So, then nothing did happen. Everything was fine. Clean slate. I could go on dating him and feel no real guilt. We weren’t even official yet when you and I hooked up.

But then I’d see you in the hallway. Get caught in a knowing stare from those hazel eyes. What? I would squint at you, as you held me there. Stop it? I would think. Then, you would walk away, swinging those thick, toned arms you worked so hard to build. You looked good and you knew it. I’d sigh at the sound of your door clicking shut. A gentle touch. The air slowly sifted back into the room. I could breathe again.

I smiled emptily at John as he looked over from the TV.

Come sit with me, babe, he said. I paused for a moment, looking at your closed door. What were you thinking in there? Were you going to tell him? Tell someone else? Had you told them already? But the white paint of the door stared back in silence, refusing to tell me shit.

That was when I knew. It was only going to get worse from here.

You started making music again. You started making music a lot.

Hardly ever left your room. Odd screeching sounds over heavy, excessive bass shook the house. Your stuff wasn’t good anymore. Like the harder you tried, the worse things got.

You gave up sleep. Eating became an inconvenient afterthought. I swear, I never saw you finish a meal. Come to think of it, I really didn’t see you much at all in those last months.
Every now and then I’d see you. It was always very brief. Quick trips to the bathroom. The occasional visit to the kitchen. Usually, you did your cooking in the morning, a time you could be sure John and I would be away. I’d see little signs of life. Peeled eggs shells in the garbage. Emptied Styrofoam packaging for chicken or ground turkey. Basic foods. Your dishes were already cleaned, but something told me that there wasn’t a lot that went into these meals. No sauces or added seasonings. You ate plain. Just something to get you through the day. You were clearly in survival mode.

John said it was because of school. You were just gearing up for finals week. But I knew better. I could tell you were reluctant. Every time you did come out you looked stern, your expression pensive as though you were being checked for time. You were efficient, too. I swear you were never out there for more than five minutes, all the while holding your breath. I could see it in your hands, they rested in tight fists as you maneuvered through the cupboards.

It was apparent. Something was definitely wrong.

Your body language lashed out where your words could not. At the time I felt a weird resentment towards it. Wanted just to get everything out in the open.

I fucked Jack-o! I imagined yelling as you danced frantically through your elaborately orchestrated food preparation. Cutting board out. Knives rinsed along with the bell peppers, onions, and mushrooms you then diced to throw into the pan you suddenly realized wasn’t up to par, probably burnt cheese from one of John’s famous quesadillas.

How the fuck are there more dishes? you’d mutter, loud enough for us to hear, but not so loud as to directly challenge John, who sat there lazily watching a movie next to me on the couch and scratching his balls, utterly disinterested in your botched protest.
I don’t like to think about this part, John.

I’ll admit, I’ve been putting it off. Writing this letter is the result of months of procrastination and a persistent, “I’ll get to it tomorrow,” attitude. But it has to be told. How am I supposed to deal with the confrontations presented to me in my new life, my present day-to-day without first acknowledging the ugly bits of my former life—my pact with you?

Even now, with years of time safely barricading us from one another—I still hold my breath as I begin to say this, to write it, relive this painful reckoning with you, John Campbell.

Everything changed that night you came home late. There were other nights you came home late, but this was like four a.m. Maybe five. You burst into the room. Smacked the door hard against the wall. The knob would’ve made a hole if you hadn’t already made one months before.

I was confused. Disoriented when you flicked the lights on, flooding my blurred vision with spite. Standard interrogation procedure, plus the added bonus of provoking a pet peeve.

Did you fuck Jack-O? you asked, mounting me as you spit the words out. Your face was glowing red, your forehead sweating. I’d never seen you like that before.

What? I said, scared of you for the first time. I can’t remember another time I’ve been scared like that. You were, and probably still are, a big guy, Johnny. At the time you were starting, inside center for men’s rugby. Number 12. I still remember. I watched you take down giants, go head to head with intense Samoan dudes, dominate the field even with your bad shoulder. You got this look when you drew blood from another player.

