PEOPLE WATCHING: STORIES

by

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On Halloween

*I’m sitting here waitin’ for my sugar to show, I’ve been listenin’ to the silence and the radio.* Emily sat at the computer desk in her living room, attempting to write a history paper. She needed a music break. The sixth track on *Court and Spark*, “Car on a Hill,” suited her mood perfectly. She was waiting for her sugar to show, only he wasn’t technically her sugar. He was her something, though. Something indispensable. Every Friday night this school year Travis had picked her up for their weekly movie night. Their tradition was to rent two DVDs, pop popcorn, shake on plenty of parmesan cheese, watch one movie, take a break, then make hot cocoa, then watch the other movie. They were working their way through all the movies they wanted to see but hadn’t: *Three Kings*, *Serpico*, *Jackie Brown*. Early Tarantino and all of Kubick.

But tonight was Halloween, and they were going to the haunted hayride instead. Every year the Pecks’ transformed their farm in Deansboro into a haunted playground. The dark cornfields would be filled with teenagers paid to dress up as axe murderers, and afterward you could buy hot apple cider and popcorn in the well-lit barn.

An instant message arrived with its upside down bell sound. Jabba1221 typed, “I’m on my way to you now my lady.”

Courtandspark26 replied, “I await you, my liege.”

“**Brandishes sword and mounts trusty mare**,” typed Travis.

“**Fans self**,” typed Emily.

Joni sang, *He makes friends easy, he’s not like me; I wait for judgment, patiently.*

*Oh where in the city can that boy be?* Emily knew that Travis wasn’t her sugar. He
wanted to be, she knew, but he never did much about it. She’d gotten a tortured email from him once, late at night, saying he wasn’t sure he could be friends with her anymore. He’d used the words “in love with.” She’d acted as if she’d never read it. All had gone on as usual, though she wasn’t sure how usual their situation really was. She felt guilty about him, but she felt pretty used to the guilt.

Her mother called her name from the TV room. Emily found her sitting under a blanket watching *Gilmore Girls.* “Which episode is this?” Emily asked.

“I’ll tell you on the commercial,” her mother said. She took her hand out from under the blanket to eat a Triscuit. “Honey, will you make sure to turn the light out so that the trick-or-treaters don’t ring the bell?”

“But how will Travis see the driveway?”

“He knows where it is.”

Emily considered this. She was feeling confessional. “Mom,” she said, “do you think Travis should be my boyfriend?”

“Do you have that butterfly feeling about him?” Her mother didn’t turn her head away from the TV.

Emily didn’t think she really wanted to kiss Travis, whose skin, though clearing up now, was marked with acne, and who’d let her and her friends dress him in a fairy princess gown and wand so that they could take pictures of him for their art class. His shoulder blades had looked as fragile in that dress as they did in his faded Grateful Dead tee-shirts. Sometimes, though, when she rested her head on his lap during movie nights, the smell of his laundry detergent made her want to cry. And how did you explain that?

“No,” she said. “I think I only have that feeling for Jake.”
“Ah, Jake,” her mother said.

“Yeah,” Emily said. “Ah Jake is right.”

Emily took a Triscuit from her mother’s bowl. Jake made her feel all the things Travis didn’t, but she wasn’t on his radar. She tortured herself before sleep with fantasies of him. In the fantasies they didn’t speak so much as edge ever-closer to each other in a swimming pool, or kiss each other’s necks with a blanket tented above their heads. The thought of being close to him was like warm water swallowed on a cold day. Emily had only had one orgasm, ever, with a boy present. And it had taken an embarrassingly long while to happen, with his head between her legs. But with Jake she knew she could be her true, primal self. Not that she would ever get the chance.

Joni’s voice came through the crappy computer speakers, clear and clean. *Everything comes and goes... marked by lovers, and styles of clothes.* This is what Emily wanted: lovers. And for time to pass, but not too fast. And, if all else failed, to acquire beautiful clothes.

Carl hadn’t thought he would be scared. He’d thought today would be a triumphant day. But he’d woken up so full of adrenaline that the moments seemed to be passing without containing him at all. Still, it was a release–there was momentum today, unlike all the other days.

The plan had been in place for a week. It had all started when he’d gotten in a fight with one of the other posters in the Ayn Rand forum, a college kid who went by “Descartes” and who thought he knew everything because he’d taken one class on global markets at University of Chicago. Unreal. Carl couldn’t remember how it had started but
Descartes had said something like, “The only people equipped to truly rule the world would have no problem bulldozing a room full of people with a machine gun.” Thatcherite84, the feminist bitch who haunted their forum (seemingly just to annoy Carl), had started in on “all people no matter how doomed to poverty and despair have the right to at least live their sad little lives out in peace.” Carl sometimes had to admire her strong use of language. He’d taken the bait. “I kill whoever I want,” he had typed, feeling his heart grow strong and hard as he wrote. “To me, people are the same as animals. I take that back, animals are better. At least they can’t say idiotic shit like you all.” Then he’d signed off.

It was true, animals were better. By far. He sat at the foot of his bed and put on his socks while Hugo lay at his feet. Carl leaned down to scratch the dog’s rust-colored ears. A strong memory came to him of the day his parents had brought Hugo home: his mother’s face as she brought the puppy into his room on his birthday. His father had taken a picture of them all, and Hugo had licked his face in the shot. It had been Carl’s tenth birthday. His parents had taken him to Pizza Hut for dinner and he’d eaten no less than twenty breadsticks, plus a personal pan pie. What a fool he’d been then. Now Hugo was an eight-year-old dog with a serious gas problem, and Carl lived with his father on the five acres of what was left of the family farm. His mother was in Florida with her stepchildren. She tried to take Carl to see Broadway shows when he visited her in St. Petersburg, where Ken (his step-father) tried to get him to play mini-golf. Carl had refused to get on the plane last year. His mother had cried on the phone, but that was entirely her problem.
Outside his bedroom window the sky turned purple. Even on the relative isolation of Peck Road (named for his great-grandfather), Carl could see small children making the trek between farmhouses set far back from the road, dragging sacks and plastic jack-o-lanterns behind them. He put on his sneakers and the black hoodie that he wore every year as his costume for the hayride. The crowning touch was the hockey mask. He found it in his closet and slid it under his arm. He remembered his father teaching him what to do as the flat-bed trucks full of Hayriders inched by on muddy ground. He’d become an expert at scaring the shit out of people: he sprang out, then retreated back into the darkness.

Before leaving his room, he pulled his hunting rifle from below his bed and told Hugo to stay. The dog settled his head on his front paws and fell asleep for the night.

Jake was making Heather moan. She was always moaning in a way that felt studied to him, as if she’d picked it up from TV and movies. He always reprimanded himself quickly when he had this thought; it was unkind. They were in his living room. His parents were out to dinner and Heather’s long naked legs were spread on the green plaid couch; he was crouching in front of her and sliding his finger inside her, and getting her off with his tongue at the same time. Her moaning was pierced by screams, not hers but Sissy Spacek’s. They’d put on Carrie for Halloween.

Heather played field hockey and in she was perfect every physical dimension. She was muscular but curvy, tan and blonde and long-haired; her eyes were big, sleepy and sexy. Her eyelashes were as blonde as her hair. She was now a freshman in college at SUNY Geneseo and had come back for the weekend. She’d wanted sex as soon as she’d
arrived at Jake’s house that night. He’d convinced her to watch Carrie and make grilled cheese sandwiches instead, but he’d only been able to hold off so long. Now here he was eating her out, but he didn’t mind making her feel good. It lessened some of his guilt.

They’d been dating for a year and a half. He’d hoped she would meet someone else when she went to college, but, strangely, his passivity with other people only seemed to make them like him more. He and Heather talked every day on the phone and via instant message. Not that she wasn’t his best friend: he loved her. But he lived his life waiting to be free of her.

“God,” she sighed, releasing his head. She always dug her fingers into his neck when she came, so that for a moment he truly couldn’t breathe. He wiped his mouth. Sighing and smiling at her, he asked whether she wanted to go to the Hayride.

She lay against him in a breathless stupor, lifting his arm and possessively pulling it around her shoulders. “Sure,” she said, “in a minute.”

In Jake’s fantasies of college he was far away, in California or Colorado, where he could still do all the things he loved: he could ski in the winter and play outdoor games and go hiking. He would still play lacrosse in college, too, maybe, but wherever he went, it would be normal for the captain of the lacrosse team to be out and proud. He’d lead his team to victory and find his lover afterward in his dorm room. They would stay up all night fucking, or they might just lie naked in bed watching a movie. He would visit his parents three times a year on holidays.

That was as far as the fantasy went. He couldn’t imagine the future beyond college. He couldn’t imagine ever telling his mother or father or his little sister, who wore matching L.L. Bean fleeces and who would all stay in this town forever. The only gay kid
stupid enough to come out to his peers here had been bullied so badly that his parents sent him away to prep school halfway through their sophomore year. Jake remembered him, remembered not being able to make eye contact with him.

But his life wasn’t bad and Heather wasn’t bad. He loved her. He’d made her come and now they could watch the movie and go meet Travis at the Hayride. He got up to mix some of his parents’ vodka with apple cider and pour it in a water bottle.

Travis slid the disc he’d picked out for Emily into his car CD player. A live recording of the Radiohead show they’d gone to together last summer. He turned down the volume to a level he thought they’d be able to talk over, then opened the glove compartment and took out the box of Tic-Tacs. He popped two in his mouth. He could feel his heart do the thing it always did when he approached Emily’s house, a kind of warning beat, an angry pulse. As if his heart were mad at him for doing this to himself again.

She opened the Volvo door and, as he’d hoped, acknowledged the music. “Whoa, is this from last summer?”

“Yup!” he said. He was barrelling into the land of enthusiasm, too suddenly, as usual.

“Can I have a tic-tac?” She reached for them without waiting for an answer.

He’d gotten his dad to drive them to the concert, which hadn’t been hard since his dad was always looking for a reason to smoke weed outside his mother’s zone of influence, but at the last minute two of his guy friends—Jake and Mike—had wanted to come along. He hadn’t been able to say no just because he wanted to be alone with Emily. They wouldn’t have understood: most people in school thought he and Emily
were dating (because they spent every waking moment together). His friends knew she had basically rejected him. Everybody else probably didn’t give a shit. Travis was embarrassed by how much sleep he lost over Emily, but what his friends didn’t understand was that it was complicated. Wasn’t it?

She made a big show of pulling her coat and scarf tight around her throat and shivering. “I’m freezing,” she said. “Can we put on the butt-warmer?” She giggled. Her weirdly prudish sense of humor always struck him as adorable, like so many of the qualities that turned other people in school off. Jake said stuff like, “Isn’t she stuck up?” Travis tried to tell him that once you got to know Emily she stopped acting that way, that she was really just shy. He looked at her now; there was something glittery on her eyelids. Sometimes she wore makeup and sometimes she didn’t. Pathetically, he often read into these small fluctuations of her personal habits, thinking that maybe the choice to wear makeup was a shift into caring what he thought. He certainly cared what she thought. When they’d first started hanging out, when he still thought there was a chance they’d start dating, she’d told him she didn’t like the smell of the patchouli oil he wore. He’d stopped wearing it. For good.

The crowd at the entrance to the Hayride was half-costumed, half-bundled up in flannels and down vests. “Here we go,” said Emily.

He parked the car in the makeshift grass lot. “I keep forgetting you’ve never done this before.”

“Never saw the point,” she said, and climbed out of her side of the Volvo.
Carl kneeled in the cornfield. It was fucking cold. A few rows away he could hear the Williams twins crushing and throwing beer cans as they drank away the time that remained before the trucks started rolling by. Every year it was the same: one of the twins wore a flannel shirt and overalls and one of those hat things that made it look like he’d just gotten a machete to the head. The other one carried a fake chainsaw and revved it in the night air.

The hunting rifle lay at Carl’s feet. His father had given it to him when he turned twelve, right after the divorce. They’d often gone hunting together before Carl had stopped speaking to him. Actually, he couldn’t remember who had stopped speaking first: Carl or his father. Conversation had been minimal to begin with, but one day it was gone. His dad ate dinner in the kitchen and Carl ate in his room. His dad got up early to do farm chores but he didn’t ask Carl to help with them anymore. It was never clear who had incited the change: Carl knew in some faraway corner of his brain that both of them, together, had done it.

He wasn’t mad at his father. But he felt sorry for him, and this made his rage burn even hotter. When he saw him in the TV room alone sometimes, drinking a beer or dozing off... it was obscene how sad it was. Everything was like that: a quick and bitter turn from sad to angry, then from angry back to sad.

School especially had become unbearable. He didn’t go every day. When he did he sat and waited to be called on so that he could lob some really good one-liner filled with choice curse words at the teacher. Then he would get sent to the principal, a tall...
country club guy who probably fondled little girls. Carl would spit another line in his face. They’d call his dad and his dad would pick him up and they’d ride in silence back home. Silence was a gift, when you thought about it. His dad should be grateful. Maybe he was.

Sometimes Carl went into the cow stalls at night just to be in their warm company. He fantasized about a world without human life, about a nuclear holocaust that would leave him and the cows to fend for themselves. Maybe there would be a few zombies left to fuck up but that wouldn’t be a problem.

He settled his palms against the hunting rifle. He’d killed five deer with it in his life and he was a pretty good shot from what he remembered.

That was definitely Jake and Heather across the field. Emily would have recognized Heather’s hair anywhere. And Jake’s profile—such a fine profile. Travis had seen them too; Travis had been friends with Jake since their moms were pregnant together. Jake and Heather were coming over.

