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It's Not a Co-Ed Camp: And Other Stories

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Abstract

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The five short stories in this collection offer glimpses of the confusion, ambivalence, and joys of childhood and adolescence.

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Second Chair

I wanted to learn the clarinet before I signed up for lessons with Shawn. In third grade, “clarinet” was the only word I ever missed on a spelling test. I spelled it “Claireinet,” staring at the back of Claire Freeman’s head while I wrote the word in cursive, looping the letters across the page, the “L” wound tight as a noose. When I was younger, there was a homeless man outside of Prospect Park who played the clarinet. Before mom died, we walked to the park in the afternoons, hand in hand, and she took out her coin purse and let me drop pennies, nickels, and dimes into the man’s clarinet case. I reached for the case slowly, passing my hand underneath the bell of the instrument, while the notes—light and warm—seeped through the slits of my fingers.

Freshman year I sat second chair in jazz band. I hated jazz band. I especially hated it when I learned the rubber underneath the seat that I liked playing with was actually gum—mounds of gum—caked on and squishy. I hated the poorly scanned sheet music where ink bled between notes. I even hated Mr. Teolis, who ruffled his toupee after every rushed measure. Mr. Teolis, who remembered which students had used up their weekly water break, but could never remember where he’d placed his baton. Mr. Teolis, who conducted with unsharpened Ticonderoga pencils. And I hated the lights, the fluorescent lights that flickered and buzzed. I gagged at the saliva that leaked from instruments’ orifices and splattered onto the floor. The boys made me gag, too, the immature boys, who would cover their farts with blasts of their trumpets.

When Mr. Teolis introduced Shawn in October, I inched higher in my seat. He was the school's music tutor. He was beautiful. The keyholes that made imprints in my finger pads seemed to magically disappear when I saw him. "Don't call me Mr. Samford. Shawn's fine," he said. He was cool. Beautiful and cool and he played a bunch of instruments.

We could sign up for music lessons after school with permission to skip that day's band class. Luke, who sat third chair, immediately elbowed me in the ribs and whispered, "Fuck, yes." He was the boy who was in love with me. Even though our Spanish homework was online, he'd always message me late at night asking what the assignment was. That was how I knew he liked me. I was sure that he did when he asked me to the fall dance. "Kate," he said, "It'll be fun," but I told him, "I hate dancing." "Me too," he said, "Let's go and not dance together." I smiled and reached out to touch his shoulder; I told him, sorry. I still went to the dance; standing by the Goldfish crackers and Sprite, and smiled back at Luke every time he looked my way. Right after he kissed Lexi, the other girl he asked to the dance, Luke looked over at me, panicked, but I pretended to be zoning out. There were days that I liked him back: when he wore his hair messy, when he wasn't cracking his fingers, when his breath didn't smell like Slim Jims.

My Dad had remarried in July before my freshman year started. Right after mom passed away, my dad didn't leave the house. He left his job at Bridgespan Consultants and lived in her robe. The first month he put her urn on the table during breakfast, and rubbed the vase like she was a genie trapped inside. During

those breakfasts he told me how they met at Red's Café, the story changing slightly each time. In the first version she got up to leave, and he told her that she'd forgotten her umbrella. In the final version, she was in the doorway and he ran the umbrella to her. Their fingers touched as he passed it to her.

Mom was never mentioned once dad's girlfriend, Stacy, moved in with us when I was in seventh grade. Photographs of my mom, the ones of her and dad together, were stacked in a storage locker somewhere. The photos were replaced with pictures of me on playgrounds, on the beach with sunglasses that had hearts on the rim. He met Stacy at the Starbucks where Red's Café used to be. She had the same curly hair as mom, the same build. It was like he was trying to find her again. I couldn't be around her and all of her stories about how cute her kindergarteners were. I would rush through dinners and practice playing until my fingertips were red. I read the Sparknotes on whatever we were reading—*The Odyssey*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Stranger*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Othello*. I talked to my girlfriends' online and we did math homework together. I kept a tab open on the side and waited for Luke's messages.

I took lessons from Shawn in the practice room by the theater dressing room. It was a small, stale space crowded with a Spinet, bench, and one foldout chair. The only light was a lamp on top of the piano, its lampshade spotted with painted leaves. I felt clumsy holding the clarinet case walking to the room with Shawn. The door closed and it was pitch black. "One sec," he said, and felt for the switch. I sat on the chair and assembled the clarinet. "You know what, how about you take the bench,

actually. It'll force you to sit straighter." I scooped up the case and moved to the bench. I wiped my hands on my legs.

"Nervous?" he asked.

"A little."

"Nothing to be nervous about. We'll start real easy. How about an F major?"

I played for him. His eyes were a haze of blue shades mixing like watercolors. He stared at me while I played, his pupils dilating. "Beautiful," he said, "Let's do the Shore piece you guys are working on." There wasn't a stand in the room, and he promised to get one for next time, saying he'd hold the music for me this time around.

"Forgetting all the squeaks, twelfth bar, your transition's not as clean as it needs to be." I tried again.

"Almost," he said. I tried again.

"Almost," he said. I tried again.

"Here," he said, extending his hand.

I handed him the clarinet and he asked if I had another reed. I told him that I didn't.

"Do you mind?"

I did, but shook my head.

"This is just punishment for not having an extra," he said, chuckling. I forced myself to join him, but when he put his mouth around the piece I felt like puking. I averted my eyes to the dandruff on his collar and felt even more nauseous.

The lessons were after school on Wednesdays. I started crying after all of our lessons. I cried when I was home at 5 p.m. I didn't know what was happening. It was like some internal bodily trigger set off my tears. I knew it had to do with Shawn, and I knew after that lesson to just go to jazz band; there was no reason not to go—the class was practically recess, a 50-minute break from analysis, labs, and calculations where I got to play an instrument that I loved. But I kept meeting Shawn and I kept crying. In order to stop my tears I would think about Shawn gagging on my clarinet, the reed splintering on his tongue.

When my Dad caught me crying in my room I told him I was thinking about mom. He stood in the doorway. I wanted him to come sit down next to me and wrap his arm around me. I wanted to cry in his shoulder. But he didn't leave the doorway. He kept readjusting his stance, like he wasn't sure how to position his body. He angled his feet toward me and put his hands in his pockets. "I still cry about her, too," he said.

She died when I was six. Most of what I know about her I learned through stories. I can remember walking with her to the park, the way she sat around the house all day with curlers in her hair. Showing me the lightning storm in the microwave when we put in tinfoil. But aside from that, I can't remember much.

My mom decorated my room and I hadn't changed it by freshman year. I didn't paint over her purple polka dots, their shape lumpy and the brushstrokes uneven. I had a pink comforter, pillows she stitched unicorns onto. The room was meant for a three-year-old who still wore princess costumes to school.

The wall between my room and my Dad's was thin. Stacy knocked on the wall if I practiced too loud. Her hand seemed hollow, like it was made of bird bones. They made love almost every night. Creaking and sighs seeped through the pillow clamped around my ears. I can't remember hearing my parents ever making love. If I had, I don't think I would have known what it was back then.

Señora Gomez, the Spanish teacher, didn't assign seats, but after the first week we all sat in the same places. Except for Luke. He had begun sitting progressively closer to me, and every time he sat nearer to my seat he turned around and I rolled my eyes and held back from smiling. At the beginning of the year he sat in the second row. But when October came he was back in the third with me. By Halloween he sat two desks away. By Thanksgiving he sat next to me and said, "Since when do you sit here?" We became conversation partners because of his new seat. He tried to flirt with me. Whenever Señora Gomez wrote out conjugations, the flesh drooping from her tricep jiggled. Luke would stare at her arm and nudge my side, laughing. He let his elbow linger against me, and I would playfully brush it off. He took my notebook almost every class and doodled. Stick figures killing other stick figures. Squidward playing the clarinet. Portraits of Señora Gomez writing on the board, the skin of her arm sagging and wrinkled, fingers fat like slugs. Underneath the picture of Señora Gomez, he titled her, "Ursula," and Señora Gomez had to send me out of the room because I was laughing so hard.

The second lesson with Shawn, I hadn't eaten all day. The cafeteria was serving Super Sloppy Joe's and steamed carrots. The cafeteria worker used an ice cream scooper for the meat and dipped the utensil in brown water before scooping up the carrots. It was disgusting. I sat down with my friends Mary and Izzy, and filled a cup of water at the fountain after finding a hair in the pitcher. I listened to Mary tell me to date Luke.

"He's cute and funny," she said.

"He's weird around me," I told them.

"So he's cute and funny and weird. You're weird, too," said Mary, and I flicked her off and laughed into my cup of water.

"Would you have sex with him?" Mary asked.

"Luke?" I said.

"No, Shawn," she said.

"Shawn? No. No way."

"Oh my god, definitely," said Izzy. "You're such a liar."

"I wouldn't!" I said. "And you know you wouldn't touch Shawn; you didn't even let Nick go down on you."

"Nick looks like he's twelve, his mom buys his clothes, and he has braces. Braces. That's just a disaster waiting to happen. Shawn's a, I don't know, he's a man," said Izzy.

"I'm with Izz. I don't know what you're talking about. I'd kill to fuck him," said Mary.

"Mary, you're so gross; why do you have to say it like that?" I said.

“Because it’s true,” she said.

“So true,” said Izzy.

My fingers were shaking when I tried to play in the practice room and my mouth was dry. Notes sounded flat and muddled. Shawn got up from the chair and stood over me while I played. He locked the door. “What’s going on?” Shawn asked. I told him I wasn’t sure and that I was sorry. “You just need some inspiration,” he said, and leaned down to kiss me. I tried turning my head but he was too quick. He kissed the corner of my mouth. He kept his lips against mine for a few seconds and then he opened his eyes—pupils expanding like black holes. “Now try again,” he said, sitting down. My fingers were shaking even more but I clamped them over the keyholes and pressed hard until the metal rings felt like hole-punchers on my finger pads. I blew hard and the notes came out crisp, piercing the stuffy air.

“There. You wanted me to do that,” he said.

“To kiss me?”

“Say it.”

“Say what?”

“That you wanted it.”

I didn’t know what would happen unless I said it. I thought about what Mary and Izzy had said, and wasn’t sure why I wouldn’t want it. I rubbed my tongue along the inside of my mouth, right under where he’d kissed me. I bit the inside of my lip there and tried not to breathe too loudly.

“I wanted it,” I said.

He unlocked the door. “Next Wednesday,” he said, and I quickly disassembled the instrument. He swung open the door and I left, the case hitting my hip. I didn’t say anything to anyone.

My only kiss at that point had happened at one of Cat Welrick’s Friday parties in seventh grade. I had on a Wild Raspberry Lipsmacker and kept running to the bathroom the whole night to make sure my lips were still shiny.

Normally, Cat turned off the lights and we waited for boys to find us, to ask us to sit in a corner or on the couch, and wait for them to talk, to recount *Family Guy* scenes we pretended to laugh at or listen to stories about camp girlfriends we knew didn’t exist until the boys ran out of things to talk about and broke silences with their lips against ours.

Whenever Cat turned off the lights I ran upstairs and sat with Cat’s parents, watching them play Scrabble and saying “No, thanks,” when they offered me pomegranate juice. But the Friday after Mary and Izzy had their first kisses, I stayed in the basement. I saw Luke that night laying under the ping-pong table and curled up next to him. The radio hooked up to the speaker played an advertisement for Nationwide. Under the ping-pong table we couldn’t see the Christmas lights duct taped across the wall, flickering red, white, and green. “You can kiss me if you want,” I told him, but he didn’t move so I leaned into him and parted his lips with mine.

