Tentative Haunters: A Novel (Excerpt)

by

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1998

Even then it felt like the beginning of something, or the end of something, or maybe both. Everything was in its right place. It was late August. Olivia and I were in the backseat of my parents’ car. The bands of my headphones were broken in half so that we could listen to my Walkman together. Olivia’s head rested on my shoulder, the music from Olivia’s half of the headphones vibrating, sending a tickle through my body.

And then there was the shack. The shack, for which “dilapidated” was much too kind a description. The shack sat on the side of the road along the stretch of causeway leading to Long Beach Island, just kind of plopped there between the road and the bay. The boxy shape of the shack stuck out of the marsh, held together by warped wood buffeted by years of rain and wind. Wild untamed grass grew so tall and unfettered inside the shack that the stalks nearly shot through the roof. Yes, the shack stood—had been standing ever since my parents first bought a beach house on the island six years prior. No matter how strong any storm was, the shack remained, at least from a distance, stubbornly unchanged.

“There’s our house,” my mother said as we drove by the shack.

Olivia and I looked at each other and snickered quietly. My mother made the same comment/joke every time we passed it. Our house, as if the idea of it was something only we could possess, something the four of us—me, Olivia, my parents—knew about. That day the shack had been doused with enough of August’s balmy glow that it looked
almost magical, and for a minute, I was more than willing to believe that the shack was ours.

The shack was one of those things that became an obvious metaphor, even for me, who was sixteen. The unchanging nature of things maybe? Yet it was this perceived permanence the shack represented that made that particular drive down to the beach feel strangely like an ending. A week later, Olivia, would head off to college, to Ithaca. Ithaca, I knew, was where Odysseus started out and this thought only further compounded the far-from-home aspect of Olivia’s leaving. Ithaca was only five hours from our hometown in New Jersey, but it felt to me as if Olivia was headed to the moon.

We arrived at the beach house a little before noon that day. While my parents settled in, Olivia and I changed into our bathing suits and rushed to the beach, as if time itself took human form and chased us.

“You know,” Olivia said, once we got to the beach. “I think it’s finally starting to sink in.”

“What?” I asked.

“Leaving, going away to college. You know, everything.”

“Don’t go.”

Olivia laughed. “Quinn.”

“Don’t go, don’t go, don’t go.”

Olivia reclined in her beach chair. She put her t-shirt over her face. I’d been playacting sadness at the prospect of Olivia’s leaving, but with Olivia’s eyes covered, I looked over at her and allowed a genuine sadness to fix itself on my face.
I’d been trying to think of each day as The Summer So Far, as if even that late-August beach trip was the middle of the season. Olivia and I had spent almost every day of the summer together, as we usually did every year, sprawled out on oversized towels either at the beach or in Olivia’s backyard at home. We’d spent hours talking about some of the boys in Olivia’s life (the boys seemed to stand in line, waiting for their number to be called). Olivia’s mother would make ants on a log for us to snack on, and though we laughed off the childishness of ants on a log, it was exactly what the summer called for: something droll, something to root us firmly in adolescence. We would listen to Bratmobile’s *Pottymouth* on repeat about a dozen times, usually followed by Bikini Kill or Sleater-Kinney—bands that were part of a scene known as “riot grrl,” a feminist/music movement that both Olivia and I were too young to appreciate, but one to which we’d still felt a strange sort allegiance. Sometimes one—and then both—of us would suddenly start shrieking the words to “Rebel Girl,” though we both balked at the word “dyke,” since it sounded more like a curse word than anything else.

I always chose the music, but sometimes I cared only slightly about what was playing. I was content to listen to Olivia talk; even then I’d only half-listen. I’d watch Olivia’s lips move, the way her bottom lip would jut out and suck the sweat off her upper lip in between sentences.

When we couldn’t take the heat, we’d retreat to Olivia’s basement, where we’d watch Olivia’s VHS collection or play Nintendo.

“Let me win one game,” Olivia said one day.

“No way,” I said.

“Come on. I’m leaving in a few months, let me just win one game.”
“Nope.”

“I can’t go away to college being a loser.”

“Guess you can’t go then.”

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I pulled my summer reading book out of my backpack. It was The Sub Also Rises, and upon seeing the book, Olivia snickered.

“What?” I said.

Olivia jerked her head towards the book. “Boring.”

“Aw man, really?”

The characters are all like the people in high school that you actively try to avoid.” I didn’t think much about the other kids at school. I had only a vague interest in making friends, an obligatory interest into which I didn’t channel a whole lot of energy. I hadn’t really thought about making new friends at all, even as the reality of Olivia’s departure began to crystallize more and more. On the rare occasion I did think about it, I felt crushed by the anxiety that I was (a) woefully unprepared for the endeavor of “making friends” and (b) light years behind in that endeavor.

The problem was Olivia. Or, more specifically, the problem was that no one I ever met would be like Olivia. We met when I was four and she was six, when Olivia’s family moved in next door. On the very first day that Olivia’s family moved in, their dog, Barkley, ran away. Olivia and her mother were out looking for the dog and it just so happened that Barkley was rummaging around in our backyard. Olivia and I played with
Barkley while our mothers drank wine on the back porch. Olivia taught me that day how to play fetch, how the person had to shake the ball or chew toy in front of the dog before throwing it, taunting the dog, tricking it through enticement.

Even then I could discern Olivia’s gravitational pull; she was the kind of girl whose dynamism could be felt many planets away. She was curious about everything, inquisitive, but also carefree. She was so full of these kinds of contradictions—adventurous but laid back, knowing but susceptible to suggestion—that I found it almost dizzying to be around her.

“What do you mean,” I said, “that the characters in the book are like the kids at school?”

“All they do is drink, complain, and have sex with each other.”

“The characters or the kids at school?”

“Both, dummy.”

“And you’re leaving me with them.”

Olivia guffawed. “Oh god. Look, not everyone is as cool as me. I get it, I know. But you should be nice to someone. You never know.”

“Why?” I said. “I’m going to graduate in two years and then go to Ithaca, where you’ll have made enough friends for the both of us.”

“I don’t even know what to do with that.”

“Just not any of those girls we saw at the Bratmobile concert. You know, the ones with the military jackets and combat boots. They scare me.”

“Everyone scares you.”
I wanted our last weekend before Olivia left for college to be extra special and/or memorable, so I was a little more enthusiastic than usual in wanting to go out that night. Olivia had been coming down to my parents’ beach house since my parents first bought it. She always wanted to go out at night. She’d want to wander up and down the main boulevard, looking mostly for boys. “It’s a right of passage,” she would say, even at twelve, before either one of us really knew what that phrase meant. I never saw the point; I was content to watch scary movies in the room we shared, the two of us huddled in one bed, trying to laugh our way through Regan’s exorcism or the slaughtering of Camp Crystal Lake’s counselors.

Olivia appeared genuinely taken aback at my ardent insistence on going out.

“You want to go out?” she said. “You, Quinn Mercer, who once stayed inside on the nicest day of the summer to play Zelda?”

“Yes.”

“You, who once faked a stomach ache when we ran into a group of boys on the beach. Cute boys.”

“They weren’t that cute.”

“Yes, they were.”

“They were smoking.”

“So? We smoke pot all the time.”

“They were smoking cigarettes.”

“We’ve done that too.”
“We’ve done that, but we don’t do that.”

“Oh, geeze.”

“You know what I’m saying?”

Instead of answering, Olivia put her head in her hands, as if to underscore my hopelessness.

We ate dinner with my parents, then went up to our room and fell onto our beds, full from the meal. We lay in silence for a few minutes, after which I climbed onto Olivia’s bed. I sat up against the wall. Olivia was lying prone. She turned her heard when I sat down next to her.

“Don’t go,” I said.

Olivia smiled. “Okay.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, totally. Senior year was a breeze. I can’t even remember what I learned. What if I didn’t learn anything? Maybe I need to repeat senior year just in case.”

“I think that’s probably for the best.”

“I think the kids up at Ithaca are like, ‘smart’ or whatever. What if they start asking me questions I don’t know the answers to and find out that I’m really stupid? What if they tie me up to a chair in the middle of the quad and stone me to death?”

“To be safe, I think you should probably stay home.”

“It’s such a beautiful quad though,” Olivia said.

“Not when you’re being stoned to death.”

“Everything up there is beautiful.”

“Things are nice here, too.”
Olivia reached over and hugged my knee. She would only be gone for three months at a time and Ithaca was only five hours away, but somehow these numbers seemed immeasurable. It was strange how two years could feel like such a vast distance. My dad was a year older than my mother and yet they seemed all but equal in age. Teenagers, I realized, seemed to age in what felt like dog years—seven years in spirit for every physical year.

“So, what do you want to do tonight?” Olivia asked.

“It’s up to you.”

“I thought you were Ms. Suddenly Social. Ms. Let’s-go-out.”

“I want to do what you want to do.”

We got ready to go out. Olivia sat at my old vanity, a maple desk with pink flowers painted on the sides. I had no memory of ever okaying the purchase of the desk and wished I could teleport into the past and prevent my parents from buying it. It looked so childish, so awkward—like it belonged in an overgrown dollhouse. Olivia brought a mirror that enlarged her face to a comically grotesque degree. In this mirror, she began curling her eyelashes with a barbarous contraption that looked more like a torture device than a makeup tool. I winced as the curler clamped down, flicking Olivia’s eyelashes upward. I never looked in a mirror when I put on makeup. I had one eyeliner pencil, black, that I used to etch thick, indeterminate lines under my eyes.

Olivia asked if she could do my makeup that night.

“Why?” I asked.

“Just let me do it.”

“Maybe.”
“Maybe?”

“No eyeshadow, though.”

“Maybe eyeshadow.”

Olivia finished putting on her own makeup, then stood up, put her hands forcefully on my shoulders and all but threw me down onto the chair.

“I have a style,” I pleaded.

“Is that what you call it?”

Olivia’s hands were warm and smooth as they made their way over my face. The fan had been trained right on us, but now, concerned with the topography of my face, I began to sweat. It was alarming to have someone else’s hands on your face. I wondered if that was what it was like to be kissed—that searching, a little blind, the pleasure and anxiety of someone sharing so close a space.

“Am I hurting you?” Olivia said.

“No.”

“Then why do you keep wincing?”

“It just feels weird.”

An eternity later, Olivia finished. “What do you think?” she said. She ran a hand through my hair as I stared at myself in the mirror. She’d been working for over almost half an hour but it hardly looked as though she’d done anything at all. Yet something was different, something subtle and alluring. I looked older somehow, as if Olivia’s hands had transformed my face, sculpted a more adult version of me.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“I think so.”
“You think?”

“I can’t really tell what you did.”

“That’s the point. If you can’t actually tell you’re wearing makeup, then that means the makeup is good.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Welcome to being a woman.”

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There was no one on the beach when we got there.

“So weird,” Olivia said. Towards the end of August the Island was usually crowded, with everyone trying to cram one last weekend into the summer before they had to slip back into the banal ebb and flow of real life. “Bummer,” Olivia added.

“Yeah,” I said. “Bummer.”

“I wish we had some weed.”

“Whiskey?”

Olivia patted her shoulder bag. “Duh.”

We slipped off our sandals and walked towards the ocean until we came to a derelict lifeguard stand that hadn’t been put a way. Olivia shrugged off her bag and handed it to me so that she could climb up. I climbed up next.

“Fuck,” Olivia said, plaintive.

“What?”

“College, man. I’m leaving.”
I gave her my best puppy-dog whimper.

Olivia unscrewed the cap to a Coke bottle, which was half filled with Coke and half with whiskey. She took a sip and handed it to me.

We drank whiskey and Coke and went through some of our greatest hits as friends. It was as if the wide-open vista of moonlight-dappled ocean was so incredibly cinematic that it required a montage. There was the time I snuck into Olivia’s house and scared off, by accident, the guy with whom Olivia had been about to have sex. There was the time the two of us, escorted by Olivia’s mother, saw the Spice Girls in concert on a mountain in Scranton, Pennsylvania. There was the time we went to a Bratmobile concert and upon leaving, found two girls kissing fervently on the hood of Olivia’s car. We had to lean against one of the adjacent cars, pretending not to watch. We let the girls finish, biting our lips to keep from laughing.

Olivia draped her arm on the back of the lifeguard stand. Her thumb grazed my shoulder. “Think about your tongue,” she said.

“What about it?”

“Tongues are so weird.”

My tongue suddenly became a lump at the top of my throat, as if swollen to twice its normal size.

“It’s like you’re choking,” Olivia said. “On your own tongue. How weird is that?”

I laughed, trying to force an agreement past the knot of my tongue.
“It’s like breathing,” Olivia said. “Have you ever thought about your own breathing before? When you think about it, it’s like you can’t do it. It’s like when you’re aware of it, it becomes impossible.”

Olivia took a larger gulp from the bottle. She pulled the bottle away from her mouth and some spittle was left dangling, like a tiny icicle, from her lower lip. She didn’t notice, but I did. The spit appeared crystalline. It was oddly magnetic. I watched it, to see what it would do, if it would drop or just continue to hang there. I felt protective of the entire moment suddenly; I wanted to put the moment inside a mason jar and preserve it forever.