And there you were, crouched on top of me on your hands and knees. Your blue eyes all bloodshot and unblinking. I thought you were going to strangle me. I could feel your thick hands
around my throat already, as you kept them poised at my sides breathing hot hate down on my face.

Did you *fuck* Jack-O? you repeated, knowingly.

No, I said, careful to hold eye contact.

My mom had raised dogs when she was younger. Warned me that making direct eye contact was seen as a challenge, even a threat. But something told me you needed me to look back, to accept your challenge in order to sell you this lie. That maybe you weren’t in total control of your faculties at the moment. That maybe my no was the only protection between my face and your blistering, lizard-brain rage. Maybe you wouldn’t hit me, but a spontaneous head butt didn’t seem entirely out of the question either.

No?

No, I stated firmly, sitting up and moving you off me. Where have you been? I changed the subject.

Doing blow with the boys, you said, almost manically, a strange smile crossing your face.

What? I asked, more confused than upset. Usually, when you did blow it was when I wasn’t there and some other, slutty sorority girls were.

Who were you with?

None of your fucking business, you said in that same strange tone, as though you were aggressively pleased at discovering my deception. Relieved to have found my hidden flaw. You told me later that you had always known deep down that I was just as bad as you. That at least when you slept around, you were honest with me when I confronted you. I was just relieved that you bought my answer for the time being. You asked me again that next day in a text.

*did u really not sleep w Jack-O?*
no, I said, ten minutes later.

_no u didn’t or no u did?_ you responded immediately.

No. I replied, _I did. I’m sorry._


Just my last message. _No. I did. I’m sorry._
Remember when we tried to start over?

We cut ties after you found out about Jack. Months went by. I didn’t see you at the bars. The roller coaster was over and I accepted that. Felt relieved even. I had let you go. Started seeing other people. I gave you back all your friends, even the girls, like Lesly Beam, who I had come to love dearly. She made me meet her for lunch once. Said she missed me. Said you were sleeping with the dumbest girl you could find. Apparently, it was just for the sex.

All the same, I came back. I always came back. Told you I was sorry. Sorry I lied. Sorry for deceiving you for so long, for making you live in a house where your girlfriend had slept with your best friend in the next room over. It was messed up.

But I wasn’t sorry. Not really. Not for doing it. Not for lying about it. For pretending it didn’t occur. When I thought about it, truly searched my soul, dug deep, it wasn’t there. I wasn’t sorry. Not really. Not to you anyway. Not even at all. I had changed. Lost my empathy. And for that, and that alone, I am sorry.

I rationalized it. You were sleeping with your ex. Like that whole time, Johnny. All those trips home to the city. Not for family. For her. On weekends. Over break. Whenever. We had been together for three months, four maybe. Didn’t matter. Cooked dinners together. Watched scary movies. Documentaries. Nothing phased you. I collected our moments like tokens. You forgot them like a toothbrush on your way down to the Bay. Slightly annoying, but you had a spare at home.

You had her fooled, too. Thought you were dating. Soul mates divided by area codes. She was an idiot. I loathed the comparison. I was vastly superior. And yet we were the same. You’d
pop in, take what you wanted, then get in your hand-me-down truck and head back to the
country. Back to me. Shoot a text twenty minutes out.

Surprise, babe! I’m coming home.

I got so excited. Instantly giddy. I was an addict. My loyalty then disgusts me. Such
genuine love. Quality adoration concentrated on you. A resin of which still lingers today, albeit
begrudgingly.

All that time, John. The touching. Wild kissing. All so tangible. All worth nothing.
Tainted. You had just been inside someone else. Your soul is a black, black place. I pity you.
I was blind. Willingly so. It reached a point. The earrings, the late texts, your vague responses to
my carefully crafted line of questioning. It was too much.