After Thanksgiving Stacy’s 102-year-old great Aunt died, the one she visited in Bay Ridge every Sunday. We sat through dinner—Sizzling Rice Soup, Crab Rangoon, Mongolian Beef, Sesame Chicken—and listened to Stacy snap her

chopsticks together and say, over and over, “A car crash. 102 years old. A car crash of all things.” She wasn’t eating and Dad suggested she take the food up to her room. I went up, too, and Dad volunteered to do the remaining dishes and put the leftovers in the fridge. I could hear Stacy sniffing through the wall between our bedrooms. The sheets were constantly rustling, like she was flutter-kicking polyester. It was pathetic. I couldn’t take it anymore.

I knocked on the wall behind me. “Stacy?”

“Is everything okay?” she asked through the wall.

“Me? Yeah, everything’s fine. How about you? Are you alright? Cause I have some tissues if you need them.”

“Tissues? Oh, you can hear—no, no, it’s just the Crab Rangoon’s spicy.”

“There’s not even a kick to Crab Rangoon, Stacy.”

She didn’t say anything for a minute, before, “Can I come in?”

I didn’t answer, but I heard her kick the covers off the bed and shuffle to the door. She came into my room and squeezed next to me on the twin bed. Her head leaned onto my shoulder and I could feel her tears wetting my shirt.

“Do you think you’ll ever think of me like you thought of her,” she said into my shoulder. Her words vibrated through my body. “Sorry,” she said, “I didn’t mean—I don’t know what...How about this—yes, yes, here’s a fun idea: Would you play for me?” She sat up and looked at me with weepy eyes. She started to look a lot less like my mother. It was like she was a stunt double, an actress that finally realized she was playing a part. “Okay,” I said.

I got off the bed and started playing. *It Don't Mean a Thing. Oye Como Va. Crazy Train.* She lay on the unicorn pillow, eyes closed, rocking her head from side to side.

"You're a great clarinetist," she said. "Clarinetist? No, no, is that how you say it?"

"What else would it be?"

"I'm not sure exactly. It just doesn't sound right."

Then she got up, wished me goodnight, and went back to her room. Later, I turned off my lights and stared at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling and listened to them make love.

In Spanish, Luke sometimes pretended to look out the window next to me, but really he was looking my way. Before class I looked into the mirror inside my locker and put on blush just in case. He hadn't looked toward the window in over a week. He hadn't written me any notes. There was one class when Señora Gomez took off her sweater because she was hot and all she had on was a black tank. It looked like her shirt was trying to suffocate her rolls. Beads of sweat dripped from her tricep flab when she wrote. There was another day when she plugged in her laptop to the projector, revealing to the whole class that the last searched item in the Google search bar was, "Blood in Urine." Luke didn't crack up. He didn't even nudge me. I nudged him. He inched away from me. At the end of class when he was trying to leave I touched his wrist and asked him what was going on.

"If I asked you out after school today, what would you say?" he said.

“That I’d have to think about it.”

The end of the day came, he asked, and I told him that I’d have to think about it.

I had a lesson with Shawn afterward. It was a typical lesson; we worked on scales and sheet music. At the end of it he told me he was playing later that night at this place, Rhythm Kitchen, and that I should come if I was free.

I went, even though I told myself I wouldn’t. I told my Dad that I was going to the soccer game at 8 p.m. and then I was going to take the bus home afterward. I arrived at Rhythm Kitchen at 9 p.m. Instead of wallpaper, a long mirror stretched around the room, making people’s reflections look like cartoons. The menu specialized in different variations of grilled cheese. I sat down at a table in the back, watching people in their 50’s swirl Bourbon and munch on grilled cheese (Cordon Blue, The Fresco, Smashed Meatball). The men were balding and wore overly colorful button-downs. Women wore too much lipstick. I looked at the same people in what could have been a fun house mirror—they had stocky bodies and squished heads.

Shawn played the piano sitting in the back left corner of the stage. He wore a black v-neck and jeans. There was also a guitarist and saxophonist. Purple and amber light washed over the stage. Shawn played with his eyes closed, his fingers swimming over keys. After the first song he opened his eyes and nodded at me, and then motioned his hand to the guitarist and everyone put down their sandwiches and drinks to applaud.

He offered me a ride afterward. *No thanks. I can call a cab. I already called a cab. My dad's coming to get me.* I couldn't pick an excuse and I felt awkward standing there without saying anything, so I got in his car. I knew I shouldn't have. He drove a 2006 blue Subaru with a dented door. A freshener—Rainforest Mint—dangled from the rear-view mirror. After about a mile he pulled into an empty parking lot and asked if we should get in the back for a bit. We were stopped and he stared at me waiting to respond. I couldn't bring myself to meet his gaze. I felt so warm. I immediately started sweating, my hair sticking to my forehead. I turned around and climbed into the back. He stepped outside the car. I wanted to lock the doors while he stepped out. I tried moving my arm to lock it, but it wouldn't move. My entire arm felt numb. When he opened the door the air made the hairs on my arm stand up, but I couldn't feel the cold; I was still hot. He came back with me and kissed around my neck and nibbled on my earlobe. He pulled down my skirt and I kept laying down until he finished. Right afterward I pulled up my skirt and stepped outside, and I could finally feel how cold it was. My coat was in the car. I hugged myself and walked on a row of bumper curbs like they were balance beams. Shawn pulled the car up alongside me and rolled down the window. "Come back in. You still wanted that ride, didn't you?" he said. I hopped off the curb and got into the car. We didn't say anything on the ride back and when I got home I showered until the bathroom mirror fogged up. I put on my pink pajamas and lay in bed. Dad came in and asked, "How was the soccer game?"

"What soccer game?" I said.

"The one you pretended to go to."

“Right—that one. It was good. Cold. It was tied at the half until Kenny Barton kicked one in in the fourth.”

“So who is he?”

“Kenny Barton? Just some...”

“Your date. You were on a date, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what’s his name?”

“His name?”

“Oh...Her name?”

“What? No, no, I’m not a...Luke. His name’s Luke.”

For one week straight Luke found me after school by my locker to ask me out, and every time I told him that I was still thinking. Finally he said, “Tell me what about.”

“Well, like a pros-and-cons list. Con—your stick figure drawings are overly violent. Pro—your portraits are oddly convincing. Con...”

“I’m serious. Give me a real reason.”

“Alright. Here. You went to the fall dance with Lexi Zeigler. And that was fine. You asked me, I said no; you’re allowed to go with someone else, but you didn’t have to hook up with her right in front of me.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. I just...I don’t get...We flirt in Spanish. We have fun in jazz band.”

“You flirt in Spanish. And I hate jazz band. Move on, Luke.”

I slammed my locker shut, slung my backpack over my shoulder, and walked away. Even though I didn't before, I started hating Lexi Zeigler. It didn't make sense that he would take her; he was too good for her anyway. She wore the same pair of shoes to school every day and still had a Hello Kitty backpack. She sat by me in English and highlighted 90% of the pages in blue ink. She got caught plagiarizing a history paper and was suspended for two weeks. I thought about not dancing with Luke, the two of us munching on Goldfish and listening to him belch from the Sprite. I would have laughed and touched his arm. Smiled and told him he was disgusting.

After a couple of months I stopped bringing my instrument to lessons with Shawn. We'd go in the practice room and he'd immediately lock the door, turn on the leaf lamp, and barricade the room with the piano bench. He'd turn off the light and lay me down on the rug. It was a small, beige rectangular rug. I didn't completely fit on it. My head was on concrete as well as my calves and heels. I tried not to think of what I was doing. I tried to convince myself that this is what I wanted, that I was living the fantasy so many girls in my grade had had—that it was just life. We stayed late one of those Wednesdays and at 5 p.m. I started crying while we were doing it. Shawn wiped my tears and kept going. He said, "This is what you want, right?" In the dark I couldn't see Shawn above me, and thought that he could be anyone. I pictured Luke curled next to me under the ping-pong table and heard myself say, "Yes, yes, yes."

It's Just Water

Andrew sat in the lounge chair, eyeing the “No Diving” sign. Dan lay on the chair next to him.

“Three, Abby Alcastor,” said Dan.

“Two, Jana Cornett,” said Andrew.

“Two, Akira Thompson,” said Dan.

“Bug-eyed. Absolutely not,” said Andrew. “And number one, drum roll, Kelli Levine.”

“Too tall. Kellie Levine’s obviously hot. But number one? Please. It’s Rachel Marion.”

“Oh, shit. How the hell did I forget Rachel Marion?”

Andrew watched Rachel Marion fish leaves out of the pool gutters. She was nineteen, two years older than they were. On the rare occasions when Andrew wasn’t focusing on the swimmers, he was zoned in on her. On her red suit that cut below her hipbone. Her uneven tan lines. The freckles on her nose.

Andrew, Dan, and Rachel lifeguarded at Bryn Mawr Country Club in Lincolnwood, IL during the summer. Early in the morning fathers and grandfathers golfed. Moms played tennis all afternoon. Kids swam with their babysitters.

The lifeguards earned \$9.50 an hour. “Sixty-six bucks to sit and tan all day? Yes, please,” Rachel always joked. They showed up at 9 a.m. to uncover the pool. They lifeguarded, gave lessons, and left at 4 p.m. Andrew snuck back there at night with Dan and their other friends to drink beers on lawn chairs and smoke weed in the hot tub. Once Andrew and Dan walked over after midnight and saw Rachel in

the pool. She was with her boyfriend; their clothes were in a crumpled pile by the diving board. Andrew watched from behind bushes, trying to make out her shape below the surface.

Earlier in the summer, before the pool opened to members, Rachel had scooped out a dead rat from the bottom of the deep end with a skimmer. She shrieked. Gripping the end of the stick, she shook the rat out of the net, flinging it out. Wet fur sunk between the spaces of the rat's ribcage. When she dropped it Andrew was sure it would shatter like glass.

Andrew cried when he saw the rat. He didn't expect to. He tried to cover his tears by putting on his sunglasses. But after playing the "Are my eyes open or closed?" game with little kids all summer, he quickly realized the lenses were see-through. He immediately dove into the pool and wiped snot off in the water. When he came out he knew his eyes were red. "Fucking chlorine," he said, and ran out of the pool area, sitting in an unoccupied golf cart on the path outside of the pool gates. When she thought that Andrew was out of earshot, Rachel said, "What the fuck was that?" "He's probably on his period," said Dan, and they left it at that. Andrew knew that Dan understood. Andrew was sure that Dan had been replaying the same image of the boy for the past year as well, how stiff and blue his body was when he was finally untangled from the seaweed.

The boy drowned on July 12th, at around 10 p.m., maybe 10:15; some of the papers said 10:30. He was a ten-year-old camper at Kawaga, in Minocqua, Wisconsin, the camp that Andrew and Dan had been counselors at the previous summer. On that day in July, Andrew's cabin was on a night swim. He noticed the

boy wasn't in the water ten minutes after they got in. At first he assumed he'd gone back to the cabin; the boy hated group activities, always wandering back to his bunk. Andrew was sure the boy was on his bottom bed, hiding underneath *Star Wars* covers playing the Gameboy that he wasn't allowed to have.

"Did you see him sneak out?" Andrew said to the other counselor lifeguarding.

"Who can play that stupid Pokemon game six hours a day?"

"I'll go get him," Andrew said, laughing.