They stood in line waiting for the next flatbed to come back from its journey so that they could climb on board. Travis and Jake were talking about anime now, which meant that Emily would have to talk to Heather while somehow maintaining a full view of Jake. Sometimes she felt she could look at him all day. She would love to be a bird perched in the space between his collar-bones. She’d ride around with him during his lacrosse games and move up and down with his breath as he slept, maybe sliding under the covers to nestle between his legs.
“So how’s senior year going?” Heather was using the fake-friendly voice she reserved for girls she wanted to patronize.

“Good. I’m applying early to Brown,” said Emily. “The musical is gonna be West Side Story.”

“You’ll definitely have a big part,” said Heather.

Emily knew not to take this as a compliment. “I hope so,” she said. “How’s college?”

“It’s okay. I miss Jake” She stuck her lip out like a baby.

“Aww,” Emily said, and tried to do the lip thing too. She suppressed the urge to kill Heather. As soon as she did, out came the familiar wish to be Heather, who was at that moment sliding her fingers into the back pocket of Jake’s jeans.

Travis and Jake both climbed up onto the flatbed. Travis settled into the dark hay and leaned back against the high metal bars that caged the passengers during the ride. He cursed himself when he saw Jake hang back and gallantly lift each girl up into the truck-bed. It was the kind of thing that would have made him hate Jake if they hadn’t grown up together. Jake felt like blood. All their lives their parents had been getting together for long boozy dinner parties. Travis’s dad would play extremely lengthy (and verbally annotated) selections from his collection (thousands-and-growing) of bootleg Dead recordings; Jake’s square dad would close his eyes and try hard to look like he was enjoying it. Jake and Travis had played video games after school every single day of middle school. No, Jake was impossible to hate. He was too good a dude. Emily settled
down perilously far from Travis in the truck. He tried to inch his butt toward her so subtly that she wouldn’t notice.

Emily could remember very clearly the occasions on which Jake had touched her. They’d been few, but precious. Once, he’d given her a kiss on the cheek after she’d received a standing ovation for her solo in the Christmas concert. Another time, he’d playfully mussed her hair at her locker after asking to borrow her study guide for AP Euro. Her study guides were famously detailed and she hated lending them out to lazy asshole boys, but Jake was different. She didn’t see him kiss other girls on the cheek—well, besides Heather—so it had to mean something. And he’d said she was special. He’d just leaned over in class one day and said it in a whisper: “You’re pretty special, Cummings.” She’d never felt more special than at that moment, with his breath tingling in her ear.

Carl could see another flatbed coming now. He’d let a few pass by. He’d stood up in the cornfields with his mask on so they could see him—a far-away menace—but he hadn’t approached. This would be the one. It would have to be, or he was going to chicken out. It was really cold and his teeth were chattering the way they used to when he stayed in the swimming pool too long: uncontrollably, as if his jaw had a mind of its own. His whole body was shaky and full of misery.

He cursed the full moon. He cursed the stars. He cursed himself. He cursed his mother and his father. He ran out onto the field with the rifle under his arm and all of a sudden, lit up by the truck’s headlights, he felt like a soldier.
They’d been pretty good so far, the scares. In spite of her nerves and the cold, Emily was having a good time. Jake was passing around the water bottle full of cider and vodka; she was getting drunk, which almost never happened. A farmer with a machete in his head, covered in fake blood, had nearly climbed aboard the flatbed, opening his mouth wide at them, revealing more fake blood inside. She’d screamed. The sound of the fake chainsaw was worst—high and surprising. Now a figure in a black hoodie and a hockey mask was running toward them fast. “It’s Freddy Kruger!” she said. She felt like her voice was too loud—she must be drunk. “Wait,” she said, turning to face Travis, “is it Jason?”

The look in Travis’s eyes didn’t make sense at first because she hadn’t yet registered the sound of the gun as real. She’d heard it as another sound effect.

Carl leapt high to catch up with the truck. He ran fast. He pointed the gun and shot. He saw the kids from school. He made eye-contact with the boy when he shot him, before the boy fell. He shot two other people. Five deer, three people. He slowed down. He fell into the grass. He buried his face in the dirt. He gripped the dirt. He sobbed. Later that night, before they could find him, he hung himself in the barn.

Jake lived for ten minutes after he was shot. Heather held his head, Travis gripped his wrist, and Emily hovered over him, not knowing where to put her hands.
Marisa got a call in the spring of 1999 from the producers of “7&7.” She’d been a fan of the show since it began airing in 1994. Now she was being asked to come to New York for a “call-back,” though she was supposed to go to college in the fall and hadn’t told anyone she’d sent in an audition tape. She’d made the tape over a few days in her bedroom and car, shooting footage of her Memphis high school and the route she drove to and from school every day. She’d cut it together painstakingly, using her Camcorder, sure that she wasn’t interesting enough to be considered. She loved music and she’d designed a soundtrack for the audition tape: Dave Matthews, Big Star, Radiohead.

“I’m a pretty normal teenage girl,” she’d said into the Camcorder.

The woman who contacted Marisa caught her off-guard. She seemed to assume that Marisa had been waiting for her call. On the contrary, Marisa had all but forgotten the audition tape she’d mailed, along with a five-page typed application, in February.

Jonathan turned 19 the day before he went to D.C. for the call-back. He was a sophomore at Roanoke College in Virginia and his friends had thrown him a big party for his birthday; their enthusiasm had filled him with guilt and embarrassment. This was always what he felt about the unfailing, ready attention of his peers. Jonathan’s stature (6’4”) and athletic gifts (varsity lacrosse and basketball in high school, just lacrosse in college) had stoked the admiration of adult men, not to mention all women, since junior high. College, so far, had been no different. He’d felt obligated to perform the usual rituals for his birthday, accepting countless sloppy, hopeful kisses from sorority girls,
opening his eyes wide in fake surprise as he walked into the room full of people, getting drunk on keg beer and shots of tequila. It all felt out of his hands, detached from his will, which had recently begun to feel like a small, underfed part of his body.

Jonathan had liked the first season of “7&7.” It had aired while he was in high school. In fact, he’d thought of the show when he was anticipating going to college, since living in a house with six other attractive people his age had seemed so much fun on that first season. The cast had lived together in Los Angeles; they’d taken a trip to Cabo. One girl, Marlee, was a tall blonde with a nose-ring and a Cindy Crawford mole. Jonathan had loved her as though he really knew her. He was a romantic. This, more than anything else, was Jonathan’s dark secret, the thing he was never allowed to reveal to anyone in his “real” life.

College had turned out to be nothing like “7&7.” Instead, it was nearly identical Jonathan’s high school experience. He’d gotten decent grades then and got decent grades now. He’d had sex with what seemed like a million girls, but the number probably hovered around twenty-five. Each time, for a brief, heartfelt, usually drunken moment, he believed that he was in love. Each time, he was disappointed in a new way. Once, a girl had gotten up from his dorm room bed, pulled on her sports bra and exclaimed that his room smelled like hamster. When he’d pointed out his rabbit, Eli, sitting in his cage in the corner of the room, she’d asked, “Is that legal?” Another time, while they were doing it, a girl had asked him whether he wanted to do something that he’d previously imagined only porn stars did. He did (really) want to, so they did, but he knew that she wasn’t “the one.” Afterward, he lay in bed wracked with questions about why it had happened: had she enjoyed it? There was no way to tell, and it hadn’t even felt that
good.

The call-back for kids in the tri-state area was held in an office building on 43rd St. in New York; everyone else went to a call-back in D.C. The New York call-back was huge. Girls wearing dark sunglasses and carrying headshots were lined up down the block, unscrewing lip-gloss wands to touch up their raspberry stains and frosty pinks. Kristy knew she wasn’t much like any of these girls and hoped this would give her an edge. She had roller-bladed uptown that morning from her mom’s house on East 12th Street, crossing town on 14th.

Kristy crouched next to the building and traded her blades for the beat-up black Docs in her backpack. She was ready. She’d felt intense desire, almost a wish, to be part of the cast of “7&7” since receiving the call-back notice in the mail two weeks ago. She’d despised the show in high school and had watched only to observe the stupidity of her peers.

Maybe it had to do with how she’d been feeling since her mother had passed. Of course that was it, but it was too depressing to think about. She tried to focus on how fun it would be to be on TV and piss off all the establishment types; she imagined flipping off the camera in the confessional, flashing the camera, mooning the camera, and making a name for herself based on her louche behavior and numerous tattoos. “The one with the tongue ring,” they’d call her. Just thinking about it made her giddy.

Inside, she met with a tall blonde woman and a mid-thirties executive type wearing a newsboy cap and a black Foo Fighters tee shirt. She took out her camera and took a Polaroid of him right away, holding the photo between her thumb and forefinger,
delicately. She could tell that all of it—the camera, the tattoos, the roller-blades slung over her shoulder—was having the desired effect. It was almost too easy. The Foo Fighters guy—Tom was his name—seemed to want to ask her out to dinner by the time she’d told them she was 23, a bartender, lived on her own and “bladed everywhere.” “My boyfriend is actually a tattoo artist,” she said, just to see the deflated look in Tom’s eyes. But she didn’t have a boyfriend and hadn’t had sex at all since the night of her mother’s wake. The wake had been at McSorley’s. Her six Irish uncles had stayed all day and all night, toasting Maggie, their kid sister. Kristy had loved and hated it and felt nothing, all at once. Her mother had been the only person she’d ever known who had any sense of humor. Everyone else was speaking a foreign language.

Charles and his sister had driven in from New Jersey. Their parents didn’t know where they were going, and Charles wanted badly to keep it that way for as long as humanly possible. They’d told their father that they were driving into the city for a youth group field trip. It was difficult for Charles to lie to his father, a man whose big frame and deep voice had been his guide in so many situations. But he knew that his father—a minister, and unfailingly moral—would hate the idea of Charles seeking even temporary fame.

They arrived at the building in midtown and Charles realized that he was one of only three black kids there. He felt like he often did in such situations: mostly worried, on edge, but slightly emboldened too. He didn’t watch “7&7” much, but when he’d seen the commercial asking for audition tapes he’d imagined that it would be a way to gain some experience—any experience, it didn’t matter what kind. He was enrolled in community college but hated everything about it, from the dry courses he was taking in
Communications to the dull-eyed girls he tried to talk to at lunch or on his way to his car after class. Charles felt deeply misunderstood, but he struggled to understand himself. Nobody ever seemed to ask him what he wanted to be, or why.

“What are your goals, Charles?” asked the guy in the Foo Fighters tee-shirt, during the interview. Charles wanted to hug him.

“I want to be known as a good person,” he said decisively. “And more important, I want to be loved. By many.” The Foo Fighters guy nodded in a way that suggested deep understanding. Charles left the room feeling full of hope.

The contract said that “Move-In Day” was September 5th, which, for Charles, meant he wouldn’t be going back to school at all.

Mandy was the sweetest, most beautiful girl any of them had ever met. What’s more, she was one of those sweet, beautiful girls who—through some accident of protective parenting or, God forbid, some early traumatic experience—existed in a cloud of serene humility. She either didn’t know she was beautiful, or she didn’t care. Maybe Mandy didn’t know, since none of them had ever seen her look in a mirror or apply any makeup. She made putting on Chapstick seem vain and indulgent. In fact, it was surprising that she’d wanted to be on TV in the first place, but it was clear why she’d been cast. She was five-ten, with porcelain skin and black hair; she dressed in soft sweaters and wrap-around print dresses. She was a New Yorker, with wealthy, conservative Korean parents. More remarkable even than her beauty was her sweetness. Mandy had a whole catalog of wholesome habits that structured her life in the house, many of which benefited everyone else.
Most astonishing was her cooking. Mandy was the only one who cooked, every day. There were always leftovers from her meals in the refrigerator, which was otherwise used only for beer, Mike’s Hard Lemonade, and bars of hardened chocolate brought home from the bodega at odd hours of the night.

All three boys loved Mandy but it was as if their reptile brains registered right away that they couldn’t have her. In the confessional, Mandy tended to say things about her housemates that highlighted their good qualities, or she’d tell little stories about things she’d seen that day—a bird perched on her windowsill (she’d woken up to the sound of its wings flapping), or sometimes something more distressing: a store owner she’d seen kicking a homeless man. Most of this footage ended up on the cutting room floor.

There was nothing to be done about Cyrus. They tried to be nice to him, but he made it so hard. He was from Seattle; his dad was an “internet mogul”—his words. How could you call a member of your own family a “mogul” with a straight face? He was constantly entering rooms into which he hadn’t been invited, and there was something about him that made the skin crawl. He was creepy with the girls; he would “accidentally” open the bathroom door in the morning while one of them was showering. He would come up behind Mandy in the kitchen and put his hand on her neck in a mock-familial way.

They felt bad for him, to a degree; it might not be his fault that he didn’t know how to behave. He was the only child of filthy rich parents who collected paintings and went out to fundraisers or club dinners six nights a week. The first week, a few of them had gathered around the house computer while Cy was sleeping and searched the web for
his last name. His father had been on the cover of Forbes magazine, a short, nerdy man with glasses and a paunch.

Cyrus was happy, though, to be on “7&7.” He’d expected to be chosen. He’d always known he would be famous someday.

And then there was Rosie. Rosie was the fourth girl cast, and she was either stupid or crazy–nobody could decide which. Over time, they came to suspect she was both.