In my freshman year of high school, my English teacher had asked the class to define the difference between jealousy and envy. No one had known the difference. To be jealous, the teacher had said, was to be overly-protective of something—as in “jealously guarded secret” or a “jealous lover.” When someone was jealous, she essentially wanted something she already had. I wondered at the time why someone would want something she already had, but that night with Olivia, our last night together before she went a way to college, I began to understand.

“Honestly,” Olivia said. “This is better.”

“What?”

“This. Just sitting here.”

“What is it better than?”

“Anything else.”
There was one last sip in the Coke bottle and Olivia offered it to me. I shook my head. Olivia said, “Mine, then,” and flung her head back to finish off the bottle. She sighed, smiled at me, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.
Olivia and I kept in touch for the first few weeks of school, but our communication dropped of steadily, until I found myself talking into a telephone receiver with only a dial tone on the other end. For almost all of that September Olivia and I had had marathon conversations online, but slowly she appeared online less and less. No one seemed surprised by this; and I suppose I wasn’t even surprised by it. I could sense the inevitability of it, the inescapable no-duh. Even back when we saw each other nearly every day, I had the nagging suspicion that our bond was due to some combination of our being next-door neighbors in a fairly small and boring town, the commonalities of childhood.

It was this sense of the inevitability of Olivia’s desertion that prevented me from reaching out to her. Maybe it was an only child thing, a strange sort of validation, but I needed people to tell me that they wanted to be with me. That Olivia didn’t reach out meant I wasn’t going to reach out.

Still I waited for Olivia to message me. I would log onto my family’s computer in the basement and hope and pray, my own sixteen-year-old, half-Jewish-but-really-agnostic version of praying that Olivia would send me a message. During one of these bouts of waiting, I stumbled into a chat room in which no one was chatting. Almost as soon as I entered, I received a slew of messages asking about my age, sex, and location. I replied that I was a twenty-year-old male from Pennsylvania.

QuarantineThePast was a seventeen-year-old female from New York. She’d messaged me and before I knew it I was engaged in an hour-long “conversation” during
which many articles of clothes were torn off, various parts stroked and licked, improbably observations made.

**QuarantineThePast:** cant really stay on 2day how bout a quickie? 
**mightyeskimo:** *smiles*
**QuarantineThePast:** no words, i like it. slam me up against the wall 
**mightyeskimo:** im slamming u up against the wall 
**QuarantineThePast:** mmm now reach ur hand into my pants 
**mightyeskimo:** my hand is now in ur pants mmm 
**QuarantineThePast:** tell me wat u feel 
**mightyeskimo:** so turned on 
**QuarantineThePast:** wat do u feel w/ ur hand?

After a few of these, I ran out of ways to reciprocate Quarantine’s lusciousness. The only well I had to draw from was the information Olivia had conveyed about her own sexual experiences. Olivia’s stories were much more romantic than some of the things Quarantine said. I started watching pornography so that I would have something to say to her.

I worried of course that one day Quarantine would cease contact altogether. Yet she was always ready and willing. It felt nice to be wanted, even if it was the simulacrum of want, of desire. My desire was real enough; I had a particular vein on the back of my wrist that felt so good when kissed, even by my own lips. I started associating this part of myself with Quarantine, so much so that merely brushing my lips over the spot triggered flashes of our conversations.

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Olivia did come home for Thanksgiving. She stayed for three days, ducking almost in cognito in and out of the neighborhood.
I sat in my room, my ear pressed against the glass of my bedroom window, listening to the murmur of the party next door at the Goddards’. In the past, Thanksgiving had been one of the two times a year Olivia and I didn’t hang out—Christmas being the other—so there really should have been no difference. Yet there was. The idea that Olivia was right there, right next door, vexed me, as if Olivia’s sheer proximity made the air thicker than usual. The light from Olivia’s house trickled into my room, giving light to the smudge left by my face on the window, the impression of my cheek, my lips.

I felt listless so I sat outside, on the cold concrete of the stoop in front of my house. It was cold enough outside to make me teary-eyed, wind whisking past me and into me through my eye sockets. There were people in the garage next door, voices whose sources I tried to make out. I recognized the throaty guffawing of Olivia’s uncle Maurice, a short and pudgy man whom Olivia and I always joked bore a strong resemblance to Wario, one of the villains from the Super Mario games. Uncle Maurice was only ever seen outside, sequestered on account of his cigarette habit.

The other houses in the neighborhood were all dark and shut up like they hadn’t been lived in for weeks. Every single one. It was eerie, almost as if all the wattage allotted to the entire neighborhood was being used up by the Goddards. It wasn’t unlike the effect Olivia had on a room full of people. I looked up at my own house, mostly lightless except for a single nightlight in the upstairs hallway and the dull illumination of the two lanterns hanging above my head outside. The light from the garage next door was brighter than the light I was sitting under. I felt that kind of jealousy that is not really envy, the kind where the person covets something, where she’s protective of it; I wanted to be in that light because I had already been in it at some point. I’d spent almost my
entire childhood basking in Olivia’s glow—a glow she seemed more than happy to share—and never found any reason to find light elsewhere.

The whooshing of a door opening and closing inside the garage made my ears perk up. Whoever had stepped outside was greeted with a frenzy of feigned catcalls. I knew it was Olivia when I heard the potholed book of Uncle Maurice bellow the words HEEEEY COOOLLLEEEEGGEE.

I stood up, my backside numb from the cold obduracy of the doorstep. Our houses were so close that I could careen my neck around the bushes next to the doorstep, while hiding my body from view. The sound of Olivia laughing snaked its way up inside me. There was no way I could reveal myself inconspicuously so I just sat back down on the step in front of my house, resigned to just listen. I wondered if Olivia’s family would I ask about me.

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The silver lining of Olivia’s desertion: I had nothing else to do but my homework. I started sketching again, and reading comic books. I kept a journal, but instead of writing down my thoughts and feelings, I’d draw a picture. Sometimes I drew pictures of how I imagined QuarantineThePast looked.

The librarian at my school told me the library had a small section of comic books. They had so many great things: George Perez’s Wonder Woman, the original issues of Watchmen. There was Spider-Man and the X-Men. There was the weirder stuff too, like Swamp Thing and Sandman.
The section was small enough that the librarian let me check out all of them at once.

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In May of that year my mother became sick. My parents withheld the severity of the illness from me for the most part, such that I didn’t think the illness was all that severe. They had a constant refrain: “Don’t worry, everything’s fine.” I knew everything was not fine, but I didn’t worry. When I was ten, my mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. My mother sat me down on the living room floor and explained that she had a lump in her breast and that she would eventually lose all her hair, that things would be sad for a while. I asked her if she was going to die. My mother said “No way,” with enough unassailable force to deter me from thinking about it any further. My mother and I spent the rest of that night lying on the floor of the living room, flipping through a picture book that illustrated John Lennon’s “Imagine” in beautiful pastel colors, wriggling our toes in the fuzzy pills of the carpet.

She’d survived that, but now she was sick again. It wasn’t cancer; it was something called myelodysplastic syndrome, which was, as my dad told me, a kind of cousin of cancer. It weakened her immune system, such that she was more susceptible to colds and other ailments.

As a result, she spent most of June and July in and out of the hospital. I didn’t visit all that often, despite not having much else to do that summer. The mental calculus went something like this: if I didn’t see her there, she wouldn’t be there.
One Saturday in late July my mother and I drove over to the public high school, where she worked as a guidance counselor. She’d decided to retire from her job. I believed her when she said that leaving her job was more of a time-to-see-the world decision. She’d often list all of the things she wanted to do and all of the places she wanted to see once she found herself free of the burden of work. “Back to Italy in a heartbeat,” she’d say. “But this time, the coast. I want to wear my Capri pants on the beaches of Capri.”

Sometimes she said she wanted to write a book, a memoir maybe. “I think that would be good,” she’d say, “not only for me, but for others, you know, who’ve been through the same shit.” I’d smile gleefully at the prospect of having a famous mother.

I’d never been to where my mother worked before. The school was only one building, one pale brick building that seemed to rise up out of the ground as if it were emerging from some fracture in the earth. The hallways were labyrinthine, an infinite network of dimly lit aisles that led everywhere and nowhere. They looked almost purgatorial. It was a Saturday afternoon in the summer and almost all traces of human life had vanished.

“It smells funky in here,” I said.

“Really?” my mother said. She was wearing a surgical mask and it muffled the words. The doctor had instructed her to wear one when in places that were dank and dusty.

I pointed at the mask. “Maybe I should have brought one of those.”
My mother’s office was larger than I’d imagined. Blinding florescent lights cascaded from the high ceiling, white lights so bright they appeared yellow and dulled everything else in the room. Motivational posters and quotes by Ralph Waldo Emerson plastered the jaundiced walls. My mother sighed as she looked around the office, searching the room for a place to start packing.

On my mother’s desk sat a picture of me in clown makeup from Clowning around, a pageant/play I’d participated in when I was in fourth grade. In the picture I had a chalky white face, confetti hair, and a red ball on my nose so big that it grazed my lips. I clutched a baton tightly, pressing it into the side of my leg, afraid even then that I’d drop it.

“Things were much simpler then,” my mother said.

“Well, yeah.”

Plumes of dust clouded the air with every drawer opened and with every folder removed from its file cabinet. When my mother wasn’t looking, I stole a glance at students’ files, an uncovering of my mother’s separate life.

Tucked into the bottom drawer of my mother’s desk, I found a dog-eared paperback of Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. The book was old, the cover held on with masking tape, the pages brittle and yellow. I flipped through the book and noticed there were making on almost every page, words circled, whole paragraphs highlighted, notations in the margins. I knew the markings belonged to my mother. I’d seen them before, in the books that she left lying around the beach house in the summer. She couldn’t read a book without writing in it.
“I read that book in college,” she said, walking over towards me. “It’s pretty strange, but an interesting read.” She took the book from me and bounced it in her hand as if trying to remember what holding it thirty years ago felt like. She pointed at Gertrude Stein’s name on the cover. “You see,” she said, “the book was written by Gertrude Stein, but the book is actually the biography of Alice Toklas, her lover. Funny, yeah?”

I looked up at my mother, demurring at the word “lover.” The word sounded silly. I shot my mother a shifty look as if to signal my fascination with the book had receded.

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My mother eventually recovered enough for us to make our annual pilgrimage to the beach at the end of August. On the way to the beach, we passed the shack, still sitting there beside the road. It stuck up, as it always had, in defiance of passing time. Yet what a difference a year made; nothing was as it had been. Nothing, maybe, except me.

It was the first summer without Olivia. My mother had heard from Mrs. Goddard, Olivia’s mother, that Olivia had gotten an off-campus apartment near Ithaca with her college roommate. Olivia was planning on getting a job and staying there over the summer. That my mother and Mrs. Goddard had been talking about Olivia—or at all, really—felt downright conspiratorial. My mother wasn’t even really that close with Mrs. Goddard; as close as Olivia and I were, our families rarely saw one another, except for a few of the Goddards’ barbeques.
After dinner, my parents and I walked up to the beach. My mother walked towards the shoreline, towards a jetty protruding out into the water. She bent down and washed her hands in the water, splashing the excess water across her face.

“Your mother’s in her element down here,” my dad said.

“I know,” I said.

“Things got scary there, for a moment. She needed this.”

“Yeah.”

There was a long, lingering pause. I didn’t know what to say or what to think. A red-alert siren went off in my brain whenever the conversation started approaching Serious Territory. In my mother’s hospital room, whenever health or medicine was mentioned, I’d reach into my bag and pull out a comic book and hold it real close to my face. The superpower of comic books: the pages are taller and more colorful than those of regular books. The superpower of a teenage girl: she can un-think herself right out of existence.

My dad said he was going to go make tea. After he walked back up the steep dune, I watched my mother submerge her arm in the water, moving it around, searching for sea glass. She loved to do this in the small swells next to the jetty, said that was the most promising spot.

“Can I help?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen any yet, but I have a feeling we’re going to find a good one.”

We searched in silence for a few minutes, occasionally plucking something out of the shallow water that felt like it could be sea glass. The pieces were just shells.

“Are you ready for school this year?” my mother asked.
“I guess.”

“You should do something, like a play a sport or try out for the school play. Something active.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, alright.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “Try out for the play. Remember Clowning Around?”

“Yes,” I said, reluctantly.

“The whole time I was thinking, ‘Don’t drop it, don’t drop it.’”

“I didn’t, though.”

“No, you didn’t.”

After looking to no avail, my mother and I retreated back to the bench at the entrance to the beach. We sat looking out at the ocean. My mother stared at the horizon line, squinting slightly as if she were trying to peer over the ocean to see what lay on the other side.

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Dark Side of the Moon was my mother’s favorite record. In fact, it might have been the only record she actually owned. I’d bought it for her on disc on year for Christmas, but she always listened to the vinyl version, which she’d had since college. The album always stuck out on the shelf of records my parents kept in the basement, maybe because it was the only record there that belonged to her. The rest belonged to my dad. “Money” was her favorite song. Whenever the song came on the radio in the car—which, if you’ve
ever listened to a classic rock station, happens fairly often—she would crank up the
volume right at the beginning of David Gilmore’s guitar solo.

