Tough Beauty

by

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Rule Followers

By the spring of Reggie’s junior year, there was only one thing she looked forward to each day: Matt Shames, smiling his stoned smile. Sometimes it was even directed at her, and receiving Matt’s smile made Reggie proud of herself.

She and Matt weren’t exactly friends, though Reggie was hopeful. Matt was easygoing with everyone, most of all himself. He caused trouble at school but the punishments didn’t bother him and didn’t convince him to change his behavior. The school sometimes suspended Matt’s driving privileges, but the suspensions were always temporary. A few days later he’d roar up again in the ’67 Mustang he’d refurbished himself, flinging the car into its assigned spot, yelling a friendly obscenity to a pal across the parking lot. “Hey asshole, learn to drive!” he’d call, laughter rippling across the asphalt.

He was a junior, too. Reggie longed to have him swear at her like he did his friends. He had beady eyes but his face was handsome. He was thin and looked half-starved but he wore it well, like a badge. He did drugs. He was cool. And, even better, a reciprocation of Reggie’s feelings wasn’t out of the question. Lately he’d been paying her more attention in their Sociology class. He was changeable, and often Reggie saw him hanging out with someone she wouldn’t have expected: the geeky president of the
robotics club, or the willowy blond named Arielle, an exchange student from France who – thankfully – would be gone at the end of the school year.

Reggie needed a distraction from what was wrong in her life: her mom’s new boyfriend (a redneck), her father’s five-year prison sentence (vehicular manslaughter), her mid-semester progress report that showed a 1.7 GPA (for the whole month of February she hadn’t been able to find her chemistry book). Unlike these problems, the absence of Matt’s affection for her could be remedied. His joy could be hers.

Besides Matt, Reggie had one other sort-of friend, a prickly and big-boned girl named Jewel with whom having fun was a chore. Jewel and Reggie argued all the time, but no matter how angry they made each other, Jewel always returned to school the next day ready to be friends again. Though Jewel was appalled by the turn Reggie’s life had taken, Reggie suspected that Jewel thought she could fix things, somehow. Jewel was always burdening herself with projects – people, pets – if only to feel the satisfaction of disappointment.

Officially, Reggie was getting help from Ms. Thorne, the school guidance counselor. Ms. Thorne was young and had been a cheerleader at Michigan State, a characteristic that in Jewel’s mind made her unfit to counsel anyone.

Reggie didn’t mind Ms. Thorne. She was on the receiving end of no one else’s empathy at the moment; in fact, most people hated her, and in the glare of their derision she was simply shutting down, as though her life were a large switchboard and she was throwing one switch at a time. Her affection for Matt was the only thing to which she was truly devoted right now.

*
One March morning, Reggie was called out of her Life Skills class to see Ms. Thorne, who heard that Reggie had burst into tears in the cafeteria the previous day.

“I’m worried about you,” Ms. Thorne said. She’d braided her mahogany hair into a crown around her head as though she were a princess in a fairy tale.

“Thank you,” Reggie said, though what she meant was, You don’t really count.

“I’m also worried about your grades. You started the year with a 3.2.”

The diamond in Ms. Thorne’s ring sent prisms of light bouncing around the room. According to the school gossips, Ms. Thorne and the gym teacher (not her fiancé) met for sex in the school locker room after hours.

“A lot has happened to you this year,” Ms. Thorne went on, “but you do have control of your GPA. What we might be able to do is get the school to approve extensions for your work, and maybe some extra credit that you can turn in over the summer.”

“Ted Irish got extensions for all his work,” Reggie mumbled. “He doesn’t even have to come back to school until April.”

Ms. Thorne went pale. It was Ted Irish’s father that Reggie’s dad had hit and killed with his car. Ted Irish had been out of school most of the year; he was only returning because baseball season was starting and he was hoping for a scholarship. Reggie hadn’t seen him since early in the fall, before the accident. Ted Irish would return in a matter of days.

Reggie lived in a small, conservative town in southeastern Michigan. Once rural, new subdivisions and strip malls sprouted up every summer. But the community was still tight-knit in the sense that some things were unforgivable and there was no hope of anonymity for anyone.
William Irish had owned a small accounting business, where everyone got their taxes done. With tax day approaching, his low-budget advertisement still played on the local channels, and when his face appeared on the screen Reggie’s mind tricked her into hoping for a few brief seconds – he’s *not* dead, there he is! – but then Reggie’s mom, Carla, would swear and ferret around the couch cushions looking for the *goddamn* remote.

Reggie wondered why the Irishes didn’t stop the ads. Were they doing it on purpose in order to torture Reggie, and torture themselves? Were the remaining Irishes sniveling into tissues while the gray-haired, bespectacled ghost of William Irish pointed at them and said, “It’s *your* money, not the government’s. We’ll help *you* get the big refund *you* deserve.”

Back in the counselor’s office, Ms. Thorne said meekly, “That’s true. Ted Irish has been getting home schooled since the accident. But again, we’re talking about *you* here.”

Reggie listened to what Ms. Thorne had to say. Then she agreed to more after-school appointments with Ms. Thorne as well as extra tutoring.

When Reggie returned to her desk in Ms. Bird’s Life Skills class, Jewel hissed, “What did Ms. Thorne say?” with her voice full of skepticism. Reggie didn’t say anything, and Jewel whispered, “Tell Ms. Thorne they should at least give you a C in Life Skills so you don’t commit suicide.”

Reggie felt tears brimming behind her eyes. She was always almost crying. While Reggie backhanded a tear away, Jewel yawned; she would only give someone attention without getting any in return for so long.
Ms. Bird stood in front of the class, holding a bag of flour. “You’ll dress up your flour babies, you’ll name your flour babies, and your flour babies will go everywhere with you for two weeks.”

The Flour Baby project. Ms. Bird had been talking about it all semester, and finally, it was time. In a way, the project offered Reggie a reprieve: it was worth half her grade and was very easy. She would have to endure a certain amount of embarrassment and ridicule for pretending a bag of flour was her baby for two weeks, but at least she would be taunted for doing something normal, something other people were doing, too.

The class spent the rest of the period gluing yarn to the scalps of their Flour Babies and drawing clumsy dresses and over-alls on the bags.

“I’ll be coming around to sign your bags of flour,” chirped Ms. Bird, “so there’s no swapping out broken babies for new ones.”

On her own bag of flour, Reggie drew plump lips and colored them in.

“Reggie, you drew red lips on your baby,” Jewel said. “You’re making her look slutty.”

Reggie was late to Sociology; she’d spent the time between classes looking into the mirror stuck to her locker door. Her plain brown hair had frizz but no curl. Her mom, Carla, was always trying to get her to apply lip-gloss or straighten her hair.

The bell rang, and Reggie scrambled her things together and ran down the hall and up the stairs, slipping into Mrs. McMahon’s classroom right as she was closing the door.

“Tardy, Ms. Taylor,” Mrs. McMahon said, not without some fondness.
“Sorry,” Reggie mumbled. She settled into her desk and stuffed her flour baby into the book tray beneath her seat.

Matt was sitting across from her. She caught his eye; he tapped his wristwatch and wagged one finger back and forth. Reggie tried to smile casually, give a flirtatious half-shrug, instead of bursting with the huge, sloppy grin that was welling inside of her. Mrs. McMahon often chastised Reggie for giggling with Matt, or for criticizing George W. Bush.

Reggie wasn’t failing Sociology but only because Mrs. McMahon never failed anyone. She wasn’t doing very well, either. Teachers, students, everyone: they were all siding with Ted Irish, careful not to show outward kindness to Reggie. Even Mrs. McMahon had grown cooler – using “Ms. Taylor” or “Regina” in place of “Reggie.”

Reggie slowly tuned out Mrs. McMahon. Her eyes crept up to Matt and lingered. He had a lazily satisfied look on his face. His pupils looked the size of match heads. Reggie longed to know what he was thinking. She wanted to know everything about him.

He’d been held back in elementary school, whispered the school gossips. Others claimed he’d spent time in rehab. According to legend, he had deep badlands. The thought made Reggie tingle. She didn’t believe the popular opinion, which was that Matt wasn’t very bright. There was something rare in him, something fossilized she could unearth. The time seemed right for such a discovery: Reggie had eclipsed him in notoriety because of her father, and this formed the basis of Reggie’s belief that they were right for each other.

Eventually, Mrs. McMahon set the class to their group work. Reggie focused on the sheet of paper before her. She was supposed to discuss No Child Left Behind with her
“quad,” what Mrs. McMahon called the groups of four desks she had huddled together. Reggie’s group, however, only had three people, the desk next to hers empty. Next to Matt sat Jewel. Theirs was the loser quad.

“So, what do you think?” Reggie asked the two of them.

“I don’t know,” Matt said, twirling his pencil in the air. “Seems okay.”

“It’s like gay marriage,” Jewel said. “Everyone deserves to be equal.”

“Well, sure,” Reggie said, “but are we going about it right?”

Matt stared furiously at Jewel, and before Jewel could respond to Reggie’s question, Matt had pulled out a pocket-sized bible and slapped it on his desk. “The Bible says being gay is wrong.”

“The bible is made up,” Jewel said. She barely moved her mouth whenever she spoke to Matt; she looked like a cooked mussel that hadn’t opened.

“The bible got me through some shit,” Matt said. His face lightened. He could change his mood easily, rocketing from bullish to breezy in moments. “Hey, I saw this thing on the History Channel about Jesus, and he was totally ripped.”

“That’s funny,” Reggie said. She’d had no idea Matt was religious. She supposed she could accept it.

Jewel frowned and straightened the cardigan she had used to swaddle her own flour baby, which she’d placed atop the empty desk. “Where’s your baby, Reggie?” she asked.

Reggie had shoved her baby beneath her desk and covered it with her jacket. She pointed downward. “Napping?” she offered.

Jewel said, “Reggie, I’ll tell Ms. Bird.”
Reggie wanted to strangle Jewel’s ugly baby. She needed to succeed on the project, but she hoped to do so clandestinely.

Matt looked curiously between Jewel and Reggie. Reggie sighed and brought up her baby.

“That baby is rad,” Matt said, and he reached across the desks to grab Reggie’s baby by its face.

“Careful!” Jewel said.

Matt held the flour baby firmly between his hands and raised it up above his head.

“Lion King!” he said, laughing.

Reggie studied Matt. He could have a good time so easily. Anything he did glimmered.

Rummaging through Carla’s closet after school was a catastrophe: nothing Reggie tried on looked good. Her boobs, about the size of small apples, weren’t big enough for Carla’s shirts and sweaters. Jewel, meanwhile, sat in the wicker chair by Carla’s window, judging. Both flour babies were in her lap; she looked like a harassed grandmother.

“Reggie, if you want to dress like a ho, let’s go to Hollister in the mall,” Jewel said.

Reggie might have liked to, but Carla was always complaining that they were poor now. “Thank God it’s so much cheaper to divorce someone in prison,” she’d said.

Reggie said to Jewel, “Hollister is trashy. I’m not going for that.” Really, though, she was, because that seemed to be what Matt liked in a girl.
She wished Jewel would go home, but Jewel lived a few houses down and often wandered in and out of Reggie’s house whenever she pleased, snooping into the Taylor’s misfortune. Though Jewel bothered Reggie, Reggie was often grateful for the company.

Reggie looked at herself in her mom’s claw foot mirror. Carla – a bony forty-year-old who could pass for a little younger – spent a good amount of time each morning trying not to look like a mom. Reggie, who wasn’t a mom, appeared frumpy and pessimistic in the tight, crop-top cardigan splattered with designs of roses and the pencil skirt that she, just a little bit hippy, could barely squeeze into.

“Where is your mom, anyway?” Jewel asked, looking Reggie’s reflection up and down. “That outfit’s not…you.”

“She takes night classes,” Reggie said, ignoring Jewel’s critique.

Carla attended classes in the evenings after spending all day answering phones for an insurance company. After class, Carla normally settled in for a few drinks at the pub. She’d also started drinking more from home. She could be heard moving through the house by the chink of ice in her glass, like a cat wearing a bell.

Reggie imagined the new boyfriend sitting with Carla in the wood-paneled bar with the plastic hanging plants. Reggie should have seen him coming, but she hadn’t, and she’d been surprised and upset when Carla introduced her to Jared, an engineer from Texas with a raspy drawl and a mustache. Reggie didn’t know where to place her allegiance. Too much was uncertain. Carla, for one, kept changing. Since Christmas, she’d been wearing the clothes Reggie was trying on now: tight jeans speckled with rhinestones and those tiny, half-length cardigans that stretched across her cleavage. Carla had unearthed these outfits from piles of junk at the Salvation Army, driving all the way
to the one in Ann Arbor because Ann Arbor was where the college girls donated their clothes. These were the throwaway outfits of sorority sisters.

In front of the mirror, Reggie pulled on a red tank top with a padded bra built in. This made her look somewhat endowed. The back was made of two panels of see-through lace that met in a V near Reggie’s tailbone. She also found a short jean skirt that fit, mostly. She imagined Matt appraising her, appreciating her.

Jewel looked bored to death in the wicker chair,. She was a smart person who, despite all her aptitude, allowed herself to become overwhelmed by ennui. Secretly, Reggie admired Jewel because she didn’t care what anyone thought of her.

“Remember to set alarms tonight,” Jewel said.

Ms. Bird had told everyone in the class to call her home phone (she would turn off the ringer) three times tonight so each of them could feel what it was like to be woken and obligated to take care of something. “I will,” Reggie said. “How does this look?”

“You look like an understudy in a porno,” Jewel said.

Reggie whirled around and glared at Jewel, who was unimpressed by both the outfit and Reggie’s withering stare. “I’m tired,” Reggie said through gritted teeth. “I think I’m going to go to bed.”

Jewel left and Reggie sat on her bed with her books spread before her. Flour baby sat on the dresser. She intended to stay awake until Carla came home; she felt secure knowing everyone was in the house. She balanced a few chemical equations, but mostly she thought about Matt. She settled lower and lower against her pillows. Then one of her thoughts caught on a gust of sleep, and she didn’t wake up until morning. She had not called Ms. Bird.
“You look different today, Reggie,” Ms. Thorne said that afternoon. “Aren’t you cold?”

“It’s just clothes,” Reggie said quietly. Ms. Thorne wasn’t the first person to ask her if she felt cold; the question was code for you look slutty.

Reggie had worn these clothes for attention, but she was embarrassed that people were noticing, and staring. Ted Irish’s friend Damien had come up to her in the cafeteria and whispered, “Reggie, with your dad in jail, I guess you’d have to become a prostitute to support yourself.”

“Fuck you,” Reggie had said hotly. Afterward, she cried in the single-person handicapped bathroom. She wondered what Ted Irish had heard about her. Stupidly, she’d called his house once, in January, thinking they could talk. Ted’s voice, low and bored when he answered, turned brassy when Reggie said her name. “Don’t you dare call here again,” he’d said.

It was strange to imagine Ted Irish’s family in a state of collapse. In a way, it made Reggie feel better – they were all miserable because of this – but Ted must have told someone about the call, because later her father’s lawyer lectured Reggie. “You may not call the Irish family,” he said. “It will look like we’re applying pressure.”

She’d called Ted to apologize, to share how badly she felt, to say she would have put herself in Mr. Irish’s place if she could. No one had cared, though. No one was acting like a human being anymore.

Someone pounded on the bathroom door. The girl in the wheelchair needed it.
Ms. Thorne had heard about the incident in the cafeteria, and told Reggie that she understood her anger, but she should do her best to ignore the nastiness of others.

Even worse than all this, Matt had not been in Sociology that day. She’d seen him later on, taking the stairs two at a time, but she hadn’t been able to catch up with him.

“Are you trying to get someone’s attention with the new look?” Ms. Thorne said casually. She straightened a porcelain figurine on her desk – an angel with its hands clasped in prayer – and ran her fingers over her perfectly-painted nails.

“No,” Reggie said quickly.

“I just want you to focus on what’s important. Your grades, Reggie, and feeling better.”

“I have to go to chemistry tutoring,” Reggie said, pointing to the clock on Ms. Thorne’s wall. Ms. Thorne frowned.

“Very well,” she said. “I’ll see you later this week.”

After an hour of tutoring, Reggie left the chemistry room feeling sad. She’d gotten a D on her last exam. Flour baby had looked on from the desk next to hers, a witness to Reggie’s ineptitude as she went over the exam with the tutor.

Reggie found Matt sitting outside on a bench by the bike racks, the only bikes left belonging to band kids whose instruments echoed from the football field. With flour baby cradled in the crook of her elbow, she went to sit next to him. The outfit hadn’t been a waste; he had been meant to see it. This thought alone cheered her.

He smiled and scooted closer to her, nudged her foot with his.

“What are you still doing here?” he asked.
“I just had some stuff to take care of,” she said nonchalantly. “Where’s your car?”

“Grounded today. No car.” Matt swung his arm and snapped his fingers in mock defeat. “That’s why I wasn’t in Soc. Missed the school bus and had to walk.”

“It took you three hours to walk here?”

“I may have made a stop or two.”

A ray of sun fell on Matt’s body. He squinted against the brightness. His brown hair shone. Reggie almost couldn’t take it.

“That sucks, about the car,” she said. She noticed Matt looking at her. If she’d known she would find him here, she would have re-applied her mom’s bright red lipstick. It had faded to a cracked shadow, the color darker in the lines where her lips were chapped. Lady Midnight, the shade called itself. Reggie tried to act the part of Lady Midnight: she twirled her fingers in her hair and removed her cardigan, though goose bumps sprouted on her freckled arms.

“How are you getting home?” Reggie asked. She wished she had a car and a license so she could offer him a ride.

“My mom is supposed to come get me but she’s late,” Matt said.

A gloomy cloud engulfed the sun – the cold weather was giving way to cool rain – but to Reggie the world was incandescent at that moment, and the barrage of demons that had plagued her for months vaporized.