The boy wasn't in the cabin. Andrew sprinted back to the swim dock blowing the whistle, an elongated, high-pitched screech. Every counselor in the camp had been trained to know what that noise meant. Counselors swung open their doors and sprinted to the dock. Andrew jumped in the water, which was cold, wavy, and dark, with his clothes still on. The campers climbed the ladder to the water trampoline and watched. Other counselors dove down, 13½ feet, sweeping their arms through thick sand and thicker seaweed, feeling for something, any sign of movement, and coming up together with nothing in their hands. Once Andrew came up screaming, "I touched a foot!" But no one could pull the boy out. A search and rescue team was called. Within ten minutes they pulled up his body. He was blue, a pale, icy blue.

Hours later, on waterlogged benches surrounding the fire pit, Andrew cried into Dan's shoulder and kept saying, "I touched his foot, his foot," while waves crashed behind them.

That same morning at Bryn Mawr, Rachel adjusted the shoulder strap of her swimsuit and continued fishing out leaves.

"I think I love her," Andrew told Dan.

"It's not mutual."

"How do you know?"

"You're 17. She's heard your *Coldplay* ringtone, your fungi mushroom joke, and she's gone skinny dipping with you a grand total of zero times."

"Yo, Rach," Andrew said to her. She looked up at him. "When're we going skinny dipping?"

"Are you free tonight? Like around 10-ish?"

"Ten? Yeah, I think I could swing that."

"You're not going to get shitfaced, forget to cover the pool, and make me clean up the next morning, are you?"

Dan couldn't stop laughing.

Andrew walked over to her and grabbed the leaf skimmer. She studied his face. He had bags under glossy eyes and pillow marks still on his cheeks. She nearly scoffed at him.

"What are you even doing here?" she asked.

"Trying to save some lives."

"You're trying too hard."

Andrew had already made three save attempts.

Two young girls were holding their breath underwater the first time he dove in to save someone. He hooked his arms under their pits and dragged the girls to

the side. They screamed, "Put us down! Put us down!" The babysitter threw her *People Magazine* to the side and yelled at Andrew. "They're fine," she said, "Let go of them!" Rachel quickly intervened. She put a hand on the babysitter's shoulder and gave her an apologetic smile. She squatted by the poolside and looked at the girls. "Who do you think can do a better handstand, you guys or the mean lifeguard?" In seconds the girls were giggling and Andrew was forced to do handstands. He remained underwater as long as he could. Over a minute. Her voice was muffled underwater, but he could hear her saying things like "Wow, look at him go." He wanted her to jump in and wrap her arms around him.

Andrew had made similar scenes in both of his other save attempts. Parents and babysitters ran over to tell Andrew that the kids were fine. The kids always were. Andrew knew that the children didn't need saving; he just wished that he would be needed again.

Later in the day only one kid was swimming. Rachel had to run home quickly; her mother needed help moving a mattress. "Thirty minutes," she said. A kid jumped from the diving board. His babysitter tanned while listening to her iPod. After each jump he looked at Andrew, waiting for him to say something. Finally, after the eighth jump Andrew said, "Six."

"Out of ten?" said the kid, spitting water out of his mouth.

"You can try again if you want."

The kid tried again.

"Four."

And again.

“Five.”

And again.

“Three.”

“How do I get a ten?”

“You flip.”

Dan immediately interjected. “No, no, no, you don’t flip. There’s no flipping. It’s a rule and it’s not allowed.”

“Then how’s he going to get a ten?” asked Andrew. It sounded absurd, but he wasn’t joking. Dan recognized that, the creases around his eyes, the seriousness in his face.

Dan looked over at Rachel’s empty chair. “Fine,” he said and rolled his eyes behind his sunglasses.

The kid got back on the diving board, his swim trunks dripping. “How do I do it?”

“It’s easy. Have you ever played soccer? You know when you throw the ball in, how you do it over your head and throw it really far out? It’s like the same thing, but after you jump, you pretend to throw the ball at your knees.”

“It’s not going to hurt, is it?”

“It’s just water.”

Along with lifeguarding, Andrew had taught gymnastics at camp. He only explained half of the flip. An easy way to get someone upside down, but he left out how to flip all the way over. Andrew watched the kid run. He hoped he would go in

headfirst and sink straight to the bottom. The kid might bash his head on the concrete. Andrew could blow his whistle and jump in. He could bring the kid to the surface and lay him out on the side. He'd be the one to save the kid's life.

The kid sprinted to the end of the board and sprung into the air. He whipped his hands down, just as Andrew had instructed. He was upside down, staring straight at his reflection getting closer and closer to the choppy surface. His face smacked the water and he sunk down, down, and down. His trunks, legs, and toes disappearing. Andrew inched up in his chair and put the whistle in his mouth.

The kid came up and spat water out of his mouth like a fountain. "That was fun!" he said, and started laughing.

Dan ran over to the kid and helped him up the ladder. He gave him a high-five. "And it was a 10," said Dan. "Now, no more flipping."

After lifeguarding, Andrew and Dan walked home. They kicked a soccer ball ahead of them on the sidewalk. They balled up bits of skin peeling from their shoulders and tossed them into weeds lining the pavement. They talked about girls and played *Fuck, Marry, Kill*. "How many times do you think I've been killed?" asked Andrew, "You know, when other people are playing." "Way more times than you've been fucked," said Dan, laughing. Andrew punched his bicep. Hard. Dan cupped his arm and rubbed the spot he'd been hit. "Dick."

They recounted their camp memories. All the times they snuck behind the pavilion to try and get with girls who didn't really like them. All the raids they went on at night; how dumb they were, dressing in army jackets and helmets. Fourth of July fireworks. They fantasized about Rachel and date ideas. They had a list of

restaurants they thought she might like. They thought about ice-skating dates and ice cream dates. They fantasized about killing her boyfriend. Everything from forcing him to watch *Frozen* on repeat to shoving him in a wood chipper, *Fargo*-style. That was when Andrew said it. "We could just drown him." He bit down on his bottom lip and his nostrils started quivering. "Fuck," he said, and tried blocking tears with the heel of his palm. "Fucking piece of shit."

"I couldn't even make it down that far," Andrew said.

"What?"

"His foot. I never touched his foot." Andrew scooped up his soccer ball. "I'll see you tomorrow." Andrew ran ahead, the whistle bouncing against his shoulder blades.

Andrew heard the knocks at 9:30 p.m. He knew it was Dan before he went down and peered at him through the peephole.

"I'm not coming," said Andrew.

"Why not?"

"I don't need to keep getting fucked up every night."

"Alright, we won't get fucked up."

"Then what are we doing?"

"We'll hijack a golf cart."

"There's no way I'm stealing a golf cart."

"I know. That's why we need to get fucked up, first."

Andrew considered it. He turned the knob and paused. He came out and they walked the fifteen minutes to the club. The lights in the club were on, but it was only maintenance people vacuuming and changing dead bulbs. Dan and Andrew cut through the third hole to get to all the golf carts. The sprinklers were on and they ducked under rainbows of water, the grass, wet, squishy. Dan opened up the shed where the carts were charging. Blinking red and green lights illuminated the shed. A cable was strung through all of the steering wheels, making it impossible to take a cart.

“Fuck,” said Dan.

“How much did you bring?”

“Enough.”

They smoked joints in the hot tub, sitting on the ledge, their legs in the water. Neither said anything for a while. They slapped mosquitoes biting the backs of their necks. Looked in the club windows at the janitors. The pool area was dark. No one could see them.

“How did Lisa Baker not make our list?” said Andrew, eventually. “She’s top five for sure.”

“Or Taylor Read? Easily top five” said Dan.

“Before or after the reduction?”

“Before. Obviously.”

“What number am I?” said Rachel. She came out of nowhere. Andrew and Dan nearly had a heart attack. She had grabbed the railing by the hot tub and

walked up the stairs. She tossed her black heels and purse onto a lawn chair.

“You’ve already seen me in my swimsuit.”

She let the straps of her dress fall off her shoulders and she squirmed out of it. She stood there wearing red panties and a white bra. She dipped her toe into the water and sat down next to them.

“You’re number one,” said Andrew.

“Definitely number one,” said Dan.

“Thought so,” she said. “Here, I’ll take that, thank you very much...Oh, fuck. That’s strong. Jesus...Here. Wait one sec. Just one more hit...Too strong, I don’t like it. See, I just broke up with my boyfriend—got broken up with, really—so I’m going to need you guys to entertain me so I can do something besides cry. And I know: why the fuck would I want to hang out with you two idiots? I’d hang out with my bitchy friend, Jen, but she’s busy fucking my boy—ex-boyfriend.”

“Oh, damn,” said Andrew. “That seriously sucks.”

“Yeah,” said Rachel.

Dan took the joint from her and tried to blow smoke up his nostrils. It ended up just getting in his eye. Rachel laughed as he blinked furiously to make it stop stinging. “Truth or dare?” asked Dan.

Rachel looked him over and grinned. “I’m not in middle school.”

“We can talk about the environmental consequences of the oil spill,” said Andrew.

“Truth,” said Rachel.

“Truth’s no fun,” said Dan.

She tossed her hair over her shoulder. "Fine."

"Dare?" asked Dan.

"But if you're going to make me kiss one of you, you should ask a different question."

"What if he asks you to kiss both of us?" said Andrew.

She pushed herself into the tub. She walked two circles around it, swishing her hands through the water, brushing their legs with her fingertips every time she passed one of them. She looked at Andrew. "Only if you kiss each other first."

"What?" said Andrew.

"We're not doing that," said Dan.

"Absolutely not," said Andrew.

"Gross. Fucking gross," said Dan.

"Alright," she said. "Andrew: Truth or dare?"

"Hold on," he said. "There's got to be something else."

"Yeah," said Dan. "Just give us another one. Anything beside that."

"Nope," she said. "That's it. If you kiss each other, then I'll kiss each of you."

"Just for, like, a second?" asked Dan. "We don't have to open our mouths or anything. It can be quick. Like really quick."

"A peck," said Andrew. "Just like, boom, and then done."

"I'll kiss you the same way that you guys kiss. So boom, and then, done sounds perfect."

They kissed. They squeezed their eyes shut and bumped lips. They jerked their heads back afterward and looked at Rachel, praying she wasn't playing a mean

trick on them. She stared at them wide-eyed and nodded at them. “All right, then,” she said. She kissed each of them. First Dan and then Andrew. Andrew tried to memorize the feel of her lips against his.

They stopped playing truth-or-dare after that. Andrew and Dan sat there and listened to her talk about Jen and her ex-boyfriend. He’d been cheating on her the entire summer. She told them about losing her virginity to him early in May. “In his mom’s car,” she said. “A fucking Prius.” She cried. Mascara ran down her face and she dunked under to wash it off. Then, after a half an hour, she got out of the hot tub and stood with her arms crossed, letting water drip onto the concrete. She put on her dress, grabbed the heels and purse, and left by saying, “Weird night, weird fucking night.” Andrew watched her walk away, watched the wet trail she left behind, at the almost perfectly straight angle of her footprints.

“We just kissed Rachel Marion,” said Andrew.

“We had to kiss each other first.”

“Let’s not talk about that.”

“Do you want to talk about earlier?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

“I just want to know what it feels like. Drowning. I don’t want to die or anything like that. But I want to know what it’s like, just for a second.

“Andrew, I’m not going to—“

“I’ll squeeze your hand the entire time. If you think I’m letting up for even a second, then just get me up. That’s it.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Please.”