The audience and the press had a field day with the “bisexual love affair” between Kristy and Marisa. Nobody would have suspected it of Marisa, least of all Marisa. She imagined her parents watching the footage taken with the night-vision camera after Kristy had turned off the lights. The edit only showed the hump of Kristy’s back moving under the white sheet, and Marisa wondered what the editors saw before they made cuts. Did they keep the out-takes in some pervy file on their hard drives? Kristy was okay with exhibitionism, drawn to it, even, but Marisa was paranoid that there were hidden cameras in the bathrooms. Bathrooms were off-limits, they’d said, but who knew? Marisa found herself embarrassed by things she knew they would never use for the show. They were too real, somehow: the moment when she’d caught herself picking her nose while reading Rolling Stone on the couch, or the time that she’d fallen asleep on a beanbag chair in the common space and woken up with a puddle of drool next to her mouth. If not for the cameras, she would have just wiped it up with her hand and then wiped her hand on her jeans, but since she knew someone was “watching” her, she went to find a tissue.

She’d slept with Kristy for the first time the night after they all went to a dance
Marisa had never liked that sort of situation. She hated strobe lights, and shouting over music that was too loud. But the producers had pushed them all to go out, “have some fun.” Ever since they’d met on the first day of shooting, Kristy had playfully flirited with Marisa. She made Marisa unsure of herself, nervous, but in a good way. Then there were other times when Kristy seemed genuinely not to like or care about Marisa at all; it became a kind of game that Marisa played with herself, anticipating whether or not Kristy would be nice to her.

(In the confessional, Kristy said, “Marisa is a babe.” Marisa said, “You know, Kristy is one of those girls who would never have wanted to be friends with me in high school. But we’re not in high school anymore, so, maybe we’ll be friends.”)

Marisa dressed up for the club in a sparkly red halter top with no bra and a black miniskirt. She snuck away from the cameras and bummed a joint from a guy with a goatee, who had offered to buy her a drink at the bar. She and Kristy smoked the joint behind the club, outside the fire exit. All of a sudden Kristy got sentimental. “You know,” she said, “you’re the only one here with any class,” and Marisa was surprised. Kristy touched Marisa’s face with the back of her index finger. She offered Marisa her hand and they went back into the club and danced for a long time. Before Marisa knew it the cameras were recording them kissing on the dance floor and then, back at the house, Kristy on top of her on the couch.

She might have been more judgmental of herself, or questioned herself more, except that it felt so good.

Jonathan knew Rosie had a thing about his rabbit. She hated it. (Jonathan had always
assumed that girls would fall in love with Eli, that being a rabbit-owner would only make him more attractive in their eyes, but in most cases they were either neutral or vaguely grossed out.) Not that Rosie was a normal girl by any stretch of the imagination, or someone whose love Jonathan sought, but her hysterical aversion to Eli really bothered him. It was easy to get Rosie started, but nothing sent her off the handle like coming home and seeing Jonathan relaxing with Eli on the couch. Eli was like that—very laid-back—he would sit in someone’s lap for hours without fidgeting.

Rosie indulged in a lot of name-calling, directed at Jonathan and also at Eli. (In the confessional, Rosie said: “I know it sounds weird, but I’ve never really understood why people want to get pets. You just have like, an animal in your home. They shed. They shit. I am like terrified of coming home and finding rabbit shit in my room.”)

Rosie was a short, extremely thin, muscular girl who ran for long stretches, up to ten miles a day. She wasn’t training for anything, she said, she just liked to be healthy. But she could just as easily eat a whole box of Entemman’s cinnamon rolls in front of the group TV. She had a boyfriend at home in upstate New York, but she flirted with all of the boys in an aggressive way. Had the gender roles been reversed, she would have gotten in trouble.

(In the confessional Jonathan said: “I do feel a little uncomfortable.”)

Her boyfriend’s name was supposedly Blaze. The story went that she stayed with him out of fear, because he was insane with jealousy and prone to violence. Two years ago, she said, she’d tried to break up with him, but he’d smashed in her bay window with a baseball bat. She’d had to take out a restraining order. The others suspected that Rosie might be “prone to violence” too.
One day, Jonathan came back to his room to find that Eli wasn’t in his cage. The door to the cage was wide open.

(In the confessional, Jonathan cried.)

Jonathan was not the kind of person who would ever have accused someone–especially a girl–of doing something as horrifying as deliberately releasing a pet rabbit. But he could tell that something weird was going on when Rosie seemed to know exactly how the lock to the cage worked, and ‘could have’ broken spontaneously. She was overzealous in her sympathy, too. Jonathan was very sensitive to facial expressions, since–nobody knew this, but–he’d been born with a small but significant hearing problem and sometimes couldn’t understand people without reading their lips.

Jonathan had had Eli since his twelfth birthday, when he had found the cage next to his bed in the morning, covered in blue ribbons and balloons.

Mandy and Charles developed a relationship based on talking about their feelings, which developed into a relationship based on talking about their strict Christian parents. This developed into a relationship based on talking about Mandy’s mother’s cancer. Charles was the only one she told. The cameras caught them sitting on the fire escape with mugs of tea, whispering, Mandy wearing Charles’s grey hooded sweatshirt. The microphones picked up Mandy’s soft voice talking about remission, courses of chemotherapy.

(In the confessional, Charles said: “I think Mandy really trusts me. And, you know, I trust her too. We’ve shared some pretty deep, personal information.”)

Mandy had to leave the house when there were two weeks of shooting left. Kristy
and Marisa sat on their beds in the shared girls’ bedroom, watching Mandy fold her beautiful clothes into perfect piles. Marisa came up behind Mandy and gave her a long hug, rubbing her back with the palm of her hand. Kristy hung back, watching, not knowing what to say. It felt strange to watch somebody else have a painful experience that you’d thought of as fully, singularly your own. But later, off-camera in a coffee-shop, Kristy wrote out a card to Mandy and pasted a picture from a magazine on the front, an image of a heart in flames.

(In the confessional, Charles said: “I guess Mandy’s mom took a turn for the worse.” He put his hand to his forehead, real tears on his cheeks.)

After Mandy left, they subsisted on Nutrigrain and Kudos bars and Fruit by the Foot. They were all young enough then that they still really wanted someone to take care of them.

As if it were destined, Cyrus and Rosie had sex, hopelessly drunk after going out together when everybody else had left them at home one night. “Yo, I don’t think they like us,” said Cyrus, and Rosie said, “We’re better than them.” She did so many tequila shots at the bar that Cy was worried the bartender might either kick them out or accuse him of trying to date-rape her. He steered her toward the door, finally, while she yelled at the bartender for over-charging her Mastercard. In the cab, cameras close to their faces, they made out. Cyrus pawed at her shirt. It was true what they’d said would happen, you did forget that you were being filmed after a while.

The house was empty, and in a scene that would later become famous, Rosie stripped down to her lacy red underwear in the kitchen and implored Cyrus to f*** her on
the kitchen floor.

In the end, they were in Cyrus’s bed when everyone else came home from the club. Jonathan and Charles opened the door on them. They turned on the lights and shouted “Whoaaaa,” over and over, laughing and shielding their eyes. “You better hope Blaze doesn’t find out,” said Rosie, flipping her hair and slamming the door behind her, wrapped up in Cyrus’s sheet, alarmingly angry. She seemed already to have moved past what had been, for Cyrus, an extremely passionate encounter.

Cyrus hoped Blaze either didn’t exist, or didn’t watch TV.

A lot of other things happened, too. Marisa’s parents came to New York and took her out to dinner; she invited Kristy. Communication broke down when Kristy referred to herself as bi. Later, Kristy kissed Marisa full on the lips in front of Marisa’s father. When Marisa yelled at her about it, later that night, Kristy said “I don’t owe you anything,” in her bitchiest voice. Things were never quite the same between them from then on. Marisa was hurt by Kristy’s disrespect; Kristy hurt by Marisa’s basic loyalty to her family.

Charles and Cyrus got into fights about small things, mostly related to Cyrus’ spoiled notion that someone would always clean up after him, and Charles’ defense of Mandy, who usually did clean up after everybody, including Charles.

Drunk one night, Jonathan broke down and told Marisa that he thought Rosie had let Eli out of his cage. “Nuh-uhhh,” Marisa breathed, her face sad and sympathetic. Jonathan leaned over and kissed her, so grateful that she understood. They fell asleep on the couch together watching Nick at Nite.
For Kristy’s birthday, Marisa bought an amulet carved out of purple rock, shaped like an owl. It made Kristy cry. The gift led to a conversation about what everybody’s spirit animal might be: Kristy was an owl, obviously; Charles was a noble lion; Jonathan was a golden retriever; Rosie claimed to have been a housecat in another life; Cy refused to play and announced dismissively that humans project human characteristics onto animals. Marisa said that she felt like a monkey most of the time, and everyone laughed. Marisa was the one who knew how to make them feel like a group.

They heard selective, edited versions of each other’s pasts. Kristy told Marisa about her mother’s clothes, how she still hadn’t given them to the Goodwill. Marisa revealed that nothing bad had really happened to her, and that this was a point of insecurity for her—would she ever develop any depth? Charles said that he wasn’t sure he would raise his kids religious. “Do you really believe in God?” Marisa asked him. He said he did. Cyrus confessed to only having had sex twice in his life—once before the show began, and once with Rosie. The first time, he said, had been “sincerely disappointing,” which left them all wondering about the second time.

Jonathan talked about wanting to find The One, about how nobody really understood him because they expected him to be this perfect, golden boy.

(In the confessional, Rosie said: “These kids are so f***in’ emo.” Often, Rosie’s confessional tapes were so crowded with expletives that the editors judged them unusable, which everyone agreed was too bad, considering her vast swath of incendiary and nonsensical remarks.)

They took the customary, spring-break style trip, this season to Miami Beach. They
stayed in two double rooms, the girls in one and the boys in another. During the day, the girls (minus Rosie) hung out by the pool with sunscreen and magazines. The boys played beach volleyball; girls in bikinis introduced themselves to Jonathan. At night, Cyrus sprang for margaritas for everyone in the cabana, and they toasted each other and their burgeoning friendships. Drunk, the boys ordered the adult channel in the hotel room and Kristy and Marisa ordered “Pretty in Pink.” Rosie came back to the room and threw herself onto the empty bed. “What’s wrong?” Kristy asked her, and Rosie’s face broke into her maniacal smile. “Nothing,” she said. “I met the man I’m going to marry today.”

She’d met him on the beach. He was a businessman covered in baby oil who wore a Hawaiian shirt over a speedo. They’d seen her talking to him; the cameras had watched them wandering by the lifeguard stand, Rosie half his size in a polka-dot bikini. Stew was his name, and he lived in Florida year-round. “I’m f***in’ staying,” said Rosie, unpacking her duffel bag as if she meant she was going to stay here, in this hotel room, forever. Drifting off to sleep that night, Rosie murmured, “I don’t see why I’m being forced to room with the lesbians.”

The girls found a note from Rosie on the desk in their room when everyone was getting ready to leave for the airport. “C-ya later,” it said. There was an empty seat on the flight where Rosie would have been, and though nobody wanted to say it out loud, things were never as interesting without her around. But maybe it was just the let-down, coming home from Miami.

(In the confessional, Cyrus said, “Am I sad to see her go? No. Will I remember her forever? Probably.”)
In 2008, Marisa sat flipping through the cable guide in her house in West Palm Beach and saw a listing for an episode of “7&7,” from her season. They were hardly ever aired; there had been almost fifteen seasons made before the show was cancelled, superseded by ever more sensational series. And Marisa’s season, Six, had been deemed boring even while it was airing. She read the episode description with interest:

*Episode 14: “Down the Rabbit Hole.”* Jonathan’s pet goes missing. Rosie and Kristy get in a political debate. Charles and Mandy are spending a lot of time together.

She didn’t particularly want to watch it. She was older. Six months of time spent with the same six people didn’t seem like a big deal now, and her memories of that time had been replaced by happier, calmer memories from her twenties. Not everyone had been so lucky. She kept in touch with Kristy, who still bartended and still lived in her mom’s old apartment in the East Village, surrounded by years of a hard-drinking single woman’s clutter. And Jonathan had been killed in a drunk driving accident in 2006, after he’d moved to Montana. His dog had been found in the car with him.

Marisa watched the episode. It would have been hard to turn it off. An eighteen-year-old version of herself was braiding her hair in front of the dressing table mirror in the girls’ bedroom, chewing gum. She had a sharp memory of the stuff the producers had used to furnish that apartment: cheap but trendy shag rugs, thousands of glow in the dark stars above their beds. She imagined the production intern who had been given the job, before they’d moved in, of climbing a ladder and pressing each star onto the ceiling.

Then there was the footage of Jonathan coming into his bedroom and finding Eli gone. His shaggy hair fell into his face as he leaned over the cage. “Eli?” he called, as if the rabbit would know to answer to its name.
Private Travel

They got into their first argument in the Jeep that picked them up from the airstrip, which they were sharing with a Dutchman. He sat in the front seat; Ginger and Susan were in the back. Ginger said there was no need to tip the driver, that it simply wasn’t done here. Susan wondered politely whether it could hurt to give him a few US dollars. The Dutchman turned around to watch them.

“It’s not like in the States,” he said, “you don’t need to give them extra money.”

The driver looked straight ahead. He had driven them down miles of unpaved road; here they were at Sabi Sands, though the sun had gone down on the way to the lodge and Susan could only see the dark outline of the main building and its surrounding huts.