The shelf of records sat in the studio, where, a lifetime ago, my dad had played
music with his band. The studio was basically just a desk with a mixing board, the faders
stuck in place from years of obsolescence. A picture of my dad hung above the desk, a
twelve-string acoustic guitar resting next to his legs. Next to the photo was a window that
looked out into another room where the band played.

Every now and then I’d catch my mother sitting on the floor of the makeshift
recording studio in the basement. She’d sit with her legs crossed and her back against the
record shelf. If I ever though about what she was like when she was younger, these were
the times; I’d seen pictures of her as a college student, sure, but those seemed like mere
images.

One day after school, I arrived home and found her just like this. She was just
home from a day at the hospital—she’d still frequented the hospital for checkups—and
she looked yogic sitting there, even in spite of the surgical mask on her face and the latex
gloves on her hands. She was listening to Dark Side of the Moon. The record moved from
“Breathe” to “On the Run.” The whooshing of helicopter blades spinning cut through the
cramped studio.

“Mom?” I said.

She opened her eyes slowly. I could see the smile on her face even through the
mask. “You’re home,” she said.

“You are too.”
My mother recoiled, as she did any time anyone made a mention that she’d been in the hospital at all. I knew a few kids at school whose mothers had had cancer and most of these mothers were very forthright about their suffering. My mother was not that way; there was shame to her suffering, as if being diagnosed with an illness debased her character.

She motioned for me to come sit next to her on the floor. I did. She leaned her head on my shoulder. It was one of those strange mother-daughter moments when the line between caretaker and one-being-taken-care-of blurred. Gingerly, I tried to rest my head on top of hers.

“I’m home,” she said. “Home, home again. I like to be here when I can.”

We sat quietly for a few minutes, just listening to the music together. I listened to her breathe, the sound of her breath amplified by the mask. For those minutes, though, it felt as if she’d never been in the hospital at all. “Time” was playing now and we had an infinite amount of it.

My mother asked me to turn the music down for a moment. After I lowered the volume, she said, “I’ve been thinking. I know this is going to sound very strange, but do you happen to know anyone who sells marijuana?”

“What?” I said.

“Marijuana. You know, pot, weed, ganja.”

“Mom, I know what marijuana is.”

“Oh really?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

She sang, “Don’t give me that do goody good bullshit.”
“Mom.”

“I’m not trying to entrap you, honey. I’ve heard that marijuana can actually help, you know, people in my situation.”

“You want me to buy you weed?”

My mother laughed. “So you do know somebody.”

***

I saw Mrs. Goddard one morning as I was leaving for school. She was getting into her car, headed off to work. She taught English at the public high school where my mother worked.

As she was my next-door neighbor, I’d seen Mrs. Goddard many times before that. Yet this morning we seemed to catch each other’s gaze for the first time since Olivia left. I resented Mrs. Goddard in a way; I wondered if she even knew Olivia hadn’t spoken to me in a year. Wouldn’t she wonder about our friendship?

She was about to raise her hand, presumably to wave, but I turned sharply, starting in the direction of my school.

***

I almost sent Olivia a message that night, telling her I’d seen her mother earlier. It was a specific detail that maybe wouldn’t sound desperate. But it had been a year of silence;
anything at that point probably would have seemed desperate. Instead, I “talked” to QuarantineThePast for a while.

I took my sketchbook outside and sat on the front porch step. I hoped that the suburban stillness of the nighttime air would either relax me or give something eerie to draw. Every suburban street looked to me like that iconic image from The Exorcist, when the priest is walking to Regan’s house. My street rarely seemed alive. The neighborhood often felt like a gated community. While I was looking around for something to draw, I heard the sound of someone coughing close by. The sound came from the Goddards’ garage. The person inside the garage coughed again, this time a little softer. The front of my house had a clear enough view of the Goddard’s garage that I could see tiny clouds of smoke floating through the small opening.

I stood and ambled closer to the garage door, but stopped a few feet from it, careful to hide my feet from view. Whoever was in the garage began shuffling, moving slowly and awkwardly. A deep sigh echoed throughout the garage. The smoke coming from the garage was marijuana smoke.

***

My mother had to go to the hospital for a blood transfusion. This was the reason she spent so much time in and out of the hospital, as an outpatient receiving blood and platelets. These trips were sometimes all-day affairs.
I’d been having somewhat of a dry-spell online, mostly self-imposed. I’d been growing of the constant barrage of pornography and the licentious chat room offerings. It was, in a way, exhausting.

So I accompanied my parents to New Brunswick. My mother seemed wary of my coming, apprehensive even. I’d brought along a bunch of issues of a comic series called Doom Patrol, a book that was so confusingly weird that it would provide a perfect distraction from the off-color gloss and acrid breath of the hospital. When my mother asked me what I was reading, I told her I didn’t know, which was more or less true. She laughed the kind of laugh that was so warm and inviting that it compelled me to cozy up beside her in bed. I took care not to rest my head too heavily on her chest. That part of her body was rocklike; grazing it was strange in its own way. Years earlier, when she was first diagnosed with cancer, she’d had a mastectomy. At the time she explained to me that her breasts were too large for someone who didn’t work in Hollywood. This was a narrative to which I skeptically, but joyfully, subscribed. I was ten. She explained that she had to replace her breasts with balloons. The image, much like a balloon itself, was pleasing, almost celebratory. Sometimes when we went to the supermarket, she’d leaf through the gossip magazines and say, “See? Look at that.” We’d chuckle all the way home.

“You look good,” my dad said now, to my mother. “Better.”

My mother mussed the hair on my head. “I feel better.”

When my dad left the room, I said, “Mom, I think I might know someone who has access to marijuana.”

She laughed, arched an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”
“Yeah.”

“Who?”

“Some kid at school.”

“Some kid at school.”

“Seriously.”

“That’s okay. It was a stupid thing to ask in the first place. I’m embarrassed that I even did ask.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“I mean, you’re my daughter.”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t be the only kid at school buying weed for their parents.”

“Oh, I’m sure those bourgeois Cunningham Prep parents are getting baked daily.”

“Getting baked?”

“What? I’m hip.”

“If you have to say it.”

***

On my way home from school I watched my feet trample the leaves that had fallen from the trees. Autumn really was the perfect season for teenagers: cinematically pretty, but also somewhat depressing. I had the thought one day that the leaves falling from the trees were like a last gasp of beauty before oblivion.

It had started raining at some point during the school day and hadn’t let up. I’d forgotten my umbrella, despite both of my parents telling me to remember it.
The moan of encroaching car resounded. Squinting through the veil of rainfall, I turned my head, trying to catch a glimpse of the car before it passed. The vehicle belonged to Mrs. Goddard.

She drove a Jeep Grand Cherokee, and although I didn’t know the first thing about cars, I found this strange. It just didn’t seem like a car a woman like Mrs. Goddard would own. She had a style that suggested something like sophistication, always in “business casual” attire, and scarves that flowed like wisps of air around her neck. Since the Goddards didn’t use their garage for storing their cars, I came to associate the blue Jeep with Mrs. Goddard. It was a kind of visual stand-in for Mrs. Goddard herself, even though I’d been in her presence many times.

Mrs. Goddard pulled her car up alongside me. She left the car still in motion, crawling.

“Quinn?” she said.

“Mrs. Goddard?” I said.

“Quinn, what are you doing? It’s pouring.”

“I forgot my umbrella.”

“Why don’t you get in? I’ll take you home.”

“No, that’s okay.”

She stopped the car and threw open the passenger side door. “Please get in,” she said.

There was a funky aroma in the car—not marijuana, as I was suspecting/hoping, but a dusty and dewy smell similar to a basement or costume shop. It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, Olivia’s smell, or at least a scent I’d associated with Olivia.
I checked for evidence that Olivia had been home recently, or at the very least, that she existed at all. Olivia’s car had always been a mess: strewn receipts, empty water bottles, cracked jewel cases with the wrong discs inside them. Mrs. Goddard’s car was very different, very clean.

“Everything all right?” Mrs. Goddard asked.

“Sure,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“What were you doing walking in the rain?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really live that far away from school.”

She snorted out a laugh. “Yeah, Quinn, I know.”

Mrs. Goddard put the car in motion. The ride felt long, despite the short distance. She tapped her fingertips on the steering wheel. She scrunched up her eyes so that she could see through the poor visibility of the windshield.

“So, Olivia,” I said, as if the name conveyed everything. And didn’t it? “How is she, I mean?”

“She’s good,” Mrs. Goddard said. “Doesn’t call or come home as often as I’d like, but she’s good.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes. Good, good, good.” She gave an anxious laugh. “I guess that’s one of the drawbacks to having an only child. Only one bird needs to fly the coop before you’re old.”

“Yeah.”

“You know, I never really thought about it like that. Where does the time go?”

“I don’t know.”
“It seems like just yesterday I was driving you and Liv up to Scranton to see the Spice Girls. Do you remember that?”

I wanted so badly not to laugh; I’d dreamed of what I’d say to Mrs. Goddard in this very situation, how I’d convey the resentment I’d felt towards her for not pressuring Olivia to keep in touch. But I recalled the absurdity of the four-hour drive to Scranton, the concert that seemed to take place both on top of and inside of a mountain, thousands of screaming girls crowding the grassy knolls overlooking the stage. Olivia and I watched the entire show through binoculars.

“That must seem like a lifetime ago for you, huh?”

It did, almost literally. Adolescence, I realized, was a time before the instinct to reflect kicked in. You just did something and then you did something else and then you forgot all about what preceded either thing. Growing up meant becoming burdened by causality. Events were no longer things in and of themselves; they became defined by what came before and what came after.

“Time flies and all that,” Mrs. Goddard said. “Your mom will find out in what—another year?”

I nodded.

“How is your mom, by the way? I was so sad to hear she retired.”

“Yeah.

“She’s so young.”

I’d almost forgotten my mother had retired. I had an idea of retired people in my head: white haired, gardening in between reading issues of the AARP magazine, watching game shows, becoming wine connoisseurs. None of these things applied to my
mother, who seemed to spend most of her retirement on the couch in the living room reading Joan Didion and immense poetry anthologies. “I don’t know, she’s okay.”

“She’s okay?” Mrs. Goddard asked.

“I guess.”

“I’ve been meaning to, you know, stop over.”

“Okay.”

Mrs. Goddard pulled her car into the driveway. I got out with an anxious thump and a breathless passage of gratitude.

My mother was waiting for me when I got inside the house. She was carrying my umbrella. “I noticed you forgot this,” she said, tapping the umbrella to her leg.”

“You’re soaked,” my dad said.

“I guess,” I said.

My mother hugged me tightly. The “oh, fuck it” hug was something I didn’t know I’d wanted until it actually happened, until I was struck by the earnest-silly punch of it.

My dad stood off to the side, looking like the ground beneath him and shook.

“Are you hungry?” my mother asked me. “I can make you something.”

“Not really,” I told her.

My mother and I watched Mork and Mindy for an hour, laughing as if we were watching the episodes for the first time. My dad sat in the kitchen, hunched over some paperwork and trying to hide the fact that he was keeping an eye on my mother. He patrolled her like she was a child and occasionally his vigilance forced me to see my mother’s fragility even more. I resented him for these moments. I saw my mother as all
daughters see their mothers: as an almost mythological figure, abstract and untouchable. He threatened to expose those faults, to expose her as human.

My mother peered through the living room window. The rain had ceased, at least for a while.

We placed a takeout order from Albertelli’s, my mother’s favorite restaurant. It was an Italian place, a few streets over. My dad left to go pick up the food and returned soon after. My mother stumbled into the kitchen, groggy, and opened the door to the screened-porch. The smell of damp wood and wet grass crept into the house, along with the pitter-patter of runoff from the gutters.

“Can we eat outside here on the porch?” my mother asked.

“Really?” said my dad.

“I know it’s not the best night, but the idea of fresh air, of eating outside with my family…”

I looked at my dad and saw the resignation on his face—the deep exhalation, the slight parting of lips working through something, inaudibly whispering.

He eventually acquiesced and we ate outside.

“This is so good,” my mother said as we ate. “This is perfect.”

“Sucks about the rain, though,” I offered.

“Rain is good,” my mother said. “New beginnings and all that.”

“New beginnings,” my dad echoed, raising his glass.

My mother and I rolled our eyes and laughed. “Thank you,” my mother said, mouthing the words across the table to her husband.
After dinner my mother sat cradled on the loveseat on the porch. She rubbed her arms together to generate warmth. I went inside and brought her a blanket. She smiled and raised the blanket so that I could come sit on the loveseat with her. I never had any occasion to sit on that loveseat before; it was made from white wicker, brittle and always caked in dirt and dust. It looked like the most uncomfortable seat in the world, except in that moment. The image of my mother wrapped in the blue blanket washed away all the grime.

“You know,” she said, once I sat down next to her. “This would be one of those times when I wouldn’t mind having that marijuana.”