Dan relented. Andrew dipped his head into the water and held onto Dan’s wrist. Andrew sat on the bottom of the tub with his legs crossed. His arm was raised above the water, squeezing Dan. Dan wove his fingers through Andrew’s hair, dug his nails in his scalp, and held him under, all the way under so that the top of his head was completely submerged. First there was nothing. Andrew opened his eyes underwater and found nothing, nothing at all. He couldn’t make out where the rim of the tub was. He felt for the edge with his foot, but he couldn’t find it. He closed his eyes and returned to the lake at camp. To screaming counselors and crashing waves. To the orange moon—a bright bully. He tried to feel himself letting go, drifting down into sand and seaweed. He tried not to fight it, to let it happen. He imagined curling his toes into the sand, kneading the lake’s floor. That’s when Andrew said it, said the name. “Ben,” he said, his mouth wide and unhinged, a flood of bubbles escaping his lips. “Ben, Ben, Ben.” Bubbles rose, bursting at the surface.

Betelgeuse

Brian had stopped hearing the Amtrak rumble past his house. At first that was all he and his mother mentioned—which was a welcome distraction from talking about the divorce—but a month after moving to Boise, neither the divorce nor train was ever brought up. So Brian wasn't shocked awake by the train whistle when Allie arrived at 2:23 a.m. from Detroit. She'd spent three days in a window seat. A blur of fields, trees, and crumbling houses. She needed to get away. A drunk driver had killed Allie's father in April. After the funeral, after studying photographs, after smoking cigarettes with her mother on their porch, after feeling too uncomfortable sitting on her dad's side of the sofa, Allie left her phone on the bed, wrote her mom a note, and hopped on a train. She moved in with her grandmother in Boise, spending her mornings making snow angels in dead grass—blowing smoke rings into the sky—and her afternoons napping on her grandmother's couch.

Two weeks of smoking and napping was about all her grandmother could take. She poked her cane into Allie's side while she napped. She forced Allie to do something other than smoke pot all day.

"I don't just smoke pot. I do lots of things," she said, sinking deeper into velvet couch cushions. Her grandma combed her hand through white and thinning hair, pulling an old half-smoked cigarette from behind her ear.

"You smoke and you sleep. Why don't you get a job?" Her grandma stuck out her hand layered with purple veins, thick and clumpy. Allie reached in her pocket and threw her grandmother a light.

"Like what? I'm not scooping ice cream."

“I saw a sign that the zoo’s hiring,” she said, relighting her cigarette. “You used to love going there.”

“I’d rather dump vanilla in a fucking cone all summer. I don’t even like animals.”

“Honestly, I’ve had it. Apply or I’m driving you home.” Her grandma angled her jaw, blew out a web of smoke, and walked out of the living room.

Allie applied to the zoo and was hired. Her manager handed her a neon green “Boise Zoo” t-shirt, and sent her to work the lemonade stand. It wasn’t really a stand. It was a shitty foldout chair positioned next to a trashcan full of melted ice and premade cups of lemonade. People paid four dollars to get handed a cup of tap water and Crystal Light that cost the zoo five cents a pop.

Brian didn’t have a summer job. He was going to be a counselor-in-training at Ojibwa, where he had been a camper the previous six summers, but the place shut down after a drowning incident. He nearly got a job at the tutoring center, but they went with a different candidate instead, so he thought he’d get Astronomy out of the way before freshman year started. He didn’t have any friends in Boise yet, and at night he reluctantly accepted playing his mother in Monopoly or Rummikub. When she asked him to go with her to see the zoo lights at 9:00 p.m. one night, he immediately accepted, thrilled to get out of the house.

He saw Allie from the dolphin tank. The full moon skimmed over rippled water, lighting her freckled face. The neon t-shirt hung below her jean shorts, and

Brian wondered if she was naked from the waist down. No one was near her lemonade stand. She stood behind her chair, leaned on her left leg, hip cocked, twirling the end of her ponytail. She looked famous and ordinary at the same time. When he could feel his heart beating through his polo he decided he was in love with her. Fourteen and in love.

“I hear the giraffe lights are beautiful,” said his mom, walking away from the dolphins and away from the girl.

“Don’t you want to see the dolphins for a bit longer?” Brian asked.

“I can’t see them in the first place. I bet they haven’t even put them in yet.”

Pulsing orange, red, and yellow lights outlined something that was meant to be a giraffe but looked more like a dinosaur with spots.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“Perfect,” said Brian, his thoughts elsewhere.

Brian didn’t listen to his mom on the walk home. In bed he buried his face in his pillow, closed his eyes and sifted through his favorite romantic comedies that he’d watched on repeat—*Annie Hall*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *High Fidelity*—trying to copy a line for the girl.

A different girl was working at the stand the next morning.

“Where’s the other girl?”

“Who? Allie?”

“Was Allie here last night?”

“Yeah.”

“Then, yeah, Allie.”

“She doesn’t get here till later.”

“How much later?”

“I don’t know. Later. Are you her friend or something?”

“Yeah. Something.”

He sprinted from the zoo to school before Astronomy started, his backpack thumping against his spine the entire way. He didn’t care about the pop quiz Mrs. Miller gave. He didn’t even realize he wrote *Allie* as the answer to the final equation. He gave her his last name and thought it sounded nice.

He went to the zoo at 4:00 p.m., right after class ended. There she was, next to her stand, reaching deep into the icy trashcan, looking left and right before sipping from the lemonade she pulled out. The sun sparkled from the fresh wet sleeve on her forearm. He walked to the stand with his shoulders back, arms hinged at his sides while making fists in empty pockets.

“Want a lemonade?”

“I want to date you,” he said, startled by his forwardness. She pressed her fingers into the plastic cup, making indents in it like play-doe. Her eyes shifted to the ground, at cracked cement.

“Why should I?” she said, meeting his gaze.

“I won’t tell anyone you stole that lemonade.”

She studied his face: Baggy eyes. Peach fuzz. A popped pimple on his chin.

She liked him.

“Come back at ten.”

“Doesn’t the park close then?”

“So?”

“So nothing,” he said, backpedaling.

“Weren’t you going to get a lemonade?”

“I’ll see you later, Allie.”

She squinted at him and he quickly looked for a nonexistent nametag, eyes squirming in their sockets. He opened his mouth a bit and glanced at her pale legs. She put her hands on her hips and waited for an explanation. In reality she was flattered. She liked that his blue eyes swam down her legs, the same pair her mother referred to as chicken bones. She thought that her mother was probably home then, crying in her La-Z-Boy.

Brian ran away. Ran past the dolphins and birdcage and monkey playground. Ran out of the gates and across Main Street and Herbert Avenue without looking or paying attention to the line of honking station wagons. He ran through neighbors’ mowed lawns and through his weedy lawn and up wooden stairs to his room where he screamed “You fucking idiot” into the pillow that didn’t give him any lines of romantic genius.

Night settled in.

He didn’t expect to find himself back at the zoo at 10 p.m. He wasn’t really sure how he got there. If a psychiatrist had stumbled upon him he’d have no choice but to conclude Brian was in a fugue state. He crouched behind the dolphin tank, trying to look at her through salty water and drifting silhouettes. Security guards

walked through and informed visitors that the zoo was closing. Brian hid underneath a plastic picnic table, watching parents push their kids in strollers and drunk high schoolers stumble toward the gates.

The zoo cleared out. Garbage cans overflowed with half-eaten pizzas, crushed soda cans, and melted cups of Dippin Dots. Paper containers smeared with ketchup skidded on cement. Cigarette butts were tucked between cracks in the sidewalk. The zoo lights flickered out. Animal noises combined together creating a slow high-pitched grinding. He crawled out from under the picnic table and walked to her stand with his head bowed. She sat in her foldout chair smoking a cigarette and smiled at him.

“So how long have you been stalking me, Steve Prefontaine?”

“Who’s Steve Prefontaine?”

“A famous stalker. So how long?”

“I’m not actually stalking you.”

“You think I’m hot?”

“I don’t know.”

“You can *not actually* stalk me but you can’t tell me if I’m hot?”

“I think you’re pretty,” he said, wishing he’d used ‘beautiful’ instead.

“Listen, if we’re going to date, I’m going to need to know one more thing. You have to tell me all of your secrets.”

He told her everything. How he found out her name and when he decided he liked her. How he’d never actually had a girlfriend or kissed anyone. He told her how his parents got divorced because his dad had stopped loving his mom. About

the time his mom caught him masturbating in seventh grade. That he desperately wanted to lose his virginity, but when he first saw her that wasn't what he was thinking about and still wasn't, but that was not to say that he wouldn't mind sleeping with her, not wouldn't mind, that wasn't the right choice of words either—he'd love to, he means, it was just that—she laughed and told him to shut up.

She went next. She was a tenth grader at the public school in Detroit, which she hated—both the school and the city. The last time she remembered having a dream was in third grade; it was a nightmare about being stuck in a laundry machine. Her favorite bad habit was cracking her fingers—arthritis can go fuck itself—and her second favorite bad habit was smoking—lung cancer can also go fuck itself. She told him her father was murdered last month, which she knew wasn't exactly what happened but still thought it was true. She exhaled and the cigarette smoke made him dizzy. They looked at each other and didn't say anything for a while.

“Since we're dating,” he said, eventually, “does that mean I can kiss you?”

“You can try.”

He cradled the back of her neck, hiding his hand under her wavy brown hair. He pulled her in and wedged his tongue between her lips. She pulled away, laughed, then taught him how to kiss. “It's not that you were doing it wrong; it's just you weren't doing it right.” He told her that animals don't kiss like humans do. It was one of the daily facts on his animal calendar pinned next to his nightstand. A gust of wind washed through the zoo, the breeze a cool hand tapping Brian's shoulder.

“Won't someone see us?” he asked. “No. It's just us here.”

There were also 82 cameras, 106 motion sensors in front of the animal cages and Ralph the Security Guard, who spent each night studying the monitors in his office like he should have done with his schoolbooks from Bryant University. Normally he would have made them leave, but he knew young love when he saw it, especially being married to his love, and so Ralph the Security Guard let them be.

After Astronomy Brian did his homework. He ate dinner with his mother—chicken, pizza, or pasta, usually. She'd encourage him to meet people, to make friends. At 10:30 p.m. Brian put his ear to his mother's door and waited until she turned off her TV to go to bed. He'd walk down his steps, careful to skip the sixth and twelfth stairs that creaked. The sliding glass doors by his backyard were perfect for late night escapes, and he'd squeeze through the bushes to cut through his neighbor's yard and then to the road. He'd find Allie around 11 p.m. by her lemonade stand with a cigarette in hand. She'd toss it and they would knot sweaty fingers. They walked past the animals. They would kiss by the birds, amongst chirps and squawks. They'd kiss by the chickens and he told her that the chicken is the closest living relative to the T-Rex. They'd kiss by the flamingos and he told her that baby flamingos are born either white or gray. They'd kiss by the chimpanzees that touched themselves while they were kissing. "What about the lions? Why don't we kiss by the lions?" Instead of saying he was terrified of lions, he told her that when he learned a lion fact, they could kiss by the lions.