“I guess I’m walking home,” she said finally, gesturing in the direction where she and her mom lived. She hoped, briefly, Matt would walk with her but he only held up his hand for a high five. Their palms slapped. As soon as she retreated from him, the cloud around her gathered again.
“Are you staying with your gentleman caller again tonight?” Reggie asked Carla when she got home from school Thursday afternoon. It was near the end of the first week of the Flour Baby project, and so far Reggie had no clue about her grade on the project. Ms. Bird watched them hawkishly during class; reportedly, she had spies throughout the school, and she planned to send a questionnaire to parents about the caretaking that had gone on at home. Carla would sign whatever Reggie wrote.

“His name is Jared,” Carla said. “I don’t know, Reggie. I don’t know what this is. I just want to have fun.”

They both sat at the kitchen table. Carla smiled at Reggie and squeezed her hand. Reggie couldn’t help it; she smiled in return.

Once Carla had gone for her night class, Reggie wrapped herself in her jacket and sat on the splintered porch with a sleeve of rice cakes and a pack of cigarettes she’d bought on the way home from school. Feeling lonely, she went inside for flour baby, and when she returned she put her feet up on the railing, the baby in her lap.

She lit the cigarette with a match and smoke filled her lungs. The night around her was inky, the stars an unfinished mural, and Reggie ground out the cigarette, replacing it with a rice cake.

A car turned onto her street and Reggie moved her wristwatch into the porch light to check the time. Too early for Carla, but the car slowed as it approached and Reggie heard the roar of an old engine, a fast one. The car stopped in front of Reggie’s house and she looked at it as though it were a mirage. A rust-red Mustang idled, and when the window cranked down, Matt was behind the wheel.
Reggie rose from her chair and sprang down the porch steps. The rice cake was still between her fingers.

“How’d you know which house was mine?” she said.

“School directory, bitches!” Matt said in a high voice. “Get in.”

The headlights pulsed. Reggie’s fingers moved to the handle but she said, “Hold on,” and ran to the porch. Her flour baby was inert in the chair. She scooped up the baby, along with the cigarettes and the package of rice cakes.

Matt pulled away from the curb. There was a rosary hanging from his rear-view. He drove them down 8 Mile until the road turned dirt and his car hobbled over potholes. Reggie munched on rice cakes and shook her box of cigarettes in his direction.

He drove all the way to Walled Lake, where the road was paved again. The lake water trembled in the dark and Reggie rolled down her window so she could listen to the waves lap the shore. Matt rounded the lake swiftly and Reggie leaned her head into the curve. In the moonlight, she could imagine they were driving on the rim of a silver dollar.

The road veered away from the lake and Matt made a left onto another dirt road. His headlights caught a DEAD END sign. He killed the lights but left the engine running, the heat blasting. Reggie strained to see Matt’s face. He was rummaging in his pockets.

He extended his palm toward Reggie. Two pills sat stark white against his skin, bright as eggs. She pinched one between her fingers but stashed it in her pocket when Matt turned to flick his cigarette out of the cracked window. Matt turned back around and started kissing her, pushing her jacket from her shoulders. Reggie struggled to free her wrists from the fabric. Matt unzipped her jeans. Maybe she should have taken Matt’s pill? Maybe that was the point? But there was no time to change that. The pill was in the
pocket of her jacket, which was in the foot well, along with flour baby. Soon she was mostly undressed, and Matt pulled her across the gearshift and into his lap. “Do you want to?” he asked, and Reggie said, “I think so, sure.” Matt reclined the seat and they squirmed until Reggie was on her back. He touched her in a frantic, awkward way.

Reggie was cold everywhere except for the parts of her body pressed against his. She gasped when he put himself inside of her. It was painful, which she’d expected, but she had thought there would also be something good about it. And maybe there would be; she wished they were in a bed but this was all happening faster than she’d ever thought it would. But what had she expected? That Matt would want to cuddle and talk about their feelings? That wasn’t who Matt was. That wasn’t why she liked him.

When they’d finished, and dressed, Matt held his hands in front of his face, pivoting his wrist. He ran the index finger on his left hand down the index on his right and said, “I can’t feel my fingers.”

“Maybe it’s the cold,” Reggie suggested.

“No, it’s the ludes,” he said. He put his finger on her face and traced a line from her ear to her shoulder.

“Ludes?”

“Quaaludes, duh. The pills we took.”

“Right. I feel fine.” Reggie made a mental note: look up qualudes. Later, she would search the Internet, realize the word had an extra “a,” and engross herself in the pages detailing the composition, effects, and forms of Quaaludes. She would be glad she hadn’t taken the pill, even though the Internet said it could enhance a sexual experience.
Truth was, Reggie had hoped for more. To start, protection. She’d assumed he would take care of that. Second, his attractiveness had withered in the cold dark of the car. Without clothes, Matt was scrawny, and for Reggie the brawn of his personality had been undone by the nakedness of his body.

Despite all this, Reggie flushed when he brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. Not enjoying sex seemed like a mature thing, and she felt accomplished just for having tried it. Next time, she would demand some changes.

“You can drive stick, right?” Matt said. “They make me light sensitive too.”

“I don’t have a license,” Reggie said, eyeing the keys he dangled before her.

“That’s not a problem,” Matt said, tossing the keys into her lap.

“Okay,” Reggie said. Though her dad had taught her to drive a manual last summer, and though she’d turned sixteen not long ago, she’d never taken the test. It had seemed wrong for her to drive after what happened to William Irish.

Reggie dropped Matt off and started walking home, a distance of almost two miles in a light drizzle. She zipped flour baby in her jacket and forced herself forward. When she got to her house, she realized she hadn’t brought her keys with her. Through the window, she could see the set with its dangling blue flower keychain on the table by the door. Carla was home, her bedroom light on, but when Reggie tried the door it was locked. She rang the bell, pounded the knocker. No one came.

She set flour baby down on the porch rail, then hoisted herself up the rain gutter. From the roof of the garage she could climb into her bedroom through the window, which she never locked. She clambered across the shingles and pried up the glass with her fingertips then rolled onto her bed. Her shoes left wet prints on the comforter.
The next morning, flour baby had a soggy bottom. Reggie had forgotten it on the porch and rain had soaked the bag.

Her project was falling apart before her eyes. Even with a fake baby that required no real care, she’d ruined everything. Just like her parents before her, she thought miserably.

She plugged in her hair dryer and blew hot air on flour baby’s yarny scalp. She put tape over its skin to reinforce the structure. Eventually she ziplocked it in a gallon freezer bag, put it in her backpack, and left for school.

Reggie waited for Matt in the parking lot. She went up to his car when he pulled up and said, “Want to skip first period?” She held up her sodden flour baby.

Matt laughed and said, “You bet I do.”

They ate hash browns at the McDonald’s down the road. Matt leaned over the table and kissed her with a full mouth. It was gross but still exciting.

“Let’s just skip the whole day,” Matt said. “We’ll go to the movies.”

They kissed more in the movie theater; they kissed everywhere. They went back to Reggie’s house and Reggie broke the promise she’d made herself in the car the night before; she let Matt come inside of her without a condom. “I’ll pull out,” he’d said, but he hadn’t.

“Ted Irish comes back to school on Monday,” Reggie said softly as they lay in bed together. With her hand she explored Matt’s curls. Matt said nothing; he’d fallen asleep.
“I don’t know how I’ll face him,” she said.

Jewel came over that weekend, but Reggie turned her away.

“I’m worried about you, Reggie,” Jewel said through the screen door. “Matt has no redeeming qualities.”

Matt came up behind Reggie. “I’ll redeem your qualities!” he said to Jewel through the screen door. Jewel scowled deeply and left Reggie’s porch without a word.

Matt still hadn’t left Reggie’s house, and Carla hadn’t seemed to mind when she found him on the couch Friday night; in fact she’d left for a weekend with Jared, beforehand pulling Reggie aside and handing her a pack of condoms. “I know you’re not doing anything, but just in case, I want you to be safe,” Carla said. She’d kissed Reggie’s cheek and Reggie returned an embarrassed smile.

Reggie felt bulletproof as she walked into school with Matt’s arm around her on Monday morning. But then they parted for their separate first periods and Reggie went to her locker to find it graffitied with red marker.

SLUT…BITCH…GO FUCK YOURSELF!!

A crowd formed behind Reggie. The hall monitor came up behind her. “Oh, jeez,” he muttered, and then he spit a few words into his walkie-talkie.

Reggie wanted to say something lighthearted, to show she was above all this, but she couldn’t find the words. She pushed through the people gathered around her and sank with her head down to Ms. Bird’s class.

She nearly walked straight into Ted Irish, whose eyes fell so coldly on her that Reggie did an about-face and took the back hallway to class. In the corner of Ms. Bird’s
room, Arielle, the French girl, was surrounded by a gaggle of girls, the school gossips. In her beautiful accent, the words falling out of her mouth like water, Arielle said, “She thinks she’s special because he had sex with her, but he’ll have sex with anyone.”

Beautiful girls saying ugly things fascinated Reggie. She was always astonished by how quickly these girls could call up an invasion of misery.

“Don’t listen to them,” Jewel said when Reggie sank into her seat. Steadfast Jewel, there by Reggie’s side even though just the other day Reggie wouldn’t unlatch the screen door and let Jewel inside her house.

In Sociology, Matt moved to sit next to Reggie instead of across from her. He wound his fingers through her hair until Mrs. McMahon said, “Enough, Matt. Save that for after school.”

Everyone laughed, except for Jewel. Reggie saw Ted Irish lean over and whisper something into his girlfriend’s ear.

The class quieted. Jewel cast a worried glance at Reggie’s water-stained flour baby. Flour had leaked from a small hole into the bottom of the Ziploc bag, and in other places the paper was thin and close to tearing.

Mrs. McMahon popped a videotape into the VCR, and the screen came alive with recorded FOX news footage of American troops rolling through Kuwait on their tanks, headed for Iraq. Boys in goggles, carrying machine guns, perched above the sandy desert, on their way to war. The invasion had begun last week while Matt and Reggie had been driving around, getting into trouble.

“See?” Mrs. McMahon said when the footage turned to an exchange of missiles. “There are the weapons Saddam’s not supposed to have in the first place!”
Reggie put her head down. In the dark, she couldn’t help it. She remembered what Matt had said about drugs, what Carla had said about having fun, what she felt about Matt. They couldn’t help it. George Bush – he just couldn’t help it. Ted Irish couldn’t help hating Reggie. Jewel couldn’t help being hypercritical. Mrs. McMahon couldn’t help having the wrong ideas. It was all wrong but none of them could help it.

After school, Ms. Thorne said, “I am very sorry about what they did to your locker. I’m not saying this will be easy. But you’re shutting down, Reggie. Skipping school. Not respecting yourself.”

Reggie looked at Ms. Thorne. She wondered if the rumors about her and the gym teacher were true; she decided she didn’t think so. Ms. Thorne was basically a good person, she cared about Reggie because it was her job, but Reggie couldn’t connect with Ms. Thorne. Ms. Thorne had done everything right in her life, while Reggie was doing everything wrong.

“I don’t drink,” Reggie said, “or do drugs.”

“Good,” Ms. Thorne said, though she looked confused.

“Do you know how drunk my dad was?” Reggie asked.

Ms. Thorne shook her head mournfully.

“0.3,” Reggie said. “That’s really high. He turned onto a sidewalk.”

“I know, Reggie. Try not to torture yourself.”

When Matt pulled up that night, Reggie went to his car. She had flour baby with her.
“Forget Ted Irish,” Matt said through the cranked-down window. “He’s a pussy, blaming you.”

Reggie nodded. “Can I drive?” she asked. Matt shrugged and unbuckled his seatbelt. Reggie got in the front seat and Matt shut the door behind her. From the passenger side, he told her to go back to Walled Lake, but Reggie turned east instead, toward Detroit, and the night fled from the headlights as she accelerated. She felt the engine ask for a higher gear and she shifted into it.

She’d left Ms. Thorne’s office feeling strange. Carla had tried to talk to her – “I got a call from the school, sweetie,” – but Reggie had shrugged her away and phoned Matt.

“Where’re you going?” Matt asked, and she turned to look at him, the wheel shaking beneath her fingers.

“Hey, stop sign,” Matt said, but Reggie blew through it.

A cop car pulled out behind her and its flashing lights pivoted in her rear view, casting a lovely glow on Matt’s face.

“I’m tired of being a rule-follower,” she said, and drove faster. There were tears in her eyes, but for the first time they felt cathartic. “Everything’s a mess and I haven’t even had any fun.”

The cop sped up too, setting his siren wailing, and Reggie kept going. Her whole life seemed visible on the road before her, ready for ruin, and she thought, get the bad stuff out of the way now. Get it all out. Get arrested now and maybe she wouldn’t later; make mistakes with boys now and she’d be too hurt to make them again.

She glanced at Matt as she careened onto the highway entrance ramp.
He looked to be teetering between uncertainty and excitement. Then Reggie had an idea. “The flour baby,” she said. “Throw it.”

A slow smile crept over Matt’s face. Whether or not they were right for each other, they could, as Carla said, have fun. He was easy-going, quick to agree, fine with anything, fine with Reggie. And she was fine with him – no, she was more than fine, she was desperate to bind herself to someone, and she wanted that someone to be Matt.

The cop was close behind them. “Go, go, go!” Matt said. He reached down and pulled flour baby from its dark nest in the foot well, tearing away the plastic bag. He cranked down the window and sent the bag of flour soaring toward the cruiser. In the rearview, Reggie watched the baby hit the cop’s windshield and explode in a poof of white powder and, for a moment, everything behind her was weightless and pure.
Twenty years had passed since I’d last seen the Beast. We were seventeen and embarrassed of one another back then. I’d asked him to prom. He agreed on the condition that I would cover expenses, and that we would have sex. I accepted the terms, so we shared one night together, me in a gaudy taffeta dress and him in cheap tux rental. He spent five minutes inside of me. We both seemed to think we could have done better as we lay together in the hotel bed, a foot of space between us.

One Sunday morning at my kitchen table many years later, I turned a page in the *New Plains Record*, and there he was. He’d become famous without my knowing it. That fame was interesting to me. His real name was Pierre, and it was strange to see it in print. He and his band – a heavy metal group called Beastific – were doing what they called a “Rural Terror Tour.” They played small venues outside of cities, or they rented barns far out in the country.

*I know we’ve played much bigger venues,* noted Pierre in the article, *but we like the intimacy of a small place off the beaten track. Our fans do, too. We’re playing small clubs but also just anywhere we can – barns, band shells, parks. Beastific is about the people.*


“What are you saying?” my husband asked.
I hadn’t heard him walk into the kitchen. He wore a bathrobe, though it was nearly noon. We slept like teenagers on weekends, throwing off our REM cycles and making Monday mornings hellish. Our jobs at offices eroded the idea that living a long life was a good thing. We just wanted to sleep and never wake up.

The terms of our marriage had included a no-children clause, a stipulation that remained un-negotiated by either of us, even though boredom had come to our hearth like a sleeping dog. I’d assumed one of us would have a change of heart, or that we’d make a mistake: an insurgent zygote would hold us at gunpoint and make us really decide if we meant it.

But that never happened, and I’d told myself I didn’t want children. What if I couldn’t love them? What if they couldn’t love me?

“Beverly, what are you thinking so hard about?” John asked. “Yoo-hoo. You look like you want to kill someone.”

John poured a cup of coffee.

I held out my mug for a refill. “If you were going to name your band with a pun on the word beatific, by spelling it like this” – I held up the paper and pointed to the name in the headline – “would you expect people to pronounce the first part normally, like beast, or the way you pronounce beatific, like be-ahst…”

“I’m not sure I follow,” he said.

“I just think it’s asking a lot of people.”

“Hm.” John sat down across from me and tugged at the financial section until it came loose.

“We should unsubscribe from the paper,” I said.
“Does the beast thing really upset you that much?”

“It’s not that,” I said. “It’s just garbage. They just write garbage. We can’t afford to pay for garbage.”

“We’re actually doing okay right now, money-wise,” John said. “Do you know their music?”

“No.”

“Ignore what you don’t like in the paper. You know Annie would grumble if we unsubscribed.”

Annie was our neighbor. Her husband was the editor of the New Plains Record. Carl didn’t keep tabs on his readers, but Annie watched front porches on Sunday mornings for the newly unsubscribed.

“It says here this band is really famous in Germany. Don’t they look too old to play metal music?” I tossed the paper on the table, where it landed with a soft slap. “Shouldn’t they learn the piano, or something?”

John squinted at the photograph. “It’s hard to say how old they are, with the horns they’re wearing.”

They were wearing devil’s horns. That was true. Famous in Germany or not, they were dressed up as though it were Halloween. They did that for a living.

“Do you want to go see them play?” John asked.

“No,” I said quickly, folding the page and tucking it beneath the Sports section. “I’m making an Eggo. Want one?”

“Two,” John said.
I took the box from the freezer, shook out a handful of waffles. Did the band’s name mean Pierre remembered me? The Beast – that had been my nickname for him. When he’d first transferred to my school in the 11th grade, he had long, chestnut-brown hair and a chiseled face. He looked like the Beast from *Beauty and the Beast* after he’d turned back into a prince. A trace of rage shimmered around him, but for the most part the Beast was a quiet person.

I’d meant to taunt him with the nickname, because everyone else sought to make his life miserable, but then I grew fond of him. I’d thought of myself then as having one shy foot in the popular circle, so it was important to me that no one knew about my crush. I was mortified, of course, to realize I was in love with him – but this was before I realized I was neither popular nor unpopular, utterly nondescript. No one cared what I did or who I liked.

Then he found out about the nickname. I’d told too many people, thought myself too clever. One day he came to school with a close-cropped haircut, and the sudden transformation made me love him even more. I wondered if I’d had an effect on him, if he cared what I thought. The next day, I asked him to prom, jumping at his stipulations because I didn’t know enough then to know I was acting cowardly.