***

The day after our outside dinner wasn’t exactly warm, but nonetheless had warmth to it, a kind of effulgence that tempered the onset of autumn. Sunlight winnowed through the branches of the trees dotting the road—the road I walked along every day to and from school. It was a gorgeous road, a road that was so totally nature that I sometimes wondered why it was always empty. It was one of those roads that seemed primed for photographic treatment, something, like the shack down the shore, that yearned to be rendered through a lens. The long branches of trees hung over the road, threatening to touch one another across the width of the street. A wooden bridge sat dead smack in the middle, as though it were there purely to look quaint.
Maybe the road had always been that way, but that day I saw it in a whole new light; the dinner with my parents had been the first time I’d felt a kind of pure happiness since the last night I spent with Olivia.

I’d expected Mrs. Goddard’s car to materialize that day, yet was still taken aback when it actually did.

“Hi, again,” she said. There was an ironic lilt in her voice. She let out a stifled laugh.

“Hi, Mrs. Goddard.”

“Do you need a ride?”

I glanced up and down the road. “I think I’m going to walk home.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s just that it’s starting to get colder and it’s so nice outside today that I feel like I should take advantage of it or something.”

Mrs. Goddard smiled. “It is pretty nice out today.” An anxious sputtering sound came from underneath the car’s carriage as Mrs. Goddard switched the vehicle into drive. “Enjoy your walk,” she said, before taking off down the road.

***

My mother and I fell into a kind of routine, relaxing in a way that felt somehow like vacation even though I went to school every day. I’d come home and almost invariably find her in the living room reading. We’d watch sitcom reruns until dinner. Her laughter was especially incandescent against the slow encroachment of colder weather. I did my
homework during commercials. Every now and then my mother would occasionally lift herself out of her seat and float over to the window in the den, where she stood with her hands folded behind her back, just looking out.

“What are you looking at?” I asked her.

“Nothing really, just, you know, outside.”

“Outside?”

“One of the worst things about being in the hospital is that everything is inside, you know? You’re just sitting in that room and the walls seem to be inching closer and closer. There’s a window—though, there may as well not be, since the view isn’t all that spectacular. And all you can thinking about is what the hell is going on inside you.”

I looked away.

“Does it make you uncomfortable when I talk about that stuff?”

“A little.”

***

My parents announced that they’d be driving into New York City, to Sloan-Kettering. My mother said the name of the hospital reverently, making it sound almost mythical, like it was some sort of hot spring whose waters healed all maladies. It was the first time in a while that she was going to the hospital. I’d grown accustomed to coming home after school and finding her curled up on the couch.

With my parents gone, I had nothing to do. I went downstairs into the basement and logged onto the computer. Quarantine was online.
QuarantineThePast: hey boy toy :)
mightyeskimo: hey
QuarantineThePast: havent seen u in a while
mightyeskimo: busy w/ work sry
QuarantineThePast: no 1 knos me quite like u
mightyeskimo: oh yea
QuarantineThePast: missed u
mightyeskimo: really?
QuarantineThePast: yea

The encounter was longer than usual, by design on my part. Through pornography I’d amassed a collection of things people did before having sex—“foreplay” this was called. I’d deployed all of this knowledge, which ended in Quarantine saying “just fuck me already.”

After signing off, I put the television on. I couldn’t find anything to watch so I went up to my parents’ bedroom, and finally to my own. I got into bed and pulled the sheets as far as they would go over my head. The sheets breathed out before enveloping me. I lay for a moment with the sheets clinging to me, conforming to the shape of my body. My finger began tracing a path along the seam of my pajama pants. In the hush of my bedroom, of my entire house, I was suddenly surrounded by the sound of my own breathing, growing incrementally louder.

My parents came home sometime in the middle of the night. The reverberation of their footfall shook the house. My mother sighed as she climbed the stairs. The door to my bedroom creaked open and I could sense my mother’s presence filling the doorframe. She anxiously tapped her fingertips against the wall, debating, I knew, whether or not to wake me up. I feigned sleep, not wanting to commit to waking up, to hearing the report of my parents trip to New York.
The next morning, after breakfast, my dad sat himself down with a kind of plodding clumsiness on the couch next to me.

“Quinn,” he said. “I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute.”

“About what?”

“About your mom.”

“Okay.”

“Our trip was very informative.”

“Okay.”

“We’ve been weighing our options. You know she has been getting treatment of Robert Wood Johnson, but we’d heard about an alternative treatment offered at Sloan-Kettering in Manhattan. You know, New York City.”

“Yeah.”

“The doctors there, at Sloan-Kettering, proposed something pretty radical.”

“Radical?”

“Extreme.”

“Okay.”

“We’ve decided to stick with Robert Wood Johnson. We don’t know if your mom could handle what Sloan-Kettering was proposing.”

“So nothing is changing.”

“Well, yes and no. Your mom is going to be visiting the hospital more frequently, just for a while, and sometimes these visits will be overnight. Like how it was in the summer, remember?”

“I guess.”
“I just wanted to let you know what was going on.”

“Okay.”

My dad took a deep breath in and then let it out, letting his lips quiver with the force of the exhalation. He looked as though he wanted to say more, as if that exhalation contained the ghost of what was left unsaid. The ghost lingered for a moment before taking flight out of the house.

Just as my dad had said, the following weeks saw my mother in the hospital more frequently. I didn’t so much as feel the lack of her presence as I saw it, heard it. I saw it in the money my dad left for dinner in case he didn’t come home. I heard it in the second-hand tick of the clock in the kitchen, a noise that echoed in the dismal silence of the empty house.

***

One rainy day, as I was walking home from school, Mrs. Goddard’s car emerged. She pulled the car over onto the shoulder and put it in park. The engine continued to hum.

“How I knew,” she said.

“Knew what?” I said.

“That you’d be walking in this without an umbrella.”

I laughed. “Oh, yeah.”

“Want a ride?”
I got in the car. After nodding my head in thanks, we sat for a moment, wordless. I watched the rain streak down the window, as though hoping for words written in the water.

“You know,” Mrs. Goddard said, “she’s kind of the elephant in the room, huh? The elephant in the car, as it were.”

“What?”

“Olivia.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Goddard said. Her voice became consolatory, so uncannily like my mother. I supposed all mothers sounded the same, as if that register belonged only to them. “For whatever happened, I mean.”

“I don’t really know what happened.”

“So it goes.”

“So you knew?”

“This kind of thing happens.”

“Oh.”

“Mrs. Goddard let out a sound that seemed half-breath and half-sigh. “The transition from high school to college is just such a confusing time, especially when you’re going away for school. You have to decide what to take with you and what to leave behind.” She said this with a shrug, as if it was some self-evident truth. It didn’t lessen the blow; I was what Olivia chose to leave behind, like a lava lamp or something, a relic from the past that had no place in Olivia’s new life.

“Well that sucks,” I said.
To my surprise, Mrs. Goddard laughed, which in turn made me laugh. It was a joy that, at least in that moment, seemed to vacuum the weirdness from the car. It seemed like such a silly thing to laugh at for so long a time, though I guess that the utterance was an encapsulation of everything she and I felt for the past year. For the first time, just the memory of Olivia was enough.

Another car turned onto the street. It appeared as a mirage at first, its headlights piercing the veil of dank grayness outside. The car passed by innocuously enough, yet I kept my head turned and followed it until I couldn’t.

“I could take you home now,” Mrs. Goddard said. “If you want.”

“No,” I said. I surprised even myself with the forcefulness with which I said this.

We stayed there, parked on the side of the road, just talking. Mrs. Goddard told me about some Olivia’s experiences at Ithaca, or at least the ones Olivia shared with her. I thought hearing about Olivia’s experiences would sting, but that someone also stung by her leaving was relaying them mitigated my reception of them. Mrs. Goddard asked me about school, facetiously turning her nose up at my private school education. Her saying things about Cunningham with such faux-derision reminded me of my mother.

Some time later, she drove us home. Before I got out of the car, she said, “I have a question for you.”

“Okay,” I said.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Tonight?”

“Besides your homework, I mean.”

“Nothing, I guess.”
“Would you maybe like to come over later?”

“Come over?”

“It was fun, catching up.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“That’s okay, if you have something else to do.”

A sense of loneliness caught in my throat, like the onset of a cold. That I didn’t have anything better to do then hang out with my former best friend’s mother was troubling.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll come over later.”

***

My parents weren’t home. I found myself pacing around the house. I stared out the rain-streaked window. The sound of the rain hitting the window synchronized strangely with the ticking of the clock in the kitchen. I was, improbably, excited.

Mrs. Goddard sat in the middle of her garage, in a lawn chair, reading. She looked so involved in the book that she almost appeared to be meditating with her eyes open. I paused before rapping my knuckles against the aluminum siding of the house.

Mrs. Goddard sprang to life. Her surprise dissolved into a smile. “I didn’t even hear you coming.”

“Sorry,” I said.

She laughed. “That’s okay. I was just doing my homework.” She held up a well-worn copy of *The Sun Also Rises*. “I’ve read this book so many times I feel like I have it
memorized.” She slipped a pencil between two of the pages, shutting the book, and placed it softly on the ground beneath her chair.

“Have you read it?” she said.

“The Sun Also Rises?”

“Yes.”

“Last year.”

“And you hated it.”

“Olivia saw that I was reading it. She said it was boring.”

“And what did you think?”

“I don’t know. I guess I agree.”

“An acquired taste, I think. I told Liv that if she is required to read a book in college that she’d hated in high school, she should give it another chance. Certain people have to be in certain places in their lives, maybe.”

“That makes sense.”

Mrs. Goddard got up out of her chair and went to retrieve another.

“What are you doing out here?” I asked.

“I find the garage oddly comforting.”

“Really?”

“Sure.” She brought another lawn chair over to where I was and unfolded it.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” she said.

“Wine?” I said.

“Yes.”

“No, thanks.”
“It’s okay if you do.”

“I actually don’t like the taste of it.”

“Also an acquired taste I suppose.”

She was about to sit down, but something stopped her. She considered me for a moment before walking right out of the garage and into her car. I sat, bewildered, looking back and forth between her and the empty chair next to me. In the car, Mrs. Goddard reached across the passenger side in order to grab something out of the glove compartment and upon retrieving what she was searching for, sat up straight in the driver’s seat. She looked at me through the windshield. I felt the heat of the light suspended overhead; its incandescence felt like a spotlight trained on me. Mrs. Goddard drummed her palms on the steering wheel, slapping the wheel one last time before she exited the car.

She sat in the lawn chair next to me. From her pocket she removed a small bag of marijuana.

“So,” she said. Her voice suddenly dug deep into the quiet of the garage. “Tell me what else you’re reading this year, over at the mighty Cunningham.”

I listed some of the books I remembered from the syllabus.

After folding the paper with weed in the middle, she brought it up to her mouth. She held it for a few seconds before licking it, running her tongue along the paper, alternating between broad laps and precise flicks. I watched out of the corner of my eye.

“Do you like reading?” she asked. “I bet you do.”

“Most of the time,” I told her.

“Favorite book?”
“In freshman English we read the Iliad, which was really fun.”

“I find that students are surprised by how much they like the Homeric epics. They’re great. The books, I mean, not the students. Well, sometimes the students can be great, too.”

“It reminded me of something from a comic book,” I said.

Mrs. Goddard pulled a lighter out of her other pocket. She flicked the switch until the sparks flamed.

I felt an impulse to keep talking as if overexposure to silence would collapse reality itself. “I like drawing,” I said. “I think maybe I want to draw comics one day.”

Mrs. Goddard wavered. “You’re an artist”

“I don’t know about ‘artist’.”

“How come I never knew that?”

I shrugged.

“Very cool,” she said. She placed the joint in between her lips and sparked the lighter again, this time using the flame to ignite the tip of the joint. She closed her eyes and sucked in, and the tip glowed orange. The glow intensified as she inhaled. Smoke began to billow from her mouth. Just the smell of it seemed to make me high. She took another hit before passing it to me.

I closed my eyes and slid the joint between my lips. I could taste Mrs. Goddard’s saliva, rusty and salty. I breathed in and felt the warmth travel down my throat and into my lungs. I clutched my chest as I expelled the smoke.

Mrs. Goddard smiled. “You’ve done this with Olivia, huh?”
My eyes widened. I tried to laugh, but the smoke was harsh so it came out as a cough. “Maybe.”

“It’s okay. I know my daughter.”

“Does Olivia know that you do it?”

“Sure.”

“Have you ever done it, you know, with her?”

Mrs. Goddard nodded.

“Does Mr. Goddard know?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I wondered what it was like for him, how he must feel about his wife smoking pot, whether he could detect the smell when she wandered into their bed. Maybe he liked the smell. Maybe he inhaled it off her and got intoxicated, like a contact high.

“Is he home?” I asked.

“My husband? Yes.”

“Oh.”

“He doesn’t let me do it in the house.”

I chuckled. Mrs. Goddard didn’t seem like the type of woman who’d let her husband prohibit her from doing anything.

“What?” she said.

“I don’t know,” I said, still smiling. I might have been already high.

