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Highly Flammable Girls

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An abstract of  
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2019

Abstract

Highly Flammable Girls  
By Mattie Worsham

The essays of *Highly Flammable Girls* investigate the intersection of addiction and the female experience. It is a collection about girls and the fathers who did not know how to love them.

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My abiding love and loyalty to my mother, sisters, brother, and father. We are family before we are anything else.

And my unending, unconditional devotion to Clara, who is not like other girls, but, in fact, much worse.

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FOR MY MOTHER

My mother will get very mad  
Her face will turn red  
and she will throw one shoe  
My father will say nothing.  
After a while everyone  
will forget it.  
Years and years will pass.  
My mother will stop mentioning it.

This is me she is carrying.  
I am a baby.  
She does not know  
I will turn out bad.

Sandra Cisneros

“Elegy For The Boy Who Couldn’t Love You”

A few days before Christmas, my siblings and I are walking in the back pasture of our family’s farm when we scare a young deer into the fence. Its breakable body collides with the mesh wiring with such force I wonder if it ever intended to jump over it – maybe it didn’t see the fence at all. Its body, folded on itself in the dirt, is still for a moment. Then the thrashing starts. I reach it first, ahead of my siblings, and crouch out of the reach of its legs. There is no blood, no fur out of place, no outward signs of injury. Just thrashing. Afraid to touch any of the seizing body parts below its neck, I place its head in my lap. My sister comes, and strokes the flat part of its cheek. My brother goes to get Dad. Its thrashing slows to a halfhearted twitch in the minutes it takes for him to come. My father appears over the crest of the hill, hulking shoulders moving quickly, my brother’s thin body barely visible behind him, and a dark, concise looking pistol tucked into his right hand.

The deer dies before my father has to shoot it. Its body stills. Its eyes dilate. My father looks down at the animal as if disappointed by its lifelessness. He does not appreciate accidental death like this.

My siblings and I look at each other, and question what to do next. It’s deep into December, and the ground hardened weeks ago. No rain has made the Georgia clay dry enough for vein-like cracks to surface. Besides, what would we use to dig a hole that deep? No one suggests that we make a meal of it, which is what we normally do whenever a dead, edible animal presents itself. We can’t leave it here to attract prey animals that might decide to stay a while, and pick off our few remaining cats.

Still staring at the body, my father has not said a word, but something stirs him. He places the pistol delicately at the base of an oak tree before he reaches down, collecting all four legs of the deer together in one hand as if about to hog tie it, and lifts it from the dirt. He walks, body leaning against the weight of the deer, towards the opposite fence line. His face, turning red from exertion,

remains calm, resigned even, as though this act is an unsaid, necessary task. The deer hangs limply, willingly in my father's hands. A few steps from the fence he shifts the body so that both hands are wrapped around its thin, fine legs. He tosses the deer over the fence and down the neighboring ravine with ease and athleticism, reminiscent of a marble statue.

When he returns, I pick up the gun carefully and hand it back to him, and we all walk silently towards the house.

After recounting the incident to my mother, I go into the kitchen. My father is by the sink preparing something to put on the grill for dinner. He turns to me, and his eyes are wet and ringed in red. I wrap my arms around his barrel-like torso. "You do good things, sometimes," I tell him, my face pressed up against his shirt. I feel him nodding gently. We stay there in front of the kitchen sink for a moment before he turns back to the cutting board and I wash my hands.

“Highly Flammable Girls”

In a hotel room, sometime in 1996. Two women, best friends, lying down on top of the comforter. They have been eating potato chips with dip made from a prepackaged powder, and drinking vodka. They are as happy as they have ever been. The younger one sits up, says: “I think I might be pregnant.” Silence. The older one starts laughing.

A few weeks later, the younger one makes a call from a high-rise office in Atlanta. The older one picks up from a high-rise in DC. “So,” the younger one says, “how much damage do you think we did to this baby?”

Maybe the older one says something like, *C'mon, the kid's fine. Or Let's hope she gets your looks. Or She might never forgive you for sleeping with her father.*

\*

The reverberations of my parents keep me awake. The lullaby of their slurred sentences running smoothly into each other, the faint scent of my mother's cigarette floating in from the porch, and the vibrations of my father's heavy feet on the hardwood floors are familiar comforts in my dark, hot room. Indistinct, unmemorable. Nothing about tonight is different except that it is.

“When you're drunk is the only time anybody can get laid around here,” my father says, voice thick with Scotch. My mother slams the sliding glass door and something shatters between them. But these words are nothing to me now, just a little girl unable to fall asleep listening to a language that she can recognize, but not understand. This moment will spend years waiting to congeal, to be recalled, understood, and assigned meaning.

The room is suddenly hotter, darker. Stuck to the ceiling, a glow-in-the-dark dinosaur, an artifact from when this was my half-brother's room all those years ago, looks down on me with failing luminescence. *You're eavesdropping*, the dinosaur says. *This is all your fault.*

\*

It's November. I know this because my mother has already started putting out decorations for Thanksgiving, and things in our family only go wrong around the holidays. My dad tries to turn the knob to their bedroom once, but the door remains locked, my mother on the other side of it. I hear him stand very still for a moment, only a few feet away from my own bedroom door, before retreating back down the hallway to the green leather couch in the living room. I wait a few long minutes before creeping out of the room, glancing first at the locked door before following my father. A soft glow from the fireplace casts the whole room in a comforting orange, and small shadows flicker across the walls hung with taxidermy. The creatures have been carefully arranged and mounted, all of them lifelike and beautiful. I crawl into the spot beside my father, and put my fingers in the dark, feathery hair that curls at the nape of his neck. He holds a scotch glass, the same I like to drink milk from in the morning, loosely in his left hand, gravity constantly threatening to pull it towards the carpet.

"I know something's wrong," I say. "Tell me." He looks on the verge of tears, red face just a few muscle contractions away from crumpled. He seems suddenly very small, like something that can only be touched softly. He begins to talk about my mother – her frigidity, her lack of understanding. He is compelling and sad and my father, and it is impossible for me not to believe him. *He's confiding in me*, I think. *Me*.

But he still hasn't told me what I want to hear. "Is there someone else?" I ask him, still wrapping and unwrapping his hair around my fingers. He doesn't respond, so I ask again. I ask until he answers. His resolve falters, watered down by single malt, and he lets out a garbled yes.

"Yes," he says, defeated and relieved. "Yes." But I immediately want to put the word back in his mouth, make it disappear. *You did this*, I think before I can stop myself. *This wasn't real until you made him say it. You wanted it to be true*. But, really, I just wanted something to explain why doors were being locked, why I could never have a sip from my mother's glass, why my siblings weren't talking.

“Does Mom know?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, “but don’t tell her that I told you.” For the first time all night, he really looks at me. Thirteen with stubborn hair cut too short, mouth a cage of braces, my body an uncoordinated hyphen between child and adult. “Promise me that you won’t tell your mother.”

I nod. “Does the woman know about me?”

“Of course,” he says, his voice wounded. “She thinks you’re brilliant. Your siblings, too.” A proud smile appears on his face, and I’m not sure if it’s in response to our brilliance, or this other woman who decided that we were.

“Do you love her?” I ask, and wish I hadn’t.