“Let’s do something different, something exciting,” she said toward the end of July. She released his hand from hers, slipped out of her flip-flops, and ran to the dolphin tank. He stood still hearing her feet smack cement, sure that she wasn’t going to jump in. She crossed her arms and gripped the hem of her neon shirt. Lifting it over her head, she tossed it on the ground. She flipped her hair to one side and turned to him, “Well are you coming or aren’t you?” He traced the bumps of her spine up to the white bra clasp that he’d only seen in movies. He jogged toward her, lifted his shirt to his head and got trapped inside the collar. He wormed his way out and kept jogging. “Are you sure this is safe?” he called to her. “People swim with them all the time!” She wiggled out of her jean shorts, revealing white panties with small horses spotted across them. He stopped and tilted his head to one side. “I thought you didn’t like animals.” She rolled her eyes at him. “My ass is right in front of you and you’re focusing on the horses?” Turning back around, she put her hands on the black gate guarding the tank and pushed herself over it. He sprinted to grab her before jumping in, but he was too late.

She somersaulted into the water and shrieked from the cold, nearly causing Ralph the Security Guard to choke on a mouthful of pistachios. Brian thought she shrieked because she was getting dolphin attacked and so he jumped in to save her and shrieked from the cold as well. Shivering, they got out of the tank, pressed their faces against each other, hands frantically stroking each other’s goose bumps with their underwear wrapped around skinny ankles. They fumbled around each other, their bodies making wet imprints in cement.

Ralph the Security Guard, scared shitless and breathing harder than they were, looked away from the monitor once they were out of the tank and labeled himself the zoo's worst security guard of all time.

If Brian was failing Astronomy he didn't know it; he wasn't, but he still wouldn't have had any idea. The day after the dolphin tank Brian woke up at 7 a.m. and flipped back to October's animal facts to tell Allie later. He went to the zoo before school started looking for a perfect place to tell Allie that he loved her. *I love you* by the butterflies. *I love you* by the sleeping camel. *I love you* next to the turtles with wrinkled scalps. He whispered each version into the palm of his hand, unsure where he should accent it, where his confession sounded best.

Allie had her own confession. She wondered how to tell Brian that she was going home in a day.

That night he found her in the usual spot. Her knees were tucked to her chest and she chewed her neon collar. "I want to tell you something," she said between bites of cloth. She was crying. She wiped her eyes, further smearing wet mascara. "Me too," he said, "I love you."

Her tears fell in small twin puddles below her. She pulled out a cigarette and took a long drag. Allie wiped her nose and mucous spread between her fingers like a webbed platypus. "Oh my god. Tell me you didn't see that," she said. "See what?" He leaned down and met her chapped lips with his. "Tell me why you're crying."

Out above the wall of willows, the tip of the capital building was lit, forcing her to think about the world outside the zoo, forcing her to think of her mother

flying down I-65 in her beat up Volvo, flicking ash out the window, misquoting Springsteen lyrics with her dad's sweatshirt jacket draped around her shoulders.

Brian sat down next to her on the foldout chair. She put her head on his shoulder, firm and bony, but she didn't mind. The sound of crickets drowned out their breathing. Her cheek, soft and cool, could feel the swift current of blood passing through him.

"That's Betelgeuse," he said.

"What?"

"The star over there. It's called Betelgeuse."

He put the palm of his hand on the back of hers and pointed their arms to the star. "There. The red one." She wrapped her thumb around his pinky, stroking the grooves of his knuckle. He wanted to tell her more stars, but all he could remember from class was Betelgeuse—the red star, the ninth brightest, and the second brightest in the constellation Orion. After weeks of not paying attention in school he couldn't actually remember the brightest star in the constellation or even the name of the constellation it was a part of.

She reached down into her back and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "Here."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"You put it in your mouth."

She took out a lighter and lit the end of his cigarette.

"Start inhaling."

"Do I have to?"

"We're all getting cancer eventually."

He inhaled.

“There you go. Keep doing that until you start coughing and hate yourself a little bit.”

She pulled out another cigarette, and used the tip of his to light hers.

“When you were a kid did you ever pretend with the air?” he said. “You know, like bring your fingers to your lips, blow out, and pretend the cold air is cigarette smoke?”

“Such a weird child.”

“Shut up,” he said.

He took a drag, laughing and coughing.

Hours later they left the zoo, walked to the hole in the fence covered by a “No Trespassing” sign, pushed it, and crawled through as they did every night. He crossed the street toward his house, and she turned left toward hers. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said. Her smile back was empty. He watched her repeatedly looking back at him until the sky and her silhouette were one and the same.

Brian went to her stand the next night; he wasn’t surprised she wasn’t there. Closing his eyes, he squeezed his shoulder with his hand, imagining it was her head leaning on him. He could almost see her seated next to him, a cigarette dangling from her fingertips, the two of them lost in a haze of smoke and love.

Sam's House

Sam Benson, the token gay kid at Evanston High, is in love with me. Whenever my friends are goofing around in the cafeteria, he's always looking at me. That's kind of why I went to his house. I was feeling lonely since all my friends were being dicks to me after I got with my best friend's girlfriend at the beach a few days ago. I wanted to feel less shitty so I went to Sam Benson's house in Chinatown, which is weird because he isn't Chinese.

What happened with my friend's girlfriend was bullshit. We were all getting shitfaced on the beach—dumping empties into the bonfire and watching the cans crackle and melt. My best friend, Jake, was passed out drunk by the flames. In between chugging Natty Lites we all signed his forehead with a Sharpie and drew dicks all over him. While I was popping the tab off my fourth beer there was this voice in my ear, a whisper. It was my friend's girlfriend, and she said, "I know someone who wants to fuck you." She kicked sand on me and walked away. I followed because I wanted to know who wanted to fuck me. On the shore she slipped out of her flip-flops and sweatpants and said, "Me, you idiot." So I fucked her even though the whole time I felt guilty because she was my friend's girlfriend. No one paid attention that we left because they were drunk, watching the flames and didn't think anything of it. Walking back from the water I said, "You better not say anything," and she said she wouldn't.

She hadn't said anything at school by Monday. We were all in the cafeteria, dropping hot dogs that we swore were rubber to see how high they'd bounce. The only way to eat them was to douse them with mustard and ketchup to make them

taste like condiments and not like shit. Sam Benson kept turning toward our table every time we dropped them.

Jake's forehead was smeared with faded black ink, red from rubbing off our names and drawings. We couldn't stop staring.

"You're all a bunch of fuckheads," he said.

"You'd do the same thing," I told him.

"Whatever."

Belle Gallop walked by.

"Goddamn," said Jake. "Those tits. Those fucking tits. Like an angel. She's got angel titties, that Belle Gallop."

We all looked over at his girlfriend to see how she would react. She just shrugged and said, "What? Gallop's got nice tits."

I checked to see if Sam Benson was staring after Belle Gallop. He wasn't. I didn't know why he would be. He was sitting a few tables over with some of his theater friends, cutting up his hot dog, eating it plain. He had these thick bags under his eyes that shined from the lights. His shirtsleeve gripped his arm, which made him look muscular even though he's not. He caught me staring and I gave him a *what the fuck are you looking at* kind of look.

I had Bio with him afterward. We'd been assigned as lab partners for the year and had to do a dissection. The pig was rolled up in a plastic tarp on the lab counter. All I could make out was a blob that looked more brown than pink. I yanked one end of the tarp, and the whole thing unwound real quickly. The pig was tiny, rolled right on its back, its arms and legs sticking up in the air, lying in a small

puddle of pig juice. It stunk. I grabbed a dissecting knife and started jabbing at the pig to see if Sam would laugh. Mr. Winters smacked his hand on the counter and said, "Cut that shit out." I stopped.

"Someone already killed it. When it's dead, it's dead. Can't be killed twice, you got that?" said Mr. Winters.

"Yeah," I said. I rolled my eyes and picked up the lab sheet to read the directions.

"Can you cut it?" Sam said. "I feel like if I cut it I'll have to become a vegetarian, and that's just not something I'm willing to do."

"Wouldn't want to miss out on those hot dogs."

"Exactly, exactly."

I cut right through the belly, slicing through curly hair and wrinkled flesh. I thought it would be smooth under there, but it wasn't. Blood oozed out from the incision. I laughed and said, "Gross," and looked over at Sam. He was crying. His eyes got real red and a tear slid down his face and dripped from his chin to the counter. He leaned his cheek to his shoulder and wiped his tear with his v-neck. I grabbed one of the paper towels right next to us and wiped the tear from the table and tried to smile at him. I didn't know if anyone had died but I asked him, "Who died?" and he looked up at me with wet eyes and then down at the dead pig and said, "Dusty." I said, "Your dog?" and he said, "My dog." I liked the way he repeated the dog part and all of a sudden I started liking his dog even though I'd never met it and thought it had a stupid name.

When I was putting my books back in my locker, Jake came out of nowhere and kicked the metal door into my side. It stung like a motherfucker but I didn't let him see that. His girlfriend was there, mascara running down her cheeks. He took his hand off her wrist and pointed at me.

"Did you fuck her?" he said.

I tried to look at her in a way that would have made her feel like a bitch, but she was staring at the floor.

"No," I said.

"No?"

"She fucked *me*."

He grabbed my throat, exhaled, and let go. She sucked in air, made these whimpering noises. Great acting. It was supposed to be me that was scared.

"And what'd you think?" he said.

"What'd I think? The fuck does that mean?"

"Just answer the question."

I knew I was fucked no matter how I responded. I went for broke. "Just wish she had those Belle Gallop titties."

My eye was black by eighth period. It was throbbing on the walk back home. I could feel my pulse in my eye socket. I went to the park by my house and lit a joint under the slide. These kids were there but they didn't see me. When one of them was going down the slide I smacked the underside of it and scared the shit out of him.

I got back in time for dinner. My mom was filling her cup with prune juice and my dad was scrolling through something on his phone. When I slammed the front door she must have grabbed a cup and a plate for me, because they were there when I got to the table. When I walked into the dining room she walked back into the kitchen. She came back holding a bag of frozen peas and looked at me real disappointed and said, "Here." My dad just stared down, shook his head. I thanked my mom and we all ate grilled chicken. I held the bag against my eye the whole time.

Jake Sharpied "Fuckhead" on my locker. When I went to the cafeteria I saw that he had moved the chair where I normally sat. He flicked me off when I entered the cafeteria and stared at me until I looked away. Jake's girlfriend was next to him. I heard she blew him in the bathroom right after he hit me. Sam Benson was eating with all the same theater friends. They were all laughing. Probably at some dumb joke. I grabbed a tray—mashed potatoes and ham—and ate in a bathroom stall. Pathetic.

That Friday, when my friends didn't invite me to the beach, I went to Sam Benson's house after texting him that I had Bio questions. His mom answered the door and introduced herself. Sam came down and asked if I wanted a tour. I said fine, even though I didn't want a tour; I just wanted to get stoned and have someone around me instead of getting stoned by myself like a fucking loser.

We walked through the kitchen to get to his room upstairs. His dead dog's water and food bowl were still on the floor by their fireplace. The lab report that was due for class was on the desk in his room. He put his name first in the title even

though my last name starts with an "A." I didn't do shit on the report, though, so I guess it was fair. There was a *Superbad* poster and a bunch of cross-country ribbons on the wall. I didn't know he did cross-country. Maybe all the theater friends he sat with at lunch were actually cross-country friends. I sat on the beanbag in his room and he asked what school questions I had. I told him that I'd actually figured them out and that I had a shit ton of weed if he wanted to smoke. He stuffed a towel under his door and opened a window. We smoked a shit ton of weed. We stuck our heads out of the window and blew the smoke at each other's faces, which was pretty funny.

"All that smoke can't be good for running," I said.

"Season's not till spring," he said and laughed.

His mom knocked on the door.