The joint shrank and shrank until it was almost tapped.

“I miss her,” Mrs. Goddard said. “Olivia, I mean. It seems like a very obvious, very sentimental thing to say, but that doesn’t mean it’s not true. And it’s the little things,
those small, silly things you miss the most. The sound of her hair dryer in the morning as she’s getting ready for school, the sound of her scurrying up and down the stairs making sure she hadn’t forgotten anything before leaving the house. All these tiny, negligible noises—it’s like the absence of these noises makes even more noise.”

“I know,” I said.

“I’m sure, in a way, you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

I thought about Olivia blow-drying her hair, that fragrance of her wet hair, a smell like damp tinder. I thought of how Olivia used to run into the upstairs bathroom to check herself in the mirror, as if only the one upstairs showed her what she wanted.

I thought too about my mother’s absence, how strangely quiet the house was.

Mrs. Goddard held up what little remained of the joint. She considered it a moment before bringing it back up to her lips, taking one last drag. With the tip of her tongue she wet the end of fingers and pinched the lit end of the joint. She sunk back into her chair and looked up at the light hanging right above us, using the side of her hand to shield her eyes from the brightness.

“Do you know what a camera obscura is?” she asked.

“I think I’ve heard of it before.”

“Back when I was in school, we made them in science class. You take a box and cut a hole in one side and so light from whatever source is outside the box goes in through the hole and you see the image of whatever is outside the box. I was never any good at science, of course, but that’s the general idea. We used to make them to look at eclipses, because you can’t just use your own eyes or you’ll go blind, right? So this box sort of allows you to see the eclipse, in a manner of speaking. It’s not the actual eclipse,
right, but some obscured version of it that becomes projected inside the box.” The words seemed to flow out of Mrs. Goddard’s mouth like wisps of smoke, plumes so tangible that they could be snatched out of the air.

“That’s pretty weird,” I said.

Mrs. Goddard smiled. “Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Kind of.”

“I don’t either.”

***

I left the Goddards’ garage somewhere around ten, though at that point time was such a slippery thing that I couldn’t bother to look at a clock. I walked back to my house under a night sky that seemed to be staring down at me and on legs that felt more and more precarious with each step. Luckily I didn’t have far to go. I couldn’t shake the dreamlike daze, even as I entered my house, feeling the way Dorothy must have felt returning to the black-and-white world of Kansas.

I managed to make it upstairs to my room. I collapsed on my bed with all the weight of a felled tree. Unwilling and unable to do anything else, I lay there with my head nestled into my pillow, as deep as it would go, leaving it there until breathing became almost impossible. After a while I turned over in my bed. I was woozy. It was a wooziness similar to when I’d lie down after a day spent wading through the ocean, the muscle memory of the tide pulling me in different directions.
Looking out at myself, all I could see was the expanse of my body, a body that from that angle seemed so foreign; it looked misshapen, my torso truncated and my legs elongated. I wiggled my feet, which appeared farcically large. I’d never been that high before.

And if my body looked foreign, it felt even more foreign. I remembered what Olivia had said on our last night together, about not being aware of your tongue and once you were it became heavy and indomitable.

The next morning came on like the dawn of another life. My dad had knocked on the door and let himself in when I didn’t respond.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said. He sat with a thump on the edge of my bed. He sniffed the air—did he smell the smoke on me? A part of him sat on my foot and I shuffled to get it free. He was apologetic. I felt as though I hadn’t seen my dad in ages; new wrinkles had seemingly appeared on his face, creases that weren’t there before.

“What time is it?” I asked, groggy.

“Almost seven. I made you breakfast.”

I felt hung over. The mere prospect of food curdled my insides.

“I also made you lunch,” he said. “I hate to do this to you, but I think it might be time for you to get up.”

I glanced at my alarm clock, which was set to go off in exactly one minute. My dad never came into my room before the alarm rang—out of fear, he’d joked once, since nothing was more frightening than a teenage girl whose sleep had been interrupted.

“Is mom home?” I asked.
“Not yet,” he said. “That’s why I wanted to see you before you shipped off to school. I’m going today to pick her up and bring her home for the weekend. She wants to see the beach house, to stay there just for the day. Would that be alright with you?”

“I guess,” I said. “Isn’t it, like, a little too cold though?”

“Well, we have those space heaters.”

“Okay.”

My dad looked at me, the way he seemed to always look at me, as though he’d had something more to say. Instead, he stood up and looked around my room. He looked at all the posters—a Led Zeppelin poster with the lyrics to “Stairway to Heaven” and a Pink Floyd flag, large and tie-dyed, which my mother had in her dorm room when she and my dad first met.

“Well, okay then,” my dad said before leaving.

***

Mrs. Goddard picked me up on the road after school that day, and since I knew my parents wouldn’t be home until later, we went back to her house.

I’d forgotten how strange the layout of the Goddard’s house was—strange because it was almost identical to my own house. Different furniture and different wallpaper, sure, but more or less the same in all other ways. It was like walking into an alternate universe version of my house.
I followed Mrs. Goddard into the kitchen. She walked over to the sink and began washing her hands, after which she shook her hands dry, wiping the excess on the front of her pants. She leaned back up against the edge of the sink and looked at me.

“You can come in, you know,” she said. “You’re making me nervous just standing there.”

The Goddards’ kitchen was adjacent to the sunroom. The sunroom had a couch that sat facing nothing but the other side of the room. There was no television in front of it or anything like that. Olivia had told me that it was her mother’s favorite spot in the house. I’d spied Mrs. Goddard reading by herself on that couch many times, blanketed by a quilt Olivia had bought her one year for Mother’s Day. Looking at the couch, I thought of my own mother, how she’d spent her retirement so far in much the same way: reading, blanketed, on the couch.

“Are you hungry?” Mrs. Goddard asked. “I can make you something to eat if you want.”

“No,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“We have some snacks. Chips and the like.”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Well, I’m hungry. You don’t mind if I eat, do you?”

I shook my head.

She pulled a Tupperware container full of meatballs out of the refrigerator. I wanted to laugh. She used to make them all the time for Olivia and I and really anyone else who found their way into her kitchen. It was her “specialty,” she’d always said, but I wondered if it was really all she knew how to make.
Mrs. Goddard laughed too. The timer on the microwave went off after a few minutes and she stuck a finger inside the container to see if the food was hot enough. She sucked the food from her finger. The noise was sharp, quick, but seemed to ring out. She took a fork from the drawer and began stirring the contents of the container.

There was a table in the sunroom where the Goddards ate all of their meals, even though they had a separate dining room. Mrs. Goddard brought the food to the table and sat down, pulling a chair out for me.

We sat quietly for a moment, the only sound coming from Mrs. Goddard blowing on her food to cool it.

“So,” she said, after a while.

“So,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Last night was kind of weird.”

“Was it?”

“I don’t know.”

Mrs. Goddard took a bite out of her food and chewed it, slowly. She wiped her mouth delicately with a napkin.

“I guess,” I said, “I never thought I’d smoke a joint with my friend’s mom.”

“Did it make you uncomfortable?”

“No.”

“That’s good.”

“It is kind of strange though.”
“Strange because it’s such a scandalous activity, or strange because I invited you to join me?”

“The second one.”

Mrs. Goddard considered this for a moment. “Sometimes we seek people out with a specific purpose in mind, either consciously or unconsciously, and that purpose may be filled as a result.”

“What?”

“You’re Olivia’s friend, and I guess despite whatever has happened in that regard, you will always be that. To me, at least. Having you—being around you—you know what I’m saying right?”

“Not really.”

“It’s a little like having Olivia around again.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

A wave of contentment broke over me. That I was supplanting Olivia, at least in some way, felt somewhat gratifying.

Mrs. Goddard pushed herself up from the table, taking the container into her hand.

“You’re sure you aren’t hungry?” she said.

“Are there any left?”

“I’ll reheat them for you.”

She slid the container back into the microwave.

“It’s the weed thing, though,” I said.

“It’s just something I do to relax.”
“Okay.”

“Is it weird because I’m a teacher?”

“Maybe.”

“I’m not your teacher.”

“Right.”

She took the container out of the microwave and plucked another fork from the drawer. She sat the plastic container down in front of me. I waited a moment before taking a bite. The taste of it was not as overwhelming as the sensuousness of memories.

“Are they as good as you remember?” Mrs. Goddard asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Good.”

“Been a while.”

“Yes, it has.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Have you ever asked Olivia why, you know, why she stopped talking to me?”

Mrs. Goddard sighed. “No.”

“Oh.”

“These things happen.”

“Okay.”

“I think what happens when two girls are as inseparable as you two were, one of both of you start to resent the other. Although it’s usually only one person.”

“Why would I resent her?”
“You wouldn’t.”

“But she would?”

“Look, I love my daughter and I’m not going to say anything that would cast her in a negative light. Girls have a tendency to define themselves through their relationships with other girls. It’s only natural that at some point you have to start defining yourself on your own.”

“Oh.”

I knew Mrs. Goddard was offering some sort of sage wisdom—or at the very least, practical advice—but there was no getting around the fact that the phrase “on your own” frightened me more than anything. It was what stung the most about Olivia’s leaving, what worried me the most about my mother’s illness.

My eyes darted from wall to wall until they got caught on the clock on the microwave. I had to leave soon in order to be home when my parents arrived.

***

My parents and I left for the shore at nine in the morning. My mother and I were both dressed in sweatpants and sweatshirts. My dad wore jeans, which was as casually dressed as he could ever get.

We eventually came to the shack, the dilapidated shack that sat on the side of the road. The warped wood had lost most of its summer luster and took on a greenish pallor. In the languorous November sun, the shack lacked its singular charm, its glow.

“There’s our house,” my dad said.
“Yeah,” my mother said. “There it is.”

It was, I knew, the real reason for the trip. The shore house was our destination, but the shack, and its unwillingness to change was the roadside attraction. It remained in view for half a minute, but the car was in slow motion, crawling past it, and the three of us couldn’t look away. It was like rubbernecking an accident on the highway.

I’d never been down to the Island in the off season. Most of the houses showed no signs of life. A dog yelped in the distance, which sounded both close and far away.

“This is so weird,” I said. “There’s like, no one here.”

“I know,” my mother said. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

I was shivering. I had to slide my arms from my sleeves to wrap them around myself. “I guess,” I said.

My dad was the only one who’d ever seen the house this late in the year. He made a point of driving down at least once a month to check on it, to see if it had been ravaged by inclemency or vandalism. He had a routine for checking the house, and I watched him as his feet carried him from one vantage point to the next. Months ago, on our last trip of the summer, he had told me that my mother was in her element down here, and now I saw that he, too, was in his element down here; that diligence was his default setting, that he would be lost if he wasn’t checking up on something or someone.

Inside the house, my mother stood before the open refrigerator. This would not have been such an odd thing to see had there been anything in the refrigerator; it was completely empty except for a single package of baking soda tucked into the corner.

“Mom?” I said. “What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know. I can’t remember.”
“Well, there’s nothing in there.”

“Yeah.”

My mother shut the door, pushing it closed with two hands, staggering from the force of her own push. She came face to face with the photographs stuck to the door, the clippings from newspaper articles that had struck her in one way or another over the years.

A sob cracked open inside her. Wanting to flee before she could cry, I stumped off towards the living room. I turned on the television, but my dad had disconnected the cable, so there was only snowy static.

“Sorry, kiddo,” he said as he came back into the house. “Had it shut off last month.”

“There’s nothing to do here, though.”

“I don’t think we’ll be staying too long.” He sat next to me on the couch and patted my leg. “At least, not long enough for you to get that bored.”

“What are we doing here?”

“I think your mom just wanted to be somewhere quiet.”

“It’s quiet at home.”

“Where’s your mom?”

“In the kitchen.”

With that he rose up from the sofa and walked off in search of my mother. I looked around for something that could divert me for however long we were going to stay. Underneath the television sat a pile of puzzle boxes, some of which hadn’t been done yet, but none that I could put together on my own.
I fantasized about Mrs. Goddard coming to pick me up, driving me far away—far enough and fast enough that we crossed even the threshold of time itself. I didn’t care where and when we landed, just as long as it wasn’t the present.

I leaned my head back until it rested against a windowsill. I pried open two of the blinds with my fingers. All there was to do was wander outside. I found my parents in the kitchen huddled together and told them of my plan to walk to the beach.

“Alone?” my dad said.

“Well, yeah.”

“Be careful.”

“There’s no one here.”

“We’ll be here when you get back.”

“I know, dad.”

The beach was serene. The draft from the ocean brushed against my face, leaving my cheeks raw. There was no sound but the staccato rhythm of the waves tumbling and receding into one another.

I sat on the bench next to the dune. It was sandy and cold. In the six years my parents owned the beach house, I’d never once been to the beach by myself. Olivia was always there, right beside me, or else my mother. It seemed so boring, to go to the beach alone. It was kind of nice.

I returned to the house and saw that I hadn’t been gone as long as I expected. My parents were both sitting in beach chairs on the back porch. My dad was reading the New York Times and my mother listened with her eyes closed to her Walkman. Joni Mitchell’s Blue sat on her lap. She was wrapped up in two different blankets and had
pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up and as tight as it could go, so that all that was showing was the very front of her face.