“Come on,” said Ginger, after they slowed to a stop, and she and the Dutchman went for the doors to the Jeep. The driver sprang neatly out of the car. Susan sat in the backseat and mulled the situation over in her mind. She’d promised herself she wouldn’t let Ginger bully her on this trip. Ginger was already limping toward the lodge with her rolling suitcase, followed by the Dutchman. Susan pulled a five dollar bill from her purse.

“Here you go,” she said to the driver, after he had lifted her two overstuffed suitcases from the trunk. He thanked her and drove off.

The following morning, they were served instant coffee in the lodge before going out on their first game drive. Susan was more than tired. Her whole body felt heavy. She poured condensed milk into the small cup of Nescafe.
“It’s instant,” said Ginger, and Susan nodded. The Dutchman wandered over to them in a safari hat. Susan noted his halitosis for a second time.

“Sleep well?” he asked them.

“Well, not really,” said Susan. “The time difference.”

“Ah, yes,” he said. His s’s were thick and lispy. “It takes at least as many days to recover from the jet lag as there are hours different.”

“Your English is very good,” said Ginger. “Do you speak Afrikaans?”

“I can understand it,” he said.

“I have South African ancestors,” he said, “boers.”

“Right,” Ginger said, “it means farmers.”

“Precisely,” the Dutchman said.

Susan said that she was excited to get going and to see some animals. The Dutchman raised his voice a decibel. “Maybe we will also see some bushmen!” he shouted. “Some real African savages!” He laughed, and Susan took her sunglasses from her bag.

Ginger had shown Susan her favorite YouTube videos of the South African wild dogs at their office in travel agency, in preparation for their trip.

In one video, three or four of the dogs chased after a long-legged mammal (“a lundu,” explained Ginger) and pulled it to the ground, killing it by gradually relieving it of its innards. Susan had said she hoped the game drives wouldn’t be quite so gory, and Ginger had looked at her, aghast. “Well, they’re wild animals,” she’d said.

Ginger and the Dutchman were in Susan’s jeep, of course. They hadn’t seen a
thing yet, but the light was just beginning to spread out over the entirety of the savannah. The view itself was enough for her. She hadn’t been expecting it to be quite so breathtaking. Her breath felt quite literally caught in her throat.

Ginger was on her left, leaning eagerly over the edge of the Jeep in a way that made Susan nervous. What if an animal leaped up and bit off one of Ginger’s outstretched hands? Ginger had brought a small cellphone-sized camera that plugged into her laptop. She planned to download each day’s footage and send it to their boss at the agency, for whom they were meant to be researching properties all over Southern Africa. Susan had no such professional ambitions for the trip; she disliked her job deeply and felt that this perk, this gift of a trip to Africa (Ginger notwithstanding) was her reward for the dismal work of the last seven years.

On her right, the Dutchman inserted his thumb and forefinger into the front pocket of his button-down shirt and pulled out a plastic sack wrapped with a rubber band. He said something she didn’t understand, opening the bag toward her face.

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“It’s drop,” he said. “Dutch candy.”

The candy was black. A smell that reminded her of gasoline drifted from the bag.

“Oh, no thank you,” she said. He popped one in his mouth, smiling.

“There they are!” Ginger shrieked, leaning still further out of the vehicle. Their guide explained that this was a pack of South African wild dogs. The dogs were endangered, he said, one of twenty-five endangered species in South Africa.

The pack of dogs, ten of them at least, gathered near a patch of water on the flat ground. Some drank, others bathed. They moved with the slightly nervous head jerks
and quick paces that one recognizes in domesticated dogs, but their features were different: their ears, in particular, were as round as a teddy bear’s.

“These are intensely social animals,” said their guide. Susan watched them for signs of sociability, but the dogs didn’t seem to be paying much attention to one another. Maybe this is what real social life was, she mused: just being together.

Dinner that night was held in a spacious dining room in the main building of the lodge. Susan had spent the afternoon reading her book on the private sun porch off the cabin she shared with Ginger; Ginger had sent a few work emails and then joined Susan with her Kindle. But as soon as she’d sat down, she’d incited an argument about why it was stupid for Susan to have brought two heavy books—why didn’t she just buy a tablet already? Susan engaged in the argument, but her heart wasn’t in it. Her book languished in her lap.

Susan had put on make-up and a white blouse for dinner, though Ginger insisted that this, too, was unnecessary and might even be viewed as “weird” by the staff and other guests. Susan noted, inwardly, with some relief, that the Dutchman was already seated at a round table with another couple. She waved at him from across the room, and though he waved back she felt self-conscious and straightened her blouse and touched her gold earrings. Ginger had been right, she was too formal. But she couldn’t very well wear jeans to dinner like Ginger, whose waistband sagged and revealed the tiniest but most embarrassing streak of black panty.

When the dishes were cleared, they were offered tea or more Nescafe, both of which Susan declined. But before the tea was served, the lodge owner emerged from his
office and quieted the diners. There were tears on his face.

“I must inform you guests,” he said, “that our former president, our Madiba, Mr. Nelson Mandela, has passed away tonight.”

“Oh my god,” Ginger shouted. She’d lived in South Africa for nearly twenty years, through most of the ‘80s and ‘90s. Susan knew well how attached she was to the country. The lodge owner looked as if he wanted to say more, but he seemed overwhelmed by the task of translating the magnitude of the event to this host of foreigners. “He was 95,” he said simply, and turned away.

The lodge staff wheeled an old television set into the common area after dinner so that everyone could watch the South African coverage of Mandela’s death, though the passing itself hadn’t been sudden or dramatic and indeed had been expected after his long sickness. Many of the lodge guests seemed stuck now in a moral quagmire, wondering when and if they would be allowed to go to bed, to pour themselves a drink, or to play cards at the corner table. Every one of them knew how important it was, of course, but almost none of them felt connected to the man in any tangible way. Of course, they could connect the moment to moments in their own lives (the Americans naturally thought of JFK) but that was only a secondary and fleeting association. The impact wasn’t sufficient for them to put off their plans for the evening–especially while on vacation.

Susan and Ginger sat near the television while Ginger narrated the series of still photographs on view, showing the great man at various stages of youth and age. Susan didn’t know much about Mandela but she’d always felt connected to him. She liked to
tell people that she was sure she’d been black in another life. Though she’d never explicitly suffered in her own life, she felt that she knew the suffering of oppression. She wanted to cry, watching the succession of photographs—here Mandela was with his young wife. Here he emerged from prison to the reception of an overjoyed crowd. Susan did cry, silently, without attracting even the slightest notice from Ginger, who was deep in her own memories.

That night, as Susan slept beneath the canopy of mosquito net, Mandela came to her in a dream. In the dream, Susan was young, and she’d gone to watch Mandela speak in a hot town square. At first she could only see the outline of his face very far away, but soon he began to walk through the crowd and touch people’s hands. They reached out to him and he took their hands with great gentleness and grace. She felt the desire to touch his hand build and build as he approached her, until finally he was in front of her. “Susan,” he said, the corners of his mouth twitching as if he knew her secret, and then he reached out and touched her forehead. Her body was filled with a great suffusion of kindness and well-wishing, so much so that she woke and sat up in her bed. She moved the mosquito net aside and walked over to Ginger’s bed. For the first time, Ginger seemed precious to her, a soft and pliable being like herself.

In the morning, about half of the staff had gone into town to participate in the public mourning in Cape Town, but since the guests had paid for their rooms and activities on that day like any other, the remaining trackers took them out to view game after an early breakfast. Ginger was in a foul mood. She walked silently, grim faced, between Susan
and the Dutchman as the group loaded into the 4x4. The light was still gray and faint. The other passengers looked sick or ghostly to Susan, and she noticed their points of vulnerability, the hairs not combed into place, the crusty eyes. She had a sudden memory of her mother reaching over to tenderly brush away an “eye-crusty”; her mother had died in the fall, leaving Susan to fend for herself in middle age. There seemed to be no man who would help her, only her sister who lived with her and paid just a third of the rent because she was in night school. She wasn’t much help with anything except sometimes finishing off the last of the Tate’s cookies in the middle of the night.

The Dutchman found his way to the seat next to Susan’s. Again he pulled out the bag of hard black candy and offered it to her.

“Don’t want to try?” he said, and when she shook her head he laughed as if the face she’d made amused him.

“It’s quite good,” he said, popping one in his mouth and sucking in his cheeks. Susan could see the square of candy through his pale cheek-skin.

Everyone in the Jeep turned to look when, across the plains, the pack of wild dogs became visible again. The wild dogs trotted toward them and Susan remembered how much she’d loved having dogs when she was growing up, how she became almost overwhelmed with joy at the excitement they showed when she came home. But she’d never had the stomach to have a dog in the city and her sister claimed allergies, anyway.

“Do you like dogs?” She turned to the Dutchman, whose face was closed in consternation as he sucked his candy.

“I like only the very smart breeds of dogs.” He was even more lispy as he adjusted the candy between tongue and cheeks.
“I have a greyhound,” Ginger inserted from across the aisle. “They’re incredibly smart.”

The Dutchman looked at her through narrowed eyes. “Are you married?” he asked her. Susan hated when people were rude enough to ask sixty-year-old women outright whether they were married. But she knew Ginger wouldn’t care.

“No, no,” said Ginger with no trace of embarrassment.

The Dutchman turned to Susan. “And you?” His “u” sound reminded her of the Austrian youth in *The Sound of Music* bidding his parents’ friends goodnight: *And yuh and yuh and yuh*. Except that the Dutchman’s “u” started out that way and then progressed into a comical “oo” sound that he clearly believed was both accurate and American.

“Not me,” said Susan, and attempted to smile. She’d never quite managed a useful self-deprecating stance when it came to being single.

“Girls,” the Dutchman said, laughing. “Marriage is a necessity!”

“No, no,” said Ginger. Susan stayed quiet. She eyed the gold band on the Dutchman’s finger. The wild dogs were about to pass in front of the Jeep, and their guide was saying that they might as well get off and have a look.

Ginger was quick to assure Susan that the wild dogs were used to humans and would not usually harm them. As the group of humans descended from the Jeep toward the group of dogs, Susan realized that she was not as afraid as she’d thought she would be.

“Don’t try to touch them,” their guide said vehemently, and Susan thought the person who tried to pet a wild animal would have to be crazy.
The group in safari greens followed their guide, who followed the pack into the field, toward a watering hole. “They gather to drink at these holes throughout the day to renew their energy,” said their guide.

Susan watched as a smaller dog playfully danced and growled in front of a bigger one, trying to get its attention. She wondered if the bigger dog was its parent. The bigger dog didn’t seem to notice the smaller dog’s efforts, and eventually the smaller dog lay down in the dust and panted.

“The packs usually have twenty to twenty-five dogs, with one alpha male and several beta males,” said the guide. “Only the alpha male breeds with the female dogs, and the beta males help to parent the pups.”

Susan watched one of the dogs bend its big-eared head toward the water, lapping it up with a long tongue. She tried to imagine herself drinking water this way, but she couldn’t. She realized that she was very thirsty, and pulled her bottle of Evian from her bag. She’d brought twenty small bottles of Evian with her on the trip, just in case.

As the Jeep drove further into the bright sun of the day, Ginger and the Dutchman began to talk about the twenty years that Ginger had lived in South Africa. Susan listened with a polite face, the upkeep of which took most of her energy as the day became hotter and the sun fiercer.

“I didn’t want to go back,” Ginger said, talking about the U.S.

“I should think not,” said the Dutchman.

“In South Africa I paid a maid the equivalent of ninety U.S. dollars a week. I mean that’s just standard here. And everyone has a maid, you know.”
“Your maid was black, of course,” said the Dutchman.

Susan’s polite face faltered. But, she wondered, who was she to feel uncomfortable with this conversation? Her mother had employed a black housekeeper in the sixties just like many of the other upper-middle class families in Saratoga.

“Well, of course,” said Ginger.

“We don’t have blacks in the Netherlands,” said the Dutchman, “except for some of the Africans who have arrived in the last decade. Ethiopians, Moroccans. They don’t want to learn the language, you see.”

“Racism is quite a problem in the United States,” said Susan, wanting to contribute.

“I lived here during apartheid,” said Ginger, seeming only to address the Dutchman.

“You know it’s the Afrikaans word for—”

“For separateness, yes, I know,” said Ginger, in the snippy tone that came to her involuntarily. But the Dutchman was unfazed and took another hard black candy from the rubber-banded bag, this time offering one to Ginger, who accepted.

“They seem to be following us!” their guide said. Susan turned and saw the dark spots in the distance behind the Jeep; the wild dogs were catching up with them. “Ah, or perhaps it isn’t us they are trailing,” said the guide, who pointed to a small group of lundu grazing quite close to where the Jeep was passing.

Susan observed the lundu: they seemed to her like peaceful, easily frightened animals. There were only four of them. They each became aware of the encroaching
pack of dogs and they lifted their heads, frozen in fear. Susan wondered why they didn’t run.

She couldn’t help but watch as the long-legged animals began to run away from the dogs, too late, of course. The dogs attacked in just the way they had in the YouTube video. Up close, strangely, it was easier to watch. A new silence descended upon the Jeep as the spectacle continued. Of course, Susan thought, wild dogs don’t think in terms of cruelty. She noticed that their guide had pulled out his cell phone and was typing a text message; he’d probably seen the wild dogs feed hundreds of times.