The ringing phone brought me back to our kitchen in New Plains. I answered.

“‘I’m calling about an overdue balance on an American Express card,’” said the voice on the other end. A pleasant voice, but cool and firm.

“I know this is a scam,” I said. “‘I’ve never had an American Express card in my life. Goodbye.”

“Again?” John asked.
“Again. On a Sunday, too. I looked it up on the Internet. Apparently these scammers convince people to mail checks to them.”

“I just checked your credit score last week,” John said. “You’re looking good.” He put down the paper and grinned. “Definitely looking good from here.”

*From here* was about as close as we came to each other these days.

The coils in the toaster glowed red. I leaned closer to check the waffles, felt the heat on my cheek. Outside, the spring day burned strongly. My sunflowers had their faces turned up toward the sun, and a red hummingbird darted around the feeder. We lived in a pleasant house in New Plains, Nebraska. A rental house, a pleasant rental, a thousand miles from the Detroit suburb where the Beast and I had lived. The yard backed up to a patch of woods. Brambly black-raspberry bushes grew at the threshold of the trees. The berries were small and sweet. I planned to uproot a few bushes when we could finally buy a house of our own.

Which seemed a long way off, as our savings never grew, only our debts.

Did the Beast own a house? *How* famous in Germany was he, really?

John sniffed the air. “Are the waffles burning?”

I worked at an insurance brokerage firm as a Marketing Specialist, but I mostly answered phones and forwarded e-mails and acted as a personal assistant and, sometimes, partner-in-crime to my boss, Calvin Burnside.

Once, without discomfort, he handed me a pair of women’s glasses and a disc of birth control pills along with an address written on a scrap of paper. I wrapped the glasses in paper towel from the bathroom and slipped everything into a manila envelope, sticking
a generic return label to its corner. I thought about adding a note, warning the woman she could get pregnant on the pill if she chronically missed days, but no one needs a stranger to patronize her.

Another time I walked to the liquor store on my lunch break and bought him a fifth of Grey Goose with the company card. I didn’t mind, I told him. I needed to buy a lottery ticket anyway, and a tube of Pringles for my lunch. I used my own cash for the lottery ticket, not his card, and I saved the receipt. I didn’t want any trouble if I won, but I didn’t end up winning.

Cal often went out to long lunches at the hotel bar next door to our building, then called me from the parking lot and asked me to bring him his car keys. I always did, no matter how strongly he smelled of booze or how red his eyes were.

I commuted forty-five minutes from New Plains to Omaha each day to do these things. Taking care of Cal’s daughters, I liked best. They were spoiled, grumbling girls, but sweet at heart.

I found them both sitting in my desk chair when I arrived at work on Monday morning. The office was empty except for them. They’d taken ice cream from the freezer and were sucking chocolate off flimsy plastic spoons. The lights were off, and grainy cartoons playing on my computer blew moonlight over the girls’ faces.

“Dad told us to wait here for you, Bevie.” Caroline looked up at me.

“Is that so?” I leaned over them and nudged down the volume on the computer.

“Are these cartoons pirated?”

“No.” Maggie giggled.

“Let’s go. I’ll take you to school.”
Maggie cried in the car, while Caroline stared pensively out the window.

“I’ve just had enough of the second grade.” Maggie hiccupped.

“I know,” I said. “It’s a hard life. Here’s a wet wipe. Clean that chocolate off your face.”

“I didn’t do my homework,” Caroline said. “I was supposed to make bookmarks.”

I sighed. Caroline’s poor performance in school meant Cal had to go to conferences with his loathed ex-wife. “Tell your teacher you left them at home, but that someone’s bringing them later. OK?”

“Which home?” Caroline asked. “Mom’s or Dad’s?”

“Well, that’s up to you. Actually, say it was your dad’s.”

“I did my homework,” mumbled Maggie.

I finished Caroline’s book report when I returned to the office, which was now alive with ringing phones and the rushing sound of the copier. The lights were on in Cal’s office, but the blinds were drawn and the door closed. Caroline’s smile, reflected in the rear-view mirror, had harpooned me. I felt elated for having spent a little time with them. Sometimes I wondered what I wouldn’t do for those girls.

The assignment was to illustrate bookmarks with depictions from The Trumpet of the Swan. I wasn’t a good artist, and my thoughts wandered from the girls to Pierre. A fantasy of the two of us together, and young, had burgeoned in my mind last night. I imagined we’d done things we hadn’t, normal things like driving around in his car or eating at a restaurant. As quickly as the fantasy brought joy, it brought unhappiness, a reminder I was no longer very young. Our old selves, or what could have been our old selves, filled me with sadness, the striking type of sadness that demands to be remedied
someway, somehow. I put Caroline’s bookmarks aside and clicked through the Internet until I had two tickets to the Beastific show in my basket. Luckily they were cheap; my credit card was nearly maxed out. I paid for the tickets before I could change my mind.

I’d bought two tickets because one seemed desperate. I didn’t want to take John with me, but who else was there? The show was tomorrow, a Tuesday night in New Plains, when everything was so dead we sometimes wondered if the sun would overlook us in the morning.

The phone rang. I answered.

“How did you get this number?” I said. “Stop harassing me.”

The caller was a woman this time, from the same collection agency, and she recited with confidence my full name and my social security number. She gave the balance on the credit card, an astronomical amount I wasn’t sure I’d heard correctly.

“I’ve told you that I believe this is a scam. If you were a real collection agency you’d send me something in the mail.”

“We have. Several times.”

I listened to her breathing as she waited for me to respond. Then I hung up. I’d pulled up the number for AMEX’s customer service and was ready to call them – to complain, to ease my worries – when Cal emerged from his office, wearing a white shirt made with thin silky pinstripes running up and down the fabric. Someone who didn’t know him might say he looked bleary-eyed, some combination of tired and high, but to me he always looked this way. Sometimes I thought he was the wrong sort of person to have money; other times I believed the money had made him the way he was. I often felt
protective of him, or maybe I was only protective of myself: I helped him with so many of the things he did wrong.

“Beautiful,” he said, picking up a bookmark. “You made it look like a child drew these.”

I bit my lip. I wanted to ask him for gas money for this morning – the girls went to a private school thirty minutes away – but I felt too ashamed. Asking for money reminded me I had no real claim to their love.

But Cal would pay anything to show his three daughters he loved them, especially after he and his wife had dragged each other through a nasty divorce. I sent the girls presents to her house using his credit card. I made their lunches in the office kitchen before I left on the afternoons Cal had the girls, leaving them for Cal to take home and give to them the next morning. I spread mayonnaise on turkey sandwiches, peeled carrots and filled tiny containers with ranch dressing. I tied neat baggies of chocolate with ribbon because the girls felt special opening a present at the lunch table, their friends peering curiously over their own boring brown-bagged lunches.

Other people would quit, or find the work demeaning. I hadn’t gotten a promotion in the five years I’d worked for Cal, and I could be making more money somewhere else – money John and I could put toward a down payment. But this job made me comfortable, as though I’d found a knot of people who understood and appreciated me. Their earthly dilemmas were mine to solve, and I solved them better than I did my own.

*
John and I first met ten years ago when we both worked for a labor union, he the bookkeeper and I the office manager. We worked for activists, which we felt good about, but didn’t have to be activists ourselves, which made us feel even better.

Then a new president and financial secretary were elected. The financial secretary would keep the books and do the taxes herself, so John lost his job. I was let go because the new administration was suspicious of the old. The former president had been ousted for using union funds to visit, repeatedly, a psychic who charged $100/hour. He’d gone crazy, but he was my friend.

He’d also bought a car.

Why hadn’t anything concerned me back then? Even when the president went to prison for embezzling, the idea I might face my own consequences some day never seemed real to me.

John and I fell in love in our waning days at the union. We whispered in the break room about our futures and complained that it wasn’t fair that we’d been suspected of complicity. Integrity, trust, honor: those things had been important to us back then. John said he hadn’t known about the president’s secret debit card until it was too late, and as soon as he found out he’d told a trustee. I believed him at the time, and now I didn’t care.

We were less in love now but we were still friends. There wasn’t ill will between us, only boredom, and, on my part, occasional weeping in the shower. All that life, six years of marriage plus two years of dating, had passed serenely, without excitement or tragedy. We could have done with more money, but we always made rent, even if it meant putting groceries on credit. If only one of us had been mentally ill, or an alcoholic.
If only I’d won the lottery one of those times I put a five-dollar bill down on the counter and asked for five easy picks.

I stood over the stove that night, stirring ramen noodles for our dinner. The collection call distracted me. I’d looked through John’s spreadsheets of our finances when I got home, but nothing seemed unusual.

“John?” I called. “I need the computer. I want to look at my credit score.”

John didn’t seem to hear me. His office popped with the sound of music and gunfire. He was playing his computer game in which he was a spy on the Titanic. The objective wasn’t to stop the ship from sinking, but rather to stop WWI and the Russian Revolution from happening. I didn’t get the connection but trusted it was there.

I turned the burner off, poured the ramen and their packets of salty powder into bowls.

“What’s this?” I set his bowl down on a pile of papers, picking up a book that lay open, pages down, on the desk.

John snatched it away. “Don’t,” he said.

But I’d read the title anyway. “Cheater’s Guide to Titanic: Adventure Out of Time!” I exclaimed. “You’re cheating at the game?”

“Oh come on, Beverly,” he said. “It’s a game.”

“But you’ve been telling me about it as though you’d figured it all out yourself.”

“Like you could figure out which boiler room the Bolsheviks hid the jeweled copy of the Rubaiyat in without help!”

“Well, did you look in all of them?”
John turned the computer off in the way you weren’t supposed to, with one push of one button, and left the room. The little book, with its answers and shortcuts, was small and depressing. We didn’t even have anything interesting to hide. Better not to fight at all.

“You didn’t save your game,” I said quietly.

He didn’t hear me.

“I don’t care how you play the game!” I said loudly.

Silence, like a stopped watch. Steam spiraled from the bowl of noodles, but even the steam looked pitiful, as though it could barely bring itself to rise.

John returned, a sheepish smile on his face. Our fights never lasted long. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Me too.”

He took the pair of chopsticks I’d set on his desk and clacked them together, then used them to pick up a strand of my hair and put it in his mouth. I smiled; he smiled. I put the book down on the desk, but picked it up again. It had been covering an American Express bill with my name on it, addressed to John’s office.

‘Bev, don’t. That’s a mistake.”

The bill unfurled in my hands, revealing a long list of charges. Gas, groceries, but also large amounts spent at Best Buy and on Amazon, and other websites I didn’t recognize.

“I was going to pay it all off. I just needed more time.” John’s face looked alien: his small mouth was open wide and red splotches appeared on his neck and cheeks, as though he’d been hexed.
Until he had spoken a part of me – a desperate, hopeful part – believed this to be part of the scam. Then it was as though I’d been sleeping on a plane, and I was thrown awake by the thump of wheels on the tarmac.

“How much?”

John hesitated. I stared him down.

“Twenty-five thousand,” he said.

“My god, John. On what?”

I let the bill fall to the floor and sat heavily in the office chair. It twirled vaguely beneath my weight. John stood before me, admitting to what he’d done, but I felt guilty, like a criminal surprised at having been caught. There was the crumpled bill with my name on it. It said I spent that money; it said these numbers belonged to me.

John hadn’t answered me, but I didn’t want to know. Not tonight at least. I was just struck dumb, and tired, and wanted to eat my pathetic dinner alone. I told John so, and he went into the bedroom and closed the door.

The noodles had gone gummy. I used to eat plain, unsalted rice cakes and salads with dressing on the side in college. Being thin had been important to me. It was an aesthetic, I said haughtily to anyone who asked me about my diet. Now I didn’t care. I’d gotten pudgy around my middle from eating the way John ate. Back then I’d been empty and foolish; now I was full of nonsense.

Moonlight shifted through the curtains and I listened to the night birds making a cacophony outside. To soothe myself, I thought of the motel room where the Beast and I had spent our night. I remembered the stained red carpeting and an electrical outlet dangling from the wall by its wires. I’d stood on the balcony in my ridiculous dress,
watching a girl – my age, or a little older – swim the length of the pool in slow strokes. I could see her whole body: long legs shimmering in the pool lights, the wavy white of her bathing suit, hair moving like a jellyfish as she swam.

I’d turned to see Pierre, his jacket removed, his tie undone and hanging from his neck. Had I gone to him, or waited for him to come to me? Did he tear my dress off with the curtains wide open? No. I went inside and closed the door and the blinds. I think I might have tried to talk about poetry with him. I liked to write poetry back then, but mostly my poems were full of questions that made no sense, questions only a deranged person would ask. *Oh, and didn’t we love to go in the river?*

That night could have been so much more.

I was glad to find Cal full of anxious energy the next day at work. I needed a distraction. John and I had woken to our alarms, readied ourselves silently. Why hadn’t I thrown him out? Because I didn’t want him to put a hotel on credit? Because I didn’t want to be alone? I thought the two of us had been bearing our boredom silently, bravely, but John had been buying things to make him happy.

The morning brought a problem with one of the clients, a parking service called Safety Park. Safety Park’s carrier – the policy brokered by Cal – had canceled their general liability insurance because, when the policy was initially signed, Cal had forged the loss runs to make it appear as though Safety Park had never had an accident or filed a claim. This got them a lower rate, and it was also untrue. All of Safety Park’s employees were on drugs, or so the rumors went, and they crashed cars all the time. They’d filed hundreds of thousands of dollars in claims, and had been non-renewed by almost every
carrier that existed. The current carrier could have figured this out with a little digging, but Cal had talked sweet to them on the golf course. I’d heard, too, he’d slept with the underwriter.

Cal was furious when the notice of cancellation was faxed over. He snapped at the sales staff and the customer service reps. The general liability specialist emerged from his office with her head hung. I caught her blotting tears in the kitchen. Somehow, this was everyone’s fault but Cal’s and mine, though I’d used Photoshop to make the loss runs look clean. “I’ll end up in the slammer right next to Cal,” I’d joked back then, but I grew nervous as the day went on. What if the carrier reported the forged loss runs to the Department of Insurance? What if I did go to prison?

Cal was on the phone all afternoon, calling in favors, saying he didn’t know how the mistake happened. At the end of the day, he slapped the phone into its cradle, took the bottle of Grey Goose from his desk, and called out, “All clear! Get out of here, you scoundrels.”

Everyone in the office clapped. I did, too. We hated Cal when he yelled and we loved him when he let us leave at 3 PM, even if we’d almost gotten arrested earlier that day.

I lingered, and when everyone was gone I checked my credit rating. There was the American Express card, the balance glowering at me, and beneath it another Visa I didn’t recognize with a $10,000 limit; the balance was creeping toward it. Now I would never be able to have a child. I wouldn’t be able to afford her.

I put my head down and wept, though Cal was still in his office.

“Beverly? You okay?”
I swiped tears from my eyes and slowly gathered my things. Cal stood in his doorway, clutching the bottle of Grey Goose by his side. I avoided his eyes as I slipped my arms in my jacket. “Yeah. Yup. Just worried about today. I didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Everything’s really okay?” I said.

“Oh Bevie,” he said. “I would never throw you under the bus. If the DoI came for you they’d have to go through me first. You know that.”

“Of course,” I said.

“I need to have some fun,” he said abruptly. He swung the bottle of vodka to his mouth.

I looked at him closely and saw tears brimming in his eyes.

“I’m going to a concert tonight.” I didn’t know why I was telling him but I knew I didn’t want to see him cry. I hadn’t told John about it, and as I spoke to Cal I knew I wasn’t going to.

“What band?”

“Someone that I knew from high school. I don’t think the music will be very good.”

“Sounds fun.”

“I have an extra ticket. It’s all the way in New Plains, though.”

Sunlight pierced the window behind Cal’s head. He appeared to be thinking. We didn’t want each other. If we did, something would have happened by now. We just wanted to be a little less lonely; we wanted something different than what we had.
Cal and I ate dinner at the hotel bar, Cal guzzling vodka sodas, and then I drove us to the venue, a barn just outside of New Plains. I parked in the grass lot next door. I’d heard of this place being used for weddings, but never for concerts. Clusters of wild violets blossomed in the manicured lawn. Teenagers in heavy black boots stomped over them. Cal had fallen asleep on the way, and I sat in the car with the engine pinging, privately embarrassed that I’d cried, and surprised that I’d felt so strongly that I’d lost someone upon seeing my ruined credit, the rating persistently red on the screen. In a life of blind, vague longings, I’d seen clearly something I’d wanted, only to have it taken away.

I dug the heels of my hands into my eyes, snapped open the visor and rubbed concealer into my dark circles. I nudged Cal awake. “Ready, or would you rather stay here?”

“Ready.”

The barn teemed with teenagers wearing black. They’d painted their faces to look like skulls, and some wore devil horns like I’d seen in the paper. I trudged in my pumps and nylons toward the door. Cal trailed behind, looking ill. The last of the sun fell on a boy selling t-shirts with the band’s name. The “t” in Beastific was an upside down gothic cross.

“Twenty bucks,” the kid said. He looked thin and tired but his teeth looked like they’d been straightened with braces.

“No, thanks,” I said.
“These kids are fucked up,” Cal said. He pointed to a group of girls staring ghoulishly with the hoods of their sweatshirts pulled tightly closed. “Whose parents would let their kids dress like this?”

I thought of Cal’s girls and wondered what their futures would bring. Now they wore matching sapphire rings, Christmas gifts from Cal. What would they trade those rings for, when the time came? I wanted them to stay perfect, but I also wanted to see them barter away everything Cal had ever given them. I loved them, but I knew their happiness couldn’t last: Cal’s money would lose its effect, or they would come to hate it. They would go from dreamy kids to brooding teenagers. I wouldn’t always be there to do their homework, to pack their lunches, and after some time they might not even remember my name.