“Mom,” I said. “You look kind of ridiculous.”

“It’s cold,” he said, chuckling.

“This was your idea.”

“How was your walk?”

“Cold.”

“You didn’t feel the water, did you?” my dad said.

“No,” I said.

My mother said, “I’m curious to see just how cold the water is.”

“I’m betting that it’s pretty cold.”

“You weren’t the least bit curious?”

“Not really.”

My mother took my hand into her town. The skin of her hand felt thin, but still warm. “Listen,” she said. “I’m sorry about earlier, in the kitchen. I’m all out of sorts.”

“That’s okay,” I said.

“Come here,” she said, pulling me towards her. I towered over her and didn’t know whether I should bend down to meet her embrace. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever. You’ve gotten taller or something or maybe just older.”

“I doubt it.”

“Doesn’t she look taller?” she asked my dad.

“I think she does,” he said.
“One pill makes you larger,” she started singing, “and one pill makes you small. And the ones that mother gives you don’t do anything at all.” She paused. “That’s because mothers don’t want their daughters to change. So stop, please.”

“Oh okay,” I said, shrugging.

My mother slackened her grasp on me. She looked me up and down, scanning me all the way from my eyes down to my feet. In spite of the warmth of her gaze, I felt sheepish, awkward in my own body. My body felt like a loose-fitting shirt. Sometimes when I had tried on clothes in front of her—clothes that were too big for me—she would say I was swimming in them. That’s what I felt: that I was swimming inside of myself.

***

Mrs. Goddard’s car took form in the dimness. I was surprised, not at the sight of her car, but at the felicitousness that rose up inside me. She flung open the passenger side door. The heat in the car was turned up and made my eyes water.

Mrs. Goddard put her hand on the gearshift but instead of putting the car into drive, she let her hand linger for a moment. “Do you have anywhere you need to be?”

“Not really.”

Without saying anything else, she put the car in drive, jerking the car from out of the shoulder and into the street. My head hit the headrest; I felt like I was on one of those fast-spinning carnival rides, where the sheer force of gravity keeps your body glued to the wall.
“Sometimes,” Mrs. Goddard said, maybe by way of explanation, “when I don’t feel like going home right away after school, I take a drive through the park. This time of year is really the best time to go, since it’s too chilly for anyone to be walking through it. Plus, they never clear the pathway that winds through it, so any kind of traffic is rare.”

This was, I realized, a fact about mothers: no matter how sociable the exterior appeared, they all craved solitude, seemed to bask in their time alone. Isolation was life’s pause button. I thought about my own mother, about how she loved the beach during the summer when activity and people could surround her, but how she loved the beach so much more in when no one was there.

I never would have imagined Mrs. Goddard as a woman who coveted peace and quiet. She lived in a house where the revolving door of people was in constant motion, a house where the embers of every party glowed well into the night. I saw firsthand her involvement in these gatherings—the glass of wine affixed to her hand, trembling from ceaseless and immutable laughter, the way she drifted from person to person.

Mrs. Goddard slowed the car to a crawl as the entrance to the park came into view. I’d only been to the park once before, for a school picnic, when I was in fifth grade. It was the sight of one of my most embarrassing memories, a memory that had remained lodged safely inside the darkened closet of my brain until that very moment. I’d gone on the picnic as the only girl without a bra. It was sometime in May, so the cold hadn’t betrayed my body; in fact, no one seemed to notice—that is, except one girl named Bianca. She was the tallest girl in class, brutishly so, towering over everyone in such a way that everyone always felt to intimidated to make fun of her. She pulled me aside, tugging my arm with such force that her fingertips left red marks. She asked me if I knew
what a bra was, and upon seeing the confounded look on my face, she cupped her hands over her own breasts. I shook my head, my face growing hot with panic. She scolded me, not with a bully’s derision, but with the tone of a mother admonishing a child who should have known better. I spent the rest of the picnic with my arms wrapped around my body.

Mrs. Goddard’s car followed the path snaking through the park for a while before parking the car off to the side, partially under the cover of a large tree. I undid my seatbelt, thinking that we were going to get out of the car, but Mrs. Goddard didn’t move.

“You sure you don’t have anywhere else to be?” she asked.

“No.”

“No, you’re not sure, or no, you don’t have anywhere else to be?”

“Both?”

“Okay,” she said, laughing. She reached towards the glove compartment. In order to open the glove compartment, she had to press her arm into my leg. I recoiled slightly. She fumbled around in the glove compartment until she found a bag of marijuana.

“Is this okay?” she asked.

“Here.”

“Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

We smoked the joint almost in silence, passing it back and forth, taking turns sucking on the wet end of it, as if we were just two friends hanging out. She rolled her head so that she was looking up at the roof of the car. She puckered her lips, as pensively as someone could pucker her lips, and started biting the bottom one as she thought about
what to say. Instead of saying anything, though, she thrust her hand listlessly into the side of her car door and produced a CD.

“You have to hear this,” she said.

We sat waiting for the music to come on. When it did, Bob Dylan started singing, “Just Like A Woman.” When the song ended, a woman’s voice began to sing the same song.

“It’s a cover,” I said.

“Yes.”

“I like this version better.”

“Me too.”

“Who is it?”

“Nina Simone.”

It became clear Mrs. Goddard didn’t want to talk while the song was playing, so I just stared outside, pretending to contemplate Big Questions. During the faux-contemplation, I saw the nakedness of the sky and the branches from various trees protruding into it, scratching it. The song played for a long time and my initial appreciated of it faltered. There was, however, something undeniably bewitching about Nina Simone’s voice.

The next song started and this time it was man’s voice singing “Just Like A Woman.”

I shot Mrs. Goddard a bewildered look. She was smiling in anticipation of my bewilderment. “Do you have an entire CD filled with different versions of the same song?” I asked.
“Yes.”

“Why?”

“It’s my favorite song.”

“Okay.”

“Olivia made it for me.”

“Really?”

“One year for my birthday. There’s about a dozen different covers of the song.”

We let another version of the song pass.

“Still the best birthday present I ever got,” she said.

I laughed, incredulous. “Seriously?”

“I don’t know, maybe.” She paused. “Maybe that’s just where I’m at right now. How maudlin.”

I let the word “maudlin” float around in my brain. Maaauuudline. Mrs. Goddard slouched, sinking into her seat.

“I remember,” she continued, “when you would come over to our house when Olivia was here and just watching you watch Olivia. I think even then it was hard to watch, but I guess at the time it was easier to dismiss because you were just Olivia’s childhood friend. How terrible is that for me to say?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I said.

“I mean, you know what I mean, right?”

“Not really.”

Mrs. Goddard gave me a knowing glance. It felt as if she was sizing me up, maybe trying to surmise the degree of my presence in reality. I didn’t know what the
degree of my presence in reality was, though I knew that I was dizzy. It was a full-body dizziness, the kind where I could almost feel the blood course through me. Mrs. Goddard closed her eyes reopened them, her gaze somehow more trenchant. It was terrifying, like when a character in a movie the audience believes to be dead reopens his eyes and reveals that he is, in fact, still alive.

“I have a theory,” Mrs. Goddard said. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Okay.”

“I think there are two things that happen in life that make you realize you’re a woman. Do you want to know what they are?”

“Okay.”

“The first thing is that you become aware of the weight of your own body. Or maybe it’s that you are somehow made aware of it, like the decision isn’t totally yours. You know what I mean? I’m not talking about weight in terms of pounds or anything—I mean weight in terms of significance.”

“Significance,” I repeated.

“It’s like your body is no longer just a body. It means something.”

Almost reflexively I began staring at the back of my hand, that part of myself that I was supposed to know so well, better than anything else in the world. Knew it like the back of her hand, wasn’t that it? Was I high? I was definitely high. I felt as though I could feel Mrs. Goddard’s monologue effloresce in me, augmented maybe, by the fact of my surroundings—in the park, the sight of my unfortunate inauguration into womanhood.

“Right?” Mrs. Goddard said.

“What’s the second thing?” I asked.
“What’s that?”

“You said there are two things.”

“Oh.”

“What’s the second thing?”

“The second thing?”

“Yes.”

“The second thing is just the realization that you’re on your own with the first thing.”

Now I knew I was high. Mrs. Goddard had to be high, too. I wasn’t sure if the conversation had only recently begun taking place in outer space, or if they had left the car and boarded a spacecraft right from the entrance to the park. I wanted to laugh, but when I looked over at Mrs. Goddard, I saw a deep despondency.

“What?” I said.

“We shouldn’t do this anymore.”

“What?”

“This.”

“The weed?”

“That was a colossally bad idea in the first place.”

“That’s fine,” I said. “Sometimes smoking weed makes me all jittery.”

“I’m not just talking about the weed, though.”

“What do you mean?”
“Listen,” she said, though she did not give me anything to listen to; instead she rested the palm of her hand on my leg. I felt the indenture of her hand. She relinquished her grasp. “I’m just not sure it’s a good idea.”

Underneath the dull snarl of the car, I heard another version of “Just Like A Woman” starting up.

“Why?” I said.

As Mrs. Goddard considered an answer to that question, she rubbed the spot on her forehead right above the bridge of her nose, pinching the skin in such a way that it looked as though she was trying to pull it from her face. “I don’t know,” she said finally.

***

I was still high when I got home; in fact, I might have been higher than I was in the park. I could feel the beating of my heart against my chest, the sound like a kick drum, resounding throughout my body. I felt dizzy, not in the punch-drunk way, but in the about-to-vomit way. Whenever I closed my eyes, I felt as though I was on the verge of falling over. I lay down on the couch, but that only amplified the wooziness. Everything around me swirled. Olivia had told me once that a kid at school had taken acid and fell into what was called a “trip hole,” an extended version of a bad trip. He had to be taken to the hospital. I couldn’t get the words “trip hole” out of my head, and this greatly exacerbated the vertigo I was experiencing. In the midst of this freak out, I climbed the stairs, planning to tell my mother that I was sorry. I was sorry that I was high. I was sorry
that I smoked marijuana. I would get perfect grades the rest of the semester if she forgave me. Please, please, please.

But she wasn’t home. I was struck, as if by lightning, by the possibility that I could die, alone.

I carried myself into the basement, towards the computer. I was determined to search for a cure for my predicament. While searching, QuarantineThePast sent me a message.

QuarantineThePast: hey u
mightyeskimo: o god
QuarantineThePast: god? does that mean ur gonna get on ur knees and worship me?

I laughed at the absurdity of this. Yet I found that even thinking up a response to Quarantine was partially alleviating my panic.

mightyeskimo: i want u
mightyeskimo: right now
QuarantineThePast: o yea
mightyeskimo: yea
mightyeskimo: im on my knees
QuarantineThePast: begging?
mightyeskimo: yes

I opened up the chat room in which I’d first “met” Quarantine and began messaging multiple people. At one point I had a half-dozen message boxes open, all filled with increasingly salacious messages. Despite the clutter on the computer screen, there was a kind of tranquility to having all these messages open; the more engagements I had active, the more rope I had to climb out of the trip hole.

END OF PART I
I arrived first on moving day, with my dad in tow.

“I believe this is what they call ‘prison-style,’” he said. I could hear the smile in his voice. It was a half-joking admonition; if he had his way I would have gone to a school much closer. The room was both shabby and Spartan, with the beds situated against the opposite walls, the mattresses of which looked as though they’d been around since my dad had been in college. It was a little sad, a little decrepit, but a little bit home—at least for the next year.

I was at Hofstra University, on Long Island, which was, according to my dad, only a 124-minute train ride from home. It somehow seemed to me both farther and closer than two hours. I knew from Olivia that the distance created by someone going away to college was much greater than its geographical distance. It was a big deal going away to college, a Big Deal, and I wasn’t sure if I was prepared for it. Despite my giddy excitement over my new independence, I was glad my dad was there. He and I had grown closer after my mother died. In the time following her death, he and I were almost inseparable. We watched movies together almost every night and on weekends we’d go to see whatever was playing at the theater. On Wednesdays he took me to the comic book store, where I picked up old Silver Age issues of Wonder Woman, which he and I would both read and discuss. I’d gotten used to the idyllic nature of this routine.
My dad and I finished unloading all of my things from the car. We even managed to put most of the stuff away, though I told him I’d unpack my clothes later. He had nothing left to do, yet he lingered, and I was surprised to find that I didn’t mind.

“You’ll be fine,” he said, in that vaguely prescient way dads know things.

“I know, dad,” I said. I tried to sound defiant, slightly snotty even, as a way of covering up my anxiety.

“I’m proud of you. We’re proud of you.”

“Dad.”

“I know, I know. Give me this one sentimental moment.”

“You get one.”

“Does it come with a song?”

“Depends on the song.”

“You know it has to be ‘In My Life.’”

“What a cliché.”

“Sometimes clichés are clichés for a reason.”