That afternoon, while reading in her deck chair, Susan put her straw hat over her face and fell asleep, mostly in an effort to avoid conversation with Ginger. She dreamed again that she was in a crowded city square, but this time she was a stray dog, weaving between humans at hip level and trotting closer and closer to the spot where Mandela stood, speaking. She had to get to him or else she would never be safe. When she finally reached him at the podium, she sat waiting patiently on her hind legs while he went on speaking. She could have sat there forever because just being next to him gave her a feeling of connection that she hadn’t experienced since childhood. When he turned to go, he spotted her. The look of recognition in his eyes was enough, she knew, to carry her for years. “Ah,” he said, “it’s Susan again. She’s a good dog.” He leaned to scratch her ears before she woke up.

Dinner that night was ostrich. Susan didn’t mind the gamey steak but Ginger refused to touch it. She asked whether something else could be made for her. Dutifully their

The Dutchman sat at their table with them; he’d drunk nearly the whole bottle of red South African wine by himself and his teeth were stained blue-red. He was singing a song to them now, a carol that he claimed was appropriate to the day, December 6th—the day that the Dutch celebrate their Christmas, he said.

“But it isn’t called Christmas, is it?” said Ginger as the desserts were cleared away. She had to shout over the singing.

“No,” said the Dutchman, stopping mid-song. “We call it pakjesavond. An evening of packages.”

Ginger tried to imitate the word. He laughed and leaned close to her. “Zwarte Piet brings the presents,” he said. His eyes looked like a mischievous three-year-old’s.

Susan wondered if he was remembering his childhood, and a strange flash of pity visited her mind before dissolving into embarrassment again.

“Who?” said Ginger. She’d had only one glass of wine but she was red-faced and red-toothed too. Susan thought she might be flirting, if only a tiny bit.

“Black Peter,” said the Dutchman.

“I’ve heard about this,” said Ginger. “The Dutch go around in blackface, with wigs on.”

Susan knew this conversation shouldn’t continue, but she didn’t know how to stop it. Ginger and the Dutchman barreled ahead.

“Ah,” said the Dutchman, “I’ll show you.” He plucked the cork from the wine bottle that lay in the middle of the table and he held it up to the flame of a white dinner-
candle. The cork blackened. Susan and Ginger watched as he blew on the cork to cool it, then smudged the blackened end onto his cheeks and forehead and nose.

“Oh, don’t,” said Susan softly.

He laughed at her discomfort. “What?” he said, in the way that she’d often seen drunk people begin an argument. “Now I look like Mandela!” he said.

Susan knew that there was something perfect she ought to say to him to shut him up, something righteous and meaningful, something heroic. But she didn’t have the words. Besides, tolerating bad behavior was such a familiar feeling that she almost couldn’t resist.

She told Ginger that she needed some air, but it wasn’t clear that Ginger had heard her. This was fairly standard for Ginger. God bless her, thought Susan. She stepped onto the porch of the building, where they were discouraged from hanging about after dark because of mosquitoes. She stepped onto the soft grass beyond the steps.

All through dinner she’d been having a private fantasy of coming out here to be alone: being alone was always a part of her fantasies. In the fantasy, a wild dog would come trotting out of the darkness to find her. But no friend came to her now, so she stood and looked up at the stars for a long moment before deciding to go inside to the bathroom and reapply her lipstick, at least.
**Gabriel, the Herald**

When Gabriel arrived on Earth again it was what humans call winter, and what the churches call Advent. Gabriel felt the push and squeeze of time as a human might feel a persistent stomach ache; she was not pleased to be there. The daylight bouncing off the snow on the village green was blinding.

Gabriel walked into a CVS and bought a pair of sunglasses. She walked to the coffee-shop on the corner and sat inside, drinking a latte. She got another one to go and walked to the church. A nativity scene in life-size colored plastics had been assembled outside. Blue-shrouded Mary leaned over the manger; Joseph’s staff disappeared halfway into the snow. The babe was larger than a newborn. His plastic feet kicked the air. The faces of the figures were solemn and vague, shaped carelessly for spectators who would likely not look closely. Gabriel slid the sunglasses down her nose and peered at the scene. The plastic oxen grazed with their snouts in the snow, and a layer two inches thick lay upon each figure’s head and over the baby’s stomach.

The year was 1999. Soon it would be 2000.

Joaquin was eight. He lived not far from the church, in a small house on College Street, with his mother, Mariah. She worked as a nurse at St. Elizabeth’s hospital. It was just the two of them; by and large, they were happy that way. Joaquin’s father lived in California. He spent a month with him every summer. Joaquin loved his father, but he didn’t fixate on him or give him more credit than he deserved. Joaquin knew his mom assumed he was being dismissive when he told her the distance didn’t bother him. He knew she thought
that deep inside he must be very wounded. But she would have been hard-pressed to find any sign of a wound. Joaquin was curious, loving, sometimes obstinate but never mulishly so.

Mariah, who was raised casually Presbyterian, took Joaquin to church on Sundays in a half-hearted effort to urge spirituality on him. She herself felt little connection to the church services; often she felt like a bored child waiting for Reverend Walker to finish his sermons. She had nothing to hold on to, there, apart from a bit of washed-out nostalgia for the somber hymns and the memorized pieces of liturgy. But Joaquin, who was engaged by everything equally, sat attentively through services and Sunday School, which was taught downstairs in the church basement. She marvelled at his ability to sit still, especially when she compared him to other children his age. Indeed, when she allowed herself to compare him to anyone else she knew, she was often shocked by the stark differences she observed: Joaquin ate his food slowly, did not beg or even ask for sweets, did his schoolwork, showed no interest in sports or games, spoke clearly but not precociously. Had she been a different kind of mother, she might have puffed herself up with his accomplishments. Instead, she worried.

Two Sundays before Christmas, Mariah and Joaquin got ready to go to church as they always did. Mariah felt a begrudging duty to Joaquin’s religious steadfastness. They drove up to the church. Each saw and stared at the woman standing by herself in the parking lot, wearing drugstore shades and a long white cotton dress over bare skin in the cold. Mariah wondered whether the woman was homeless, but she’d never seen a homeless person in town. Joaquin emerged from the passenger side door, where he wasn’t technically tall enough to sit, but sat for short rides anyway. He walked over to
Gabriel with such certainty that, as usual, Mariah felt inclined to watch rather than interfere. Joaquin and the woman smiled at one another, and when she took off her sunglasses Mariah saw that she was beautiful and, to all appearances, quite sane.

After the service, the woman stood with Mariah and watched Joaquin as a group of young boys circled around him. “I used to worry he’d be bullied,” said Mariah, “but he’s very popular in his way.”

“My name’s Gabriel.” The woman accepted a styrofoam cup full of steaming coffee from Mariah’s hands. “Any chance you’re looking for a babysitter?” she asked the young mother, before taking a delicate sip.

Mariah hadn’t been able to think of a good reason not to hire Gabriel as an after-school babysitter for Joaquin. She wasn’t one to judge on the basis of dress, and besides, in a conventional town like this one it would be good for Joaquin to be exposed to someone a bit outside the box. And her need was great; his babysitter of two years, lovely Julia, had gone to college in the fall, and Mariah hadn’t yet been able to replace her. Joaquin had been stuck with a string of irresponsible middle school girls who had variously eaten Mariah out of house and home, left cigarettes on the back porch, and snuck some of her chardonnay. Gabriel was an old soul, she decided.

On Gabriel’s first day, Mariah came home from a long ER shift to find them seated on the couch together, each with a book in hand. “You’re reading! That’s great,” Mariah said, closing the door quickly behind her as a snow flurry began outside in the dark.
“Yes,” said Gabriel warmly. “I hope you don’t mind, I brought some books over for him.”

“Of course,” said Mariah, her voice faltering as she noticed that there were volumes scattered all over the living room rug. “This looks like pretty adult reading,” she said.

“Oh, it’s not,” said Joaquin, looking up from his book. “They’re all Bibles.”

Outside, on the front steps, as Gabriel prepared to leave, Mariah asked her if she was a particularly religious person. She tried to ask tactfully, as she realized that this was a sensitive subject for some people, and especially for the zealous.

“That’s a good question,” said Gabriel.

Her voice was warm and kind, thought Mariah, with just a bit of an edge, like an English headmistress in a movie. “Well,” said Mariah, “I ask because I’m really excited about you babysitting for Joaquin, but children his age can be very impressionable.”

“And you don’t want him to get the wrong impression,” said Gabriel, smiling. She had wonderful deep wrinkles in the skin around her eyes, Mariah noticed. There was something gently mocking about her expression now.

“I guess not,” said Mariah, trying to communicate an apologetic but firm boundary. She wasn’t sure how she felt about Joaquin reading the Bible after school every day. Next it would be one of those cartoony pamphlets that the Jehovah’s Witnesses handed out door to door, giving instructions for the Rapture.

“I’m not concerned with Joaquin’s eternal salvation, if that’s what you’re worried about,” said Gabriel laughed softly.
“I see,” said Mariah. “Well, alright. I think we understand each other.” But she wasn’t at all sure that this was so.

Joaquin and Gabriel were done with the Bibles and had moved on to other things within a few days. After school on Friday, the two took a long route home from school. It had just snowed. Twilight had begun to settle over the town by four o’clock. They walked on a back road with no sidewalk, hand in hand, until they stood before a house where there were no Christmas decorations. A lonely and angry dog was chained to a tree. He barked at the two figures standing in the darkening light.

“I’m going to leave you here for a minute,” said Gabriel, “because if I’m with you, the effect of your actions will be different.”

Joaquin looked up at her. For just a moment, he looked scared. It was the first time she had observed any fear in him. She put her hand on his shoulder until the fear went away. “I’ll be right back,” she said. He turned away from her and walked up to the dog, who quieted as Joaquin came closer. A face appeared in the kitchen window of the house. Joaquin scratched the dog’s face and neck and the animal sat there in the snow confused by but grateful for the affection.

A woman with a narrow face emerged from the house. “Hey there,” she said, “you shouldn’t be out here in the dark. This is private property. Where’s your mom?”

“At work,” said Joaquin, not taking his eyes from the dog, who cowered under the tree as the woman came close. “He’s afraid,” said Joaquin. He looked at the woman’s face, and watched the shame as it screwed up her features.
The woman said, “It’s cold. He probably wants to come inside. Come on, Barker,” She detached the chain from the dog’s collar and led him toward the house. She seemed to have forgotten that Joaquin was there at all. She was gentle with the dog now. The dog walked next to her, his movements eased up and less tense.

“Gabriel,” called Joaquin into the darkness, “I did it. I understand.”

It was almost seven when they returned home that night, and Mariah had just come in to an empty house. She rushed to greet them, a wild mother’s look in her eye that she tried to cover up with politeness when she saw how calm and safe they looked.

“I’m sorry,” said Gabriel. “We had to make a detour.”

Mariah pulled Gabriel aside as Joaquin walked contentedly past them to his room.

“Gabriel, I like you,” said Mariah, “but you’re going to have to follow my rules a bit more.”

Gabriel was surprised. Couldn’t Mariah see that their rules were, or should be, the same—that Gabriel’s rules were the only rules of any value? She could see from Mariah’s eyes that this wasn’t clear. She put her hand on Mariah’s arm. “I think you will have to trust me,” she said.

Mariah, who felt that her power in this relationship with her son’s babysitter diminished afresh each time they interacted, nodded. She offered Gabriel her money for the afternoon; Gabriel waved it away as she had before, saying that Mariah could pay her at the end of the month.

Mariah shut the door behind her and stood waiting to hear Gabriel’s steps move down the walk. But they must have been muffled by the snow.
Gabriel and Joaquin sat in bean bag chairs in Joaquin’s bedroom. They hadn’t spoken for a long while. The light coming from the window was soft and grey; Joaquin was wrapped in a blanket.

“Can you come to Christmas?” the child asked.

“I don’t know,” said Gabriel.

“Were you there?” asked Joaquin.

“I was,” she said. She was pulling lint from her sweater and rolling it into balls between her fingers.

“What was it like?”

“It was much the same as it is now,” said Gabriel, “except darker all the time.”

“But what was it like when He was born?”

“It was much the same as when you were born. He was just a baby.”

“Wasn’t there something special about Him?”

“That came later,” she said. She examined the nails of her right hand.

“After he became a teacher?”

“Yes. Just as you will become a great teacher.”

“Was it you who decided about me?”

She sighed. “No,” she said. “It wasn’t.”

Joaquin learned fast. He went out into the small world of the town and, with Gabriel’s help, made his presence felt. One night, Gabriel offered to take Joaquin to see an
animated Christmas movie in the theater so that Mariah could wrap some of Joaquin’s presents. Instead, Joaquin and Gabriel walked toward the high school. A teenaged couple stood within the outer doors of the school, embroiled in a fight. The boy, who was tall and strong, reached toward the girl and pushed her. As Joaquin approached the doors, he heard the boy say that the girl was stupid, a slut, that her dad was a drunk and her mother a junkie. Joaquin swung the big door open with all his might. The couple froze, and the girl turned tender eyes toward the child. She babysat, and she loved anything young—puppies, kittens, children. Joaquin said, “Can I tell you two a story?”

Sometimes it was something as simple as getting someone to look up from a cell phone. Gabriel and Joaquin sat across from a man on the bus whose voice came out strangled as he argued with a coworker. Joaquin stood up, walked in a wobbly line, then sat in the extra seat next to the man, taking the phone gently from next to his ear. The man’s face went from startled to awkward as he took in his seat mate’s age and stature. Joaquin folded the phone, put it in the man’s right hand, and then reached for the man’s left. Gabriel watched as the man—seemingly overcome with emotion—sat quietly, as if a rare and wild animal had just stepped out into a clearing in the woods, and if the man moved he would scare it away.