“They probably think we’re parents who wouldn’t let our kids go alone,” I said. I felt a brief elation at the thought that one of these kids could be my own. I’d noticed a few dozing women in parked cars, piles of coats in the backseat. I wanted to be one of them.

“I’m going to find the bar,” Cal said.

One long note resounded from inside the barn. The show had begun.

I stood in the back and watched Pierre sing into a microphone swinging from the ceiling. His face was the same face: strong chin and sunken eyes, high cheekbones. He wore his hair long again. He still looked boyish. I became, once again, the girl who wanted him, the girl who had teased him out of love, but standing there I also felt the presence of all the time we’d been apart. We’d never even known each other in the first
place. I’d had nothing to do with his angst; I was not the wicked bitch he sang about. Our lives had briefly overlapped, and that was it. These two feelings – I loved him, and we meant nothing to each other – combined to make me brazen.

The crowd of teenagers moved like a swarm migration, but I tried to shoulder my way into the mosh pit. I lost my breath quickly; my jostled bones felt like rattling tin cans. I was knocked to my knees, and a group of hands pulled me up and pushed me toward the back wall – the safe haven of the few adults who had chosen to come inside. I felt stupid, but no one seemed to notice me.

Pierre sang one song, then another. They all sounded the same. But I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I wanted to talk to him, touch him. Above me the packed beams of the barn roof seemed to clasp their hands in prayer.

I’d gotten pregnant on prom night. I told only my best friend at the time. I stayed pregnant for six weeks, until I turned eighteen and didn’t need my parents’ permission. That friend and I lost touch years ago, but at the time we were very close. She went with me to the clinic.

Getting rid of the baby had been the right choice; it was the choices that followed that had made no sense.

The show ended and I queued outside with the teenagers waiting in line to talk to Pierre. I wouldn’t tell him about the baby – there was no use in that – but I wanted to see if he’d recognize me. I thought of John as I waited. He was at home nosing around the Titanic, flipping through his book for clues. I didn’t know if I could afford to divorce him; I didn’t know if I could bear to be alone.
I reached the front of the line. “After party here,” Pierre said, thrusting a flyer into my hands. “Eighteen and up. T-shirts twenty dollars.”

He looked at me more closely and smiled. “You’re not our typical fan.”

“I’m here to get something signed for my daughter,” I said. The lie emerged from my mouth like a ball of light: enthusiastic, sure of itself, with a trueness of spirit that even my truths didn’t always possess. I thought he might recognize my voice, but he didn’t seem to.

“Is she eighteen?”

I nodded.

“Bring her to the party. We’ll take a photo.”

He looked at me as though he wondered why I was still standing before him.

“Want to buy her a t-shirt?” he asked.

I bought a t-shirt and moved aside, already regretting the twenty dollars. I hadn’t seen Cal since he’d wandered to the bar – which was really just a cooler of ice and a few cases of liquor. I wondered if he’d go to the party with me. I’d have to find an excuse for my fake daughter. I could text John and tell him I had to stay the night with Cal’s daughters. Or I could say nothing at all.

I found Cal making out with a woman. He had her pressed against the barn wall. Her hair was falling out of its bun. She looked like someone’s mother, a businesswoman. I knew he’d be going home with her, and I was on my own for the night. They both lost their balance, and I took the opportunity to call Cal’s name.

“Bevie!” He sounded delighted.

“Do you need me to pick up the girls? I could stay with them.”
The girls. As though they were mine, too.

“No,” Cal said. “No. The bitch on wheels has them tonight.”

“All right, Cal,” I said quietly. “Good night.”

The after party was at a Holiday Inn off I-80. Beastific had booked the whole top floor; people wound their way in and out of rooms with doors propped open. Music blared from some of the rooms; other rooms contained people on their way to being undressed. I picked my way through plastic cups and cigarette butts, looking for Pierre. I was curious how much the hotel would charge their credit card. When I couldn’t find him, I went to one of the balconies and watched cars stream by. Once again I stood on a balcony with Pierre somewhere on the other side of the door, only this time the room was packed and smelled of beer.

I went inside to the party. I was disgusted with myself for being there, and I felt the need to go home and talk to John. To yell at him for stealing my identity. Just to scream. The spreadsheets he kept of income and expenses were phony, and in any case I’d only pretended to be interested in them. I no longer needed Pierre to recognize me. In fact, I would be embarrassed if he did. What I’d felt in the barn had dissolved like tissue paper stirred up in water; part of being an adult was letting passing fantasies blow away, wasn’t it, even if I’d already taken the first step to making a mistake?

I dug through the pile of coats on the bed, looking for mine.

“Hey, did your daughter make it?”

I looked up to see Pierre had entered the room, surrounded by girls. They had their hands on him. They were all so young. Their faces were studded with jewelry, and I
hoped they wouldn’t let Pierre use them. I looked at the blond one with her finger on his ear lobe and saw Caroline. The sulking one behind her could be Maggie in ten years. My heart broke for those girls, even though they might end up with better lives than I had. Who could say?

I turned away. “She won’t be coming.”
Excerpt from *Castles*

A novel-in-progress

Joint Task Force Guantanamo

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1. The Naturalist

George North remembered the day three years ago he had poised his pen over a stack of paperwork and, with a few signatures, drifted into the army. He’d hoped it would lend order to his life. He’d known he was attracted to men that day in the shabby recruitment office, the recruiter towering over him with folded arms and a whistling nose, but he signed up anyway.

He was a 31E Corrections Specialist, first stationed at Fort Leavenworth, now stationed at Guantánamo Bay.

On the island – what everyone called the base, though of course it wasn’t separate from the rest of Cuba – George could hide in the long hours and the strange work. He wasn’t supposed to talk while he paced the cellblocks. With friends, he drank at O’Kelley’s or sped boats around the bay, keeping his true self at a distance, always worrying what others thought of him. A gaze that lingered too long, an affectionate touch or something more genuine than the gay chicken all the guys played could bring him to ruin. In his three years in the army, he’d achieved a balance of knowing who he was, and
not knowing. He wasn’t the only one to keep up a disguise. In his line of work, everyone lived a second life underneath the first.

George wasn’t completely unhappy; the island was a place of paradise, the water always warm enough to swim. Beneath the surface spread colorful landscapes of coral. In the water George was free to be no one at all.

Between shifts and on his rare days off, George traded his glasses for goggles and swam laps against the current, heart pumping hard, mind lost to the bay and the sea beyond. He wasn’t fulfilled, but he stayed calm; the work of guarding the detainees was boring, sometimes cruel, but he did it without complaint. He’d recently decided to continue life as it was, for three more years at least. These were the terms of his re-enlistment. He believed things would stay the same, until he fell in love with the base naturalist.

He met Clifton Meyers the day he almost drowned while swimming offshore of Glass Beach.

Deep beneath the clear water, sea glass caught light and shimmered. George powered through the waves, headed for the buoy some fifty meters out, when a rip current grabbed him and pulled him swiftly toward the sea. He tried to swim against it but the current held him in a tight embrace. Scrubby desert hills surrounded the bay, their long grass thick and brown and tinted green by his goggles. A wide bandage of blue sky, knobbed with a few flat clouds, spread above him. His heart raced in a broken-footed gallop as he continued to struggle, growing tired, and then he saw a blurry figure on the shore. Someone stood near the place where George had folded his brown-gray army t-shirt and tucked his glasses into one of his sandals. His instinct was to be paranoid; here
more than anywhere he feared the consequences of showing weakness. He did not think to call for help.

His next instinct was that he would simply have to outlast the rip current. He was the strongest he’d been in his life. His muscles were taut, the sinews strained in his neck when he wrestled men bigger than he to the ground. He was stubborn as well. He’d ignored his mother’s e-mails until they stopped coming.

He could ride the current out, but the panic returned when he thought of the deep, endless blue of the sea. He tried again to swim but his limbs moved in different directions; he couldn’t coordinate his mind and his muscles. He struggled without logic against the current, trying to push himself forward. He felt he could laugh if he had enough energy: did all those who drowned have this feeling, before they sank?

Then he remembered: swim sideways.

George burst free from the current, the waves rolling loosely around his body. Beneath him the floor of the bay glittered in the sun, full of coral and sea glass murmuring with reflected light. Water had filled his goggles and he pulled them from his head, swiping salt from his eyes. With slow strokes, he made his way back to shore.

The man he’d seen, a stranger in civilian clothes, a pair of binoculars slung around his neck, was still there.

“I thought you needed help,” the man said. “I was about to radio the coast guard.” He said his name, Clifton Meyers, and he was a base naturalist.

“Just got caught in a current,” George was out of breath, his head spun, and he couldn’t blink enough light from his eyes. He’d gone right to the beach from one of his
swing shifts; he hadn’t slept in thirty hours. They were in the still of the morning on a bright November day.

“Jesus Christ, be careful,” the naturalist said. “You wouldn’t be the first GI to drown out there.”

George nodded; somehow, this made him feel important. George stumbled to his pile of things, collapsed into the sharp rocks and smooth sea glass that covered the beach. He strapped his sandals to his feet, yanked his t-shirt over his head. Salt spray had speckled his glasses but he put them on; Clifton came into focus. A clipboard lay on the ground next to him, along with measuring tape and thick gloves.

“I’m out measuring iguanas,” Clifton said. His eyes were a warm brown. His rowdy, curly hair lay flat in some places, stood upright in others. As he talked – the iguanas here were really big, he was emphasizing – he smoothed his hair back. His exposed forehead revealed a mole right in the center, dark and round like a clean bullet hole.

George didn’t care about the iguanas, though they were everywhere. They scrabbled outside the barracks, over the tiles outside the Starbucks and the Navy Exchange, spiked and mean-looking. But Clifton sat down next to him, kindness dancing in his eyes, sentences spilling from his mouth. Though George’s next shift began in fewer than eight hours, he stayed and listened.

2. On Leave

George’s enlistment had broken his mother’s heart, the final in a series of things he’d done to upset her his final year at home. He’d been eighteen, lost, and he developed
an interest in the army recruiter who’d spent a week at his Michigan high school sitting behind a folding card table, arms in a triangle behind his head. George took pamphlets and key chains, his fingers resting lightly on the metal rim of the table.

He lost touch with his family upon his transfer, two years later, to GTMO; the Internet on the island was slow and George never had anything to say that would make his family happy. His mother Luiza, his stepfather Shawn, even his stepsister Helen, who had been his ally in the family and whom even now he considered a real friend, faded into memory. It was easier not to think of them.

George had gone to Puerto Rico instead of going stateside for R&R two months ago. There, he’d met Ethan. Ethan was an affable college student in San Juan with his family for a vacation. George had eyed him – surreptitiously, he believed, but then one day Ethan came up to George’s beach chair holding two drinks. “Hey,” he said. “The bartender made a mistake, so this one’s a freebie. Want it?”

George stuttered a response, some version of yes. The boy was beautiful; no other word could describe him. Far more beautiful than George, whose looks had been shorn away along with his thick blond hair. He’d always wondered what it was like to be wholly attractive, not to have your looks rely on one thing that could be taken away.

“Come on, take it,” the boy said. “Come on. I’m Ethan, by the way.”

George took the drink, wrapped in its wet napkin. He gave his own name. Ethan sat down in the chair next to George and stretched out his legs. They were matted with dark hair. Grains of sand stuck to his skin, and his face was shadowed with stubble. His eyes were a spring green. He looked like a model who had been left on an island at the end of a photo shoot.
George was wearing his ARMY t-shirt but Ethan didn’t ask him about it, and George didn’t volunteer any information. Ethan seemed comfortable to talk about himself; he was the type of person who thought his own life was very interesting, and probably it was: he was a student at Brown, his parents had decided on one final family vacation before they divorced (this was Ethan’s suspicion, anyway), and it was just like his father to go to a cheap hotel during hurricane season. He was probably hoping they would all die. Every day there was a new uproar between his parents, who loved to fight, so much so that Ethan wondered what they would do with their time after the divorce. They derived energy, he said, from warfare.

The more Ethan talked, the quieter George grew. He was chastened by this boy’s looks, and by his attention. This was the sort of encounter he had always longed for, but now he was nervous. He didn’t know what to do with himself. George felt panicky, unsure, about to dismiss Ethan with a bark – call him a fag or ask him what the hell he was thinking – but then George remembered he was on leave. There was no one here to give him a disgusted, appalled look; no one here to report him to his CO. Waves danced in the water, so blue it shone. The sky was cloudless, unperturbed; a flock of seabirds banked and plummeted into the surf. George wasn’t used to being around so many civilians. He tore his napkin into pieces in part to keep his hands from reaching out and touching Ethan’s knee.

For as long as he could remember, George had been attracted to boys. His only time with a man – a drunken night when he was still in high school – had been impulsive and catastrophic. His name was Logan, and he was the army recruiter. A senior in high school, self-destructive and depressed, George had left his family to live with his
biological father – the man whose disgust had taught George to be disgusted with himself. Logan, too, had turned on George when they awoke together, in bright sober light. A great loneliness had followed these events, sweeping through his life like a heavy bird with an endless wingspan.

George could survive the loneliness – had survived it – but on the beach with Ethan, despite his nervousness, he felt almost free. His father receded in George’s mind, as though George were on a life raft and drifting away from a burning ship.

George and Ethan had drinks together and then they’d gone to George’s room – an economy single with one small bed and peeling wallpaper. A faucet dripped in the small mildewed bathroom. The nightstand drawer opened to cobwebs and a bible sticky with some ancient spill. George and Ethan fell into the bed’s pile of unmade sheets; George had slept through housekeeping that morning.

Ethan was sure of himself and adventurous. He laughed at George for being nervous. The room was hot, the ceiling fan bore slow oscillating witness, and George grew bolder, vivified, as though Ethan’s touch was sunlight, was rain. George’s heart was wiped clean of debts, its sorrows lifted. He might have been inexperienced, but in bed with Ethan he wasn’t confused. Their bodies came together and parted in a riot of passion.

Ethan seemed to feel no awkwardness when he put on his clothes right after and said he was late for dinner with his parents. Hope rose like a moon inside of George as he lay alone following the click of the door. He fell asleep to the sound of breaking waves and late-night tropical noises: night birds making a cacophony, tourists reveling. This was a new paradise.
George looked for Ethan the next day but he was gone. George asked the concierge about the family, but the concierge, dressed in a blue suit and wearing a tight ponytail, shook her head. “Gone,” she verified.

George tried to find Ethan on the Internet but he didn’t have enough information – didn’t know his last name, wasn’t sure of his age except to say he looked about twenty. His stepsister Helen, an Internet sleuth, would have been able to find Ethan. She was such a whiz at discovering information that she bordered on clairvoyant. But too much time had passed since he’d written her; she would rightly accuse him of reaching out to his family only when he needed something.

George returned to Guantánamo disappointed – what had he done to make Ethan avoid him? – and he couldn’t shake the feeling he’d done something wrong. A one-night stand for Ethan was, for George, a chaotic mix of hope and despair.

He went through his duties uncomfortably for days, certain someone around him would look at him and know.

3. Guantánamo Bay

Guantánamo Bay is a mouth of water on the southeastern shore of Cuba. The US-controlled territory is six miles wide and twelve miles long; the depth of the water ranges from 30-60 feet. The airfield is on the western side of the bay, the Leeward Side. The barracks, the suburban houses and apartments for families and civilian employees, the Navy Exchange, the library, the pool, the courts, the bar, the restaurants are on the eastern side, the Windward side. In the residential part of Guantánamo, children play in the yards of stucco houses. Hanging baskets of flowers sway in the breeze. Wind chimes chatter,
too. There are birdfeeders and vegetable gardens. The lawns are green and tended, just like lawns in the States. Often there is a feeling of calm. This is what the Navy calls the real Guantánamo.

Sherman Avenue cuts from Windward Point inward through the main base. Smaller roads branch off into neighborhoods, with Sherman Ave continuing north past the now-closed Camp X-Ray, all the way to the Northeast Gate and the border with Cuba. The U.S. base and Cuba were once separated by nothing more than a small gatekeepers hut; now the border is completely closed. All along the divide, coils of barbed wire cloak tall chain-link fences patrolled by Marines. In 1903, the United States signed a perpetual lease. In the deep belly of the calm rests a feeling of endlessness.

Low desert hills rise over the real Guantánamo; the cliff-side detention camps are on the other side. Surrounded by glinting barbed-wire fences, the camps look out over the Caribbean Sea – gleaming metal, gleaming blue. A civilian like Clifton could live there his whole life and never see a prisoner.

Clifton. George had been thinking about Clifton since they met. For months he’d replayed the encounter with Ethan in his mind. Now he had the same fantasy, only with Clifton in Ethan’s place. Ethan hadn’t disappeared; he was too beautiful to be gone from George’s mind for long. But he glowed more distantly now. Clifton was not as handsome as Ethan, and George wasn’t even sure Clifton was gay, or if he himself was gay, but the fact remained that he couldn’t stop thinking about Clifton. Sometimes this made him feel exhilarated, other times miserable.

On the beach, Clifton had sat close to George. Their arms draped over their knees, brushing one another, and a breeze whipped up Clifton’s hair, revealing the unsightly
mole. Neither George nor Clifton had scooted over to allow room, but perhaps Clifton was just oblivious. Either way, George’s arm hair rose just thinking about it.

George liked Clifton’s imperfections, which made him feel realistic about his desires. Whenever George thought of Clifton, or of both Ethan and Clifton, his stomach dropped, or he would wake up hard and have to stroke himself in the small bathroom he shared with another GI, sperm swirling around the toilet bowl, one hand pressed against the white plaster wall.

George lived in the Cuzco barracks: mustard-yellow units that looked like shipping containers. A boardwalk connected the endless rows of barracks. GIs placed welcome mats or lawn chairs on the wood planks. George had his own room and shared bathrooms and a common space with Ted Gary, his bunkmate, whom he called Gary, or, if they were around the detainees, G. Gary loved the nickname. “Just call me the Original Gangster,” he said.