This time he doesn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

When his chin falls onto his chest and the scotch glass is resting safely on the coffee table, I go back to my room. I stare at myself in the mirror and will myself to cry, but I can’t even muster a cough. *If you’re not going to cry now*, I promise myself, *Then you’re not allowed to cry ever*. And something heavy takes root inside of me, extending into a place that I cannot reach. It feels safe there, contained. So I leave it and go back to bed, unaware of the pieces of me that it has displaced.

My parents separate for the first time the following summer, and my mother and I move into a widowed house, the owner only dead two weeks. Every room smells like cigarettes and dead flowers. But it’s on the same property as the barn where we keep our horses, and imagining their heavy bodies nearby, breathing softly in the dark, makes the house feel less empty. I see my father in three hour increments every other week or so, and it’s much easier to love him this way.

\*

I go visit my half-sister, Jenna, in New York, and my last morning there she notices the pink slits on my thigh when I get out of the shower. She spends the next half hour chasing me around her one bedroom apartment with a tube of Neosporin and Vitamin E oil. “To help with the

scarring,” she says, and her voice is so sad that I almost let her do it, let her try to heal the parts of me that she can reach. But the thought of my scars disappearing back into my skin stirs something animal inside of me, something that wants to thrash, to escape, because these scars are mine. They are the only part of my body that I chose, the only sign that I am living in it, that there is pain inside of it. I wear them like a signature, a confirmation of my own existence.

She gives me the Neosporin and oil to take home with me. I lose both of them before I even get to the airport.

That night she calls our parents. “I don’t care what she tells you,” Jenna says. “Look at her fucking legs.”

The first therapist they send me to is inexplicably annoying, office stuffy and over-decorated. The second one is a man. The third one, Mary, doesn’t bother me so much. She looks like a soft place to land, and I tentatively agree to go back.

During our second session I tell her earnestly that I’m not going to stop cutting. Maybe ever.

“I didn’t ask you to,” she responds.

\*

The first time a boy kisses my neck, I am fifteen. He’s seventeen, which seems infinitely older because he can drive. A few days ago my best friend, Reagan, wrote my phone number in the sand, followed by the words *Call me maybe?* with an arrow pointing to where I lay extended out on a beach towel. Now the concrete outside his hotel room is uncomfortable against my back, and his hands, moving in small circles above my waistband, feel unnatural and alien, but I like it. He pushes one of his knees in between my legs, his ripped jeans rough against the sunburnt skin of my thighs. He starts to put a hand down my shorts, but I grab his wrist.

“Has anybody ever kissed your neck before?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No.” So he does, just under my ear. With his head tucked down, mouth moving towards the top of my shoulder, I see myself for the first time, reflected in the dark window behind him, and it seems impossible that those are my arms draped over his shoulder blades so easily, as though they have been there before. Impossible that it is my body hidden behind his. Impossible that the eyes looking back at me, dark and empty in the opaque reflection, are my own.

The next morning, I leave Myrtle beach with a necklace of rose-colored bruises under my greasy brown hair. Reagan’s family drops me off at my mom’s house, and she thanks them for taking me on their trip.

“Did you have fun?” she asks once we are inside the house, screen door slamming behind us. “I made spaghetti.”

“Yes,” I say. And the word feels so nice in my mouth that I say it again. *Yes.*

After dinner, I stand in front of the mirror and pull my hair back, tracing the broken blood vessels in my neck. *He wanted you*, I think. I say it out loud and the words feel foreign in my mouth, the way a curse word feels when you’re a child. *He wanted you he wanted you he wanted you.*

The bruises fade in a few days, the blue stains turning yellow before absorbing back underneath the skin, but the voice of this wanted girl will stay with me, hot and emphatic in my ear. *Once you’ve felt desirable*, she says, *You won’t ever want to feel anything else.*

\*

My first boyfriend, Walker, runs a hand from my hip to half way down my thigh, fingers stuttering over the ridges of scar tissue I’d spent the last three years making. “Why do you do it?” he asks. “It’s like killing a flower.”

We met a few months ago when he cheated off of me in Geometry. His father is the kind of man to throw golf clubs. He told me once that his dad punched him in the nose, and he bled all

down the front of his shirt. I look at his face, imagine blood painted over the freckles on his cheeks, dripping from his chin to his collarbone.

We are both still too young to drive, so my mom takes him home every night after dinner. Walker and I sit in the backseat together, and I lay my head in his lap. It's never premeditated, and I can't even remember this first time it happened – if I was turned on or ashamed or both – but when we get to the highway, he slips a hand into my jeans or under my skirt, keeping up a conversation with my mom the whole time. I close my eyes tightly, and impressionist paintings appear on the back of my lids. My body shakes and spasms, but is silent. Afterwards, in the darkness of the backseat, he puts his fingers down my throat. His desire for me, for my body, feels complete and unending. Like a promise. Like Love.

My mother pulls up in front of his house, and he hops out. I crawl into the front seat. “Thanks for the ride,” he says before disappearing up the driveway.

On the way home, I lean my head against the window, and try not to breathe in the inky smoke of my mom's Winston Ultra-lite.

One night in April, Walker and I are wandering around in the front yard with blankets over our heads, brushing against each other and then pushing apart – an activity that we arrived at inexplicably, without ever vocalizing the rules of the game. He comes up to me, wraps me in his blanket. “Ritchie gave me a condom,” he says, voice rising at the end as though it was a question and not a statement.

“Okay,” I say. “Alright.”

Sex is painful and embarrassing and there are a lot more fluids involved than I expected. In the flatbed behind the barn, it is too dark for me to tell if I'm bleeding, but when we go back inside my hands are the color of rust. Walker goes to the bathroom, comes back and says “Are you *okay*?” I look down, see his hands are red too.

The second time we have sex, the condom breaks. When we realize it, I start crying. Walker pets my hair and touches my cheeks, telling me that it will be fine, that I don't need to cry. He's as gentle with me now as he's ever been.

The next morning I drive to CVS and beg the pharmacist to let me buy the morning after pill. She looks at me with big brown eyes and something like sympathy. I can't imagine what I must look like to her then – eyes swollen and shadowed with ruined mascara, desperate, like something caught in a trap.

“Isn't there anyone who can buy it for you?” she asks. “You give them the money, and they just have to come up to the counter.”

I walk around the store, looking for women who might be vulnerable to my tear-stained face. The first two just shake their heads, say, *Sorry*. But the third, a woman with hair so dry it might snap and skin that retreats into her cheekbones, takes a long, disappointing look at me. “Oh, honey. You need to find yourself a nice man. Someone to take care of you,” she says, and then turns slowly back to the wall of cold medicine. I stand there for a moment, staring at the wiry back of her head before spinning around and leaving the store.

Half an hour later, my mom walks through the door, heads back to the pharmacy. “My daughter was here earlier,” she says, her voice calm but not unkind.

“You take it in two parts,” she tells me gently, helping me open the package. “One now, another in twelve hours.” I look down at the white pill, smaller than the Motrin I took for headaches as a child. “The pharmacy ladies were really worried about you,” she adds, voice so tender that I feel like I might break in half.

“Thank you,” I say to her in a language of half words half strangled sob. “I love you so much.” She gives me a hug, handing me a bottle of water before I start to cry again in earnest.