We started talking about which classes I was looking forward to when Lucia, my roommate, arrived, with her dad trailing behind her. I didn’t know much about Lucia, though we’d exchanged a few emails over the summer about what each of us would bring. The four of us—me, Lucia, our dads—glanced at one another and suddenly became overcome with recognition. This crossfire of looks would have been comical had the implications of this moment not been so sullen. Yet in spite of the this strange sullenness, both Lucia and I smiled at one another.

She pulled me in for a hug. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“I know. I’m so excited.”

“Me too.”

Lucia and her dad seemed an odd pairing; he was fairly unassuming, soft-spoken, while Lucia was vociferous in her demeanor—not obnoxious by any means, but she sort of beamed, radiated, vibrated with energy. Even at rest, her face had a smile on it, a devious kind of smile that was so inviting in its mischievousness.

When Lucia and her dad went out to get more of Lucia’s stuff from their car, my dad and I looked at one another. I was so happy he was there—happy because I wasn’t alone, sure, but also happy because it had created an undeniable Meaningful Moment between Lucia and I.

“Well,” my dad said. “I guess this is it. You don’t need me anymore.”

I laughed, rolled my eyes. “Dad.”

“124 minutes.”

“I know.”

“Two hours.”

“That’s nothing.”

He left when Lucia and her dad came back. Lucia’s dad left not too long afterward.

“Your dad seems cool,” I said.

Lucia smiled. “Don’t tell him that. He think he’s cooler than he actually is.”

“Oh, my dad too.”

“It’s just dads I guess.”

“I guess.”
After Lucia finished unpacking all of her stuff—and she had a lot of stuff—she sat herself down on her bed with force. I was setting up my computer, crawling underneath the desk to fiddle with the wires.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I said.

“I’m super pumped about this year.”

“Yeah, me too.”

***

Two weeks into the semester it was difficult to gauge what college would actually be like. There had been a lull between the first we’d arrived on campus and the first week of classes. There were kids who took college so seriously that even at the beginning of the semester they passed out in the library, their faces crammed into the creases of their textbooks. These were usually math and science majors, kids who, after only two weeks, were already behind in their courses. Lucia and I walked around campus as much as we could, taking in the sites, learning the best routes to class, figuring out where all the good study spots were. When we walked around the library, Lucia got on top of one of the desks and put herself into the fetal position to see if she could fit “just in case” she needed to pull a literal allighter.

We spent most of the first few weeks reading, trying to get a head in our courses. I never though I’d be so lucky as to have a roommate who preferred to read than to go out and party. It was especially striking given Lucia’s disposition: the girl was beautiful, sure,
but also full of the kind of mirth that would light up parties. She had a laugh that
automatically produced laughter in others.

Our relationship seemed so effortless from the beginning—though in the back of
my mind I wondered if Lucia and I would be friends if we weren’t roommates.

Being on campus made me feel as though I was in a new world—maybe not a
whole new world, but more of a parallel, pocket universe where the external world
vaguely resembled itself, where the people on campus were the only people that existed.

One morning towards the beginning of the semester, as I was getting back from
my ten a.m. class, I found a note plastered on the door of our dorm room, written by
Lucia: “In the common room with everyone else.” Everyone in the common room was
huddled around the television set. A few girls were crying. All were flabbergasted. Lucia
was standing, leaving against the windowsill. When she saw me in the doorway, she
waved me over. I couldn’t tell if Lucia had been crying or not, but she did looked dazed,
stupefied.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

Lucia explained as best she could, but the truth was that no one really knew what
was going down. I tried to get a good glimpse of the television, so I could see the surreal
litany on images on the screen clearly. I turned back to face Lucia, who was gazing out at
the window of our high-rise dormitory building at the campus sprawled out before us. I
ran through the who-what-when-why-where-how of it all and to all of those questions,
Lucia answered, “I don’t know.” I expected Lucia to grow frustrated with my incessant
questions, but at the end of it all, Lucia, still looking through the window, grabbed me
and pulled me close to her. Even from the very first day we met, when the two of us
recognized our motherlessness, there was always this sense of “we’re in this shit together”—a phrase Lucia had uttered numerous times, mostly in jest, sometimes like a mantra—but that day our togetherness seemed tangible for the first time and I, despite myself and only for a moment, felt a pang of gratitude for whatever was happening on the television.

***

Towards the end of September, Lucia’s boyfriend, Andrew, came to visit. Lucia showed me a picture of him. He was good-looking, with blue eyes that looked as though they’d gotten their color from an Alaskan ocean. Lucia was so excited to have him visit that she unloaded all of his biographical information in one long breath. He was attending community college back in Staten Island, where Lucia was from He was studying Civil Engineering, though neither Lucia nor I knew what that meant. He raced cars at an amateur raceway. He smoked a lot of pot. I wondered if he would bring any with him; I hadn’t smoked in nearly two years, after my minor freak out. Andrew and Lucia had been dating for a year and half. He was Lucia’s first boyfriend.

Andrew was staying for the whole weekend. On the Thursday before he came, Lucia asked me if they could have some time alone. I was taken aback, mostly because I didn’t know where I would go.

“I just meant for a little while,” Lucia said. “How about I put a scrunchy on the door outside and when it’s safe to come in, I’ll take it off?”

“I guess.”
“Sorry, dude.”

“It’s okay.”

“I haven’t seen him in a month.”

“I know.”

“Mama’s gotta get her kicks.”

“Gross.”

“Hey, I’m the one with the boy who doesn’t live here. You’re single and pretty and you’re gonna be surrounded by it.”

“Surrounded by what?”

“Dick, dude. You’re going to be surrounded by dick, is what I meant.”

“Oh my god.”

I was unable to scrub the unfortunate image of the scene Lucia had described from my mind.

Andrew arrived around dinnertime on Friday night. I stuck around to meet him at Lucia’s behest. He was even better looking in person than he was in the picture, maybe because he was nice and shy and bashfulness had a way of increasing the attractiveness of a person.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

“You too,” I said. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

He glanced at Lucia, smiling. “Oh?”

“Well, I didn’t tell her everything,” Lucia said. “You know, especially about the way that it curves.”

“Alright,” he said.
I unwittingly found myself fantasizing about what he might be like during sex. Lucia seemed like a girl who knew precisely what she wanted, and who got precisely what she wanted. He obviously satisfied her.

As they were about to leave for dinner, Andrew threw his arm around Lucia. It was comical, an antiquated gesture, something that might happen between Thunderbirds and Pink Ladies, not between two kids in the second year of a new millennium. But Lucia returned the gesture, wrapping her arm around Andrew’s waist. They looked then like the perfect couple, an unimpeachable couple.

The night Andrew and Lucia went out for dinner was the longest period of time that I’d been alone since arriving at school. Lucia and I had stuck pretty close together, and aside from our different class schedules, we seldom stayed apart for too long.

I got food from the cafeteria and brought it back to my dorm room, too embarrassed to eat in public alone. To satisfy my teenage angst, I put on Weezer’s “The World Has Turned and Left Me Here.” Rivers Cuomo sang, “And in your place, an empty space,” and though he was presumably addressing a lover, I felt as though Lucia had left me there.

After dinner I went to the library, to the top floor. It was the library’s quiet floor, and in addition to that luxury, the top floor also housed private study rooms. They were made for groups to study in together so that they wouldn’t make noise, but I found that they were rarely used. These rooms also had windows, allowing in just enough natural light, even at dusk, that I didn’t have to switch on the overhead light right away.

I couldn’t get the image of Lucia and Andrew having sex out of my head. The Weezer song was also in my head and the juxtaposition of a grungy pop song and the
imagery of my roommate’s bawdy reunion with her boyfriend was enough to make me resent both Rivers Cuomo and Lucia.

My Western Lit class was reading The Odyssey, having just finished the Iliad. The books reminded me of Mrs. Goddard, of smoking in her garage. Things had ended strangely between us, but I wasn’t actually sure what those “things” were. She’d told me that day in the park that we shouldn’t see each other anymore and that is precisely what happened, except for a few random encounters here and there. The next time I spoke to her was at my mother’s funeral, where she’d shown up with Olivia. Seeing them both there had produced a particular kind of resentment in me. Mrs. Goddard was a trend, I realized later: just another in a line of people—women—who left me. Olivia, Mrs. Goddard, my mother. It seemed like only a matter of time before Lucia grew tired of having me around.

I couldn’t concentrate on Homer. Instead, I took out my sketchbook. I had an idea for a story about a girl who was the only girl left on Earth. In the story the narrator quotes from The Bell Jar as she surveys the post-apocalyptic wasteland: “I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn’t, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another. I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line.” Yet before the narrator of the story can cross that boundary, the world ends—some virus or something, I hadn’t worked that part out. The girl loses all of her friends to this plague. I thought maybe the plague would be caused by sex, but that felt a bit too right-wing.

There was a scrunchy on the door when I got back to the dorm room. It was 11:30. I wondered if Lucia and Andrew had fallen asleep and forgot to remove the
scrunchy from the door handle. When I took my headphones off I saw—I heard—that this was not the case. They were having sex. I glanced up and down the hallway before putting my ear to the door. I listened intently, alternating ears as a way to keep watch on the two entrances to the hallway. Lucia cried out, “Oh, fuck,” as if something had gone awry, but she kept saying it, more exasperated each time until the utterance became a whisper.

I sat against the wall next to the door. I was going to read my book until Lucia opened the door. A couple had come up from the elevator and made their way to the girl’s room. The guy’s hand was tucked into the back pocket of the girl’s jeans. They didn’t notice me. I threw my head back and closed my eyes.

Sometime later, a girl from my floor nudged me with her foot.

“Hi,” the girl said. Her name was Kathryn. She lived two doors down from Lucia and I.

“Hi,” I said.

“Are you drunk?”

“No.”

“High.”

“No.

Kathryn glanced towards the door and saw the scrunchy. “Oh, you’re sexiled.”

“Sexiled,” I said. “Yes, I guess I’m that.”

Before she walked away, Kathryn knocked once on the door of our dorm room.

“You’ll thank me later,” she said.
Lucia and Andrew planned to see each other once a month. They’d alternate between him coming to visit and her going home. One day, however, just before Lucia’s turn to go home, I came back from class to find Lucia in bed, breathing sharply, heaving almost. The bedcovers were pulled over her head.

Andrew had slept with someone else. I couldn’t conjure this image; he’d seemed so nice, so in love with Lucia—though I admittedly had no idea what love looked like. Lucia, her voice muffled by the bed sheet, said that he’d been so distraught over only seeing her once a month that he, according to Lucia, accidentally tripped and fell inside another girl. The other girl in whom Andrew’s dick accidentally landed was a mutual acquaintance of Lucia and Andrew, some who’d decided to stay in Staten Island instead of going to school.

“So I get punished because I wanted to get out?” Lucia said.

“That’s really unfair,” I offered.

“So unfair,” she said.

I nodded, but stopped when I realized Lucia couldn’t see me nodding, on account of her face being still covered in the bed sheets. Consolation was a gift I did not possess. Olivia’s boy troubles were always such that the boy needed consolation. I suspected, however, that this was one of those things that could solidify our friendship; if Olivia had been heartbroken, if I had been there to pick up the pieces, then maybe I would have at least been held on retainer for any future heart-break. She would have at least needed me for something.
I sat down on Lucia’s bed and patted her shoulder. “There, there,” I said.

Lucia turned over in her bed and laughed. She wiped away some of the moisture from under her eyes. “There, there?” she said.

“I’m not very good at this.”

“It’s something, I guess.”

“He was an asshole,” I said.

“I don’t know.”

“You deserve better.”

She sat up and draped an arm around me in a kind of half-hug. “Thanks,” she said.

“I’m here for you,” I said. Having run out of consolatory clichés, it was all I could do to stop myself from singing the theme song from *Friends*.

***

Lucia said she was thinking about going home for the weekend. Thanksgiving Break was in three weeks and I wondered why she couldn’t just wait. I thought maybe her wanting to leave was a reflection of my inadequate friendship services. Lucia, however, said that she’d been too distracted to do her school work and that it wouldn’t stop until she talked to Andrew face to face.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Didn’t he cheat on you?”

“Yes,” Lucia said.

“Doesn’t that mean things are over?”
“Not necessarily.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you still love him?”

“Yes.” She paused. “I don’t know.”

Ultimately, she decided to go home.

“I just have to,” she said. “You know?”

“I get it,” I said.

I did and did not get it. Sure, I’d felt an inherent homesickness—being away from home for the first time and all that. Yet I was not in any rush to go home, either. It was the first time since the beginning of the semester that I’d be alone for more than a night.

After deciding to go home, Lucia went to the library to get as much work done as she could before the weekend. This was Monday and she was thinking about leaving on Thursday night since she didn’t have class on Friday.

With Lucia at the library, I tried to convince myself to use the time to work, but got distracted by browsing the personal ads on a website I’d stumbled on once. Sometimes I’d spend hours perusing the “women seeking women” section of the site. I did this mostly out of curiosity, to see what was out there. The women who posted listings there often said the strangest things—strange here meaning bluntly salacious. Of course, there were also the more chaste solicitations, but these listings seemed almost sad in their desperation.