A dry erase board hung tacked to one of the slapped-up walls. This could be a dormitory if not for the unshakeable knowledge that they could not leave.

Gary was at times odious, at times friendly. He was a large man, barely twenty, with something trembling inside him – some kind of power he held back. He reminded George of an airplane waiting on the runway, with its engines turning. Gary watched porn with the volume too loud; once he flew into a rage in his room and tore down his ceiling fan. When George asked what had happened, Gary responded that his Internet girlfriend – a single mother in Wyoming whom he’d met in a chat room – had married the father of her son.
“Women are fucking whores,” Gary had said, and George had nodded limply. He could never say why he wanted Gary to like him, but he did.

Sometimes George and Gary guarded the same cellblock in Delta, their boots snapping against the polished concrete floor. They stopped every few feet to peer into the wire-mesh windows in the thick metal doors. This was tedious anytime, but George preferred the swing shifts. Nights were quiet. There was no Forced Cell Extraction just so the inmates could have their ankles chained to the floor of the common area, the television glowing before them. If the interrogators were keeping inmates awake all night with heavy metal, or worse, as they’d once done, George didn’t know about it.

Dawn was George’s favorite time. Morning prayers rose from the cells in a tide of voice so unlike this place they were in that George felt chills run through him. The prayers, warbling from human lungs, could blast craters into anyone’s heart. Sometimes his eyes misted behind the stiff plastic of his facemask. This was shameful, and it broke protocol. He was not supposed to betray his emotions. He wanted to tell Clifton about the prayers, but he didn’t know when he would see Clifton again.

Gary cursed whenever the prayers started. He said religion was what had gotten all of them into this mess. He was a dying breed of guard at GTMO, devoted to kicking some terrorist ass. Most of the guards – George included – did what they were told and only turned mean when they had to.

4. The Past

George had lived for most of his life with his family – Luiza, Shawn, Helen – on a blueberry farm an hour’s drive from Detroit, where the city gave way to wetlands.
Swamps, weeping willows, the wallop of a bullfrog’s call: these had been George’s from age seven onward.

When Luiza and Shawn married, Helen’s mother had been dead two years. Luiza had just taken out a restraining order against George’s father. George, the victim of incomprehensible decisions of adults, didn’t trust his family, this one or the last. Helen – younger, braver – adjusted without hesitation, accepting of this new family forged out of old misery.

Shawn bought them the farmhouse in the country. Luiza planted two acres of blueberry bushes and started a U-Pick Farm. Each summer the berries turned from green to blue and by August the backyard looked as though the sky had broken into pieces and fallen into their grass. Luiza and Shawn cared for each other, were faithful as far as George could tell, but George could not decide if they were steadfast or if they were merely treading water.

Things settled. George and Helen developed a friendship over the years, Helen always trying to figure George out. “Poor, sad George,” she would say whenever George fell into a gloom. He couldn’t identify what upset him; the sadness seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere. For most of his childhood he hid his depression from Luiza, who felt so guilty for marrying a violent man, George’s father, that she never reprimanded George, never made him apologize when he acted out.

5. Peaceful Protest

One prisoner in George’s cellblock was peacefully protesting. He refused to leave his cell for recreation or inoculations. Every time George worked the day shift, he and
three other men pulled the prisoner outside by force. George was the one to knee him in
the kidneys and pull the plastic restraints so tightly he drew blood. George worked
methodically; performing the cavity search no longer felt abnormal. He left the cell
feeling the same as when he entered – that is, he hated something about himself, but not
for what he’d done to the detainee, or not for that alone.

When the inmate returned later on, George gave him the things he asked for:
water, crayons for correspondence, the next book in the *Harry Potter* series from the
library cart, translated into Arabic.

“I bet *Prisoner of Azkaban* is their favorite,” Gary said once. “They’re doing
research.”

“That makes us the dementors,” George said.

6. O’Kelley’s

Two weeks after George and Clifton met on Glass Beach, George found Clifton
browsing the produce stands in the Navy Exchange. George shook Clifton’s hand. They
stood by a cascade of lemons, the fluorescent lights flickering almost imperceptibly
above them. The register coughed out receipts. They spoke for some time, nerves and
excitement invading George like an army. He tried to recall the confidence Ethan had left
him feeling, and not the despair.

“What are you here for?” Clifton asked when the conversation came to a pause.

George was expected at Gary’s poker game that night; he’d come to the Navy
Exchange to buy beer. He told Clifton so.
“How about we drink at the bar instead?” Clifton grinned and ruffled his own hair. “They’re out of beer. You’ll have to wait for the Barge to come next week.”

George looked to the bright, barebones coolers. There were a few empty Budweiser boxes but no beer.

“Well,” George said. Then, quickly, he agreed.

They arranged to meet later. Clifton left, the bell above the door dinging as he passed through it. George lingered in the air conditioned Navy Exchange, feeling triumphant. Sometimes, when loneliness overthrew him, he hated that he had to live so secretively. But he could still do things that made him happy; perhaps he was not completely depressed. It was just a drink at the bar; he didn’t have to decide anything right now. Since he’d met Clifton, he’d had something to think about while pacing the cellblocks other than his own unhappiness.

George had so few hours off, but he wished them away. In the store, Clifton’s eyes had searched George’s face and George had wanted to tell him everything. His heart swung like a bell without a clapper. He returned to his barracks room, showered and shaved, took his laptop to Starbucks, where the WIFI was fastest, and slunk through slow Internet pages. They were out of cream, so he drank coffee with powdered milk.

He was about to close his computer when an e-mail from his stepsister Helen popped up. It had been some time since they’d spoken. Loquacious, she usually rambled on for paragraphs, but her message was brief, without punctuation: I realized today I might not ever see you again so if that’s the case goodbye

George sighed and rubbed his temple. Helen thought he had separated himself from her forever, or maybe she was just trying to make him feel guilty. He wasn’t
shutting out his family because he didn’t like them. He’d acted badly during his last year in Michigan, and he didn’t know how to apologize. He didn’t know how to explain why he’d felt guilty around them and why, since he felt guilty for no reason, he’d done things to make them feel bad just so he wouldn’t feel so strange, so inexplicably unhappy.

The speakers emitted fast, tinny music. He typed a reply – *I’m sorry, I’ve been working long hours* – but deleted the words, the cursor blinking softly on his screen. He wanted to tell her about Clifton, but he didn’t dare write that in an e-mail.

He checked his watch; he wanted to get to the bar early and be waiting there when Clifton arrived. He knew he should respond to Helen’s e-mail now; if he waited, a day would turn into a week, then a month. But thoughts of Clifton edged out Helen. He closed his computer, left the Starbucks and its whirring frother, and went out into the warm dry evening.

O’Kelley’s, a small bar strung with memorabilia, sold alcohol at a steep discount. A jukebox pounded in the corner and a busy bartender shuffled behind the bar. George arrived at 19:30 and drank two beers to replenish his courage. Then he ordered a shot of whiskey and another beer. Fear and desire collided inside him. Fear of what might happen if this night led somewhere – if one small agreement between him and Clifton became a bigger agreement, one that set George down a path he’d hovered before all his life – and also wild anticipation for the same.

Soldiers mingled at tables or by the bar, propped up on elbows, drowning in their beers. A family sat in the corner, eating hamburgers from the restaurant next door, four
children climbing over their chairs, trying to grab fries from one another. George drank steadily and felt eyes on his back when there were none.

Helen – two years younger than George – had hinted that she knew his secret. Once, when he had Skyped her from Fort Leavenworth, she’d asked, “You know about Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, right?”

“What are you trying to say?” George whispered, quickly plugging in his headphones.

Helen studied him. She was sixteen then, a fierce and sporty beauty with ringlets of strawberry blond hair. “I’m just trying to find something interesting about you. I’m like a pig rooting for a truffle.”

Though George had hated the way Helen forced herself into his head – always pointing out where and why he was wrong, always forgiving him when he didn’t apologize – he missed her gregariousness. Thoughts of her latest e-mail returned; she was a sophomore in college now, and George didn’t even know her major. She’d always included George in her life when he hadn’t had a life of his own, and now he repaid her by pretending she didn’t exist. He wished he could bring himself to write her, but the more time he spent here, the less he found to say.

Don’t ask, don’t tell.

The door opened; George watched Clifton walk into the bar and all his other thoughts slipped from his mind. Clifton reached George and slapped his back in a jovial way. George imagined that Clifton’s hand lingered, but the truth was he removed it right away, raising one finger to the bartender, calling out for a whiskey and water.
George lifted his beer and spun his coaster on the polished wood bar. In part, he had joined the army to avoid having to do this – go out and drink, find love, be himself. The subtleties of flirting were foreign to him. Were Clifton’s eyes searching his, as he hoped, or was his friend – friend? – simply waiting for a response to a question he’d asked? George hadn’t heard the question. George’s palms began to sweat; a vein in his eyelid twitched. He took a sip of beer and choked and Clifton, his rescuer, pounded his back.

Which did George want more – a friend or a lover? A woman or a man?

George never thought of women in that way, but even that wasn’t enough for him to be able to answer the questions that swarmed in his mind.

At some point, the conversation became easier; the alcohol may have helped. Clifton had grown up in California, and worked as a biologist at Yosemite National Park, an ecologist specializing in reptiles and amphibians, until he came to the island.

“There’s no place like California,” Clifton said fondly. “I miss it.” He punctuated every sentence with a smile.

George nearly couldn’t bear it. “Do you like it here?”

“It’s incredibly beautiful here,” Clifton replied. “Paradise, in fact. I’ve been trying to get my mom and dad here for a visit, but they don’t like flying.”

Only later would George realize that Clifton hadn’t answered the question. “Tell them about the huge iguanas. Who can resist the iguanas?”

Clifton laughed. “That’s genius,” he said, swinging his beer to his mouth.

The bar was low ceilinged, wood-paneled. If George’s brain had a décor, O’Kelley’s matched it. What a drunken thing to think; he gulped more beer. He wanted
the night not to end; or he wanted it to end but not in the way it always did, with him
alone in his white-walled room, lizards crawling up the wall, the sound of GIs coming
home late or leaving early, the sound of Gary’s porn in the room next door. Gary never
seemed to sleep. He knew everything that everyone was doing. George wondered if Gary
was an army experiment rather than a real human. Inadvertently, George looked over his
shoulder.

“Are you all right?” Clifton asked.

George settled back into his skin, settled into the concerned look in Clifton’s eyes.
He was older than George by almost ten years, George had found out that night, but had a
face that didn’t seem to reflect time.

_I could be yours_, George wanted to say, a thought that appeared in his mind like a
mirage, instant and illusory, but instead he shrugged and said, “Thought I saw someone
coming up behind me.”

Arrows on the walls of the cellblocks pointed toward Mecca. George always felt
confronted by these arrows, taken aback, as though they were asking him to explain
himself. He had nothing to say. Passing judgment was for people off the island, George
believed. Being nearer Camp Delta, if anything, made George less judgmental. He had
few opinions about his work or the camps. He just did what he was told.

The day after George met Clifton at O’Kelley’s, he and Gary paced in a circle in
Delta 2. George locked eyes with each detainee once every three minutes, pounding the
glass until the men looked up.
“You missed the poker game,” Gary said. He smelled of smoke. Each day, Gary smoked cigarette after cigarette while they waited for the bus to take them from the barracks to Camp Delta. Each day he had to surrender the pack and his lighter at the security checkpoint. His breath and uniform would stay filthy with smoke all day, but it was better than the scent of human waste and the sour smell of unwashed, imprisoned bodies.

“I know,” George said as they paced. “I was using the WIFI at Starbucks. I lost track of time.”

“Bullshit,” Gary said. “K said he saw you at the bar.” K for Kip, a soldier who lived across the boardwalk from them.

“We’re not supposed to talk on duty,” George said. Inside, he was in turmoil.

“Levy was there,” Gary said. “New MP here, you met her? She grows basil outside her door. She’s a Gitmo 8, a stateside 6.”

George grimaced, but his mind was somewhere else; he didn’t even chastise Gary for saying her name.

After leaving the bar last night, George had walked, drunk and loose-limbed, to Clifton’s car – an old pick-up truck, a beater like all the cars on the island. The crummiest vehicles were a source of pride.

Desire had burned in Clifton’s eyes at the bar; George could see it even through the haze of alcohol. They couldn’t touch each other; they couldn’t whisper. There was no hope of anonymity here, and the drunker George grew, the more he worried there was no hope for him and Clifton.
Clifton offered George a ride, and George expected Clifton to drive the short way to George’s barracks, a distance George could have easily walked, and then George expected him to drive away, north up Sherman Ave to the subdivision where he lived.

The truck lurched over potholes. The night was moonless. Only Clifton’s headlights illuminated the brown desert hills and the occasional dark splotch of a palm tree.

Instead Clifton took George home with him to his beige stucco apartment. They could have been in a desert suburb somewhere stateside. “Is this okay?” Clifton asked quietly. George found himself nodding in the dark of the truck, agreement that came easily – because he was drunk, or because this was right, he couldn’t say.

Clifton’s headlights caught a banana rat scurrying across the driveway as he pulled into his covered portico. The creature was as big as a groundhog, with a pinched, whiskered face. Most people thought they were cute, but George thought they were nightmarish.

“Poor things,” Clifton said as they climbed down from the truck. “I’m laying traps for them tomorrow. I hate to do it, but they’re denuding the mahogany trees.”

“They’re ugly,” George said, bracing himself against the taillight. The world was beginning to spin; above him, their precinct of stars glowed bright in the tropical darkness. George felt hot and nauseated.

“The Cuban government gave us permission to kill them,” Clifton responded. “The only thing we can agree on is the extermination of varmint.”

George threw up a puddle of vomit – mostly beer – onto the pavement.
“Okay, inside now,” Clifton said, and they went in. George spent a half-hour clutching the toilet while Clifton left him alone. George was grateful, and felt better afterward.

Clifton let him use the shower. Standing in the hot stream of water, George wondered what Clifton was doing in the other room, what he was waiting for, why he’d brought George here when all of George’s qualities were bad ones. George felt secretive, taciturn, full of self-loathing. He scrubbed himself roughly with soap, as though he could wash away all he hated about his life.

He squeezed some of Clifton’s toothpaste on his finger and cleaned his teeth.

George spun the knob of the faucet; the stream retreated into the showerhead. George stood naked in the white tile, rubbed his finger through a trail of soap scum. He and Clifton could be right for each other. How was George to know? Who was George to sabotage something that could be good for him, for both of them?

He wanted to be here in Clifton’s apartment, and he wanted to run. He wanted love, and he also wanted the grim satisfaction of being hated, of having his worst suspicions about himself confirmed. With Clifton, he might have all of these things; this would be the type of downfall that only a miracle could bring.

Clifton coughed in the other room. Through the door came the sounds of dishes knocking together, papers being swept away, the brief applause of a running faucet. George toweled off and went to him.

George left after a few hours with Clifton; his shift began at 05:00. He walked alone down the dirt road, the brown grass unfurling around him. He couldn’t see the bay
from the road but he could hear the slap of water against the shore. He could smell the salt rising from it.

A dusty pink golf ball caught George’s eye. There was a course nearby. White balls were too easy to lose in the sand-colored grass so anyone who played putted hot pink or neon green balls from hole to hole. George stooped to retrieve it, rolled the ball between his fingers before slipping it into his pocket. He wobbled as he stood; he was still a little drunk. Clouds had gathered in the distance, a lightning storm dancing amid them.

George passed the closed Navy Exchange and the dark library, hearing the echo of Clifton’s voice in his ear, feeling the thrill of his touch. Clifton had closed the blinds. Without saying anything, they’d stood so close to one another their breath touched. Then lust overcame and toppled them both. Clifton put his hand on the back of George’s neck and kissed him hard. They laughed into each other’s mouth as they stumbled toward Clifton’s bedroom, scattering their clothes as they went.

The dark was forgiving, enticing. George pressed his face into the rough, tanned skin of Clifton’s neck. Clifton had condoms in his nightstand, which George found thrilling. George pulled his glasses from his face but Clifton whispered, “Leave them on.”

That the night had happened at all – that Clifton existed at all, or George himself for that matter – seemed unclear the next day. He worried his inexperience had been obvious as he walked in circles around the block of six cells, listening to Gary go on about Levy’s breasts.

“She’d never be able to drown with tits like that,” Gary said.
One of the inmates beckoned to George, and he stooped to speak through the slot in the door. The prisoner had recently been given a white jumpsuit for good behavior. His gaze was strong and he muttered something George didn’t understand. Then he reached through the slot and smeared his shit on George’s mask. “Fucking pig!” Gary yelled, but George was quiet; automatically he pulled his mace from his belt and thrust the can through the slot, spraying without aiming, spraying everything.

“Dude did not hesitate!” Gary said later, clapping George on the back. “I tell you what, this motherfucker shows no mercy. I didn’t know you had it in you, North.”

George was surprised; he’d done what he was supposed to, hadn’t he? Gary was trying to compliment him, but George wanted to cower, as though anyone who looked at him for more than a second could see him for who he really was.

They were standing on the boardwalk with a few others. Sheila Levy was there – or George guessed it was Levy from the way Gary’s eyes devoured her. She wore her dark hair in a tight bun. Her tits were fine, normal. Another of George’s friends, Kip, sat in an armchair with missing belts, holding a beer and smiling. Rumor had it Kip was something like a friend to one of the detainees, encouraging him to draw cartoons to send to his attorney in Florida even though he knew they’d be stopped by the censors.

George only had six hours off between his last shift and his next, and he had spent one of those hours in the hospital getting blood drawn. “You probably didn’t catch anything,” the nurse had said. Her nametag read Portia, though that wasn’t what she was really called. The medical staff all assumed names from Shakespeare when seeing to the
detainees. “It’s unpleasant, though,” she went on. “But you were wearing the mask, which is good. I always tell you boys to wear the mask.”