I snapped.

Confronted you. And you just stood there, shoulders back, proud, unashamed and
admitted it. Admitted it all. Or a lot of it all, anyway. I was struck. Couldn’t believe your offense.
The nerve. But you still wanted me. How could I rationalize this? Resolve this pit of pain and get
what I wanted? The rules had changed. I guess we could make them up as we went.

So, I slept with Jack-O. Found comfort in knowing it would hurt you. Traded in my own
soul to assault yours. I still hate that part of me, the part that sunk to your level. Sure I’d been
violated. I mean fuck, man, you could’ve given me something. But that’s beside the point.

And you admitted it. Looked me in the eyes and said yes, you’d done it when I asked. I
mean, she had come with you to visit and chased us down the street when you left the party with
me.

Who was that girl? I asked, shaking.

My ex, you said calmly. She’s crazy.
It took me a couple days to work up the courage, but finally I asked you.

Did you sleep with her?

Yes.

Recently?

Yes, you said, plainly. No hesitation. No remorse. It threw me. Your honesty. We were sleeping together. One person at a time, right? Those are the rules, weren’t they?
Things were different at the rugby house. We left our innocence, or at least the genuine sweetness we felt when things ended the first time. We were different people back at the three-story house. Younger. Less experienced in the subtleties of human torture.

This was our second time around, although technically we broke up every other weekend or so. Stayed unofficial for quite some time while I proved myself to you. Repented for what I’d done before. Demonstrated with quiet patience my repentance. For over a year, I feigned a sort of blind trust to show my worthiness. Cut ties with all of my guy friends to confirm my true loyalty to you.

Everyone knew about the affair with Jack. It wasn’t just the house. The whole team knew me solely as the girl who slept with your roommate, your closest childhood friend, the guy you convinced to move out from the city to this little, college town once he got back from his study abroad in India. No matter what I did, how nice I was, how many times I brought over a six-pack or offered up hits from the peace pipe, I was simply “the whore” to everyone there.

A nameless face that came to represent all of the girls they had known once who may have betrayed them. I embodied all of them, the girls who danced with them at house parties, but left with their boyfriends, the sluts who used to answer their phones at three a.m., but stopped eventually when they realized the score, they all lived inside me and I would be treated as such.

I lost all standard girlfriend privileges that morning you came home at four a.m. Do you remember that morning? Back at the three-story house? You were pretty drunk, but I think the all the drugs might have balanced you out. Jack had moved out already. You were relieved. He’d been such a dick that whole semester, ever since Winter Break.
I pretended not to know why he was being so weird and we talked shit about his weird behavior behind his back. He was a common enemy, unpleasant energy that pushed past us in the hallway and complained daily about the supposed “dishes situation.” He united us. At least he did at the time.
Hey, man. It’s been a while. My default is to guess six months. I always use six months when I’m telling a story. Sounds more reasonable. Like saying “a dozen” instead of “a million.”

But I want to say, honestly, it’s been about a year.

Same boyfriend. He’s great. No complaints. Like it feels solid.

And I know these words might not mean anything to you. We don’t know each other anymore, and probably never actually did. But someone needed to hear them. Someone who I once trusted with my biggest secret. Someone who knew the whole story, or at least some version of the whole story and reserved judgment anyway.

And no, things are not perfect right now. I still think I’m selfish.

No, I know I am. I am a hardened narcissist with a keen eye for narcissism. After all, I did set out to write these letters as a sort of apology to you—an explanation of past wrongdoings, an unsent call for some unearned atonement. And yet they’ve come to an end. I am at peace with making peace with myself, if that means anything. And I strongly doubt these letters, were you to happen upon them, would come across as anything more than the continued griping of a blatant “woe is me-er.” An utterly self-centered perma-child. An uncooked-adult. At least that’s how I see it.