Gabriel had noticed that people were almost immediately receptive to Joaquin in this way. They softened instantly, as if they’d been waiting inwardly for just such a moment. The first time around, it hadn’t been so easy. People had been angry and violent when faced with His tenderness, as if to allow themselves such a thing would be to admit defeat. Now they seemed hungry for it.
There were difficult cases, as there were bound to be. When they walked in the door of a darkened classroom one afternoon to find a grown man beckoning a twelve-year old girl closer and kissing her on the lips, Joaquin nearly turned away. But Gabriel met him with the force of both hands on his tiny shoulder-blades and watched with pride as he entered the room.

Joaquin asked whether Gabriel would be invited to Christmas Eve dinner. Mariah didn’t have the heart to say that she was considering firing her, that their closeness had escalated too far, that too often in the past weeks she’d entered a room she’d thought was empty, only to find it occupied by her son and his babysitter in mute contentment. She was jealous, certainly, but it went beyond that. She felt a terrible black fear in her chest when she settled into bed at night. She felt that she was losing her child, though he was sleeping peacefully in the room beside hers. She couldn’t reason her fear away; to her, it felt as inevitable as the weather.

She didn’t say this to her son. She said that of course Gabriel would be invited. Mariah would make rabbit, as her Italian forbears had. They could invite Reverend Walker too, Mariah thought to herself. She’d been meaning to arrange for him and Gabriel to spend some time together, since Gabriel’s religious convictions were so strong.

Joaquin said, “I don’t want to eat the rabbit, though.”

Mariah gritted her teeth. “Why’s that, honey? You’ve always loved it in the past.”

“But I didn’t know any better then.”
Mariah and Gabriel and Joaquin walked the quiet streets of town, toward the church, on Christmas Eve. Mariah noted the Christmas decorations as they passed house after house, and Gabriel and Joaquin nodded and murmured, accommodating her. Mariah liked blue lights on Christmas trees, and she didn’t like the new icicle lights people had started buying a few years ago. She also liked tinsel, though this was a controversial opinion in her family: her mother thought it was tacky.

Gabriel, for her part, was mournful that night. She had heard humans say it too: that the holidays, supposedly so full of cheer, brought a powerful nostalgia. It felt as if departed loved ones were in the room, sadly looking on. The heart expanded sorely with missing. Gabriel felt this soreness, multiplied many millions of times. She missed Him. She had known Him as a baby only, never as a man, though for her these states did not take on huge differences in meaning. Gabriel had loved Him as she had never loved a human, in part because it was always clear that she would not be able to help Him. He was beyond help. And she cursed herself for falling into the same trap as the rest of them, for falling in love with the sadness of it all, for loving the story more than the man Himself.

Later, after church services had finished and after the plates of rabbit stew had been eaten (by Mariah and Reverend Walker) and not eaten (by Gabriel and Joaquin), after Joaquin had opened just one of his presents (this was the tradition), and after Mariah and the Reverend had finished all twelve verses of “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” red in the face and giggly from egg nog, Gabriel went up to Joaquin’s room. He wasn’t asleep. He
sat up in his bed and said, “I feel excited. The way I usually do when I know Christmas
morning is coming, but even more excited than that.”

Gabriel smiled. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes,” he said, “but I need to say goodbye to my mom.”

He got up and put on his sneakers with his pajamas. He put on a sweatshirt too. Gabriel sat with one hand folded over the other, on the bed, watching. “It’s best not to
upset her,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “But I have to say goodbye.”

He walked down the hall and opened the door to his mother’s room. The
Reverend was lying next to her in bed; they were both fully clothed and lying on top of
the covers. Joaquin sat next to his mother’s hipbone and took her hand. She stirred, woke,
and murmured, “It isn’t time for presents yet.”

Joaquin felt like crying. For the first time, he felt that it wasn’t fair, the way it had
all been formed, his mother’s love for him, and the pain she would endure when she
woke up—on Christmas, of all mornings—to find him gone. He saw her sweet, green-eyed
face in his mind’s eye and watched the extremes of emotion and grief she would likely go
through. Finally, she might forgive him, but it might take her longer than either of them
had. He could see it all in front of him and he was frightened and sad.

“Joaquin?” said Mariah with her eyes closed. “Go back to bed.”

Joaquin squeezed his mother’s hand and met Gabriel in the hallway. The angel
was holding out to him his coat, hat, scarf and gloves.
Episodes of *Mad Men* from Memory

I like to watch episodes from Season 3 when I am completely alone, because it is very sad. It may be the saddest season.

Last night it was nearing sundown; the sun sets here at ten o’clock during the summer. I had been reading in the garden, but I came back in and poured myself some wine from the fridge, sniffing first to see how old it was, but really I have no idea. I poured some and poured some nuts into another glass and with these snacks I sat down at the desk to watch *Mad Men* on the computer. I put my legs up on the windowsill with my feet beneath the curtain wondering who might walk by and see the bottoms of my feet there.

I started with the episode where Sterling Cooper, the advertising agency, is having a fortieth anniversary party orchestrated by their new British parent company. Don is supposed to speak at the party. He is having an affair with the schoolteacher, his daughter’s teacher. The affair with the schoolteacher is one of my least favorite of Don’s affairs. It is the most painful of his affairs to watch, since she is so sincere and so young. I don’t feel bad for her, exactly, though. Her sincerity and naïveté seem like willful handicaps. Faced with Don, I think while watching her, I wouldn’t be such a fool.

It is during this part of the season that Don becomes emotionally involved with Conrad Hilton, and Hilton often calls in the middle of the night. He and Betty and their new baby are woken up by Hilton’s calls, and there are many scenes like this, in the middle of the night, Don unsettled and awake. That’s how he gets into trouble. He
wakes up, talks to Hilton on the phone, then gets in the car and drives toward the city from the suburbs, where he drives past the schoolteacher running on the road. She behaves at first in a scolding way toward his displays of interest. But then one night he shows up at her apartment, over the garage of another family’s house, and she lets him in. And he says, “I want you. I don’t care. Doesn’t that mean anything to someone like you?” She lets him kiss her.

I’m thinking, No, I wouldn’t do that. I wouldn’t let him kiss me.

During the episode I get up to refill my wine, or maybe between episodes I do this. I like to watch episodes of *Mad Men* over and over. It is so soothing, the sadness of the lines and the things that happen to the characters, and the different clothes the women wear.

Toward the end of this episode, Don and the schoolteacher are lying in her bed together. The sex must have been good, you assume, but maybe not as exciting as some of the sex Don has had with other women. Partly he must attracted to her purity. When he picks her up, earlier in the episode, out on the road in the morning, he says, “Who are you? Are you dumb, or pure?” And he is fascinated by her vocation, her devotion to children, her ideals. She is small, and brown-haired, and she wears sweet dresses, nothing fashionable. There is something in Don that wants to taste all the flavors of women.

He goes to work the next day and calls Betty at home. Betty has been up all night, waiting for him to come home. He lies to her easily about where he’s been; he’s one of those liars you can’t argue with because he makes it seem scary to ask him what’s true. Faced with Don, as Betty, I say to myself, I would be able to get in touch with him
when he’s not home. I would know how to make him talk. But I am less sure about this than I was about my judgment of the schoolteacher.
Body Dysmorphia

“I love your mouth,” he said, touching her upper lip with his index finger. “Your lips are so pink.”

She touched her lips. She didn’t like her mouth. She didn’t like the way the color always seemed to bleed out at the edges of her lips, as if colored in by a child, outside the lines.

“I love your hair,” he said, taking a fistful and rubbing a curl between his fingers. “It’s so wild.”

“Oh,” she said, “it’s such a pain.” She’d always hated her curly hair; she wished it were straight and smooth, like the feeling of fine grains of sand falling in the gaps between her fingers.

“I love your throat,” he said, and kissed her there, at its most sensitive point. She swallowed. She thought of the many cigarettes she’d smoked the night before, and imagined she could hear the air as it whistled through her throat on its way to her lungs, obstructed by tar and phlegm.

“I love your breasts,” he said, touching them through her tee-shirt.

She couldn’t argue with him there. She liked her breasts too, but sometimes they didn’t feel quite like they were hers. She felt like a spectator to her own breasts.

“I love your belly,” he said. “It’s like a little girl’s.”

She remembered her mother, always matter-of-fact, surveying her in a two-piece bathing suit inside a dressing room at Nordstrom’s. You’ll probably always be one of
those women with a tire around her middle, her mother had said. She’d never owned a
two-piece bathing suit, to date.

“I love your ass,” he said, smiling, pulling her toward him at the hip and slapping
her there, satisfied.

“You do?” She smiled, feeling that she should be coy where her ass was
concerned.

“I love your smile,” he said, becoming serious, and she had the urge to laugh at
him but instead she smiled more deeply. She’d examined her teeth in the mirror after
flossing this morning and had resolved to buy some Crest White-strips.

“God, I love your eyes,” he said. He looked at her like he was trying to steady
her, but she couldn’t stay steady long. She blinked, laughed, looked up at the ceiling.

He’d told her a story once that had alienated him from her once and for all, about
a co-ed sleepover with the other kids in his sixth-grade class at the Waldorf school. He’d
told her that they’d played truth or dare, and she’d remembered her own sleepover at
Mackenzie Richardson’s house, how they’d dared Leah to put snow down her pajama
pants and watched the old movie version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

She’d asked him, “What did they dare you to do?”

“I had to open the window,” he’d said, smiling, nostalgic, “and yell out the
window three times–as loud as I could–I love myself! I love myself! I love myself!”
Three Women

Alex: Awake again after an hours’ sleep. Luke next to her. His breathing, her breathing, in sync, out of sync. She syncs it, she lets it fall out of sync. She moves her hand from against his belly, careful not to wake him. She thinks about bedbugs, feels a phantom itch. She should have bought the plastic cover for the mattress when they were at Home Depot last weekend. She seems to feel their tiny bug-legs crawling across her forearm. She uses her nails to scratch the skin there, and then it itches more. This is how it starts, she thinks. She often has trouble sleeping.

Walks downstairs to do the dishes; she was too sleepy earlier. Now she’s tired but alert. Her hearing is heightened: she hears tree branches against the windowpanes and soft rainfall. She runs the hot water, warming her hands underneath the stream. She handles each dish and glass with rote care, while her mind drifts to other things: what they would do if they had a bed bug infestation. They’d have to put everything in garbage bags and take it to the laundromat. Absolutely everything. They’d probably have to throw out the bed: not just the mattress but the frame.

Sits on the couch, cold, with nothing to do. She picks up the New Yorker. With varying degrees of jealousy and resignation she’s watched a girl she knows—a casual friend from Oberlin—continue to publish in the magazine. Thoughtful pieces on relevant topics. She won’t read Amy’s piece now, though. She’ll read the Talk of the Town and the movie review, neutral blocks of text that she won’t have to read too closely. Then she’ll make tea.
Hallie: Says her final line: “I’ve made my choice.” With each line in a play there is an opportunity for change. She appreciates this. But she’s said it badly this time. In the tiny bathroom offstage, she wipes her face with a disposable wipe, pulling off swaths of rich salmon makeup and pink blush. She makes her face up again with street makeup. She likes to isolate herself like this after rehearsals, separate from the rest. It isn’t good, the play. She hangs the ‘80s business suit that is her costume on a wire hanger, then finds the costume girl.

Opens a beer, folds her sore knees under her to listen to the director’s notes. Tomorrow they open. Jim tells her that she’s still holding her neck stiffly in her scenes. She nods, and brings a hand to her neck as if to acknowledge its stiffness. She’s noticed this in old pictures of herself, the neck slanted forward and tense, her face frozen in reaction to someone else.

Zips her jacket as she and her friends move toward the door. Tess and Jeremy and some others. They’re going to the Sly Fox again. She looks forward to her time with these people she knows very little, when, after rehearsals, they can drink and smoke as much as they want. Jeremy flirts with her, and she enjoys the feeling of building tension, the private glances from him and the way they both focus so intently on the act of lighting her cigarette when he holds the match to it and their hands cup one another and the flame.

Wishes her jacket had a hood to shield her head from the rain. As the drops fall into her hair the twin smells of hair and hairspray are released, and she’s reminded of her years of theater in childhood and adolescence, of watching older women and girls curl and spray their hair.
*Emily:* Sex finished, he’s ready to sleep but she won’t let him. She can always tell when they want to sleep, so it’s then she has to start talking. She asks him about his family. She’s not interested in his family, but while he’s talking she can relax. The muscles in her neck let go, then the hips and jaw. He’s saying that his father caught a big fish once in Mississippi. He has a studied country-boy affect that she hates without having to think about it, even a touch of an artificial accent. She’s listening to his voice but not the words. “What about you?” he asks her. She doesn’t like to answer questions like that. She’s tense again at the thought of answering a question like that.

Flips open her laptop. She untangles her legs from his and loads a video. “You’ll like this,” she says. But she’s sure he won’t: it’s the newest “Keeping up with the Kardashians.” Their bodies curve around the glowing laptop. He complains that he won’t be able to fall asleep with the light in his face. “Fuck me again, then,” she says, and his eyes get soft as he crawls toward her.

Thinks (while he’s fucking her) about what she’ll say about him. Each man is a story. Her mother’s advice to her about youth, beauty—to enjoy the attention while it lasts—is always with her. This man fucks like he doesn’t fuck that often, and he’s young, and he has a medium-sized dick. In conversation with her friends she calls herself a size queen, and it’s not untrue: she can barely feel it unless it’s huge. Unless it’s too big.