“We’ll get you on birth control,” she says, because she is a better mother than I deserve.  
“That way this won’t happen again.”

\*

The summer after Walker and I break up, my parents get back together. I’m sixteen and graceless, drunk on liquor that the hand currently tracing my bikini line stole from our neighbors’ garage. I’d been drunk once before now, on a bottle of hard lemonade and the attention of the boy who gave it to me, intoxication mistaken for affection. But that was two months ago, and I have been imagining a second drunk ever since. And a third and a fourth.

This trip is when I drink beer for the first time. And vodka. And whiskey. And some dark, unidentifiable liquid that’s in a water bottle floating around the hot tub. I take shots, chasing with Gatorade or Diet Coke. I dance to songs I’ve never heard, falling down on the beach. I pee in the sand behind trashcans, looking at Reagan beside me, crouched the same way, and can hardly stop laughing long enough to say, “You’re my best friend.” I touch boys with a newfound boldness. I let them touch me back with an even newer carelessness. I forget names, people, entire hours of time. But not stars. I remember stars.

There is no mention of it on the weather channel or in the news, but every night sometime around two there’s a hasty meteor shower. *He’s missing it*, I think, staring up at the sky behind the shoulder of a forgettable boy I’d met earlier that day. Or earlier that night. *He can’t see the sky*. But when I tell him that I just saw a shooting star – and another one, I just saw another one – he’s unconcerned. These are not the kind of boys to care about the stars they’re not seeing. And I realize with a sudden strike of drunken sadness: I only see these stars every night because every night I’m on my back.

The last night before we return to Atlanta I stumble home by myself and grab a handful of mini snickers bars from the refrigerator. I take them to bed with me, and cry because it cannot

possibly have been me that did all those things with all those different boys. Someone that is me but not me, like in a dream, did all those things. *But maybe I've got it backwards*, I think. *Maybe this is the real me*. I stop crying. *Real me*, I think again, and sink into the comfort of an identity – its safety, borders. I'm unconcerned by what this identity might look like in the daylight, away from the unreality of a beach at the end of summer, ignorant to the permanence of the mold that I'm stepping into.

The next morning I wake up in sheets made of shiny silver wrappers.

\*

Without really meaning to, I start dating someone who's too good for me. He's handsome in an unassuming way, all dark features and white teeth. Devoted, but not desperate. I lean into him tentatively, uncomfortable with stability, unsettled by his reassurances of affection, which don't seem to cost him anything, which he offers up freely. Without warning, I'm transformed from a train wreck into A Nice Girl, but I only feel worse about myself the more he reassures me that I'm better, each affirmation of my goodness like a denial of the bad things that have happened to me – that I have let happen to me. I'm inseparable from my damage, my existence contingent on acknowledgment of it.

"Something in me," I say in therapy, "it's just *wrong*. Despicable, maybe. No. That's not the right word either." I pause, reaching for simplicity. "*Bad*." I say finally, drawing out its singular syllable until it feels large enough to hide behind. "I'm just bad. And he doesn't get that."

"You're not bad," Mary tells me. "You're hurting." But now, young and afraid of the unfamiliarity that is love, I am in no position to distinguish between the two. The logic tracks, but cannot reach the place inside of me where the hurt lives.

It is easy to cheat on him with a guy I meet in Starbucks, a guy who is arrogant and brutal, quick to tell me who I am, what I deserve. Inadequacy, as crippling as it may feel, is at least familiar. Even after my relationship ends, I keep seeing the Starbucks boy on and off for two years. His

basement looks like the inside of a Valentine's day card, and I spend hours there smoking hookah and having sex on his red futon or in the hot tub or on the pool table. Sometimes we go to Starbucks and fuck in the parking lot. He never asks for me, but doesn't deny me either. I bleach my hair in an effort to keep his attention. I start losing weight. I change how I dress, what music I listen to. I start smoking cigarettes to seem cool, stop – or at least try to – when he says he hates the smell of smoke. I write about him constantly, and when he reads it is the only time I have his undivided affection, completely absorbed by the version of him that I see – dark and complicated and endlessly interesting. He says things to me like: *You'd be a good target for a pedophile, you know, because you're not that pretty and have low self-esteem, and I can't ever be serious with you because you don't believe in God.* Or *You actually do have beautiful eyes.* And in a strange way, I cherish each of these observations equally. It's not the first time I've mistaken cruelty for honesty, and in a misguided way, I feel seen. He's confirming something that I have spent such a long time trying to prove was here, inside of me. The thing that I call bad because I do not know that it's pain.

When he starts hitting on Reagan, talking about the ways in which I don't really understand him, the specialness is suddenly transparent.

“Why am I good enough to fuck,” I ask him one night over the phone, close to tears, “but not to date?”

He doesn't pause before responding, “I fucked you because you wanted me to.”

\*

Just before Christmas, my mother goes out of town to visit family, leaving me and my half-brother alone with Dad for the weekend. Coming home from a late movie, we find Dad passed out in his bedroom, scotch glass miraculously still held between his fingers, and an outdated flip phone tucked in his other palm. When I finally shake him awake, he looks up at me uncertainly, as though

surprised by his own drunkenness. I help him to bed as my brother watches from the doorway, both of us aware of the phone that isn't his normal phone.

Afterward, I wait until his breath is heavy and so slow it seems like he might not be breathing at all, before I go back in and dig the phone out of his bedside table. I lock myself in the bathroom and read through the thread of messages between my father and a woman who is decidedly not my mother. I go downstairs and show my brother. Older than me by ten years, he gives me the defeated look of someone who has been here before, who knows that he will be here again. He sighs, says, "This is why Dad can't have nice things."

The next morning I call my mom and tell her. I cry uncontrollably. Body wracking sobs that leave me exhausted and thirsty. She sends me to a friend's couch for the rest of the afternoon. Tells me *Do not give that phone back to your father*. She makes the six hour drive home in four, and shakes me awake in the early evening. The sun is setting through the French doors and I smell coffee brewing. The house had filled with women while I was asleep.

"He's going to move out this time," she says. "We get to stay."

This time she's leaving him for real, or at least for the next few months.

\*

In between Christmas and the New Year, my mom takes me to the beach for a few days – anything to get us out of Atlanta, away from my father's underwhelming apologies. On the drive there she cannot stop talking about how much fun we're going to have. I keep my temple pressed to the cold glass of the window. When my mother had woken me on that couch two weeks ago, looking into her apologetic eyes, dark with blame she didn't deserve, I'd felt a crippling rush of pain, and then nothing. By the time we get to the beach, I'm indistinguishable from the nothing.

One afternoon on the island, three guys see me walking near the water. One of them says I have a beautiful smile. The others agree. They walk with me a while. Cooper and Tyler are cousins, both eighteen. Jack, a friend, is twenty-two. *You look older than sixteen*, they tell me. I smile more.

We find some abandoned beach chairs and sit down, me in Cooper's lap. *Mattie, Mattie*, they keep saying to each other, shaking their heads. *Got that pretty smile*. Every time I shift my weight, Cooper's hands tighten on my waist and I like the feeling of his knuckles digging into my side, of something getting harder against the back of my thigh. Jack pulls out a water bottle that's been emptied and refilled with alcohol. He hands it to me and I drink obediently, happily. But it's getting late, and I have to be home for dinner. They decide to walk me back, but when we get to the pavement, Cooper nudges me behind a car. He kisses me until Jack and Tyler are far away.