Each of the soldiers had a story to share that evening in the fading sun – shit, semen, piss. Curses, obscenities, hatred that cut to the bone. George wondered how his hand, holding the mace, had looked like from the other side of the door.

7. He’s Still One of Us

When George was a sophomore in high school, he’d discovered his stepsister Helen was having sex with someone in his class. Helen was in the eighth grade.

One of his lab partners in Chemistry told the story, leaving out Helen’s name at first. George had gone on measuring the chemicals while the rest of his group sat on the high metal stools and gossiped.

“Whose the girl?” asked the only girl in the group. Her eyes flitted to George, who was about to pour HCL into a test tube. “No,” she hissed. “You do that part last. Put the cobalt chloride in first.”

She was smart and proud of it, whereas George was smart but so nervous he always found himself making mistakes.

“You know who it is,” Chester said, his eyes narrowing toward George. He whispered, loud enough for George to hear, “George’s sister.”

“Oh,” she replied. “God, how sad.”

George had gone home that night and watched Helen as she did her math homework, flipping to the back of the book to check the answers to the odd-numbered problems. At the time she had braces and wore her hair in two French braids; her lip-
gloss sparkled and smelled of cherries. That she had a secret life, or any life, outside of school and home came as a surprise to George. Though older, at the time George was so confused about his sexuality that for the most part he suppressed it.

Another brother might have been angry and protective, but George was mildly impressed, even intimidated, that Helen had stepped without hesitation into adulthood at so young an age. He feared for her, too, because he could not protect her from the people in the world who might use her.

George still wasn’t sure he could be so bold. He played his night with Clifton over and over again in his mind: he’d been sloppy, inept, hungry. Could he feel desire without the groping, the hand-wringing, the apologizing? Days passed without word from Clifton and George grew more and more embarrassed; he was buried in the shame of not having been enough. What if Clifton had told someone?

George didn’t have a cell phone, nor did he have Clifton’s e-mail address. They would run into each other sooner or later – there were only so many places to go on the island – but George was anxious. With Clifton, he’d felt wanted because of his body, and the result, somehow, was transcendence. He’d left his body; all the old burdens had fallen away. The world had glowed. But then he’d ruined everything.

After they’d had sex, Clifton poured each of them water and sliced a mango from the tree behind his apartment. George chewed the sweet flesh, sitting upright in Clifton’s bed in only his boxers. A bead of juice dribbled down his chin, and Clifton caught it with his thumb and smiled. “Thanks,” George muttered. This gesture seemed somehow more intimate than everything else they’d just done. A small act of love, physical intimacy that
was neither friendship nor sex. George hadn’t been nervous before, but he was now. He was tired, too.

“Is this something you’d want to do again?” Clifton asked quietly. When George didn’t respond, Clifton dug the heels of his hands into his eye sockets, as though he’d just realized he’d made a grave mistake.

“There’s just a lot to think about,” George said. “Protocol to consider.”

This seemed like the only thing he could say, but he hated the way his voice sounded, as though he were reciting from a rulebook. He and everyone else had been given a pamphlet when they’d first enlisted, about what to do if you witnessed a violation of DADT. *Remember: he’s still one of us until his discharge,* a cartoon Lieutenant had said, his words lifted up by a speech bubble.

“Fuck,” Clifton muttered. He threw the covers back, went into the bathroom, and closed the door. George heard the shower run.

George lingered. He imagined that Clifton had fallen asleep instead, and that he himself was running his fingers through his tangle of curls, running his thumb over the dark mole. He imagined the two of them were somewhere stateside, in Michigan or California, somewhere that, once George stepped outside, they wouldn’t have to pretend they didn’t know each other. Somewhere George wouldn’t have to consider a protocol.

George slipped from the bed and took the plate with the soft mango rinds to the kitchen. He rinsed out his water glass, leaving it in the drying rack, then scribbled his e-mail address on the pad of paper by the telephone. He poised his pen to write a note, but he found he had nothing to say.

*
To rid himself of thoughts of Clifton, he chain-smoked with Gary on the boardwalk and listened to him talk about Levy, with whom Gary was now having sex. He swam; he attended extra sessions of PT. No matter how tired he was, he forced push-ups out of his arms, his nose touching the green grass of recreation area. “Gym rat,” Gary called him, snidely.

But George could not stop thinking of Clifton. He reminded himself that unmanageable love has a way of wearing itself out – it had only been one night, after all – but in his gut glowed a jewel of hope that Clifton was thinking about him, too.

Why had he brought up protocol? As though he’d been following it up to that point, as though stirring up Clifton’s sheets was okay as long as he acted rudely afterward.

As long as what they’d done was a one time thing.

Camp Delta 4 was open air, with sleeping shelters and bathrooms separated by a stretch of dirt where the detainees played soccer. A week had passed and George hadn’t heard from Clifton, and his mind wandered as he stood on the sidelines of one of the soccer games. The men playing yelled to their teammates in Arabic. The day melted into a sticky heat. There was no breeze to rustle the fabric of George’s fatigues.

He remembered the smell of his father’s breath in his face when he would come home some nights, drunk and in a rage. He’d grab George’s collar, get close, and call him a pussy. Luiza weeping. His father’s punches landed in the drywall, or sometimes hitting their mark on his mother’s face. George had not been able to protect her. He and Luiza would lock themselves in the bathroom with hydrogen peroxide and aspirin.
George had been too young to know what, exactly, made Luiza leave him when she’d endured him for so long, or if it had been the erosion over time, abuse carving a valley inside of her as though George’s father was a glacier.

Now, of course, he realized that she’d met Shawn already. That he had helped her to leave George’s father, guided her through the legal process of filing for a divorce and obtaining the restraining order. Somewhere in that mess of loss and paperwork, they’d fallen in love.

Luiza took George to meet Shawn and Helen at a park one spring afternoon, after they had moved into the small apartment above a dry cleaner’s. Helen, five and still carrying some of her baby fat, had torn her hand free from Shawn’s and run across the parking lot, pressing two hands and a cherubic face against the glass of George’s window, terrifying him. He looked at Luiza with horror. Who were these people she had taken him to meet?

George had always wondered how Helen had recognized their car, and now, beneath the beating Caribbean sun, he knew that Luiza had spent time with Helen before. All three of them, even the five-year-old, had been coddling George.

That day in the park, though, George tread warily behind Helen as she climbed the jungle gym and screamed at the top of her lungs, sending the kids around them scattering. She organized a game of Crack the Whip, bossing around everyone. Meanwhile, Luiza and Shawn sat on a bench, lost in the plans they were making, plans that seemed impossible after so much pain.
The two families parted ways when the sun began to make a mess of the horizon. Helen planted a kiss on George’s cheek. Shawn laughed and said, “Look, she’s scared the daylights out of him.”

Something bounced off George’s boot. He had returned to the dusty soccer field, far away from home. The soccer ball had rolled toward him – dirty, a little limp from lost air. George blinked. Beams of sunlight landed in his eyes.

A man who’d been running after the ball stopped ten feet from George, waiting with a puzzled expression as George stared at the ball, then at the man, who knew he couldn’t approach George. Only George could approach him. There was safety in knowing this. George rolled the ball beneath his boot, then kicked it back to the group.

8. Visiting Scientist

Clifton opened the gate of his truck and a metal trap thumped to the ground and bounced like a metal tumbleweed. He sighed. He was at the marina; from here he would load the traps into one of the base’s Boston Whalers and motor to Hospital Cay, his last stop for the day. He volunteered to do stuff like catch banana rats because he was so lonely.

He had a map scrolled in his back pocket, marked with the places he planned to lay the traps. George’s e-mail address, folded in his other pocket, prodded his heart. Why was he carrying it around? What was the point? He’d made a mistake with George – immature, inexperienced, rule-following George. He’d brought George home on loneliness’s dime. He wanted to say he’d seen something in George’s eyes that day a few weeks ago on Glass Beach – something kind, something safe – but he’d only been
projecting. That sort of thing didn’t exist here, and as long as Clifton stayed, he was alone.

He would tear up the note and flick the pieces into the wind.

You either love the island or you hate the island, or so Clifton’s neighbor told him when he’d first arrived. It wasn’t so easy for Clifton. He felt both marooned and at home here. He’d gone to the perfect place to do his work. So few people, so little pollution. Only one plane came and went each week, banking nonchalantly, showing its soft steel belly as it glided toward the Leeward Air Field.

Not so long ago he was an enthusiastic ecologist at Yosemite National Park. When his contract was up with the NPS – or, rather, had gone un-renewed, a less-than-forthcoming way for Clifton to say he’d been sacked – he found the listing for the position of a visiting scientist with the military and, like a fool, but one who loved reptiles, he’d taken it. That was one year ago, and he’d not been back to the mainland since. Good riddance, he’d thought at first, but now he thought fondly of his time at Yosemite. The end didn’t seem so bad anymore, though at the time his contract’s nonrenewal fractured something inside of him, and he wondered if he’d made all the wrong decisions.

He’d healed, and grown confident again, on the desert island. The tangled, impenetrable mangroves gave shelter to countless species of birds, which he watched in his spare time. He’d picked his way through vines and branches, wearing long pants and sleeves in the thick, bludgeoning heat. He sketched, photographed, and spent quiet hours with his binoculars.
His ex-boyfriend Sebastian had come to visit him once, a few months ago, after they’d had some fun over video chat, but since then their relationship had fizzled out, as though seeing one another in Clifton’s sparse apartment, in a part of the world closed off from almost everyone, had been the necessary dram of poison for their love. Sebastian couldn’t handle being introduced as Clifton’s cousin, and Clifton could introduce him no other way.

Sebastian also thought the camps were barbaric. He’d had to wrestle with his conscience even to come visit Clifton. Clifton tried to explain he lived in the real Guantánamo. The Joint Task Force was separate, and he’d never go there, and it didn’t have anything to do with his work.

Sebastian hadn’t understood, or hadn’t cared.

God, though, they’d had a good time when Clifton worked at Yosemite. The thought of it made Clifton stop his work, the empty cages motionless in the gravel parking lot of the marina. Every day, thousands of tourists streamed through Yosemite. Sebastian, a medical student and the son of Clifton’s boss, had signed up for one of Clifton’s nature walks, which he volunteered to lead, but for the whole time he’d only watched Clifton.

Clifton carried the traps to the dock, his fingers hooked through the metal links. He strapped them to the bow and climbed behind the wheel, turned the key. The motor rolled the water beneath him, and the dock faded away.
9. What Makes You Happy?

“What makes you happy, George?” Helen had asked him once when they were both teenagers.

George was in trouble with Shawn for fighting at school. Luiza had excused herself from the conversation, taken a glass of wine to her room, and George had felt cool betrayal run through his veins. No one cared that he’d punched Zach Eagleton only after he’d endured thirty minutes of Zach’s quiet taunting from the seat behind him.

Shawn’s problem was that he didn’t realize lawyerly advice was not the same as fatherly advice. George didn’t know how Helen withstood him, but they seemed to have a good relationship. Shawn didn’t know about the things she did with guys, and she never gave him a reason to worry. Somehow, Helen had managed to get everyone to leave her alone – every teenager’s dream, George’s most of all.

That night, after the yelling match had ended, George sat on the roof of the garage, smoking cigarettes. Helen sat in a chair on the other side of his bedroom window, her elbows resting on the sill. Curls fell into her eyes, and she asked her question about happiness, then looked at George sadly, as though she expected him not to have an answer.

So he’d said something stupid. He’d spit first, his saliva flying in an arc toward the ground, and then he’d said something stupid, something like, “What a bullshit question, Helen.”

Now, his cursor blinked at him in his barracks room. The AC whirred to life in his vents, and he heard the sound of boots thumping against the boardwalk outside.

*Dear Helen,* he wrote.
Things are good here. Sorry so long without writing, but you know the life of a gangster’s a busy one, ha ha. What’s this bullshit about never seeing me again? You can visit you know. SPRING BREAK! They have a guesthouse. Gitmo Guesthouse, where your Caribbean dreams come true. I’m putting up a Christmas tree in my room. I’ll send a photo. Ok, more later. George.

He re-read the e-mail, which sounded as though Gary had written it. He sent it anyway.

Later, because George had time to kill before his night shift started, he sat in the back row of the bleachers at the Lyceum, an outdoor movie theater that was playing a movie about vampires and werewolves. It turned out to be a garbage love story with a sullen cast. Everyone had talked excitedly about this movie, which was playing for the first time today. But news was slow to reach GTMO; it came separated by bursts of static. They’d heard vampires and werewolves, not love and teenagers.

A few raindrops fell from the sky, invisible until they burst open on George’s arm. From here he could see the bay, cut in two by a strip of moonlight. The screen before him couldn’t hold his attention, which beat its wings around his mind like a wasp. He closed his eyes. Everything moved in circles: his mind, the sea around the island when he was posted in the watchtower, his own feet when he paced the cellblocks. What did make him happy?

He opened his eyes and they fell on Clifton, sitting ten rows ahead of him. His elbows rested on the metal bench above him, his feet on the one below. His head was tilted back, his mouth open, as though he were trying to drink the rainwater. Something
like desire, but more chilling, pricked the back of George’s neck. It was love, the way love shows its face and flees when you’re not ready for it.

George stood, thinking he would leave, but instead he took one step down the bleachers, rising and falling with the risers, slowly getting closer to Clifton. He had almost reached him when a voice called to him from the metal folding chairs on the ground below.

“North! Get down here!”

It was Gary, waving one arm. Clifton turned his head sharply. He looked surprised to see George looming over him, and George’s eyes met Clifton’s heavily, as though his own shadow, cast there on the metal bench, was trying to tear him down.

“NORTH!”

Someone shushed Gary. A woman sitting with her children turned and scowled at George. The confusion disappeared from Clifton’s face, replaced by a dark, energetic scowl.

“Your friends are waiting,” he whispered.

“I wanted…”

“Not here,” Clifton said. He turned back to the movie, though when his eyes met the screen he seemed embarrassed to be watching. He had no other choice, though; he could watch the movie or look at George, who felt the urge to plead with Clifton. But he had no argument to make.

A clap of thunder in the distance snapped George to attention. He bounced down the bleachers, shaking benches and disrupting popcorn. He landed on the ground with a thump before Gary, who was there with Kip and Levy.
“What were you doing up there?”

“Looking for a screw for my glasses.” The lie came quickly, easily. George was good at lying, used to it. He could protect Clifton, protect the both of them, a thought that gave him hope. He looked back up the rows of bleachers, but Clifton was still staring at the screen.

Kip squinted. “They don’t look like they lost a screw.”

“Yeah, maybe I just thought I heard a ping.”

“Whatever,” Gary said. He was never interested in any conversation that didn’t include him. “Let’s go to O’Kelley’s. Is this movie unreal or what?”

“I can’t show up to work drunk,” George said. “I think I’ll just go back.”

“No, no,” Gary said. “Come on. Have one. Or have none but hang with us.”

George considered. He’d thought he might beg off, but linger nearby – then sneak back in and sit behind Clifton, where they could whisper a conversation. He let his eye flit up to where Clifton sat, but this time he looked, Clifton was gone.

10. Weapons Training

One hundred times, George lowered his chin to the ground in the recreation field; he threw up, but his CO told him to stay where he was, so he did his push-ups with his face plunging toward a puddle of vomit.

“You think you’re here to party? You think you’re here to have fun?” The Lieutenant’s voice rang in the night, spinning around George until his head rang. It was two in the morning, and George had been here in the field since midnight – running,
doing sit-ups, doing laps up and down the bleachers, each metal bench letting out a whispering metallic shiver beneath his boots.

“I just checked, Specialist, and we don’t have a record of you getting pepper sprayed in weapons training. You know what that means.”

George did; each of his weapons – mace, baton, rubber bullets – had been tested on him during basic training. He had been sprayed with mace once already, but there was no use in pointing this out. He finished the push-ups, the scrambled to his feet and stood at attention.

His Lieutenant said, “Soldier – go to your barracks room. I don’t think I need to tell you how stupid you are again. Report for weapons training at 08:00. Understood?”

“Sir, yes sir.”

“Next time it’s a military tribunal. At ease.”

George slunk through the night; the base was lightly populated with people on their way to sleep.

George had followed Gary and Kip to the bar and had one whiskey that, when he showed up for work, his CO had smelled on his breath. He was sober, but it didn’t matter. He shouldn’t have done it.

The door to his barracks clicked softly behind him. Air conditioning stirred in the vents. Getting sprayed with mace would mean two days off work while he recovered, but all he would be able to do would be lie in bed with his eyes closed.

In his room, he turned on his ceiling fan, though the room was already cool. He liked watching the quick oscillations, liked feeling the air dance over his face.
The next day, George reported for weapons training. He stood at attention until the cloud of mace brought him down.

George slept with cold compresses over his eyes. His nostrils burned every time he breathed, and his dreams brought billows of smoke and fire. By some revolt of his body, he had a low-grade fever, and for the first time in years he replayed his memories of Logan, the army recruiter.

Logan and George spoken in the low-ceilinged hallway of George’s high school during recruitment week; their high school sent a good number of kids into the army every year, so the recruiters stayed for five days, lingering in the hallways during lunch periods. Logan was there at his table with pamphlets and key chains every day that week. George first noticed him on Monday; Logan caught his eye and smiled. Most of the recruiters in past years were stony-faced, serious or else bored; or maybe they were lonely and terrified and knew no other way to show it but through a stern expression. Logan, however, plucked the staleness from the air, from George’s unhappy days at his high school.

George felt Logan’s immediately; in his mind that gaze that Logan offered him grew, multiplied, photosynthesized, so much so that he was overthrown by his own certainty that something was meant to happen between him and Logan. This would be the first time in George’s life that he had wanted something unlikely and then gone and gotten it. But he lost more than he gained, and the memories weren’t pleasant.