"Fuck," he said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

He flicked the joint out the window and said, "Just a second!" He Febreezed the room and opened the door just a crack to talk to her. She had made us mac-n-cheese as a study snack. We ate the mac-n-cheese and talked about sports games I never watched. I didn't think he'd be the kind of guy to watch sports because he was gay and looked hipstery with his ripped jeans and black v-necks.

"It didn't make any sense," he was saying. "Why would they go for it unless they converted? It was just a lose-lose situation."

"Definitely," I said, not knowing what the hell he was talking about. I was quiet for a bit and I tried to change the subject and break the silence by pretending to poke him with the mac-n-cheese fork like I did with the pig. At first he laughed

but when I got closer to stabbing him, his eyes widened and he said, "Quit it! Quit it!" I was having too much fun pretending to poke him so I kept doing it. He grabbed my forearm and dug his nails into my skin. He stopped looking scared and he said, "You wouldn't."

I didn't want to hurt the guy—I was actually having a good time with him—but I felt like he was being a dick to me, and I was sick of all my friends being dicks to me, even though Sam Benson's not my friend. He's just my lab partner. I forced his hand off of me and lifted the fork high above my head. He didn't cower away or even react, he just stared at me real intense. I said, "What, are you in love with me or something?" I don't know why I said it.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Let me ask you something: Do you want to get with every girl you see?"

"Pretty much."

"Wow. I wouldn't even think about getting with you."

That didn't sit well with me because I didn't understand why he wouldn't want to get with me. I work out all the time and veins pop from my arms even when I'm not doing curls or push-ups. During Valentine's Day in 8th grade, I got more soda crush cans in my mailbox than Steve Keats, and he'd just gotten back from school after a car crash. He was in a coma for a week.

Even though I was still holding the fork above him, he looked so fucking confident I wasn't going to stab him. His arm was bumpy with red dots like he had eczema. I jabbed the fork into his eczema bicep and pierced his skin. The fork was in

there pretty good. I yanked it out of him. His face was burnt red and his cheeks were so puffed out with air I thought they'd pop. He stared at me and said, "You're such a fuck." He clutched his bleeding arm and kept saying that between tears and heavy breaths. All of a sudden I started crying because he was crying.

I had to get out of there. I prayed he wouldn't call down to his mom or that she wouldn't run up from the noise. I couldn't call 911 because I'd probably get in trouble for stabbing a dude, and my parents would probably throw me out for real this time, which I always took as a joke, but maybe it was a threat.

I took off my t-shirt to stop the bleeding. I saw the towel by the door but I thought it would be quicker to just use the shirt. It had these paint stains from the art class they made all the freshman take, but I didn't think paint would poison his system so I wrapped the shirt around him while he was on the bed. I wanted him to stare at my abs while I was wrapping it, but he shut his eyes so tight they looked like creased folds on his face. He bit his lip. Instead of apologizing for stabbing him, I leaned down and kissed the lip he was biting. I let my tongue touch it for a second. It felt smooth and spongy.

He shook me off of him and drove his foot into my stomach, saying to get the fuck out of his house and to stop texting him. I coughed from the kick and stumbled to the door, clutched the knob. He threw my shirt at me and said, "Seriously, fuck off!" Even though the shirt was a lot grosser since it had his blood all over it, I didn't feel like arguing with him right then so I walked out of his room with the shirt and told him he was a dick, which I knew he wasn't.

I raced down the stairs. I could hear the sink running in the kitchen and dishes clanking against each other. I looked in the mirror by his front door. I must have wiped my face earlier in his room because it looked like I was crying blood. I got out of the house and walked past a bunch of restaurants with Chinese bullshit all over them. I knew I couldn't take the bus back home with the bloody shirt, so I walked, the shirt wrapped around my fist. 34 blocks. A couple of ambulances passed me down Frank Street. Maybe he called one. It was freezing so I put on the shirt inside out, so other people couldn't see all the red splotches. I could feel his blood, sticky and cool, rubbing against my chest.

I debated going over to the beach where all my friends planned on drinking again, but I knew they didn't want me there. I didn't care. They were fake friends anyway.

My parents were watching some black and white movie on TV when I got home. Staring at the screen, they asked how my night was. I stomped up the stairs like some dramatic girl and said, "Shitty." They didn't come check on me.

I dumped the shirt in my hamper. There were streaks of his blood on my chest and side. When I saw them I forgot where they came from, thought for a second it was my blood. I didn't know how to tell the difference between one person's blood and another's. We learned something about it in Bio. How the color of it changes with oxygen or some shit. It's not like piss, though. Blood's all basically the same color.

The bloody smears on my body had dried to red brushstrokes. I rubbed my finger over them and they felt chipped and scaly, like something that's been fading for a while.

It's Not a Co-Ed Camp

Camp Greenwoods for Boys and Lake of the Woods Camp for Girls sit tucked above a grass bank overlooking Turtle Bay. The camp shares the bay with Timber Ridge Trailer Park in Decatur, Michigan, about 40 miles northwest of Kalamazoo. A wooden fence divides the trailer park and boys' camp, while a gravel path slices through the sports field, separating the two camps.

There are nightly camp traditions: capture the flag and tug of war, s'mores, songs, and moonlight swim sessions for the oldest boys and girls, where they'll all skinny dip if only someone has the courage to suggest it. At 10:30 p.m., charred sticks—the tips sticky from marshmallow—bob above dying wakes. The campfires have been pissed out, and flashlights roam cabin ceilings.

There are nightly trailer park traditions, too. Old men read sitting on rotten logs, tilting their books to the fire pit, flames flickering across the pages. Inside the Windjammer on the far side of the park, a couple opens their windows and door, blasting *Kind of Blue* on repeat. Some Timber Ridge parents play Cribbage around foldout tables, crushed beer cans and half-smoked cigarettes littering their feet. Mrs. Watkins' trailer is pin neat. Outside in her garden, a patch of bluebells surround Detroit Tiger's themed garden gnomes. While she waters them at night, skinny boys in wife beaters sneak away from their sleeping parents and climb through the fence into Greenwoods.

Counselors joke that women in the trailer park have more tits than teeth, but they've never actually seen any parents. They've only seen the boys, skinny boys, whose lips are stained blue by blow pops, sprinting barefoot through wet grass,

hobbling over gravel, or tiptoeing into Lake of the Woods—the girls’ cabin area—to see girls clutching their robes walking back from the shower house. If the boys make it that far without getting caught, they sit Indian style in the forest, silently, careful not to slap mosquitoes nibbling their bellies, hopeful for the chance of seeing breasts or pubic hair.

The boys who summer at Greenwoods know better than to spy on the girls. If they get caught on the girls’ side they are immediately sent home. Counselors have ingrained the phrase “We’re not a co-ed” camp at both Greenwoods and Lake of the Woods. Yet those counselors, when they’re not kicking out the trailer park boys, spend their nights fucking in sailboat cockpits or on the gymnastics mats. No one bothers looking for trespassers on the boys’ side, so they don’t see Amy, a nine-year-old from Timber Ridge. While her brother, Ian, and his friends search for girls at Lake of the Woods, Amy sinks her toes in the sand, wading her way through seaweed and zebra mussels. She climbs onto Greenwoods’ water trampoline. She bounces herself tired and lays down, staring at swaths of stars, smears of purple and white, shooting stars that quickly fade from the sky but not from memory.

There are nights when counselors stomp on the dock drunk, rip off their clothes and flop into the bay. Amy slips into the water and underneath the trampoline. She floats on her back, drifting in the trampoline’s hollow insides, as bodies above her sink in the mesh, moaning, counselors sharing each other like stolen bottles of vodka.

After Amy swims, she goes to Greenwoods’ grassy coast, shivering and dripping. She hugs herself, squats by fading embers before exploring the camp. By

noticing when counselors turn off the cabin lights, she knows which cabin has the oldest boys (Mohawk, lights off at 11:15 p.m.) and which cabin has the nine-year-olds (Iroquois, lights off at 9:30 p.m.). She knows about the stash of ping-pong paddles, basketballs, whiffle balls, and logs, kindling, and matches in the Program Cabin. She knows about the counselors who smoke weed on ski boats. She has seen counselors stumble back from the bars in town, cursing at each other and laughing. The ones who puke in recycling bins. She has looked into Mohawk, Navajo, and Souix, and seen boys watching *Family Guy* on their iPods, boys studying photographs of their family. Some nights she goes into the shower house and pulls the rusted chain that releases hot water to warm herself. She waits for a boy to go into the stall next to hers, look under the divider and see her pink toenails, chipped and sparkly, and waits for him to yelp. The boy never comes.

On Mondays at 11 p.m., the counselors of the nine-year-olds tell ghost stories. Amy has learned the ghost story ritual. She sits outside, underneath the cabin clothesline, safely tucked behind damp towels and sandy bathing suits, looking through a dirty window.

She likes the story of Turtle Man. The counselor's accent is Australian, she thinks, but it is really South African. The counselor paces the cabin floor. "It's June, 1957. Right now, you kids try to sneak in candy to camp. Some of you try to sneak in cell phones...Craig." The campers giggle. Amy smiles to herself even though this is the only thing she knows about Craig. "But in 1957, the kids tried to sneak in fireworks to set off on your Independence Day. Of course the counselors found them all, and they were duct taped in a box under a counselor's bed. Gregory Turtle

was his name. One day Gregory's girlfriend broke up with him. He went to the bars, got completely shitfaced." The kids laugh at the swear word, not knowing what it means. "Gregory was stumbling back and smoking a cigarette, which you could do at camp back then. He passed out on his bed, the cigarette still lit, and it fell to the floor, rolled right to the cardboard box with the fireworks. It was set on fire and the fireworks went off, BAM! BAM! BAM!, every one of them, exploding under Gregory. He was set on fire, completely engulfed in flames, and he was howling, sprinting for the bay to try and put the fire out. But he was so badly burned that he died almost immediately and sunk to the bottom of the bay, and no one's ever found him. So it's Turtle Bay, because it's his, and he haunts it every night, sifting his way on the sandy floor, waiting for one of you campers to go in after dark so he can pull you in with him."

The counselor stops pacing. He walks toward a camper's bottom bunk, wraps his hands around the camper's ankles, and drags him to the foot of the bed. The camper shrieks. Everyone else gasps. Amy imagines them pressed against the back of their bunks, arms hugging themselves. She crawls along the side of the cabin and peeks through a window above one of the boys. She is in love with him. She is in love with his homesickness and racecar bed sheets and unkempt blonde hair falling across his pillow. The boy tapes his parents' letters over his bunk. She reads them through the window every other night at 3 a.m., when she is sure that everyone is sleeping. She strikes a match stolen from the Program Cabin and holds it close to his window. The boy's name is Brett. Letters from his mom begin, "Hi Sweetie!" and letters from his dad, "Hiya, Brettster." From the parents' replies she

knows that he sends out letters where he circles fallen tears, that he's threatened to run back home if his parents won't pick him up. He hates Greenwoods, hates the food, the older boys who get him out in capture-the-flag, and the counselor who scares him before bed on Monday nights.

Amy wants it to be Brett that notices her toes in the shower house. She has never had a boyfriend. She wants her first kiss to be with him on the water trampoline. She wants to walk in front of him wearing a towel, even though she doesn't have breasts or pubic hair.

When Amy is done reading his letters she can see herself holding the match, her reflection burning in the cracked glass. She remembers Turtle Man and has an impulse to dive into the bay, let the water put out the flames, and wait for ghostly arms to drag her under.