I’d often fantasized what I would be like to respond to one of these ads, and had even drafted a few emails in response, but I knew I’d never go through with it. I’d spent
years, after all, lying about my identity on the internet. But with the prospect of Lucia leaving for an entire weekend, I read the recent listings with newfound attention.

I came across a posting entitled “In Town For One Night Only.” It was posted by a woman claiming to be thirty-five. She’d be “in town” that Friday night. The title was enough to garner most of my attention: “In Town for One Night Only” sounded like the tagline for a sexual tryst via Barnum and Bailey.

Hello, the post began, my name is Ava. I am an average, feminine woman seeking more or less the same (I’m not really picky) for a night of fun. I have many interests, though since I am seeking someone for one night only, it hardly feels worth it to enumerate them here. I have been told, however, that I am a great cook, if that’s something you’re into.

I need to know who is real and who is not. There are so many frauds in this digital age. So first I thought we could share a few emails that are more than a few sentences and have accurate spelling.

The top of the listing featured a picture of Ava exactly as she’d described in the text: average, feminine. The picture was somewhat blurry—clear enough so that interested parties had enough of an idea of what they were getting into and distorted enough to not be completely recognizable to someone who might have known her. The woman in the picture had long, light brown hair that swooped in such a way as to briefly appear as a scarf hanging on one side of her bare neck. She was sitting at a table with her hands cupping a teacup, her thumbs crossed through the loop of the handle. It was a picture so unassuming that I had to reread the title of the post.
I crafted a response to the listing, saving the email as a draft. I paced around my dorm room debating whether or not to send it. I even stepped outside, as if the nighttime air would afford me an answer.

I sent the email. After shutting off my computer, I lay in bed. Only when Lucia returned from the library hours later did I check my email again. In my inbox was a response from Ava.

*Hi, Olivia,* the email began. *Would you believe me if I told you that your email was one of the only ones that didn’t contain egregious spelling and/or grammatical errors? Not that THAT’s my sole criteria or anything…*

*Anyway, I would like you to call the number at the end of this email at exactly 3:13 tomorrow afternoon. I would like to hear your voice. I would just like to know that you are indeed a 22-year-old female as you say.*

***

I called the number at exactly 3:13 the next day, skipping my class to do it. Someone on the other end picked up but said nothing.

“Hello?” I said.

I could hear the faint sound of someone breathing into the phone.

“Hello?” I said again. “Um, this is Olivia.”

With that, the person hung up. Later that night, I received an email from Ava.
Sorry for all the theatrics, the message said. If it’s any consolation, you passed the test. There’s a Sam Goody in the Roosevelt Field Mall. Can you be there at 7 Friday Night?

***

Lacking a car, I took a taxi to the Roosevelt Field Mall. I arrived almost an hour early. I went to the food court and dawdled there, more or less twiddling my thumbs.

I asked myself a series of questions that now seem easier to tabulate in third person.

What was she doing? She had arranged to meet a strange, thirty-five year-old woman in the mall for what—a sexual dalliance? Quinn was eighteen, a college freshman. She’d never even kissed another person on the lips except for her grandmother once accidentally. She’d never even told anyone she was attracted to women. Shit, she didn’t even know that herself—could such a thing be known without actually having gone through it. Was that stupid? Did people who were attracted to the opposite sex dispute their straightness before they fucked someone of the opposite sex? Did fucking equal confirmation? Olivia had once joked that she hadn’t met any boys who made her feel confident that she was not a lesbian.

In the midst of this pondering, a kid in a McDonald’s apron approached the table where I was sitting. He asked if I was okay.

“What?” I said. “Why”

“You’ve been sitting there for a long time, almost an hour. And you’re not like, doing anything. You’re just kind of sitting there.”
“Shit,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Are you like, waiting for your mom or something?”

“My mom?”

“I used to hate when my mom dragged me to the mall. She’d always make me stand around in Macy’s while she tried on these like, skirt and blazer combos. At least your mom is letting you chill by yourself.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m waiting for my mom.”

The kid nodded. He lingered for a moment, shrugged, and then walked back towards the McDonalds.

I stood up hurriedly and left the food court. I was not at all confident that I’d be able to pick Ava out. She did, after all, describe herself as “average.” Thus, unsure if I’d be able to spot Ava, I instead took to browsing the rows and rows of albums for sale. When I got to David Bowie, a presence materialized next to me.

“Bowie, huh?” a woman said.

I was sure she could hear the sound of my heart in my chest, reverberating like a struck bell.

I snorted out a laugh, deciding not to look at her. “I guess,” I said.

“You guess?”

“I was just looking.”

“Me, too.”

I laughed again. I felt flushed, sweaty. I looked up at the woman, who was smiling. She looked, perhaps unsurprisingly, nothing like her picture. She had a vaguely German look about her: blue-eyed, brusque. Her gaze was trenchant, her lips curving up
into a slight smirk. She had reddish blond hair, long, though I could tell she wore it in a ponytail most of the time, since there was a wave where she would have tied it. I recognized this mostly because my hair was the same. My hair was unruly in its waviness, so I just left it up most of the time.

Nervous, I turned back to look at the CDs. She laughed a laugh that seemed to have a question mark at the end of it.

“I searched the internet for average looking white woman.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re the girl in the picture, though. I mean, the one you sent. That’s you.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“You should be careful. You don’t know what’s out there.” She paused, let out a laugh.

We left Sam Goody and walked in silence through the mall, towards the parking lot, occasionally chortling out soft, wordless acknowledgements of the awkwardness of things.

“Did you drive here?” Ava asked.

“Taxi,” I said.

She smiled through her teeth and rolled her eyes, as if to say, That was dumb. I followed her to a silver SUV. “This is me,” she said.

I got into the car and closed my eyes. I felt as though I was being shot back in time. All that was missing was the stench of marijuana.

“I was thinking we could talk for a second,” Ava said. She started up the car and the engine turned over.
“Okay,” I said.

“Please don’t be nervous.”

“Sorry.”

“Please don’t be sorry either.”

“Okay.”

“So you graduated from college?”

“Yeah, Hofstra.”

“Decided to stay on the Island?”

“It was just easier.”

“So you’re not originally from here?”

“I’m from New Jersey.”

“I won’t hold that against you.”

I laughed.

“I’ve heard people describe Long Island as the New Jersey of New York,” she said.

“I can definitely see that,” I said.

Now she laughed. “Me too.” She drew in a deep breath. “So, not into Bowie, huh?”

“Never really got into him.”

“Acquired taste, maybe.”

“My favorite band is Sleater-Kinney.”

“Punk rock girl, huh? Very cool.”

“I don’t know about punk.”
“You don’t seem the type?”

“What do you mean?”

“Unassuming, quiet.”

I shrugged. “What about you?” I said.

“Music?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m all over the place. I know that’s a lame answer, but it’s true.”

Ava asked a series of other biographical questions and I supplied her with mostly lies. If she recognized them to be lies, she didn’t say anything. How could she say anything? Lying to someone you met over the internet was as natural as breathing.

She finally put the car in drive. She drove with a strange mix of apprehension and determination. Her pleading for me not to be nervous had an obvious irony/hypocrisy behind it. I rested my head against the cool glass of the window.

“I know it’s a cliché,” Ava said, “but I thought we could maybe go to a motel.”

“That’s fine,” I said.

A few minutes later we pulled into a Red Roof Inn. We got out of the car and walked into the hotel lobby. Ava told me to hang back and though I did, I was still close enough to overhear Ava tell the man behind the desk that she needed a room for her and her daughter. After getting the room key, Ava waved me over.

“Enjoy your stay,” the man behind the desk said.

“Do you think he knew?” Ava asked, with fake exasperation, once we were in the elevator.

“Knew what?” I said.
“You know what.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Yeah?”

I laughed. “I’m a little too old to be your daughter, right?”

“Or maybe I’m a little too young to be your mother.”

“That too.”

“You do look young.”

“I do.”

“It’s okay.”

Once we crossed the threshold of the room, Ava shrugged off her jacket and threw it over the chair by the window. She sat down on the bed and began unzipping her black leather boots. I dawdled in the doorway, rocking back and forth on my heels. Ava finished slipping out of her boots and after tossing them gingerly out of the way, looked right at me. The smirk she had on her face at the mall I recognized now was more or less permanently affixed. She was so self-assured. I walked over to her and kissed her on the mouth. I figured that since she’d put out the ad, she was looking for someone also assertive, someone also experienced. I was, of course, neither of those things, but there was a certain carte blanche aspect to that evening. I could try on assertiveness as it if were a piece of clothing at the mall.

It was the first time I’d kissed anyone, a sad fact about which I tried desperately not to think. Ava made it easy to forget. As we kissed I felt a kind of spiritual surrender—like the weight of my self was being extricated from my physical existence.

After about a minute, Ava pulled away.
“What’s wrong?” I said.

“I know this is what you’re here for—what we’re here for. It’s just a little strange.”

“It’s strange for me too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.

“Because of my age.”

“It’s not that.”

“Because of your age?”

“My age?”

“Because you’re twenty-two and I’m thirty-five.”

“It’s not that.”

“I’m not actually thirty-five.”

“Oh.”

“I’m thirty-nine.”

“Okay.”

I sat down on the bed next to her. I’d expected a certain number of lies from a person I’d met through the internet. I certainly wasn’t surprised by this specific lie. If anything, Ava’s lie made me feel easier about the evening—rather, her reveal of her lie. There was no better truth, no better confirmation of realness, than the lies people told. Ava, or whoever she really was, felt more real to me in the wake of these un-truths.

She was about to say something else, but I pressed my lips against her mouth in such a way that the words couldn’t come out—in such a way that I was almost
retroactively trying to prevent the unspoken words from ever having formed in the first place. Ava appeared receptive, though I was concentrating so much on the immediate sensuality of it—the position of our heads in relation to one another, the seemingly complex interlocking of our mouths, the rhythm of our prodding tongues—to notice the degree of her receptiveness.

Ava assuaged my unawareness as she situated her hands on my waist, digging her palms into the curve of my hips. The grasp was so sudden that it almost hurt. I tried to remember some of the tricks I’d picked up watching porn, but I’d forgotten most of them in the immediacy of the kissing. Ava’s spit tasted like some combination of mint and honey, but also a little briny. The only other person whose saliva I’d tasted was Mrs. Goddard’s, and that was only because we’d shared a few joints.

The kisses became sloppier as they progressed. Whenever Ava wrenched her head in a different direction, some spit was left dangling between us. I returned the kisses just as sloppily. Every so often Ava would bite down on my lip and draw it away from my mouth. I was prepared to let the lip go if Ava wanted it. We kissed for what seemed like hours, passing one large kiss back and forth until it grew to be too big, the opposite of sharing a joint.

When we were done, we both fell asleep, turned away from one another. Some time later, she prodded me awake.

“Olivia,” Ava said. It took me a moment to enter back into the waking world. I’d thought I was still in a dream, which being called “Olivia” did not assuage. I’d forgotten that I told her my name was Olivia. “Olivia,” she said again.

“Huh?” I said.
“Hi,” Ava said. She had a demure smile on her face.

“Hi.”

“I have a favor to ask you.”

“Okay.”

“It’s more like a request.”

“Okay.”

“Can I take you home?”

I sat up, clutching the sheet against my exposed body. “What? Why?”

“This is going to sound crazy, but I need for you not to be here in the morning.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No, No, it’s nothing like that. You were fine, great even.” She sighed. “It’s just, you know how something seems like a better idea at night? How morning has this way of exposing flawed thinking?”

“I guess.”

“You know what I’m saying?”

“What time is it?”

“I know, I’m sorry.”

“But what time is it?”

“A little after one.”

“I’m just going to call a cab.”

“That will look strange.”

“Why?”

“Why is my daughter leaving our motel in a cab at one in the morning?”
“I don’t think they care.”

“I do.” She paused. “Alright, I’ll call you a cab.”

***

I couldn’t sleep once I got back to my dorm room. I felt the phantom kiss of Ava’s lips on mine, the indentures of her fingertips in the flesh of my thighs, the soreness where she had sucked on my neck. I felt too the lingering pain of her fingers inside of me. Maybe Sylvia Plath had been onto something about the world being divided between people who’d slept with someone and people who hadn’t. I’d felt slightly altered in some way, a lot like the time Olivia put her makeup on me, her fingers crafting a more matured version of my original self.

Thirsty, I trotted across the hall into the communal bathroom. There was someone in the showers, which was odd given how late it was. While I checked my body in the mirror, inspecting the burgeoning purplish welt on my neck, the girl in the shower pulled back the curtain and revealed herself. It was Kathryn. I waved and wanted to laugh; it was nice to be on the good side of one of the universe’s cosmic jokes. Not too long ago Kathryn saw me sitting outside my door, waiting for Lucia and Andrew to finish.

“You’re up late,” she said now. She bent over to wrap her hair in another, smaller towel.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I said.

“Roommate busy again tonight?”
“Actually, no.”

“That’s good.”

I nodded. I took a sip of water and ran through the various ways in my head that I could tell Kathryn that I’d been busy that night. Not that Kathryn would care, but I suddenly felt possessive of my night with Ava. Jealousy: being protective of something you already had.