I still make poor choices. Stay up late watching my shows, indulging in the hard earned products of other people’s dedication to their craft. Idly I sit by suckling on the wit of others’ writing as a means of avoiding the painful process of developing my own skill. Overspend on half-rotten organic groceries, and Styrofoam clamshells of uneaten take-out, of which I have two whole bites before pilfering through the snacks my sleeping roommates’ cupboards.
And above all, I obsess over these shortcomings. Obsess far more than any person this lucky ever rightfully should. I find myself in the middle of the day, staring out onto the street outside my shop, watching old ladies walk their dogs past street kids I can smell from inside raving about future plans I doubt will come to fruition. I look past them all, as I fixate over past failures.

Where would I be now if only I had ___?

How far along the standard life checklist would I be if I had chosen A rather than settled for B? All this I think of as a means of chastising myself—an indirect way of detaching from the past, thereby excusing my current self from actions taken by this foreign, unworthy other.

 She made those choices. Not me. I am a victim here. I don’t really believe that though, do I? I realize I have a ways to go. Admit that I continue to sidestep a lot of responsibilities. Place the blame for my unhappiness on my relationship with others. Invest far too much of my personal well-being on my current boyfriend, who isn’t actually anything like John Campbell, but still has his own flaws, responsibilities, and life choices to make, all of which could lead him away from me at any minute.

And that has to be okay, Jacky. You know? I understand that it is time to move forward. And I am. Every day.

I feel like I’ve found a home now.

The girls in the other room, the voices of my roommates talking shit. The story does hurt. Especially from the mouths of friends.

But the girls telling the story are not malicious.

In fact, they are amazing people. They love me. Tell me about how many people they’ve slept with. There’s a real number and then the number they’d prefer were true. One guy was the
ex of a mutual friend. I’ve sworn never to tell. One couldn’t... contain his excitement and another quite appalling individual, the brother of a common acquaintance who we all still see from time to time, and can no longer look in the eye without imagining him asking our poor friend if she knew what “fisting” was.

The point is, that despite the harsh “t” at the end of “rriiight?” meant to second a proposal that I am in fact a selfish slut, along with the elongated, “o” in figure it out, implying my complete lack of self-awareness. You do not think I’ll “figure it out.”

As I take in these accusations of doubt as they come, sifting through the wall. I have to try my best to let these phrases pass right through me. My best to sift through the malice. Disregard the lingering residue. Continue to trust others. To trust myself with these secrets. I thought I could outrun this stuff. People. Relationships. Thought keeping them shallow would make things easier. Create some shield of indifference to the opinions of others.

But it’s not just the girls that are home. I feel like I don’t have to hate myself anymore. Like maybe I’m okay the way I am. I’m vain. All I do is talk about how other people’s lives impact me. How John hurt me. How girls from my past have slighted me. Betrayed me. But I’m starting to think it’s okay.

I’ve found a home now, albeit temporary.

Not that everything is resolved. I am twenty-six years old and still dragging out a master’s program I could’ve, with the slightest bit of effort, completed years ago. I ride a borrowed mountain bike to work a minimum-wage job where I run into former students I mentored as freshmen undergrads who tell me happy stories of how they’re engaged now and planning to start work, real work, in the fall. I am nowhere near there yet. But the thing is, it’s not over yet.
I do feel like I can recover. I don’t know why I’ve been telling you all this. I honestly
don’t know what you would have to say in response. I don’t really know what John Campbell
would have to say either. Probably something short. Something courteous:

I’m sorry if you still feel hurt by this. I hope you can move past it someday. Hope you’re
doing well,

Warmest Regards,

John Campbell (or something else equal parts arrogant, dismissive and contrived)

But I am over it, you know? I truly am. I just need to start being honest again, you know?

Put myself out there. See what happens.

In the meantime, I’ll turn my fan on.

White noise to drown them out. Collect my thoughts.

Stop the voices for a while.
WORKS CITED
WORKS CITED