"C'mon," he says, "there's a place we can go nearby."

The place is a dirty bathroom counter, made of stone that digs into the skin of my back. I avoid my reflection in the mirror. He doesn't have a condom but I ask him if he "has anything." We fuck until someone comes in the door.

I make it back in plenty of time for dinner.

Cooper had texted me, asking if we could meet up again, telling me how much his friends like me, how much they want me too. After my mom goes to bed that night, I sneak out to see them. Tyler meets me about half way down the beach and hands me another repurposed water bottle.

"What is it?" I ask him, as if it matters.

"Bacardi," he answers, but I'm already unscrewing the cap and taking a gulp.

He asks me why I didn't bring any friends for him and Jack, but I reassure him that I'm game for *anything*. By the time we catch up with the others, the liquor no longer tastes like gasoline.

“There’s that pretty smile,” one of them says. I sit down between them, and I don’t know whose hands are on my thighs or under my shirt. The empty bottle is discarded in the sand. I lie down on my back, and they repeat my name like a prayer. Jack starts kissing me, I think, and Tyler brushes his hands across my abdomen. Cooper watches. The Bacardi is now a heaviness in my muscles, my brain, that slows everything down. They touch me like this until I’m supple, agreeable. Sleepy.

Jack stops kissing me, moves towards where Tyler is now sitting between my knees. “Me first,” Tyler says, pushing him away. I don’t stop him from taking my shorts off, or Jack from pulling my shirt over my head. I keep asking for Cooper. “I want to be with him,” I say, my voice low and drowsy. Tyler unzips his pants, and Jack comes back to my face, starts kissing me again. Then the sky is too close, like a blanket over me. Tyler’s hands are on my waist, keeping my hips steady. I drift, but the roughness of the sand against my back keeps me tethered to my body. Jack kissing me keeps me somewhat awake. Then he stops. I feel myself lifted up, placed on top of something that kind of hurts, but I move against it without thought. Then I’m being turned over, and the sand is not on my back. The sand is in my mouth, in my eyes. I can feel it blistering against my knees, collecting under my fingernails. I clench my teeth, and tiny grains crack between my molars. Tyler is still behind me, his body heavy. I feel my eyes start to water. I form words, but can’t make a sound. I hear Jack and Cooper, maybe ten feet away. I think they’re laughing. Then, while a body is still moving against me, hands holding my hips up, pushing my head down, everything goes black and starless.

They stay until I wake up. I search for my clothes and phone in the sand, and then Tyler walks me home. “You can make it home from here, right?” he asks when we’re about half way, and I nod.

I stay close to the edge of the water. The moon reflects off the choppy surface like a broken sand dollar. I stop, face the ocean, unsure and unconcerned where I am in relation to home. I blink, and I'm standing on our back porch, peering into the sliding glass door to make sure that it's actually our house. I blink again, and I'm in the bathroom, studying my mascara stained face in the mirror. I get in the shower, letting it cake sand into my hair, and watch as the dark and swirling water circles the drain.

I don't have the awareness needed to unravel this experience yet. By the time I do, it will be a memory, distorted first by the intoxication and then again by time, by a desire to forget about it entirely. I pull the skin back over the wound that night left, trusting that it will take care of itself. Even years later, when I do finally reach the understanding that not saying anything is not the same as saying yes, I am still tentative to use the word *rape*. *Rape* seems too definitive. To call the incident anything would be to deny the ambiguity of that night, to etch something onto the dark spots in my memory and call them anything other than empty. To use *rape* might make it real. *I was a slut in high school*, I will tell people instead, thinking of this experience, or *I was experimenting*. Or, more often: *It was my fault; I was drunk*. By which I really mean: *I deserved it*. So I'm careful to leave the wound untouched, sure that in trying to give it a name and reset the break after so much time, I'll just hurt more.

A few weeks later, I find a blurry photograph on my phone. I'm smiling stupidly at the camera, an empty bottle in my hand and a guy on either side of me. *They fucked you because you wanted them to*, I think, and a sense of revulsion rises in my throat before sliding back down like sand.

\*

Different boys, different places. But the morning after it's the same nauseating white pill. Other than that first time when I was too young, and the few times I had to buy it at some place right off the highway on the way home from a beach, I go to the same pharmacy, get money from

the same ATM. I take it out of the packaging before getting in the car, tossing the box into the trash so that my parents won't find it. There is no reason for me to be in this situation. I have access to birth control, to condoms, but something in me reaches for the risk, loving the hazard of unprotected sex, flirting with the possibilities of my body, of what I can do to it, of how I might endanger it, without any actual consequences. I know that, whenever I need it, there's another pill waiting for me.

When my half-sister got engaged last fall, my father cried. I went to him, put my hands around his neck and reassured him that he still had me.

"You're right," he had said. "You'll probably have five husbands." I think of this, sitting in the parking lot, choking down another tiny death pill, and start counting all of the others that came before it. *One, two, three.* There was never really a Plan A. *Four, five, six.* Really, Mattie, why don't you just say no? *Seven, eight, nine.* It's called *having a backbone.* *Ten, eleven, twelve.* Do you need a receipt?

*Five husbands, twelve pills,* I think. But only one father.

\*

Within the year, my father has moved back in, reclaimed his place at the head of the table at dinner. He always eats with one arm wrapped protectively around his plate, and I push my food around without really eating.

"What's wrong with your steak?" my mother asks, pointing towards it with her fork.

"Nothing," I say, "I'm just not really in the mood for it."

My father pauses, teeth about to rip into another sliver of meat. "You've had worse things in your mouth," he says. My mother looks at me, but says nothing.

After dinner, the carving knives are steely and silent in the sink. I stare down at them, unable to look away, but also unable to finish washing them. My father has said things like this to me before, and will say them again. *If you eat like this, no wonder you can't get a date. Or I could get a lot of money*

*for you for sex trade in Taiwan.* Each time I reach for something in me that might contradict what he says, but can find nothing. I am all volatile compulsivity, needing to be handled with the same caution as something that is highly flammable. He thinks he's being funny, or even complimentary, and has no awareness of what it sounds like for a father to say these things to his daughter, or what it's like to be the daughter who hears them.

\*

My first weekend of college, a boy who recognizes me from a summer reception grabs my arm. "You're a freshman, right?" he asks. "From Atlanta?" He says he remembers me. He says his name is Landon. He says he's got a bottle of Fireball in his room.

"Yes," I say to him.

We start studying together, then sleeping together. I drink with him. I drink without him, but I drink with him, too. Stop studying together. Keep sleeping together. He says he doesn't want anything serious, so when he isn't around, I sleep with someone else. It doesn't matter who loves me as long somebody does.

"Did you *fuck* him?" Landon asks. I'm not entirely sure which *him* he's referring to, but I know that either way the answer is yes. I feel my insides start to shake, everything in me trying to backtrack, redact my own confession. I didn't tell him that I'd been with other people out of any sense of loyalty so much as to get a reaction, to see if he cared, to see if he would prove my father wrong. I want to tell him that it wasn't really me, that none of this is really *me*. A metaphor, I want to say. All of this is just a metaphor. It doesn't count. It wasn't supposed to be *real*.