Usually Amy reads Brett's letters, watches his chest rise and fall for a minute, and wanders back to the trailer park. But tonight Amy stays put. She lights another match and pinches it between her fingers. The newest letter hanging over Brett's bed reads, "Hiya Brettster, your mother and I have spoken with the camp directors and we're coming real soon to pick you up." The flame trickles toward her fingers. She blows it out, strikes another match. "We can't wait to see you and we love you so much." Amy cries. Tears drip from her chin and splash against her legs. She can't imagine her summer without him, this boy she's never met.

When returning the matchbox, she digs around the Program Cabin and finds a pencil and paper. She writes Brett a note, showing off her newly learned cursive: "Brett. My name is Amy. I am nine." Amy lets a tear splatter onto the page. "I know

you are going to leave camp because I accidentally saw one of your letters. The idea of you leaving is making me cry. If you don't believe me I am circling my tears. If you want to meet me come to the dock tomorrow night at midnight." Amy slips the note in his cabin's mailbox.

The next night is a Tuesday. On Tuesdays the counselors have their weekly staff meeting from 11:45 p.m.-12:45 a.m., when the campers are all asleep. Amy has sat outside the lodge and heard stories of why kids are sent home: the boys who blow each other at the camp overnight, the girls who sneak Bacardi into the camp social, the counselor who touches an older girl camper. Amy leaves the Program Cabin and heads for the fence, hovering low to the ground. Long blades of grass skim her ankles. Dry bark crunches underneath her toes. She climbs into Timber Ridge and sits with Ian and his friends at a foldout table. They drink backwash from beer cans. They dig through dirt and relight squashed cigarettes. They suck in the smoke and muffle their coughs with mud-stained elbows. Amy watches them, sitting crisscrossed in the chair.

Early Tuesday morning Amy's father makes her go fishing in the community rowboat. Slits of sunlight escape through the fog. After countless hours on the bay, the sun has burnt the boat copper, the sides dripped in rust. The oars of the boat went missing early in summer, so those who use the boat paddle with their palms. That's Amy's job. She leans over the front of the boat, the prow digging into her sternum. Amy paddles, peering beneath the water's glassy surface, trying to spot the fish. As she scoops the water, her father spools his line. He leans the rod against

the side of the boat and pops open a beer. He sips and watches his daughter paddle, the water beginning to splash inside the boat.

“Watch it,” he says. “Are you baiting it or me?”

“I am. Is here good?”

He nods and takes a drink, handing Amy a worm. She loves holding the worms, watching them slither in her hand, inching over the markings of her palm. She folds the first worm over and over again until it looks like tiny brains. She can feel it stiffen, slightly, and then bend like rubber again. She pinches the worm’s center, squeezing until there are two worms in her hand, coiling at different paces. She grabs the hook and pierces one of the worms, watching how easily the metal point slides through its pink skin. Her father takes the rod and casts his line, the wire slicing the fog. Amy rolls the other piece of worm between her fingers, feeling for its grooves.

The camp bells sound at 7:15 a.m. First one, then two, then dozens. The bells ring through the camp, echoing through the trailer park, their vibrations rippling over still water. Counselors strike the bells until the entire camp stands in a horseshoe around the flagpole with hands washed—counselors check—and teeth brushed before heading to breakfast.

“Every day,” says her father. “Scaring the goddamn fish.”

“You sound like grandpa.”

“You be careful now.” She laughs.

Amy looks toward Greenwoods. She can make out the red-painted cabins, but she can't see individual people, just a blur of athletic shorts and t-shirts as campers walk groggily to the mess hall.

"You don't want to be like them," he says.

She thinks that she does.

She watches the campers until they are out of sight. Greenwoods' ski boats are still parked, teepeed by tarps, their bows hovering over the beach where last night's footprints lay buried in the sand. A row of canoes line up perpendicularly on the camp dock like seesaws. Amy imagines herself on the dock next to Brett, their legs dangling, the two of them drawing hearts in the water with their toes.

"There we go," he says.

The line snaps. Her father reels it in, and lets the fish swim away before pulling it back in. The fish jumps from the water, silver and scaly. Her father yanks the rod, the bass smacking the side of the aluminum and falling into the boat, wide-eyed and flopping. Amy crouches against the front of the boat and cries from the sight of the fish's heaving sides, its bloody organs.

"Throw it out, throw it out!"

"Amy, for Christ sake, you've got to stop crying every time. Here."

He unhooks the bass and grips it in his hand, putting it in front of Amy.

"You throw it out," he says.

She can't stop crying.

"You gonna let it breathe or what?"

Amy sticks out her hand. The fish fills her palm and she holds onto it, feeling its slickness, the way it squirms. And then, for a moment, it stops moving—a limp mass. She chucks it. Amy glares at her father, then leans over the front of the rowboat, sinks her arms in the water, and paddles back. Her father rolls his eyes and lets her row.

For the rest of the day Amy sits inside the trailer and stitches lanyards—box stitches and butterfly stitches and diamond stitches—periodically peering toward the dock and the sky, watching the light fade. She refuses her mother’s offerings of cereal (Captain Crunch or Fruit Loops) and says, “No,” to another day of broiled hot dogs. “Fine,” her mother says, and she made them for herself, the pan sizzling in one hand, the other clutching a cigarette, smoke and steam mingling together. She sits at the table with Amy. Her mom takes a bite of her lunch every time she turns a page of her romance novels.

At midnight Amy sprints for the dock, hiding between upturned canoes. Every few seconds she rests her chin on the yoke and waits to hear Iroquois’ door creak open and for Brett to sneak out, run down the hill, and greet her. She practices kissing her hand, trying out different ways to pucker her lips—unsure how noisy her kisses should sound.

The moon is a sliver passing overhead. Amy’s legs begin to hurt, the wooden planks scratching her skin. Running her hands under the dock, she can feel nails hammered in a hurry, warping underneath the planks. She stands up and runs to

Brett's cabin, sitting under his window. The lights are off, but she can hear them speaking in rushed whispers, aware that their counselors are away at a meeting.

"No, she's his girlfriend. Tell us Brett, tell us she's your girlfriend."

"I don't know who she is. She just sent it to me," says Brett.

Amy hears the sound of paper flapping.

"Look at it. How is that not a girlfriend? That's what a girlfriend is Brett.

You've got to go."

"I don't want to."

"Well, what if we all went with you? Will you go if we all go together?"

He must have nodded. Amy hears bare feet slap concrete, the campers shuffling to the front of the cabin. The door fling open and out pour each camper in pajama pants or boxers, white t-shirts or shirtless. Amy watches them sprint for the dock, twigs snapping under their feet. She thinks about running to meet them. About staying hidden against the cabin wall. About running home. Instead, Amy bolts inside Iroquois. It's empty, silent. She stops in front of Brett's dresser, studying it. Ripped open packets of Pokémon cards are stuffed inside his plastic drawer. His schedule is taped to his dresser:

A Day: Monday, Wednesday, Friday

B Day: Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday

First Period: Volleyball.

Second Period: Rock Climbing

Lunch

Third Period: Sailing

Fourth Period: Water Skiing

Fifth Period: Riflery

First Period: Archery

Second Period: Golf

Lunch

Third Period: Canoeing

Fourth Period: Riding

Fifth Period: Rocketry

She reads over the schedule a few times, committing it to memory. A Cubs hat is draped over the post of the bunk bed. She takes off the hat and puts it on. The clasp is a little big on her, but she knows she'll never fix it. She eyes the basket of shower supplies: coconut body wash and Loreal Kids Surfer Paradise shampoo, a can of Axe body spray. She takes out the can and sprays a line down her arm, wet and sticky.

A boy emerges from the bathroom "You're supposed to be at the dock," he says, confident and composed.

Standing ten feet apart, she stares at the black shadows of the boy's eyes. Amy takes off the hat. "Tell him I'll be back there tomorrow," she says, and sprints out of the cabin. She runs past the campers on the dock. Some have their hands cupped to their foreheads, looking out into the bay. Others are on their hands and knees, looking on all sides of the canoes. She can see Brett in his blue pajama pants, standing with his arms by his sides, holding her note in his hand. She takes the hat off of her head and grips it between her fingers, squeezing through the fence to Timber Ridge. She looks in the inside of the cap and sees in faded Sharpie: Brett Greenberg. She says the name out loud.

She joins Ian and his friends by the road. They play with the "missing" oars, spinning them around and trying to hurl them over the yellow lines of the road. Ian hands the oar to Amy.

"Nice hat."

"It's his," she says, taking the oar. "Brett's."

"Creep."

“Who’s Brett?” asks one of the friends.

“This boy that she stalks,” says Ian.

“Shut up,” she says.

Amy tries smacking his shins with the oar, but he’s too quick. He jumps over the oar and smirks.

“Shit,” she says. She runs down the road—short, staccato steps—and he runs after her. The camp crossing warning light blinks red, and they run through its glow. It’s the only road for miles—47 ½ Street—and they’ve raced on it often. A crushed bird from early in the summer has nearly decomposed into the asphalt; the only clearly remaining feature is its beak, still bright orange.

Amy runs down the middle of the road until Ian wraps her in his arms. He drags her to the grass ditch and wrestles her to the ground. Ian’s friends laugh. So do Amy and her brother. Giddy and giggling, he takes the hat and climbs off of her. She stays on the ground by the road, catching her breath.

“Chicago sucks,” he says.

“You’ve never been.”

“It still sucks.” He tosses her the hat.

Amy avoids fishing the next morning by faking a cough, but she can’t escape her mother. Her mother knocks on every trailer door until she has vitamins, cough medicine, and orange juice for her. Amy gulps down the juice and forces herself to swallow the pills—something she had vehemently refused to ever do, saying she will only take ‘chew’ pills for life—but she has plans this morning.

She dresses herself in a bright tank top and athletic shorts, and has her mom put her hair in a pony like the girls at Lake of the Woods. Amy plans to stand near Brett's activities and let her heart beat a little faster. She knows his schedule, exactly where he'll be.

"Be careful," says her mom.

"Of what?"

"Just be careful."

Amy waits until the first period bells sound, until all the campers are at their activities. She wedges herself through the fence, the Cubs hat loose on her head. Ski engines hum. Sailboats are being rigged. The lifeguards at the swim dock blow their whistles. Amy walks the path through the boys' camp. From the windsurfing dock a voice calls to her: "Honey, where are you supposed to be?" The woman pulls out a walkie-talkie. Amy runs. She doesn't get far. A golf cart pulls up along side her, the driver wearing a visor stained with sweat.

"Sweetie, what activity are you supposed to be at?"

"Um, I thought that I had swimming, but they were all boys there so I think I got mixed up.

"You know it's an A day?"

"Oh. Whoops. I'm supposed to be at rock climbing, I think."

"Hop in. And hold on to that hat!"

Amy climbs in the cart, the white seats hot. She takes off the hat and cups her hands around her thighs; her knuckles digging into the vinyl, which hurts, but it's

better than the burning seat. All the boys are at their activities. Shirts lay in crumpled piles by water coolers. They play volleyball, baseball, tetherball, soccer, and flag football on the sports field. There's movement everywhere. Even on the baseball diamond, kids in the outfield shuffling their feet, the ones in the infield bobbing on their toes. The batter lets the bat hang loose in the air, gently oscillating. All the boys look the same: chests shining from sweat and sunscreen, hair wet and messy, their ribs protruding.

"So what cabin are you in?" asks the driver.