Every day, Logan looked George’s way, though it wasn’t until Friday that George got up from his lunch table – pecking his girlfriend Paula on the cheek, poor Paula he
tried not to think about now – threw away his Styrofoam lunch tray, and walked over to the recruiting table.

He already knew the recruiter’s name was Logan from lurking a few meters from the table and hearing him say, brightly, “Hi, I’m Logan. Do you have a minute to talk?”

Logan’s smile showed on yellow front tooth in a mouth of straight white ones. George could feel every part of his heart move, the beats coming together and then scattering. The sensation was both familiar and strange, as though he had experienced it once in another life.

“So, are you a senior?” Logan asked.

George nodded.

Logan went on, “What are your options for next year?”

George shrugged. Logan’s face brightened, as though the uncertain ones were the easiest to recruit.

“Maybe the army is something to consider,” Logan said. “There are so many career options. Invaluable training. Journalism, meteorology, corrections. There’s something for everyone.”

George contemplated the table, his fingers folded around one of Logan’s pamphlets. The glossy paper showed boys in goggles, looking proud, an American flag pealing across the background, mid-snap in the imaginary breeze. The bell rang and George looked up, startled.

“Here,” Logan said, taking a business card from the pile in front of him and one of the cheap GO ARMY pens scattered around the table. He scribbled his name and
number and handed the card to George. “Why don’t you call me and we can talk more, if you’re interested.”

Logan had a smile that could make money, George thought stupidly. He also had golden hair that was grown out just a little, dimples in his cheeks. It was no wonder he was doing recruiting work: seeing someone like him in uniform was reassuring. Beautiful bravery sat before him, extending a hand.

George nodded. He tried to sound nonchalant as he said, “Maybe,” though even as he put the card in his pocket he knew he would call.

George joined Paula in the crowd swelling from the cafeteria. Her eyes fell on him coldly.

“What?” he said, and she sighed as though this was a conversation they’d had a thousand times.

The next morning, George called Logan, who sounded as though the call had woken him. George was all apologies but Logan laughed and said, “Let’s meet at the Starting Gate,” the saloon above the racetrack a few towns over. George agreed.

Logan was waiting there when George arrived. He sat at the table overlooking the track. He looked into his beer and cleared his throat. George wanted to extend the moment – watching Logan, Logan unaware he was watching – but Logan looked up, and his lips parted in a big smile.

George sat down across from Logan. Logan drank from a frosted mug; he drew his finger through the condensation left on the table, making patterns. The saloon overlooked the track; beneath them, the horses brayed and fidgeted in front of their wagons. Today was harness racing.
“I bet on number 8,” Logan said. His ticket was clutched in his palm as though it were a lifeline. “You place a bet?”

George shook his head. He’d passed the mostly empty betting windows on his way in, the window intercoms silent, the tellers behind them bored. He was only seventeen at the time, and they carded at Starting Gate, and anyway betting had never interested him. Gamblers lived by their guts, and only in rare moments did George feel he had one.

George expected Logan to talk about the army but instead he cursed number 8, tore up his ticket, ordered beers for both of them, though George wasn’t a drinker then. By the time the race ended, Logan was drunker than George would have expected for someone Logan’s size. George offered him a ride, which Logan accepted, and at Logan’s small sublet Logan kissed George suddenly, without preamble.

The sex was over quickly, as it had been the only time Paula and George slept together. The shades were drawn, the white canvas yellowed by bright rays of light. Silently, Logan and George fell asleep, and when they woke, Logan had sobered. The drunken cheer had left his eyes.

George didn’t realize this meant he should go. But then, he was happy even as Logan grew miserable.

Feeling bold, George touched Logan’s chest, but beneath his fingers the muscles tensed into tight coils.

“Go,” Logan whispered. George remembered not hearing Logan; he remembered asking, “What?”
It was then that Logan struck him squarely across his face. George’s jawbone popped in a way it shouldn’t have.

George plucked his clothes from the floor. He could not find his boxers but could feel Logan’s cold gaze on his back, so he dressed without them and left. Stepping into the same day he’d left outside a few hours ago felt like returning home to find one’s house dilapidated. The clouds had broken to blue sky but the change was unwelcome, too glaring; the birdsong sounded chaotic, rehearsed in order to disturb George.

His phone showed no messages. Had he been living with Luiza and Shawn during that time, and not his father, someone would have shown concern by now. He’d been gone all day without telling anyone where he’d been.

In the days that followed the urge to apologize to Logan was never far, but because there was nothing to apologize for, George couldn’t find the words – nor could he find Logan. So he apologized to Paula, who had been jilted, too, though she didn’t know it.

“What for?” she’d asked.

“I’ve just been out of it lately,” George replied.

Paula had been pleased. She liked the attention of an apology, deserved or not.

George enlisted, in part, because he was obsessed with what had happened, though he never saw Logan again. In another part, he enlisted because he was so confused about himself he needed someone to tell him who to be – a move that had only served to muddle things further.
George tried to push the memories away. His eyes were still swollen shut from the mace, and because he had nothing else to do, he hoped to welcome the soft friendship of sleep.

The next morning, George could open his eyes into slits. Helen’s voice was in his head. *What makes you happy, George?*

11. Renaissance

George put on sunglasses and walked from the barracks to Clifton’s laboratory, which he only knew because Clifton had pointed out the squat white building the night he’d taken George home from the bar. George saw Clifton’s truck parked outside. The heap of its metal settled heavily on old wheels.

George wandered the halls. Nearby, the camps stood heavily guarded, but here no one asked him any questions. He studied a directory affixed to the wall; a drinking fountain hummed at his hip. He found Clifton’s name, white letters affixed to the black background, and he went to him.

George rapped his knuckles softly on Clifton’s door. Clifton swiveled in his chair, his face blank as he looked up at George. George removed his sunglasses. The light made his eyes water; he could barely make out Clifton’s face.

“Jesus Christ,” Clifton said. But George could hear the smile in his voice. Some of the tension between them floated away. “What did you get yourself into?”

“I can’t open my eyes that wide.”

Clifton sighed. He stood. George felt the displaced air swirl around him. Then he felt Clifton’s fingers on his temple, his thumb grazing the swollen skin.
A swish of footsteps in the hallway made Clifton step back. George returned his sunglasses to his face.

“You should go,” Clifton said.

“I came to harpoon you with an apology,” George said. He tried to smile.

“Not here. Please. I’ll get in touch.”

Finally, a week later, an e-mail materialized in George’s inbox. Clifton apologized and said he would explain in person. Did George know the gazebo on the hill that overlooked the bay? Clifton asked George to write back with a time to meet there.

When the day came, George biked to the hill with the picnic gazebo; he’d been to it once before for morale building. Now he pumped his legs over the rocky dirt road, the heat as thick as water, until he crested the hill and the expanse of the bay spread before him. Emerald water crawled in and out of tidal poles, cozy against the shore. Small cays dotted the water like stepping stones. A breeze slapped George’s face and, for a moment as he squeezed the hand brakes, he was one of the people who loved it here. Someone like Clifton, whom George saw sitting alone at a picnic table, hands clasped, staring out at a flock of pelicans. A row of tower viewer telescopes stood austerely at the edge of the hill, bearing witness to a coast guard boat with its whipping flag and mounted guns, a few sunbathers on a beach below, and a group of children collecting shells.

George walked his bike to the table and pushed down the kickstand with his foot. Clifton smiled when he saw George, but his smile faded as George sat down across from him.
“It’s good to see you,” George said. Clifton nodded. George had a feeling Clifton had called him here to end things, whatever they’d been, once and for all. George wondered what he could do to stall Clifton, to make him change his mind. He remembered the brief, floating happiness that had been his in Clifton’s bed. Being made to feel good about yourself, isn’t that a type of love? But the more he thought, the more sure he was that he had nothing to offer Clifton. Only secret, stifled love.

“You can say it,” George went on, though his voice shook.

“Jesus,” Clifton said, clutching his hair. “I don’t want to, though.”

“Then don’t,” George said. He was nearly begging. One of Clifton’s hands lay flat on the table, fingers spread. George reached out his own so the tips of their fingers brushed.

The brown hill unrolled into the water, and from where they sat, George could see the marina. The bay looked like a quaint harbor, docks wading out into the water. Telephone wires cut through the bushy tufts of trees. Clifton didn’t recoil.

“We’re fools if we think there aren’t risks.” Clifton moved one of his fingers so it rested on top of George’s thumb. He tapped thoughtfully as he spoke. “My neighbor saw you leave my apartment that night. She gets up early to teach a fitness class.”

George froze. For all he had damned the rules, he feared breaking them, or feared to be caught breaking them. “Is that a problem?”

“I don’t think so,” Clifton said. “She likes me. But the point is we’ll have to hide it. Hide everything.”

“I think we already made that choice,” George said. “By coming here. I’m sorry about what I said. I didn’t mean it.”
Clifton looked pained, and George wondered if Clifton even knew what he wanted. George knew now, but it didn’t make things clearer: he wanted the joy of acting with abandon, but he also wanted to feel safe. He had not felt safe in some time. Nearly every day he disappeared through a series of chain-link fences, each one wreathed with barbed wire, and if anything he felt less secure, for he didn’t always recognize himself in the camps.

“You’re right.” Clifton spoke so quietly George almost didn’t hear him. “You’re right,” Clifton said again, louder, and this time he broke into a smile, revealing a top row of straight white teeth. There was something intimate about being so close to someone’s teeth. George wanted to lean over the table and kiss him but that wasn’t something he could do. That wasn’t part of the deal.

Though they were alone, they spoke in whispers. George hoped Clifton would take him back to his apartment, but Clifton said they shouldn’t. He said he wanted to take things more slowly from now on. George was hurt, concerned that Clifton wanted to leave himself room to renege, but he tried not to show it. After all, he’d been the one to bring up protocol.

Clouds moved in as they spoke, narrowing the blue sky into a single trapezoid, then covering it altogether. The wind picked up. A small motorboat tied to a battleship mooring rocked in the water.

“There’s rain the forecast,” Clifton said. “Should we go?”

“Let’s stay,” George said.

The rain fell lightly at first, then quickened into a big crescendo. Raindrops splashed around them, heavier and heavier until the blue of the bay, the brown of the
hills, and the green of the trees were veiled with a uniform gray. It was the only disguise
George needed to lean over the table and kiss Clifton. He brought his hand to Clifton’s
cheek. The world around them disappeared.

Clifton pulled away. “Okay, okay,” he said, but he burst with a sloppy grin. The
rain would stop soon, the sky would clear, and only the leftover blanket of humidity
would remain to remind them of the storm and their kiss.

“What, that’s not what you mean by careful?” George said.

“Not exactly,” Clifton replied. He seemed to be weighing a decision in his mind,
measuring risk. He chewed his lip and George imagined calculator tape scrolling in his
head.

“Do you have to work next Thursday?” Clifton asked.

“What, Thanksgiving? I work the night before, into the morning.”

“My neighbor invited you to dinner,” Clifton said. “She likes strays.”
Tough Beauty

Greta’s always the one holding my hair back at parties, comforting me as I throw up and cry about the tuba player in band who doesn’t love me back. Then she’ll put breath strips in my mouth before I walk home so my mom won’t know about any of this. That’s the difference between us: I’m more likely to fall apart, but Greta’s tough. She’s mastered the art of doing whatever she wants and looking good while doing it. I get lonelier than Greta does, and sometimes I catch myself trying to act like other people because of it. Sometimes I try to act like Greta but I always take it too far, missing the cut off between cool and silly and ending up shrilling loudly, one lone note in the auditorium after the song has ended.

But I take days off from getting drunk and acting boy crazy. Greta and I like to spend time together reading, or Greta will lay down her tarot cards and we’ll decide what our lives are going to look like. Greta once revealed to me as her fingers flipped over the cards that she felt special, more special than our town, a little suburb of Detroit called Hollis Hills, would let her be. She said this quietly, thoughtfully, in the least vain way possible. The way she said the word – special – made me think it wasn’t necessarily a good thing. Not a bad thing, either. She was just meant to be somewhere else; she’s meant to meet new people. She wasn’t trying to impress me. For a minute the silence between us was sad, because I’m not included in new people. I’m part of the ordinary
world she needs to escape. But the sadness passed because we still have two years left of high school, two years that seem endless. No one is expecting us to be anything, or anyone, right now. We can just be ourselves.

School has just let out for the summer. I think of all this when I meet her new boyfriend, Ian, for the first time. I think, really? I think, that guy?

Greta points him out at the swim club. He’s up on a ladder, painting the eaves of the shower buildings. Greta and I both work at the pool from May to September – me in the snack shack, Greta as a lifeguard – and this guy has been around the past week, painting, but I didn’t pay him any attentions until now. “See that guy?” Greta whispers into my ear. “He’s my neighbor’s son. His name’s Ian. We’ve been hanging out a little.” When she pulls back, strands of her hair get caught in my lip-gloss.

I’m on my break, sitting with Greta on her lifeguard stand. I look where she’s pointing, but I’ve never seen this guy before. He looks older. He doesn’t go to our school. He doesn’t look like the type who will be okay with just hanging out for very long.

“You have a new boyfriend?” I say. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He’s not really my boyfriend,” Greta says. “We haven’t done much. He just moved in with his mom this spring.”

He’s wearing cargo shorts and a holey, paint-stained t-shirt. His muscles flex as he paints the eaves, and his eyes are hidden behind sunglasses. There’s a quarter-sized splash of white paint in his hair; he has a curly mass of it the color of tarnished brass. His leg hair is dark and matted with sweat. My eyes are fixed on him, and he must feel my
gaze because he turns and catches it. I look away but not quickly enough. When I look back, he’s on his way over.

His age becomes clearer when he’s standing beneath Greta’s lifeguard stand: he’s older than we are. Maybe the drinking age, or maybe a little younger. But he can’t be in high school anymore. He pushes his sunglasses up and I see he has pretty eyelashes for a man. Greta beams down at him, and he reaches up and takes her foot in his hand. She laughs and kicks him away.

The feeling in the air has changed now that Ian is here. The look that passes between them tells me they’re both thinking about the same thing, something they don’t want me to know. I look away to give them some privacy, unsure of whether or not I should just climb down and leave without saying anything. The hot breeze pedals around us; it’s a windy scorcher of a summer day, too hot for early June. Jeremy, the tuba player, walks by, but he doesn’t pay me any attention.

The pool spreads gelatinously before us, mostly full of bobbing children. One boy splashes another – a big wave of water right in the face – and Greta blows her whistle. “No horseplay!” she yells.

“No horseplay?” Ian says. “That’s a shame.”

The pool is closed the next day because of thunderstorms, and I’m grateful for the break, not from work but from drinking. Every night after the pool closes we drink, and I’m starting to feel ill all the time.

During a pause in the rain, Greta comes to pick me up, and she takes me back to her house. The sky looks like the skin of a watermelon: green swirls of angry clouds.
Once we’re there, Greta showers. I tell her she could get struck by lightening in there, but she says that’s an urban myth.

It’s early afternoon but the gloom outside darkens Greta’s bedroom; shadows accumulate in the corners, cottony and comforting. Gray light reaches in from the window onto her bed and I sit in a pile of it, listening to the shower compete with the rain and wondering about Ian. Greta told me he’s twenty-one, and what they’re doing is casual. She seems the same, for the most part. She played the same music in the car; the book on her nightstand is the same one she’s been reading, only the bookmark is tucked in closer to the end than it was the other day. I start reading the book from the beginning, and when Greta comes in with a towel wrapped around her head she snaps on the overhead light. “You’ll wear out your eyes reading in the dark,” she says.

“I have good night vision.”

“Whatever. As long as you don’t lose my spot!”

Greta sits cross-legged on the floor and puts on makeup. She has red hair the color of wet bricks, and one crooked incisor that makes her smile interesting to look at. Her cut-offs are always just a little bit shorter than mine. The rain gets heavy again, but calm descends on us, and I think there might not be anyplace safer than Greta’s bedroom.

We’ve been friends since middle school, but it was our mothers who decided we’d be more like sisters. Ingrid (her mom) and Mary-Anne (mine) are both divorced, working women, with Yahoo! Singles profiles. They still live in Hollis Hills because it’s a place leftover from their marriages, a place of four-person families and stay-at-home moms. They worried about how much time Greta and I used to spend alone in the evenings, so we started going to Greta’s after school, where I’d stay until I knew my
mom was home from class. At first we’d just do homework or lounge in Greta’s room, but then Greta got her license and a used 1989 Honda Civic, and we started going places, or just driving and talking. I’m a good listener. Greta says she doesn’t know a better one.

Ingrid’s an attorney, and my mom works for a call center and is taking night classes to become a paralegal. Sometimes I think the best my mom could do is work for Greta’s mom. When they’re together, my mom defers to Ingrid; she values her opinion more than anyone’s. It might be because of this that I think Greta’s so sophisticated, that I’m always asking Greta what she thinks.

Greta finishes her face with a few sweeps of lavender eye shadow, and then she rolls over on her stomach so she can reach her CD player. She punches play and after a few notes I realize it’s a CD I gave her – one girl with a guitar that makes me feel dreamy and sad – and hearing the song, knowing Greta listens to the music I found first, reassures me that Greta won’t forget me, even though she’s so special. I go back to her book and we’re quiet for a while. It’s comforting to think this isn’t a day I’ll remember.

“Do you want to lay out the cards?” Greta asks. She’s trapped strands of her hair between her fingers and is twisting them into a braid. In just a few minutes she’ll have twisted a crown of hair around her head, and she’ll look ready for anything. It takes me an hour at least to interrogate my hair with a straightener until it confesses its sins. Then I’ll need a coat of hair spray, then some finishing powder to make it look like I didn’t use hairspray. Thinking about this leaves me feeling bad about myself, about how much effort I put in with so little payoff, and I hope Greta interprets something good in the cards.