"Did you fuck him?" he asks again.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Please look at me."

“It’s hard to do that,” he says, “with my best friend’s cock in your mouth.” I keep apologizing, but eventually he just walks out. He comes back a few minutes later, leaves again the next morning.

\*

Eddie and I fall out of the party, spilling onto the sidewalk, hanging over and on each other. Deciding to go home with him was like playing musical chairs – which guy would be underneath me when I could no longer stand up. Tonight it’s Eddie from English 181. Outside his dorm, he puts both hands on my face. I don’t know what he says, but it makes me smile.

Upstairs in his room, my back up against the wall, I drag my acrylic nails across his shoulders hard enough to scrape the surface of his skin. He leans into it. “I can’t tell with you,” he says. “You keep pushing me. Do you want me to push back?” I tell him I do, and so he does.

I feel my skull knocking against the wall over and over again. Something hurts, but the pain keeps moving around, and he keeps moving with it. Too many things at once, too many places, too many parts, but through the glass pane of alcohol they’re just a single vibration, a dull body pain. I can’t tell him where it hurts, so I don’t say anything at all.

In the morning I wake up coughing on a bare mattress. Comforters, sheets, pillowcases – even the mattress cover is on the floor. There is a body to my right. I turn my head to the left and see his roommate on the twin bed across the room. I’m completely naked. I get up slowly, quietly, grabbing my underwear, shorts, slipping into a t-shirt that isn’t mine, advertising a place I’ve never been, and am already down the hall by the time I hear the door click shut. Halfway across the freshman quad I realize I forgot my shoes.

I tip my head up, stretching out my neck, looking in the mirror at the hickies opening like dark purple roses, branches spreading like ink in water. The way they cut all the way across my throat looks like something out of a low budget slasher film, the color unexpected and violent.

There is a distant soreness everywhere between my chin and collarbone. I pull out concealer, start painting over the marks that I don't remember getting.

When I go back that night to get my shoes, Eddie's eyes widen at the marks on my neck, still visible under the layers of foundation. "Wow," he says, and his hand lifts, moving as if to brush it against the bruised skin, but he stops himself. "Those are pretty bad."

He hands me my shoes and tells me I can keep the shirt.

When I get back home, I don't turn on the light, letting the blue glow of dusk fill the room. I can see only the shadow of myself in the mirror, and it's easier to imagine that I am not real, that I am just the unwanted memory of my future self; a girl who is like me but not me, who has already lived through all of this. Someone who is so far removed from this moment, no one will believe that we were ever the same person. Her eyes are not shadowed by two day old mascara. Her hair is not tangled and bleached. She doesn't wear bruises around her neck. She doesn't smell like cigarettes, or remember the taste of sand. She doesn't swallow pills in parking lots. Her stars are not the same as mine. But she is years away from now, and if I turn on the light, see the body reflected in the mirror, it will be just me.

“For Vinny”

In New York, I fall in love with men on the street all the time. On East 34th street, I’m an angel. My hair dark with sweat, face red with exertion, I weave in and out of people who don’t look up, and my repetitions of *on your left on your left on your left* go unheard. But a group of construction workers part for me, making a path under a ceiling of scaffold. “Angel coming through,” one of them says, cupping his hands around his rusted mouth. The line of yellow helmets turn in unison, always one step behind me. My pace picks up, but my breathing slows. *Angel*. There is innocence in the word, something redemptive. I know they are not naming *me* so much as naming the skin of my stomach, the place where my thighs disappear into my running shorts, the tan lines that split apart my shoulders. But I feel it in the parts of me that they cannot see – the parts of me that I want to be named, that I need to be wanted.

Their language becomes my geography. I’m an *angel* on East 34<sup>th</sup>. And *C’mon, it’s okay to smile* at the 190th street station, arms wrapped tightly around myself, lips involuntarily turning up. *God bless you* at Hillside Avenue and Broadway, midriff exposed. *I’d fuck the shit out of you* in Riverside Park, too short skirt inching up my thigh, exposing what’s left of my razor blade years. The fear that makes me want to cross to the other side of the street is cut with validation, desirability. Their approval costs me nothing but an anxious moment, a few worst-case scenarios that remain unexplored. They have the privilege of naming, and I have a flash of fear before the flood of feeling wanted.

The first time a boy wanted me, I was fifteen. I can remember the cold stone of the hotel wall against my back, his hands foreign on the skin of my abdomen. His desire gave me shape, made me real. I had felt desirable for the first time, and I never wanted to feel anything else.

In high school, I was sent home for dress code violations with regularity. When I walked through the door most mornings, the woman in the front office would shake her head and say, *too*

*short or too low cut.* I would then be instructed to call my mother – who had just dropped me off, fully aware of what I was wearing – to take me back home to change.

“Did you know I was going to get sent home?” I ask her as we’re driving home after one of these occasions. “Why didn’t you tell me to change?”

She lights a cigarette with one hand, keeping the other on the wheel. “Would you have done it?”

On a particularly provocative day, I can remember my boyfriend’s mother approaching me. She, who only acknowledged my existence when it was absolutely unavoidable, actually touched my arm and took me aside. “Dressing like that,” she said, gesturing to my slit skirt and shirt that was actually a bra, “is going to get you a lot of attention, but it’s the wrong kind of attention from the wrong kind of people.”

I spent the rest of the day coiled in a corner, feeling inflamed. She had told me what I did not want to know – that I did not care who the attention was coming from, or why they were giving it to me. It did not matter if it was garnered from the self-inflicted scars on my legs, or the skin exposed by the neckline of a dress, or the apparent promise of sex in my mannerisms – I wanted to be wanted. Just like I do now.

That same summer in New York, I visit the Museum of Sex, completely taken by the history of desire - the bodies, the positions, the primality. At each exhibit, you answer a question. *Do you like giving or receiving? Monogamy - yes or no? How many sexual partners have you had?* At the end, the results describe your sexual personality. It takes two opposing characteristics and places you on a spectrum between their extremes. I’m tentative to read the results, afraid that I answered too honestly. *The wrong kind of attention*, I hear again. *The wrong kind of people.*

### **Social vs Sexual Makeup**

**You are socially extroverted, sexually introverted. You are gregarious. You are the center of attention. You are monogamous. Usually. You believe in love. Always.**

A man calls out to me as I walk home on Bedford Avenue. “Hey beautiful,” he says, and it takes me a moment to realize he’s talking to me, and another to locate him. He’s in a white van, sitting in traffic and leaning across the passenger seat towards me. Traffic inches forward, matching my pace. “Can I just,” he says, “can I take you to get a manicure/pedicure?”

In a way that confuses me, this request feels the most invasive. The other men made declarations, gave names. *You are*, they told me, and the rest of sentence didn’t matter just as long as I was *something*. This man is old and grimy and someone who my mother would say gives her “the creeps,” and he’s here, requiring something of me. His approval is conditional.

“Or at least,” he adds “can I take you to dinner?” I smile at him, like I would for a camera, because I don’t know what else to do. I hear my sister, somewhere in a universe where this was happening to her and not me, screaming at this man in her angry lesbian, radical feminist way. She is the social justice sister. I’m just shy.

“If I get out of the car,” he says, because I am smiling, “are you going to mace me?”