They cross the road. She knows the boys' cabins perfectly. She can picture each one and list them off. But she has only gone to the girls' side once with her brother. Lake of the Woods cabins are all girls' colleges. Amy doesn't know the names of any girls' colleges.

"Hun?"

"Sorry. Can I walk? I'd like to walk, if that's okay."

Amy jumps out of the cart and runs. She doesn't see any other option. She runs down the gravel path. The woman drives after her in the cart and keeps shouting things like, "Honey!" and "Sweetie!" Amy cuts through trees and calls back, "Stop chasing me, I don't even go here!" Confused, the driver brakes. She grabs her walkie-talkie and screams into it, watching Amy disappear into the woods.

Amy clutches her hat and runs through the trees to the climbing wall. It's in the back of the camp, next to the riflery range. It's a boys class. They wear red helmets and tennis shoes. Amy wades through bushes and bends under branches. She stands on a fallen tree; the bark has eroded and the wood is smooth, slippery.

The forest is dense with leaves, making her difficult to spot. Amy can feel sweat dampening her hair.

She watches the campers and their harnesses, how the straps frame their crotches. The Australian climbing instructor, in her halter-tops and short shorts, is the main topic of conversation in the mess hall. When she walks by Mohawk cabin, the boys slap the underside of the table (simulating simultaneous erections) and laugh. The Australian counselor smiles and says, "Oh, you boys." The boys immediately mock her, repeating the line back to her in a girlish voice. But late at night in the shower house when the echo of water hitting concrete is sufficiently loud, some of them masturbate while whispering *Oh, you boys, you boys*. They remember how her accent rises and falls, imagining she's talking directly to them. The Australian is the only reason Mohawks take climbing. The younger campers take the class for the swing and the zip line, the chance of ringing the bell once at the top.

Amy sees Brett on the wall. He hangs from the ropes, legs flailing out to both sides.

"C'mon Brett, you're almost there," says the Australian. She feeds rope through the belay device until he stops on the wall.

"No, I'm not. Take me down."

Amy laughs. There's something cute about his whining. She wants to surprise him with a hug. Brett kicks off the wall and descends to the ground. The counselor unhooks him, and Brett untucks his shirt and takes off his harness. He fills a cup with water from the cooler and takes a sip. Then he turns his head. Turns

it quickly, right to the forest, to Amy, aware of the presence staring at him. He sees the hat, his hat, the one he spent all morning looking for. They stare at each other. All the noises—the rifles going off, golf balls being struck, carabineers being clipped and campers shouting—mute themselves. She picks up her hand and cocks her wrist to one side, a half-wave. She whispers to herself, “Mrs. Brett Greenberg.” He picks up his fist and slowly uncurls his fingers until their palms, small and pale, face each other.

At midnight, Brett leaves his cabin and hides behind a tree. He pokes his head out and sees Amy on the dock. They face their palms toward one another, and shyly put their hands by their sides. Clouds stretch themselves thin across the sky, blocking out the darkness. Starlight seeps through, and a pale glow encloses the camp and bay. He walks down the hill and onto the dock, stepping over canoes until they stand right in front of each other.

“You took my hat,” he says.

She unties a lanyard from her wrist and hands it to him. “It’s for you. But you don’t have to wear it now or anything.” He looks at it, turns it over in his hand, and puts it in his pocket.

“Thanks,” he says.

She reaches down and pushes over the canoe. It rolls upright.

“Come on,” she says.

“We’ll get sent home.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted.” With her foot, she pushes the canoe into the water and it slides off the dock, its nose dipping into the water. “And I can’t be sent home, anyway. I don’t even go here.” She walks into the canoe and takes a seat.

“Are you coming?” She holds out her hand. He takes it and steps into the canoe, managing to sit down before losing his balance.

“Where do you go?” he asks.

“Timber Ridge.”

“The trailer park?”

“Yeah. Are you going to paddle or me?”

“You live there the whole year?”

“Yeah.”

“What about school?”

“When school starts, I go to school. I’ll just paddle.”

“Wait,” he says. *Why me? Why’d you send me the letter?* But he doesn’t ask. “I can do it.”

Brett crawls to the front of the canoe to paddle, but the boat’s curve is too steep to reach the water. She notices, and they sit next to each other in the center and dip their arms in the bay.

“Do you know about Turtle Man?” he asks.

She smiles, but keeps her focus on the water.

“A really long time ago kids would bring in fireworks for 4th of July. But this counselor, Turtle Man, took everyone’s fireworks and put them under his bed. And then one day he sets the fireworks on fire so they all go off and they explode under

him and then he exploded. So he runs to the bay to put out the fire, but he dies there and drowns and no one's found him. That's why it's called Turtle Bay."

"How did he run to the bay if he exploded?"

"I don't know. That's just the story."

Amy laughs to herself.

"What?" he asks.

She looks at him and tries to make out the color of his eyes. But it's too dark. She knows he's pale and freckly. When she looks at him she tries to open her eyes extra wide. Throughout her whole life everyone has always told her she had pretty eyes, and she wants him to see. He turns away and keeps paddling. She scratches a patch of mosquito bites on her shoulder.

"You have to put 'X's' in them," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"To make them stop itching. With your nails."

She carves 'X's' in her mosquito bites, but they continue to itch and now they hurt.

"Better," she says.

They stop paddling and let the canoe drift. It doesn't go far. The boat rocks as they shift. *What did you tell your bunkmates when you left? Do you still think you're going to go home early? Are we boyfriend and girlfriend?* She keeps her questions to herself. She thinks Brett probably did, too. She isn't sure what to expect from the night. All she knows is that she wants to be near him; in the canoe,

after listening to his botched Turtle Man story and poor mosquito advice, she's satisfied.

White beams from flashlights skip over waves, crisscrossing, until they combine, spotlighting Brett and Amy on the boat. The beams are harsh and blinding.

A voice shouts at them from the shore. "Hey!"

"No one can fuck out there," says the counselor next to him, his words slurring.

"Teach us your ways!"

"Teach us your fucking ways!"

The counselors laugh. Amy can hear Brett's breath; she can see his shoulders quiver.

"It's okay," says Amy. "They're just drunk."

The counselors leave, flashlights bobbing in their hands.

Brett and Amy paddle back and pull the canoe onto the dock, which is easier than either had anticipated. She walks him to his cabin door and whispers, "Have you ever kissed anyone before?"

"No. Have you?" he says.

"No."

She wants to pucker her lips and push her face into his, but he turns to go inside.

"Tomorrow?" he says to the screen door.

"Uh-huh."

She sits outside his window and watches his head hit the pillow. She has an impulse to climb under his racecar sheets, let their bodies rub against each other. But she leaves and watches her brother and his friends tackle each other in the grass.

Tomorrow comes. They meet on the dock and before she says hello, she proposes.

“I think we should get married.”

Before he has time to answer, she takes his hand in hers and walks him into Timber Ridge. They weave through trailers. White, black, and red trailers. Dents in their sides, bumpers freckled with mud. Trailer awnings are ripped apart from rainstorms, from water that has sunk into the cloth until the seams split open. From the trailer on the far end of the park, they hear piano keys, the sound of horns swelling. Mrs. Watkins waters her flowers. Most trailers have windows cracked open. Snoring and coughing and incoherent whispers pass furiously, swirling in the air like wind. Amy joins the whispering. “You do want to get married, don’t you?”

“I guess,” he says.

“No. You need to want to.”

“Okay.”

“Okay you want to?”

“Yes.”

Ian and his friends are in the playground. Monkey bars, a sand pit, and a slide are scattered among weeds. Her brother stands above the monkey bars, legs spread apart, his hands on his hips.

“Who goes there?” he shouts.

But he knows and waits for them to walk underneath his bars.

“Can you marry us?” Amy asks.

“You’re too old for a pretend wedding.”

“Then make it real.”

Ian holds back a smirk, and looks at Brett seriously. “Have you ever been married before?” he asks.

“No.”

“Good.”

Ian makes the necessary preparations. He runs back to the trailer and grabs his pocketknife and the stick he has been sharpening all summer. He sits down in the pit and drags the blade across the stick, flakes of wood falling into the sand. Ian and his friends rake the sand pit, making clean-cut lines like corduroy. Amy and Brett walk to the center of the pit barefoot, their toes pointing at each other in the center. Ian’s friends sit on the ledge, their feet buried in the sand. They kick up sand with their toes. Ian holds the stick out in front of Brett and takes his ring finger.

“The first step,” he says, and twists the tip of the stick into Brett’s finger pad. He draws blood. Ian pinches the tip of Brett’s finger, letting drops fall into the sand.

Brett cries, but he doesn’t move. Ian’s friends stop flicking up sand. They look at one another, unsure. The friends stand up.

“Sit down,” says Ian, and they do.

Ian spits on the bloody end of the stick and wipes it clean. He hands it to his sister.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

Amy rolls the stick between her fingers. She looks at Brett and he nods.

Slowly, she brings it to her finger and lets it touch her skin.

“No,” says Ian, “This one,” and he sticks out his ring finger.

The sharpness of the stick sends chills up her spine, but she pricks her ring finger, looking at Brett the entire time. She stares at his teary eyes and decides they are brown. Amy hands the stick to her brother.

“Good. Now kiss fingers.” Amy and Brett rub bloody fingers.

“Now kiss for real,” says Ian, but then, “Wait.” He tells his friends to look away. They turn around and see the fireflies, a field of flickering neon.

While they are turned, while the grasshoppers chirp and campers snore, Brett and Amy kiss. They push their lips against each other, their front teeth scraping. They stare at each other the entire time, eyelashes intertwining. The tips of their noses are pressed together, and Ian’s hands cup their shoulders.

“You’re married,” he says, and walks over to his friends. He claps them on the back and they run through the field of fireflies, trying to catch and crush them in their hands.

Amy walks with Brett to the fence. They try different hand holding methods. Interlocking fingers and grasping each other’s palms. They link index fingers and let their hands fall to their sides. She stops. So does he.

“We’re married,” she says.

He smiles. “Yeah, we’re married.”

They arrive at the fence and he squirms into Greenwoods. Amy watches him walk toward his cabin. Down the path and up the hill. She closes her eyes and listens for the creaking of the cabin door, but all she can hear are the waves.

He isn't at the dock the next night. He isn't in his cabin. Amy peers through the window. Racecar sheets have been stripped off. There is only his blue mattress—thin, scratched, and bare. The row of letters above his bed are no longer there. Only one note remains—hers. Across the page he has added his own tear marks, dried splotches circled in green marker.

Amy collapses into the ground and lies down in a bed of pine needles. She presses into the cut on her fingertip. She digs deeper into her finger, pushing through skin and pain, until she can finally reach him.

For the remaining days of summer, Amy wakes to the camp bells and fishes with her father. She munches on cereal and squirts ketchup onto broiled hot dogs with her mother and her cigarette, while threads of smoke swirl in Amy's nostrils. After lunch she stitches lanyard, clusters of colors—reds, blues, yellows, and greens—that fold over and into each other. And at night she swims; she goes to camp—climbs the low part of the climbing wall, teaches herself to shoot a bow, kicks deflated soccer balls, swings on the gymnastics bars, watches her reflection in the dance studio as she walks on her tippy toes and twirls. Before bed she plays with Ian and his friends. Races. Tag. Catch. Wrestling. She tries smoking cigarettes that she found in the dirt; all she tastes is mud. She drinks and spits out backwash

from a can of beer. She spits it out on Ian, and his friends all laugh. For the rest of summer, she lives under a hat that's too big on her.