*Alex:* Wakes with a start to lightning and thunder. She’s drooled on the throw-pillow. She wipes it, discovers she is hungry. She pulls down an open bag of Maple Bacon potato chips from a kitchen shelf. A new flavor, and not great. She stands munching while a storm whips up.
Thinks about the hurricane of a few years ago, the trees down on the street and the long walk to work up Fifth Avenue when the subways were flooded. She loves the flashes of lightning. She licks maple bacon flavoring from her fingers. She won’t be able to sleep now. She puts on the kettle. The tag on her Yogi tea bag reads, “Everyone and everything is your teacher.” True, she thinks. She pours hot water over the tea bag, echinacea.

Finds her book and curls up under the blanket, reads in the dim lamplight while drinking the tea. She’s reading *Housekeeping* again. The slim, worn spine of the book feels good in her hand, as do the soft pages, stiff in the places where they have touched water. She loves this book and tells everyone to read it. Luke tried to and found it boring; she wasn’t surprised. She and Luke get along great on the outside, but their interior worlds, she thinks, couldn’t be more different. Maybe this is true of all women and all men. She is prone to generalizing thoughts about the differences between the sexes, thoughts that she sometimes believes but more often catches, examines, and mirthfully tosses away.

*Hallie:* Walks through the door of the bar as the storm begins in earnest. Here are the familiar smells: piss and Febreze. They take a booth. The only other customers are old Ukrainian men on barstools. Jeremy brings shots of vodka and cans of beer to the table; Hallie’s glad for the free drinks. She has twenty dollars in the pocket of her leather jacket and ten in her bank account. She won’t be able to afford a cab home. Jeremy sits down next to her and starts telling her about Canada, where he’s from. He offers a cigarette, and though she won’t smoke one herself because she is determined to preserve her voice, she stands next to him in the chill. They stand underneath the awning and watch the rain
pound down. For a moment, neither of them talks, and his hand comes to the back of her neck, tender. She hears a couple fighting as they try to hail a cab. “They’ll never get one in this weather,” she says to Jeremy, who strokes the tight cords of neck muscle under her hair.

Feels absurdly nervous in this lead-up to a kiss. It’s the obviousness of it, the fact that they both know it’s coming, that makes it uncomfortable for her. It’s awkward. Some men—and Jeremy is one of them—never seem to mind this awkwardness. In fact, they thrive on it, pointing out the woman’s embarrassment almost as a bully would, provoking a blush. Jeremy looks right at her face, but she keeps looking at the street. “What?” she says, turning toward him. He leans toward her with his lips.

Kisses him. She kisses Jeremy. Kissing is not like it used to be, that’s for sure. When she was younger, kissing felt like an exalted activity. You could do it for hours. At some point, midway through college, or afterward, it started feeling like a warm-up, like swinging one’s arms back and forth before a rehearsal.

Wonders what they are warming up for, now, what she is promising him by kissing him, and what he is promising her.

Emily: Gets on top of him, makes him come, sliding off his unprotected dick at the last possible moment just to scare him. But now he’s really going to want to go to sleep, while she’ll never be able to through the lightning and thunder. “I’m scared,” she says in her best baby voice, and in response he hugs her to him roughly with the last of his energy. He kisses her neck, but soon he’s snoring. She lies tense under the now-heavy weight of his arm.
Rages against him in her mind. She’s never been able to sleep well, alone, but it’s only in adulthood that it’s become a problem. When she was younger she was allowed to fall asleep in her parents’ bed, except for on nights when they had people over for dinner or drinks. On those nights she would hide under the stairs reading a book until one of her parents found her and, tipsily, took her to bed. Then, immediately, she’d tiptoe down the stairs from the second floor of the loft, and she’d sit in view of the table where the adults were laughing and drinking. She’d wait until, inevitably, someone spotted her. One of her parents, or else one of their friends, would call to her sweetly and open their arms to her. She’d hop into the offered lap and sit basking in the rush of attention until it ebbed away. Then she’d find a spot on the nearby sofa and fall asleep with the chatter of voices, the sound of safety, in her ears.

Alex: Awake again, this time because a cat or a human or something in her dream was howling. She holds the dream whole in her mind, ponders it. But it fades. She wanders to bed, wakes Luke without meaning to. She tells him that she couldn’t sleep, that she read and ate Maple Bacon chips. He murmurs that she lives a whole life at night of which he has no knowledge. He notes the storm.

Lies awake while he falls back into sleep. She’s bothered by the thought that somewhere, something howled, there was a dream she doesn’t remember, and everything may not be quite clean in the kitchen. Soon she gets back up and puts her slippers back on. She opens the fridge and begins to weed out old food. The energy of cleaning fills her tired body. She takes out an old container of miso, wondering if miso goes bad. She examines the grey-brown lump. Better to throw it out than to let it sit in there; no one will
use it, anyway. There are three slices of bread left—someone will eat them, toasted most likely. And she’ll keep these Thai leftovers. In fact, she’ll eat them now.

Heats a frying pan. With a little oil, she scoops in the mound of pad thai. She’s very hungry, or at least, she’s full of craving. She wants to eat as soon as possible, so she takes the food from the pan before it’s heated through. She eats it quickly from the bowl, standing up. A little wine, she thinks, and opens the fridge again to find the bottle of white—a week old, but fine, tart and cold against her tongue and throat. When she can’t sleep there always comes a moment like this one, a “what now?” moment, tinged with true despair. It’s not that she’s objectively unhappy—what is there to be depressed about, after all?—but the fatigue takes over and drains all the life from her life. There is nothing, nothing to do. She settles onto the couch on her side, ostensibly resting, but with a new, more restless energy running through her legs and arms.

Hallie: In a cab back to Brooklyn, with Jeremy, making out. She opens her eyes to appreciate the skyline as they cross the Manhattan bridge, then closes them again to kiss. Jeremy chooses to give the driver a thirty percent tip. He swipes his card. They get out of the car, into the rain, up the steps to his apartment in Bed-Stuy. He asks her whether she’s drunk and she tells him yes, a little. She had a beer and a shot of vodka, and she hasn’t eaten since noon.

Kisses him in his room, on sheets that smell foreign and male. He becomes generous, complimentary, as each of her items of clothing come off. She likes this. She begins to feel tenderly toward him somewhere in here: there is a cascade of actions that bring this on, beginning with his burying his head in her neck and kissing her gently there, and ending with his use of her name, again and again, while he’s inside her. This
last surprises her and seems fearsomely intimate. She wants to believe that it’s genuine, his ardor, but she’s inclined to think it’s temporary nonetheless.

Continues to receive his kisses now that they’re resting, on her shoulders and chest. He seems unself-consciously affectionate, and she thinks that maybe he’s been that way the whole time she’s known him, to everyone, only she never noticed before. He ruffles hair, gives frequent hugs, kisses on the cheek in greeting. He falls asleep next to her, and she thinks that if she were a boy, good-looking, with enough money to give a thirty percent tip, she might be generous too.

Emily: Desires human noise, so she finds her headphones and her phone and pulls up a podcast. An interview with a designer. “Your clothes have been called timeless, feminine, playful,” the interviewer’s voice chimes. She takes comfort in the sharp recorded consonants. But she can still hear thunder. She reaches for the little box made in the shape of a shell. Given to her by her childhood nanny. She takes an Ambien. Swallows it without water, listens to the details of the designer’s process: a certain company delivers his vegan lunches to him daily at the office. The Ambien hasn’t been doing anything for her lately, besides making her a little foggy. But she wants to slow her heart, and it does that.

Runs through her other options, if she can’t fall asleep. She could wake Miles up, come up with a story to tell him about why she’s wakeful or scared. She could say that she was robbed, recently. Still traumatized. Another option: get up, get dressed, drive the car into the city and sleep at her parents’ house. She could drop Miles off somewhere else, feign emergency. This might be good. But the Ambien has slowed her down. Her
head feels heavy, despite her unease. Option three is, take an adderall, do some online shopping.

Reaches for the shell-shaped box again, lifts the blue pill between her thumb and forefinger. She opens the door to the kitchen and turns on the light.

Kills a roach sitting in the sink, waving its antennae. She crushes its body into the paper towel, then balls up the towel and crushes it again into her first. You have to make sure they’re dead.

Pours a glass of water and uses a knife and cutting board to skillfully cut the small blue pill in two. She swallows half and sweeps the blue powder on the cutting board up with her index finger, touching it lightly to her gums.

*Alex:* Woken by her bladder. She pees in the dark, lifts a new bar of soap from the shower ledge and sniffs it. She skips washing her hands, skips flushing, and stumbles back to the couch. She must have been dreaming of something bad, because her thoughts are raucous now, completely out of control. Strings of memories and worries related to memories. Nothing traumatic, just goals she set and abandoned, people she disappointed or blew off. There are so many, and she’s only thirty.

There is the high school friend whose boyfriend she made out with just a few days after they broke up. There’s the boy she dated for a few months, right before she met Luke, who doesn’t want to be friends with her despite her best efforts. She knows these worries are mundane, but their power derives from how often they come back to her. When she is vulnerable to them they are more powerful still.
She sits up, reaches for her phone, and finds the ex-friend from high school on Facebook. She imagines that she would be much happier if they were still in one another’s lives. She remembers this girl walking next to her and saying, “It seems like all you care about is male attention.” Maybe this was true then, and true now—she isn’t sure. Maybe she’s never been good at friendship. She scrolls through the pictures of this girl and her friends—there are so many!—on beaches and in bridesmaid dresses. Alex has never been a bridesmaid.

_Hallie:_ Shocked awake, hungover or still drunk. Surprised to see him there, vulnerable and deep in sleep. The alcoholic smell of their bodies and the metal taste in her mouth are unpleasantly familiar. She gets up, puts on underwear and shirt, slips into the bathroom. Does he have roommates? The house is silent, the rain has slowed, she pees. Cold floor, cold air, sore muscles. She wiggles her bare toes. Despite her physical state she feels excited, nearly euphoric, thrilled to wash her hands under cold water.

Imagines herself in this house weeks or months later, knowing its details better. Finds a mug, rinses it, drinks water from the tap. It’s sweet in her mouth and as she lies down beside him the peaceful cold feeling of the water drifting from her throat to her stomach soothes her. But she’s in no mood to sleep. Her mind replays a dramatized version of the events at the bar: the lit cigarette, his hand in her hair, the subtle touching of hands and thighs under the table, the cab-ride, all of it luminous now.

Hears birds chirping outside. She toys with the idea of leaving now, going home, crawling into her own bed. Just to get some sleep. She would have to take the bus, though, and she doesn’t have a metrocard. She’d have to get change in quarters from a
bodega. Too many steps required. Her throat still tastes like dried-out beer. She can smell Jeremy’s breath, close by.

Thinks, this is how people fall in love: they have sex, they fall asleep, and then all of a sudden someone is intimate with your morning breath. Her heart races for a moment: she’s scared herself. Infatuation isn’t something she finds attractive in herself or in anyone else. Her mother and father divorced when she was four, and her mother has been staunchly single ever since. She’s emphasized independence, and Hallie has had no choice but to listen.

Turns over, swings her legs out over the side of his low bed and begins to dress. Emily: Gets back in bed with her laptop and a glass of whiskey with two ice cubes. She sets the bottle on the floor next to the bed. First she e-mails her mom. As usual, the adderall makes her mind go wild with plans. She writes to her mom, What do you think of this apartment? There is an open house tomorrow at two, we could go together just for fun. Her mother has told her before that she might be interested in investing in real estate in Brooklyn.

Writes an e-mail to her friend Zoe, with a link to a pair of shoes. She lies on her side, sipping the whiskey, and clicking through pictures of shoes. Each pictures makes her mind feel more balanced. She likes knowing she can choose what goes on her feet. She lets her head drift down to settle on her wrist. She scrutinizes a Facebook picture of herself.

Sets down the empty glass on the nightstand.
Alex: Goes down to the front stoop to watch the sunrise. These hours of insomnia make her feel like a lone witness to life. Good thing she is a writer, or will be, someday, maybe. She composes bad half-lines in her head: *purpling clouds over brownstones...the smell of bodega coffee will always remind me of fall.* She quits thinking. In a few hours she will be expected at Bloomingdale’s, where she is a junior copywriter, work that she tells Luke is making her stupider. Secretly, she doesn’t want to let go of the security of working from nine to five. She is good at the job, ultra-competent, and she’s not sure she could bring the same focus to writing novels, short stories, essays...whatever it is people are supposed to write.

Pulls her arms into the sleeves of her sweater. Wet red leaves are fresh on the sidewalk, after the storm. Restless, she moves inside, tries to be quiet while changing into yoga pants, tank top, sweatshirt, Nikes. She eats some yogurt from the carton with a spoon.

Walks toward Atlantic. She will be the first person to arrive for the first yoga class of the day, and it won’t be the first time. She imagines how she looks—haggard around the eyes, a little sad—but maybe people can’t tell about the second part.

Thinks, suddenly, of something nice: She’ll buy Luke a muffin from his favorite place on the way back home.