“Yes,” I say, still smiling. Traffic begins to move, and he pulls forward, cutting the wheel to park in a bus lane. He gets out of the van and comes towards me, trapping me between the street and the park fence. He’s larger standing on the sidewalk. Older. Creepier. His stomach hangs over his belt, stretching the fabric of a cotton shirt that was once white. Years of grime fill in the wrinkles of his forehead.

“My name is Vinny,” he tells me, and he holds up his hands, as though that makes this feel any less accosting. It’s the middle of the afternoon, but his boldness makes it seem like night.

“Okay,” I tell him, “this is where you actually get maced.” As though I have anything stronger than moisturizer in my bag. As though I would even know how to use it. He takes a step back toward the van.

“I love you,” he says, and I keep walking, turning away and down a street that I don’t live on. In a few moments, his van speeds by, free from traffic. With the windows rolled down he shouts, “I’ll miss you,” before disappearing over the crest of a hill.

Wrong attention. Wrong people.

### **Attached vs. Independent**

**You are atypically attached. You want more intimacy than you need. You confide. You experiment. You are too trusting.**

Later that week, walking home again on Bedford Avenue, I make eye contact with a boy on the opposite side of the street. He holds my gaze for a few dense seconds. Dirty blonde hair, plaid flannel, blameless face. He looks older than me, but not by much. Then a car passes, disappearing him behind it.

I do not think about him again until a block later when he appears beside me at the crosswalk, breathing heavily. He ran to catch up with me. “I’m late for something, but I had to say something after that crazy eye contact,” he says. “I had to know, like, who are you?”

I’m stuck to the pavement, my brain thick with the fantasies that have all started out with a handsome stranger on the street. “I have a boyfriend,” I say to him, but somehow it sounds like, “I’m Mattie.”

He tells me his name, which I instantly forget. “You live near here?” he asks, and I shake my head. I say that I am from Atlanta, only here for a summer program. I cover my face with my hands.

“What?” he asks. “What is it?” Then I really do say that I have a boyfriend, gesturing down the street, to the apartment where he is waiting for me, not making eye contact with anyone.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell the boy in a flannel. “Really, I’m sorry.”

“I guess that’s it then,” he says, and turns away.

“It was good eye contact, though,” I say to his back in consolation. “I’m sorry.”

When my boyfriend walks with me, I am not *beautiful* or *angel* or *fuckable*. When he walks with me, I am *bis*. But he was not there, and so I feel awful for rejecting a boy whose name I cannot even remember. I even start to feel bad for Vinny, who might have worn flannels and had dirty blonde hair before he was old and grimy and full of *creeps*.

“I’m trash,” I tell my therapist, “I was just so sorry. Sorry for being a bad girlfriend and for disappointing that guy who doesn’t even *matter*, but somehow does.

“Mattie,” she sighs, “you realize that you’re apologizing for *eye contact*?”

### **Independently Content vs Devotedly Erotic**

**You are Devotedly Erotic to an extreme, using sex to explore your partner more deeply. You are using sex to explore. You are using sex. You are you are you are.**

Late one night, walking home after going to a play with a friend, a group of college kids, stumbling and drunk, come toward us. One of them says something that I can’t make out, but know instinctively to be about my body. I don’t acknowledge him, allowing the darkness to save me from the responsibility of smiling politely. He reaches out as we pass them, putting a palm on my shoulder. “Fuck off,” I say to him, jerking my body sideways, but I look more surprised by my response than he does. I am the apologetic girl. I am the don’t breathe too loudly girl. I am constantly trying to take up less space. I am always looking for approval. I am patiently waiting to be named.

At home, unable to sleep under the tweaking ceiling fan, I apologize to the empty room, sorry that I cannot understand how I feel both objectified and validated by these men, like I am worth more because of what they think of me, but less because I need them to think it. I did not consider myself beautiful, I realize, until someone told me I was.

But there are some women who do not get cat-called. They are always tall and dressed well. Slender. Their posture is perfect, as though their spines will bend, but never break. Girls so unobtainable that when they walk past, men go silent. I see a female celebrity of this variety on 12<sup>th</sup> street – all height and dark hair and cheekbones. I feel a hot strike of jealousy for her unreachable beauty, the security that comes with it. I know without knowing that when she walks by, the construction workers on 34th and young men in flannels and Vinny's who drive white vans - they do not speak to her. They do not call out. Maybe she wishes that they did.

“Elegy For The Boy You Never Loved”

Heroin, as in a body, surrounded by mother and sister pushing and pulling and pleading for life to resurface. As in an ambulance is on the way.

The same body, two years earlier, standing beside you in the dark, cupping the flame of a lighter for you, saying, *Pall Malls? Really?* Then lying beside you in bed, fingers stuttering softly over the bones in your spine. You fall asleep to this. You wake up to it.

The same body, one year earlier, drunk and putting his mouth against your thigh. It is impossible to imagine death touching the same body that is touching you.

As in now that body is bluing around the edges, eyes like two slits of moon that used to be brown.

Heroin, as in, it was actually Fentanyl. As in *what? Since when?* As in you knew about the drinking, but not this – never this.

As in you never loved him, but might convince yourself that you did.

As in an open casket, and people milling about as though it were closed. *He looks so full*, you think, staring at the wide chest of his suit, his hands folded carefully on top of the fabric. You half expect him to sit up and swing his legs over the side of the coffin.

As in girlfriends, plural. Apparently he had two when he died. You search the faces, trying to pick out the two most beautiful women in the room because you *know* that those will be the ones. You are not nearly as beautiful, but he never needed you to be.

As in his hands on the handlebars of a bike, feet on either side of the front tire. *Like this*, he says, steadying the fragile frame underneath you, walking slowly backwards so that you keep your eyes up, looking at his face and not the ground. *Start pedaling*. As in a bloody chin, and gravel that you will be picking out of your teeth for years.

“Assume Horses”

My half siblings and I are separated by ten years and a mother. We have a father in common, but he is rarely there to connect us. Instead, we have his likeness—long noses, broad shoulders, narcissism, secrets. He surfaced in me last summer on a beach trip, when someone I had just met led me to the trunk of a car filled with bottles of liquor and said, *pick one*. Now I am seventeen and it’s prom night and our father, again, is not there. So it is just my siblings and me, and the halves of him that we each carry, that we do not want, that we are learning, slowly, to use against each other.

The after party is at my house because I have the mother who is willing to buy alcohol. “Nobody is allowed to smoke inside,” I say, lighting a cigarette from the pack of Pall Mall’s that she also provided. “Except for me.” There are girls draped over the couch, glasses in hand. One sits on the carpet in a heap of chiffon, mixing vodka and orange juice into screwdrivers. “You want it strong?” she asks.

“Straight,” I say, back, emphasizing how cool I am with an exhalation of smoke. “I always drink it straight.” I get my drink, take a long pull, and put out my cigarette in a coffee cup turned ashtray before heading downstairs. My sometimes boyfriend follows me silently, loyally. There is a group of people sitting on the floor playing spin the bottle, the dirty tile hidden underneath prom dresses. I fold myself into the circle, unconcerned about my body-con dress riding up, flashing everyone. *Where’s the rest of that dress?* My father had said when he saw me. *Hussy*.