“Let’s go on the porch,” I say.
We take the CD player with us, the sturdy DD batteries keeping the music going. In the stairway the music is loud and trapped, and it’s almost too quiet to hear once we’re outside. Greta’s porch is a long slab of concrete with a high, second-story pavilion held up by wooden pillars. It’s raining everywhere except the place we’re sitting. Greta lights a candle, and the flame flickers in the damp air. The raindrops are as big as eyes and they give us privacy. The houses of Greta’s neighbors slink behind a blurry, wet curtain. We sit cross-legged, like when we were younger, but we’ve traded Pogs for divination. I always get the chills when I lay out the cards in a Celtic cross and flip over the first one. Greta won’t touch the cards herself, because she wants the reading to be about my energy. Sometimes I try to read the cards for Greta, but I have to have the *Learning the Tarot* open on my lap and it takes too long; Greta gets bored and part of the fun is not knowing what the cards mean, and Greta knows what each one means.

“Oh,” Greta says, pointing to a card. “The Chariot. This is an interesting one to get for the Center Card.”

She’s about to explain when a car pulls into the driveway next door, and Ian climbs out. Greta’s attention snags, and the cards turn lifeless on the cement. The card isn’t interesting unless Greta tells me why, so I go where her attention is, and watch Ian as he holds the car door open and talks to whoever is inside. The car starts to reverse back toward the road, even though the door is still open and Ian has to jump back into the ditch to protect his toes from the wheels. The door swings and catches the latch, but loosely. The car speeds away, slashing puddles of rain as it goes. I never see who’s driving.

Ian must think he’s alone. He doesn’t try to flee the steady rain that beats down on him. He just stands there, pulling on his finger joints and staring at the ground.
“He looks so melancholy,” Greta says, and I can tell she loves it. She stands and calls his name. A smile is on his face immediately. He runs through the garden with just a few springs and then he soars, he’s actually in the air for a moment, and his boots land hard on the porch. He looks proud, as though he’s just cleared a row of burning cars on a motorcycle. It’s a show-off move, but before I can scowl he has Greta in a soggy hug.

“Stop, stop!” She folds her arms over her chest, where he’s gotten her tank top wet, but her voice glimmers with laughter.

“Elizabeth!” he says, and he hugs me, too. I’m surprised by what I hear as genuine affection in his voice. How can he be happy to see me when I’ve met him once, and I gave him a look like I thought he was up to no good?

The tarot cards are forgotten. Ian sits on the cushioned rocking chair and takes off his shirt, wrings it over the porch. Greta and I sit on the ground, but I don’t like the idea of sitting at Ian’s feet, so I stand and lean against one of the pillars. Rain blown off course spits against my neck.

“How could you stand to leave Chicago for Hollis Hills?” Greta asks. “This place stunts your growth.”

“It’s not that bad,” I say, though I regret saying it, because Greta rolls her eyes.

“I’m serious. They put something in the water that kills brain cells.”

“What is a brain cell, exactly?” Ian leans back into the chair and looks thoughtfully at the pavilion overhead. “How is it different from cells in other parts of your body?”

Greta looks like she’s thinking.
“Are you talking about neurons?” I ask, but Greta and Ian are no longer listening to me. They only have neurons for each other.

“I didn’t grow up here,” Ian says. “My mom just moved here last year, and now I’m here, too, because, well…”

Greta nods sympathetically, though he hasn’t said anything deserving of sympathy. I want to reverse my judgment of him – Greta seems to like him, and I usually agree with Greta about other people – but the way Greta outcasts me when he’s around pits me against him, even if he’s been nothing but nice to me.

“Why did you move here?” I ask, trying for conversation. I take a survey of my body language and try to loosen my muscles, but I think I look more uncomfortable than before.

“It’s complicated.” He’s ready with his answer; it pops from his mouth like a bullet. He’s cracking his knuckles again, and he sighs as he does it. His body works like a piece of old machinery: it’s loud, popping, jumping, huffing. It’s not broken, but it’s not running particularly smoothly, either. It’s as though he’s led a hard life already.

The next day at the pool, it’s like the storm never happened. The sun tractor beams up all the puddles from the glass tables and lounge chairs, and I wipe away the last of the moisture from the Snack Shack counter, then set out the ketchup and napkin dispensers, the salt and pepper, the cup full of straws. Ian’s back again, and he starts painting the Snack Shack. I retreat from the order window, wash the floor and clean the ice cream cooler. I change the oil in the deep fryer. Ian starts singing “Ruby Tuesday” and I know he’s singing to get my attention. At first I roll my eyes, but there’s something
about it, something sweet, and I feel like he knows how to give attention, and when someone wants it. I think the word is charisma. Greta has it. Ingrid has it, smiling and showing some leg in her Yahoo! Singles photo. Jeremy has it, chasing people with his Sousaphone wrapped around his body during marching season. Sometimes I glimpse it in myself, but as soon as I see it, it dies, like a glow bug caught in a jar.

I think I should reciprocate. I take out an ice cream bar and bring it to him.

“Here,” I say. I want to tell him he hasn’t won me over yet; I want to tell him I’m still watching him. But for now it’s easier just to give him the ice cream bar.

The day becomes so hot and humid that most people choose to stay inside in the air conditioning. A fan in the Snack Shack bears oscillating witness to my boredom. Only a few ardent sunbathers melt into their towels by the pool. One swim-capped man does a slow breaststroke across the water. Ian moves on from the Snack Shack to the clubhouse, though he takes frequent breaks to linger under Greta’s lifeguard stand, or to dare me to say something vulgar over the PA system. I pick up the handset once, ready to curse, but I chicken out. The thermometer climbs toward 100 degrees, and on my break I toss a tube of sun block toward Greta. “You’re turning into a lobster!” I say.

Everyone complains and sweats, but this is Michigan in the summer: the rain yesterday brought a chilly gloom, only to be swiped away by heat today. I love how curious the weather is, how desperate for attention it seems. Talking about it doesn’t feel like small talk because it’s just so bizarre. It makes me feel like Hollis Hills is special.

I see Jeremy walk in a half hour before the pool closes. He does this often, coming to the pool for the after-hours parties even though he doesn’t work here. He
strolls in with a cooler, and the assistant manager – a college student home for the summer – turns to look the other way.

Jeremy wears glasses that look like the ones popular with emo bands. I play the clarinet in the school band, but he doesn’t seem interested in woodwinds, though he’s dated the timpanist, a trumpet player, and the third trombone. He’s popular in the band, but he can barely keep his head above water with the real popular crowd, the non-band kids, many of whom work at the pool. I have an easier time because of Greta, but I still fade into the background. I thought Jeremy and I would be right for each other; when he showed up at the pool I thought he’d gravitate toward me, but he hasn’t. Greta says I could do better, that my last boyfriend was better, but I’ve spent a lot of time in my room convincing myself my feelings for Jeremy mean something.

Ian finished painting hours ago, but he’s hung around. Now that everyone else who isn’t a teenager has left, he looks too old, his stubble too thick. He looks like an imposter. If he were anyone’s friend other than Greta’s, I would welcome him as a bringer of alcohol or bearer of knowledge, but his attention is hovering too close to my friend.

When the gates are closed and the assistant manager has roared off in her car, the music starts. I’m handed my first drink and I gulp it, then dive into the pool. Tonight Greta is the lifeguard. Since we’re drinking and swimming and we don’t want to get caught, one of the lifeguards stays sober to keep an eye on things. I feel safe under Greta’s watch. When I surface, I see her talking to Jeremy, and I sink back underneath the water. I imagine Jeremy coming over to the ledge of the pool and telling me to sit by
him. I imagine how I might look against the shimmering aqua light the pool gives off, and he’d kiss me, and I’d feel my own charisma surge in me…

I’m out of breath. I kick to the surface and gasp for air; the gasp comes with a loud croaking sound.

“I thought you were drowning!” Greta calls. “I was about to dive in for you.”

Everyone laughs. Jeremy is laughing and looking at me as though he doesn’t know I’m in love with him, as though it doesn’t matter that I love him. I try to laugh, too, and after a beat everything is back to normal, but my heart slides down an oil slick of shame.

I climb from the pool and do three shots of vanilla vodka in a row. The swim club tilts, or I tilt, or we both do. Everyone else is kissing, swimming, laughing. We all have a sun-worn look: hair washed in pool water, late nights, work in the morning, red sunburns. Those of us who drink often have had so many bad hangovers already that the miserable mornings combine to form one big everlasting summer hangover.

I see Greta climb from her lifeguard stand. Ian pours her a shot of something and she throws it back; her face is only scrunched for a moment before it springs back to a smile. She bites into a slice of a lime.

She’s not supposed to be drinking if she’s the lifeguard, I want to say, but I can’t bring myself to care about the rules. I go over to them. “No horseplay,” I say, but the words come out as a slur. Greta laughs, Ian laughs, but they’re laughing at me. Ian hands me a shot. Instead of stopping, like she usually does, Greta does another shot, too, but I’m too drunk to ask her why.
I throw up in the bathroom a little while later, am already retching into my hand before I make it to the toilet. I look at myself in the mirror and am shocked to see a blood vessel has burst in my left eye, leaving the white of it red and bloody. I splash water in it, vaguely hoping the water will make the redness go away, but all it does is sting. I wonder why no one said anything to me, why Greta didn’t tell me my eye was bright red.

I can’t go back out there, so I leave without finding my things; there’s a key in the planter outside my house I can use. The road that leads to the swim club is dirt, forest clapped to either side. Alone in the dark, the finally-cool dark, I feel a little better. I think that those people might not be my people. Maybe Greta is right about needing to get away, get anywhere, though the thought of it scares me. The alcohol is doing its confusing work of clarifying some things, clouding others.

I feel safe, though, even if the road is deserted. Other people would feel unsafe but the darkness emboldens me. Maybe I’m a vampire, I think. Maybe I’m special. I feel tucked in the pocket of the summer darkness, and I get the feeling that it could zip me up and forget about me there and I’d just stay with the exuberant noise of insects and the pop and glow of fireflies in the lonely, exciting endlessness of night.

But the twin glow of headlights comes up behind me, and I veer to the side of the road, slipping down into weeds. Something thorny catches my ankle but I plow forward, waiting for the car to overtake me, but instead it catches up to me and slows.

Ian’s behind the wheel.

“You left Greta?” I say.

He shrugs. “I have to get home. She’ll be okay.”

He’s right. Greta’s always okay.
“Get in. I’ll drive you.”

He’s driving a sedan I recognize from Greta’s neighbor’s house. I’ve been seeing it for months, so it must be his mom’s. I give vague directions, and he laughs and says, “First thing to learn to do when you’re drunk is how to tell other people where you live. Otherwise you have to pin your address to your jacket.”

“Noted,” I say. My head falls against the headrest and my eyelids feel heavy.

“It’s good to get it out of your system now. I didn’t drink in high school and then swung too far in the other direction afterward. People forgive you when you’re a minor. That goes away.”

“What do you need to be forgiven for?”

“Well, it’s a long list,” he says in a tone that isn’t serious.

“Is Greta on it?”

There’s quiet in the car. I don’t know what made me ask, but I look over at Ian. His face glows from the consul lights, and his mouth is in a thin, stern line.

“Age of consent is sixteen,” Ian says. “Greta can decide for herself.”

“I think it’s seventeen.”

“Nope. Sixteen. I looked it up.”

“So Greta’s on your list, then?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You all but said it, and that is just icky,” I say, but the word icky makes me laugh. I laugh and then I start hiccups, and it’s impossible to make a point with the hiccups. I’m trying to be serious but I can’t. I’m worried about Greta, but also a little bit in awe, and doesn’t she always know when to stop?
*  

I wake up and my brain feels like a spinning plate. My eye is still bright red and shining with protective tears; it looks like a glass apple. I shower, and when I’m finished I only feel halfway reanimated, but Greta texts and says she’s on her way to get me so we can go to the diner. *I need hash browns!* she writes.

My mom is eating cereal at the kitchen table, a textbook open and pages of notes fanned around it. When she sees my eye, she says, “Jesus Christ!” and she rummages in the drawer and hands me a package of disposable eye patches she has leftover from a cornea abrasion she had last year. “Poor baby,” she says, and kisses my head.

I put the eye patch on, because I can turn an eye patch into a funny story, but what looks like pink eye is never funny. I hope it will make Greta laugh. It does. She asks if it’s temporary. I tell her it is, and she says, “That’s too bad. You could say you lost your eye in a bar fight.”

Music is blaring in Greta’s car; she says it’s a good cure for the hangover, that the bass will just shake the nausea right out of you. “Yeah,” I say, “in the form of vomit,” and I roll down my window so some of the music can escape. Greta shifts into a higher gear and I get that good feeling I always get when she first picks me up, like our journey has just started.

It seems brighter inside the diner than it did outside. The windows are thrown open and the white lace curtains whip in the breeze. Plates of greasy, sunny-side up eggs zoom from the kitchen to the row of booths and the tables crowded on the floor, arranged so the waitresses can hip their way through them. Behind the bar, a blender magicks up
fruit smoothies. Greta and I slide into a booth and order coffee, and a few people stare at my eye patch, but mostly everyone ignores us.

Greta does what she always does at the diner: she builds towers using plastic pots of jam and packets of sugar. I think the childhood habit looks good on her.

“I drank too much last night. I pulled an Elizabeth.”

“Hey,” I say. “It’s not like I invented drinking too much.”

“No, but you’ve made great strides in the field.”

We laugh. The waitress breezes over to us and asks if we want a warm-up for our coffee; she splashes a little into our mugs.

“Don’t you think he’s a little old?” I say. I lower my voice though there’s no one here we know.

“When I’m twenty, he’ll be twenty-five. That’s not that big of a difference.”

“Kind of it is,” I say.

“It’s only a big difference to the people who aren’t involved, and it’s none of their business.”

I nod, but I don’t really understand. What bothers me is that to Greta, the end of her time in Hollis Hills, and the end of our friendship, is so inevitable, and yet she can imagine a future with Ian after knowing him for a month. I don’t say anything, because the waitress brings our food: hash browns, bacon, and a fruit plate for Greta, pancakes for me.

In the middle of our meal, the bell above the door chimes and with my one good eye I almost don’t recognize Ian. He’s wearing a suit and he’s following a woman with a baby strapped to her chest. She’s wearing a tight black skirt and a white blouse, with
sneakers on her feet and dyed black hair pulled into a high ponytail. She leads Ian to one of the tables and sits with her back to our booth. I see a flock of birds tattooed on her neck, soaring into her hairline. The baby is wearing a white christening gown, and as the woman unclips the child from her bosom, the dress flies free, and the baby’s bare pink feet thrash the eyelet lace hemline. I think it’s a girl because of the bow around her head. Then the woman hands the baby to Ian and the baby starts to scream; she goes stiff as a board as though she’d rather slide to the floor than be held by Ian.

Greta turns at the sound; for a minute I thought I might be able to protect her. I could keep her looking my way until they left. But it’s too late. Greta has seen them.

“Hold on a sec,” the woman says to Ian. She stands and frees her blouse from the skirt and ties it into a crop top. Another tattoo peaks out, a few arms of an octopus lashing from beneath the shirt. “Damn, it’s hot in here. Okay, you can give her back.”

Ian hands the baby back across the table; her limbs flail and her face is scrunched in infant misery, even though her soul has just been saved. Ian isn’t the easygoing Ian I’ve seen before; he looks like a spring-loaded version of himself, like he could get up and flip the table or break the window. But then he sees us, and his anger capsizes. It sinks right through the floor and he sends a clandestine smile Greta’s way. She lifts a hand and lets out a wave one finger at a time.

“That’s Alicia,” Greta whispers to me. “They’re breaking up.”

“You knew about this?” I say.

Greta shrugs as though it isn’t a big deal. “She’s unhappy, too. He moved here to give it a try – you know, for the baby – and it hasn’t worked.”

“So you want to be that kid’s pretend mom?”
Greta frowns, as though I’m a colony of carpenter ants and I’ve infested her fantasy. She finishes her coffee and eats one last piece of watermelon with her fingers. She slaps money on the table. “Let’s go,” she says.

I’m about to suggest the backdoor, but Greta’s already out of the booth and winding through the tables towards Ian’s. “Nice eye patch,” he says to me, but he looks uncomfortable now that we’re talking to him. Alicia waits to be introduced. She looks at us sternly, me especially, as though she’s trying to see through my eye patch. Her nose ends in a sharp point, and her eyebrows have been darkened with a pencil. She’s made herself look exactly how she wants to look.

“This is Alicia,” Ian says. “And our baby Miriam. Alicia, this is my mom’s neighbor, Greta, and her friend Elizabeth.”

At the mention of her baby, she brightens, puts her lips on the crown of the baby’s head and plants small kisses. Then she looks up and we shake hands. I notice the ring on her finger: it’s a chip of diamond that traps a mosquito of sparkle.

“We just came from church,” Alicia says, and looks at us skeptically, as though we’re demons and the mention of church might banish us. But Greta’s persistent; she stays until Alicia says, “I don’t think the waitress will come back as long as you’re standing there.”

The baby watches us go; she has long, pretty eyelashes, just like Ian.

“Congratulations,” I call when we’re at the door, and Alicia nods without saying anything. She looks at Ian with a question in her eyes, and Ian starts talking, flicking his hand as though he’s dismissing something.
“She’s not very friendly,” Greta says when we’re outside and she’s fishing her keys from her purse. There’s a high ceiling of blue sky, and we’re supposed to be at the pool soon. I can’t believe the Greta standing before me is my best friend, my sister. I don’t understand how she could go and dispatch all her good judgment.

“This seems like something I would do,” I say, but my words have no effect on Greta.

The heat feels awful. I want to tell Greta she’s in line for his next bullet, he’s not worth anything, and this will end badly. She’ll get hurt. I want to say I love her, and isn’t my love enough for now? Isn’t friendship good enough?

But even more than all that, I want to go back into the diner, throw a beverage at Ian, preferably a scalding one, one that will leave a mark on his face, and say, “If you have to look up the law, it probably means she’s too young.”