Hallie: Steps onto the bus, surprised by the crowd so early in the morning. She never comes to this part of Brooklyn. She should have asked Jeremy how much his apartment costs. Hers is too expensive for her, really. Her mom helps her, but she won’t help her forever. Her pupils flit over the changing objects in her view: signs promising cigarettes, coffee, beer, sandwiches; the usual. She’s lived here all her life and at times it feels like
the city exhibits her mood. Right now it’s vibrant but agitated, colorful and on edge. When the bus fills up, she gets up so that a man with a cane can sit down. She stands and hovers over him awkwardly. He smiles. At the back of the bus, someone is singing along to music only he can hear.

Steps down from the bus on Graham Ave. She imagines the story she’ll tell her roommate about Jeremy, in a few minutes. She’ll tell her to look for him when she comes to the show tonight: like hers, Jeremy’s part is small. But significant, she thinks now. The play seems suddenly full of meaning and craftsmanship. They’ve worked hard together, she and Jeremy and the others.

Emily: Panic upon waking. True panic, the kind that makes her feel like she is falling to her death. She wakes, struggles to breathe, and struggles to reorient herself. She reaches out instinctively and clutches at his shoulder; whoever he is, she’s forgotten his name. He’s confused, thinks she wants to have sex. “No,” she says, angrily, and he retreats like a kicked dog. She regains composure, gets out of bed, and walks to the fridge. Orange juice and a packet of salami.

Sits, tired, folded over, and listens to him lift his belt from the bedroom floor. “Stay,” she says, in a softer and more feminine voice than the one she used before. She peels slices of meat from the packet one after the other. She eats five or six and then gets up. He’s putting on his jacket. “I feel like I should go,” he says, with a quick wounded look into her eyes. She raises her eyebrows, plays dumb. “That was weird, in bed just now,” he says. She looks at him, blank, as if she doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He backtracks. “I just mean, it seemed like you were angry,” and she keeps the dumb look in place. “I don’t know,” he says.
“Aw,” she says. “Isabel told me you were sensitive.” She watches him struggle to decide whether this is indeed the fundamental truth about him. Over and over she has been surprised by the way people volunteer themselves to be judged. “Should I stay?” he says, and she purses her lips playfully. She turns to the table and reopens the packet of salami.
Hotel Americano

The three hostesses had been working at the hotel for only a few months by the time New Year’s Eve rolled around. The hotel planned a big party for the holiday and nearly everyone on staff was scheduled to work, including Ksenia, Brianna, and Nell, who had the job of standing right inside the glass doors of the entrance, greeting guests as they arrived.

Nell was the oldest of the three. She was nearly twenty-eight. She’d lived abroad for the past year, before moving back to New York; she’d taken the hostess job because she’d been fired from a nannying job. Brianna was the next-youngest, at twenty-six. She’d worked at the hotel for nearly half a year, longer than the other hostesses. She referred to herself as “head hostess,” though this was not an official designation. And Ksenia was the youngest. She’d graduated college the previous spring. Her mother had died a few months after graduation, she was estranged from her father, and now she lived with an aunt in Brighton Beach. She shared a bedroom with a younger girl cousin; from her mother she had inherited their old cat, Max.

Nell and Brianna referred to Ksenia as “little sister,” because she seemed tiny and fragile. Ksenia loved to work with Nell because Nell was a good listener. “It’s like going to therapy,” she’d tell Nell after unburdening herself of another story about a boy or her money worries. Nell could understand; the early twenties were hard, she knew.

Ksenia called Nell one night, crying, after fighting with the man she’d been sleeping with on and off for months, a man about whom Nell already had her suspicions. He was forty-five; Ksenia was twenty-two. He’d told Ksenia that he was attracted to her
because her body was like a young girl’s. Ksenia said that he was her soulmate: all they liked to do was fuck, smoke weed and eat ice cream in his bed. But he had another girlfriend, someone closer to his age; the other girlfriend was the one who got to go to parties with him.

“Is this what you want?” Nell asked her.

Ksenia said that she didn’t know.

“Yea,” said Nell, “that’s hard.”

Soon after the tearful phone call, Nell and Ksenia worked a brunch shift together. Ksenia yawned extravagantly and said that she’d been up all night. Nell asked why, and Ksenia told her that the man she’d been seeing had called her at two in the morning from the hospital. He’d fallen from his friend’s fire escape and had broken his tailbone. Ksenia described going to the hospital and cheering him up with his friends, all of them sitting in a drunk, tired circle around his bed. She’d taken him home to his apartment, where she’d promised to nurse him back to health. Nell had her suspicions about nursing men back to health, but she just sighed and said that it was sort of romantic.

The hostesses always talked about romance. There was so much time to talk and it was so easy to talk about men. Brianna had been texting with a Dutch graphic designer who’d come into the hotel for dinner one night and insisted she take his number. They’d made a date to go to the movies. Nell, who was half-Dutch, rolled her eyes and told Brianna to beware of Dutch men. They weren’t evil, she said, but they were obnoxious.

Brianna met the Dutchman for coffee and a movie. She told Nell about the date later, describing the pains she’d taken to look good. (“You always do,” Nell had said.) Brianna had a huge dyed-red afro and she was the only hostess who took seriously the
management’s rule about wearing heels at all times on the restaurant floor. Brianna waited for the Dutchman outside the coffee-shop near Washington Square Park; when he arrived she was careful to smile and to kiss him delicately so that her lipstick would stay on her lips rather than stray to his cheek. His head was shaved and he had a huge and athletic body. They talked during coffee about their gym habits: Brianna liked to go in the evenings whereas he started every morning with two hours of exercise. In Holland he had biked; he also missed his volleyball league, living in the States. When Brianna suggested that he join an intramural soccer league in Brooklyn, he scoffed and told her that Americans knew nothing about football.

They saw a science fiction movie in which Brianna was not much interested, starring Rosario Dawson. Dawson first appeared on screen, dressed head to toe in black leather. “America is full of beautiful dark women,” said the Dutchman. Since there was little light in the movie theater, Brianna knew that he couldn’t see the look on her face. He brought up race again as they were walking to the subway together, this time in reference to the president. “I didn’t think Americans would ever elect a black man,” he said. “They are too ignorant and racist.”

“Do you think I’m racist?” asked Brianna.

He made the same noise as he had in response to the idea of Americans playing soccer. “You couldn’t be.” His eyebrows narrowed, as if he were doubting her intelligence for the first time.

Brianna recounted the story to Nell, who shook her head and bit her lip. “I’m not surprised,” she said. “Dutch men think they’re so liberal, but they’re not.”

“He wanted to go out again after that,” Brianna said.
“What did you say?”

“I told him, as a black woman, there are things I don’t talk about with white men. He called me right up after that and wanted to get into a whole discussion. But I just told him that I have my limits.”

Nell was impressed by Brianna’s restraint in all things. She’d been to Brianna’s house just once, for a dinner party hosted by Brianna and her roommate Possum, an English girl who owned a hypoallergenic rabbit. They’d invited three male models over, one for each of the girls. Nell had been amazed by Brianna’s spotless floors and meticulously organized closet. The inspiration board above her desk was composed of magazine clippings of John Legend and Joan Smalls. Brianna hoped to put out her first album within the year.

Nell didn’t have Brianna’s restraint, at least not in matters of love. Or maybe she’d had it at one point, but she’d lost it now. She’d been single for nearly a year and there was nothing interesting or fun about it. She was either confused, despairing, or disinterested most of the time. Only one person had jumped out of the woodwork for her, a white rapper named Aleksey whom she’d met through a close friend. He was a first-generation American whose single mother had emigrated from Soviet Russia in the ‘80s, before he was born. He lived with her still, on 155th St. He had very little money; sometimes he bike messaged for a friend who was a prosperous drug dealer and sent him on errands around Manhattan. But that was only when he was feeling up to it.

Nell liked him in spite of his flaws. She more than liked him. He’d asked her to be in his music video; she’d made a rather uncomfortable extra in the limousine scene but he’d seemed to find her awkwardness charming. He’d asked her whether he could come
home with her and she'd said yes. With his last few dollars, he'd paid for the cab to her
apartment. And then it was as if an entire world opened up for her: he'd said her name
again and again. He’d made her come on the first night. That was unprecedented. She
loved his long, ratty hair and the way he compulsively boiled water for tea, even in other
people’s homes, a private ritual that struck her as very Russian.

She told the other hostesses about him. She wondered why he hadn’t texted her
back. Nell had never had much trouble getting what she wanted from men, at least in the
short term, and so she was confused but intrigued by his disinterest. Brianna said that
Nell had to learn to play his game. She asked what his astrological sign was; Cancer,
Nell told her. “That’s the problem,” Brianna said. “You’re a Libra and you have this
huge heart. He’s a Cancer and he’s got this hard shell so he can’t accept your love.” Nell
thought there was some truth to that.

The New Year’s Eve party began picking up when Giovanni, the Colombian
doorman they were all half in love with, came to the hostess stand and grabbed Nell’s
hand. He’d been flirting with her for months, but word was that he was married. Brianna
had even said that his wife was going to be at the party tonight. Giovanni leaned close to
Nell’s ear. The bartenders had been slipping her champagne flutes all night and empty
glasses lined the shelf by her knees. “You wanna see one of the rooms?” he asked.

Nell was careful not to look straight at him. He was slightly shorter than she, but
so handsome that she felt dizzy when he talked to her. She nodded. She let him lead her
to the elevator, where he produced a key-card from his pocket and selected the top floor.
He opened the door to one of the small and stylish rooms. The bed was low to the floor,
and she dropped onto it with a sigh. She had no idea what to say to him. He opened the mini bar and passed her a Peroni. He took a bag of cocaine from his breast pocket. “You interested?” he asked. Everything he said felt like an invitation to sex.

They leaned over the low bedside table. He put his hand on her thigh.

“What are you married?” she asked.

He nodded. “But it’s not like what you think,” he said. “We do what we want.”

“Like an open marriage?”

He seemed to be searching inside himself for an answer that was at least partially true. “Sort of,” he said.

“Still,” she said, “we should go downstairs.”

He laughed. “Okay then,” he said, and took her back to the elevator. Downstairs, Nell passed Brianna on her way to the hostess stand. Brianna looked harried and grumpy, a stack of menus under one arm and a stack of winter coats over the other. It was 11:45. The dining room was crowded with rich drunk people. Brianna handed off the pile of coats to Nell, who took them downstairs to the rack and hung them one by one, checking each of the tags for the names of the designers, a habit she’d developed to keep herself entertained and cynical.

Brianna walked to the reception desk, where Omar the night reception manager had nothing to do; no guests would check in at a quarter to midnight on New Year’s Eve. Omar worked the desk five or six nights a week, but he was also trying to organize a series of parties to be held in the hotel basement. “I’m so fucking sick of this job,” said Brianna. She lifted her foot out of her shoe and rubbed it discreetly. “Do you have any weed?”
Omar nodded, his face frozen in boredom, as usual. “Meet me outside,” he said.

Brianna went downstairs to the locker room to get her coat. She would miss the countdown, but what did she care? She’d thought someone in this hotel would eventually notice her, but although guests remarked on her beauty and her big hair, few of them seemed to care about her goals. Maybe she could give out her demo or business card later on, but right now she wanted to get stoned.

Omar was outside in his Northface jacket, joint in hand. They smoked it together while women and men in fur and leather smoked cigarettes a few feet away. “Brianna,” said Omar, “I like your style. You’re a bad bitch.”

Brianna laughed. She loved to laugh, and she loved to smoke weed. She felt good, finally. The countdown was beginning inside; she could hear those idiots shouting “Seven!” In a moment of utter relaxation and joy she grabbed Omar’s jacket collar and pulled him toward her for a kiss. His mouth tasted like weed and his lips opened awkwardly under hers. They touched tongues for a moment, then broke away from one another. She laughed again.

Ksenia saw them kiss on her way out the door, as the countdown passed two and ended with the great familiar roar, this time for 2012. She pulled on her coat and looked up to find Brianna and Omar right in front of her. She’d seen something similar inside and had liked it even less: Giovanni, the Colombian doorman, had walked with self-assurance to the hostess stand and taken Nell in his arms. He’d kissed her while Ksenia watched with enormous jealousy and loneliness and fatigue. She’d been told by the manager she could leave around 11:30, but she needed more hours. She’d taken her time clocking out. It had been a shitty night altogether. The other hostesses had been too busy
to talk to her and she still felt hungover from last night, when she’d drunk a bottle of red wine in her room watching old episodes of *Friends*. The show always made her feel like she would be alright. Now she was less sure.

She put her head down and walked to the subway. The city was full of the energy of the holiday, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to get a cab. She took the tip money she’d made working coat check from her pocket and counted it. Forty-two. She bought a little bottle of Jack from the liquor store. The man who sold it to her wished her a happy new year, but she scowled and mumbled and rushed out.

It began to snow while she was on the Q train. The train emerged from underground, a moment she loved every time; she saw the snow and began to cry. “Nobody cares about me,” she said aloud in the empty subway car. She wiped her eyes with her hand and brushed the mascara smears onto her miniskirt.

She let herself into the house; her aunt and uncle and cousin were gone somewhere. She couldn’t remember what they’d said. She thought of the forty-five year old, whose tailbone was better now. He didn’t care about her either, she knew. Maybe she would quit this job soon.

Her cousin’s room, the room she’d been sharing since the fall, was warm and smelled like Herbal Essences shampoo. The strong smell of her cousin’s hair normally annoyed her, and she generally went out of her way to make snide remarks about it. But she welcomed it now, the feeling of the room, and there was Max on the bed, stretching out to welcome her home.

She dropped her bag and knelt at the foot of the bed to bury her face in the cat’s fur. “I love you,” she said aloud. There was nothing she wouldn’t do for that cat.