It’s not my turn, but I spin anyway. Tyler. I lean across the circle, kissing her on the mouth. I spin again. I kiss whoever it lands on, this time only aware that it is not my sometimes boyfriend, who is sulking behind me. *Spin*, I slur, putting the bottle in his hand. He does it, and kisses my best friend, looking miserable the whole time. *Drink*, I tell him, handing him what’s left of mine. He does.

After I've kissed enough people, I stand up, pulling the sometimes boyfriend into my bedroom. *I could literally see her pussy*, someone says behind me.

When I stumble out of my room, pulling my dress back on. My brother is talking to a guy I haven't seen in two years.

"You're not getting your keys, man," he says. "You're wasted." The guy—Mark, I finally remember—glares, but storms into the other room.

"I'll talk to him," I say, smoothing my hair. My brother looks at me skeptically, but doesn't stop me.

Then, without really realizing how I get there, I am slapping Mark, hard, across the face. *Bitch*, he says again. Another slap. He stands, and for a moment I know that somewhere I am afraid and unable to feel it.

"Here," my brother says, having come in after the first slap. He hands Mark his car key, which is actually just a pair of pliers he uses to turn the ignition, and Mark bolts. "What the fuck are you doing?" James asks me. "He could have *killed* you."

"Isn't he, like, a really good boxer?" my best friend says from where she sits in someone's lap across the room. We hear vomiting, and my brother goes towards it.

"Jesus Christ," he says, looking at the sometimes boyfriend on the floor of the bathroom.

"I'm sorry," he says, lifting his head up from the blue tile.

"Don't worry, man," my brother tells the sometimes boyfriend, and starts cleaning up. I suddenly feel like crying and turn away. My sister is there at the foot of the stairs, watching. She looks me up and down. "You slept with him, didn't you?" she asks. I nod, and so she thinks this is why I am crying. Jenna, a name derived from a word meaning *pure*, *pale*, has always cared about what

I allow others to do with me, to me. So when I say, “I’m only crying because I’m drunk,” she does not believe me.

\*

In the morning, the pounding in my head takes on a rhythm, a repetition of what my sister said the night before. *You’re just like Dad you’re just like Dad you’re just like Dad.* Even after my ibuprofen has kicked in and my brain is no longer beating against my skull, these words keep circling.

Jenna has not spoken to me all morning. She has glared and sighed and looked upset from across the breakfast table, but said nothing.

“Your father doesn’t need to know about last night,” my mom says. “I mean it.” The last part is directed at Jenna because Jenna is not hers. *These two are from the first litter,* our father tells everyone. *She’s from the current.* He will gesture to me, younger by ten years, always singular and separate. James is downstairs in his room, where he has been all day, and does not need to be told. He is the secret keeper, the silent. In a way that Jenna and I envy, he belongs to neither parent. I look at Jenna as she moves the scrambled eggs around her plate, knowing that when she looks at me she sees our father’s face. It’s hard, I think, to be connected only through the worst parts of ourselves, only through what we inherited from him. I wonder if it would be different if it was a mother who held us together, if we could love each other in a way that was not modified by the word *half*.

“You didn’t hit her,” my mother says after Jenna has retreated to her room. “She’s making that up.”

I try James first, creeping across the hall into his room where he’s reclining, legs splayed, on a stained comforter. His eyes are glued to the screen of a tablet that’s emitting sounds of clashing

metal and explosions. A faintly French voice alerts him to an approaching cavalry. “I don’t know what to do,” I say to him. “What do I say to her?”

Eyes still on the screen he says, “I can’t talk to you about this. You hit *Jenna*.”

“I remember hitting *Mark*,” I say emphatically, adding, “but Mom says I didn’t actually hit Jenna.”

He finally meets my eyes, unmoved by my swollen face. “She always takes your side,” he says.

I go back to my room to call the other sometimes boyfriend. He is also unsympathetic, suspecting that I fucked someone else last night. “I don’t know what’s going on with you,” he says, “but you’ve got a problem.”

I drag myself upstairs and approach Jenna tentatively, armed with an underwhelming apology. “I’m sorry,” I say, but add, “I don’t remember hitting you.” She stares at me. Underwhelmed.

“James and I were the only sober ones in the house,” she says. “I just need some space.” I nod, leave the room.

“Of course Jenna would say that,” my mom says. “You know how she is.” I want to believe her because I cannot imagine a violence like that inside of me. My mother is the violent one, though it is never acted out on one of us. Phones, flower pots, rocking chairs are thrown or smashed or sent flying off the back deck onto the concrete. “She lies,” my mom adds, “It’s *pathological*. She’s in therapy for it.”

“I know,” I say, studying the split ends of my bottle blonde hair. “When is Dad coming over?” I ask her.

“This afternoon. And he doesn’t need to know about *any* of this,” she says again.

I do not apologize to Jenna until a few years later, when I am a few months into one of several attempts at sobriety. “I’m sorry I hit you,” I say to her in a diner near her apartment in Washington Heights. She forgives what I may or may not have done, what I will never really know if I did. *But I was seventeen*, I don’t say. *I was drunk on alcohol that my own mother bought me*, I don’t say. *You may be lying*, I don’t say. *But so could I*. Something in me struggles for reality, for something that I can know is true, but there is none, because there is no account unburdened by alcohol, or pathology, or delusion. And I must believe her, because that is the burden of the forgetful, the faulted. The drunk. I think of Occam’s Razor—the idea that the simplest explanation is always the right one. *If you hear hoof beats*, a professor told me once, *Assume horses, not zebras*. But I don’t know who is the horses and who is the zebras. I know that I would not hit my sister. I know this doesn’t mean that I didn’t.

\*

This is what I know: In between fucking the sometimes boyfriend and the cops showing up after reports of domestic disturbance, my sister corners me in the pantry. My mother is behind her in the kitchen, only partly in view. “You’re acting just like Dad,” Jenna says, grabbing my wrist, face illuminated by anger. I am hyperventilating, trapped between her and a wall of shelves. I snatch my hand upward and out of her wrist. I do not feel the impact of my hand on her skin, but I don’t not feel it either. Smirnoff has desensitized all my surfaces. Jenna recoils, though, and clutches her cheek. Her anger dissolves. Betrayal replaces it. I blink and she has left the room. I don’t really think about what has happened. I am just relieved to walk out of the pantry, to pour another drink, to smoke a cigarette with my mom who will put me to bed before the cops show up, who will wake me gently in the morning, saying, *Get everyone out of the house. Now*. And who will take my side because I am wholly hers.

“Sunburns”

Before the addict is an addict, she is just a sixteen-year-old girl on a beach saying *yes* to a high school dropout from Muscle Shoals, Alabama when he pulls a bottle of hard lemonade out of the open hatchback of a car. His name is Jayte, but it’s pronounced like *jay-tee*. He is so beautiful that it hurts, the liquor so sweet that it burns. The concrete outside his shitty motel is sticky with spilled mixers that blacken her bare feet. She pulls on his arm and begs him to go out on the beach.

They stumble around in the sand, laughing and harassing people for a lighter. Jayte tells her about going to juvie when he was fourteen for beating up his dad, about his court date next month for underage intoxication, about the grandfather who died last spring and the sister he loves more than anything.

The Atlantic Ocean is dark and inviting, and she dares him to swim out. “Until you’re gone,” she says.

“I’ll do it,” Jayte says, but he’s only ankle deep when she screams for him to come back. He drops his plastic cup in the sand, and reaches for her hand.

“That could kill a sea turtle,” she says, but then he kisses her, and she forgets about the sea turtles. When Jayte touches her lower back, she flinches. She pulls up her shirt and shows him the sunburned skin, already starting to blister. “Take a hot shower,” he says. “It’ll take the sting out.”

When she gets to the beach house that night, she lies down on the couch and lets the room spin around her. The stars in the window look like Christmas lights under water. Everything is glittery and broken. She feels herself drifting, and because she has never been drunk before, wonders absently if she is dying or just falling asleep. Her blood is vibrating silently in her veins, and when she remembers the taste of the alcohol, all the hair on the back of her neck stands up. *Why would anyone do anything else, ever?* she thinks, and is too drunk to notice as her entire center of gravity shifts.

She wants to see Jayte again, and tries. Her messages go unanswered. She will be returning to Atlanta soon, and the idea of leaving without another drink makes her desperate. “You don’t want to fuck on the beach?” she asks him, as though she has ever fucked anyone on a beach before. She sees the freckled face of the boy who took her virginity three months ago, and decides that sand is probably more comfortable than the flatbed of a truck.

“I didn’t think you were that kind of girl,” he finally says, and then does not respond again. *You’re not that kind of girl*, Jayte says, and almost saves her. *You’re not that kind of girl*, he says, and points to the part of her that she is about to let go of, the part that tells her when to stop, what to stop for. *You’re not that kind of girl* but she lets that piece go anyway, thinking that it will be easier to get what she wants without it. *You’re not that kind of girl* but she is not a girl at all. Now, she is just an addict, and she’ll be anything for a drink.

\*

The addict wakes up in her bed on a Tuesday morning, unsure how she got there, but her keys are in her hand and her car is in the driveway. She dry swallows an ibuprofen and gets dressed for school. In the center console of her car, she finds a water bottle with two inches of Vodka left – clear and perfect – and she finishes it speeding down the highway. She smokes a cigarette so that her breath won’t smell like she’s been drinking, and keeps all four windows down so her hair won’t smell like she’s been smoking. By the time she pulls into her high school’s parking lot, her fingers are red and numb with cold. The warmth slowly permeating her chest temporarily halts the stuttering ache in her head. These few moments of stillness get her through the day. Another drink gets her through the night.

\*

The addict dunks her head in and out of the hot tub, trying to sober up. “No, no, no,” her friend says, jumping towards the addict and holding her up by the shoulders. “Don’t do that.”

“It’s helping,” the addict says, pushing wet hair out of her face.

“No,” the friend laughs, “it’s not. Let’s go back to the beach.” She steers the addict towards the steps, keeping one hand on her arm and motioning for the other senior girls to follow.

The addict looks over her shoulder, searching for the mop of blonde hair belonging to the guy she had just fucked in someone else’s bed. “Bye, Ben,” she screams. “I love you!” Just as she has loved Anthony and the other Ben and the guy whose name she has already forgotten or maybe never knew, and anyone else who she might have slept with on her spring break.

The girls walk the addict to her beach towel, where she collapses. Once the addict passes out, they put Oreos all over the addict’s face, thinking she might be hungry when she gets up. They leave her there and go for a walk.

When the addict wakes up, she knows without opening her eyes that her whole body is burnt. She turns her head from one side to the other, looking for her friends. When she finally sits up, miniature Oreos fall in her lap. She touches her face. More cookies fall. She reaches for the water bottle beside her and is relieved to find out its vodka.

\*

The addict is sitting in a bathtub crying, her friend still asleep in the next room. “Mom,” the addict says, clutching her phone to her cheek. “I think I have a problem.”

“Mattie,” her mother says, “we all make choices.”

The addict looks up, thinking about the bottle hidden in the closet. She chooses to remember that the bottle is still half-full, and to forget what she had to do to get it.

But her body does not have the luxury of forgetting. Her neck remembers the boy from last night, the pressure of his teeth. Her back remembers the hard edge of his kitchen counter digging into her spine. Her skin remembers. Her mouth remembers. The back of her throat remembers.

“You’re right, Mom,” the addict says, and stops crying. “I love you.”

\*

A few weeks later, the addict quits drinking. For a while. Instead, she goes to meetings. Bad coffee, folding chairs. She mumbles through prayers that she has never heard before, but by the end of the week she says them without thinking about it, the verses forming on their own accord. But if she stops in the middle, she can't find her place and has to start over again.

Only eighteen, she is the youngest person there, and everyone is kind to her. Lindsey, who does everything short of holding the addict's hand on that first day, who sees her kids during supervised visits once a week. Henry, who is older by a few years and asks the addict for a light, and then if she wants to get dinner. Greg, who re-introduces himself to the addict every time, saying *Hi'mGreg* in the way that he does. Ashlee, with her stringy hair and blue eyes, who, the first time they meet, puts her hand on the addict's thigh, asking, *So how many times have you been arrested?* Tony, who always comes in twenty minutes later, but always comes. Chris, who the addict falls immediately half in love with.

The first time she meets him, he has an entire baked chicken and half a gallon of milk in a bag. Before the meeting is over, he finishes both. Everything about him is paternal, from the polo tucked into his jeans to the lacrosse team he coaches on the weekend to his broad shoulders, filled out with age. The addict sits next to him almost all the time now, and he brings food for them to share. "You remind me so much of my own kids," he says, and the addict's smile falters for a moment. She spends most meetings staring at his hands.

The addict counts days. When that is too much, she counts hours. Someone tells her that physical cravings only last for seven seconds, so she counts seconds instead.

"I'm thinking about getting a tattoo," Chris says one day, "of Sisyphus."

The addict has never heard of him, so Chris explains the myth of the man who is condemned to spend eternity pushing a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down the other side.

“Perfect, right?” Chris say, pushing a plate of watermelon towards her. *It’s day 25*, the addict thinks, and loses her appetite.

When Chris isn’t at the meeting, the addict just stares absentmindedly out the window, watching the fog in the foothills across the street slowly dissipate. Someone who has been sharing for a long time stops on the words: “Sometimes God has to break your heart to get in.”

She does not move, but her neck tightens, and the addict knows that she’s not ready to be broken into.

\*

The addict goes to college sixty days sober. On that first morning in her dorm room, the light comes through the shades, casting long shadows across her body on the bed. *I can do this without drinking*, the addict thinks, *I just don’t want to*.

A baseball player on her floor invites her to a party. “I will not drink,” the addict says, walking into a house that’s pulsing with harsh strobe lighting and subwoofers. “I will not drink,” the addict says, and reaches for the plastic cup in someone’s outstretched hand. “I will not drink,” the addict says, and knocks back sixty days like it’s seven seconds.

The next morning, the addict wakes up with a gasp, reaching for the water on the nightstand before her eyes are even open. As the addict clammers down from the lofted mattress, the tan body on the other side of the bed rolls over. She looks at him, realizing with surprise that he is quite beautiful. Her reflection in the mirror, though, is decidedly not. Black stains under her eyes, hair a knot at the nape of her neck. She sighs deeply, looks at the boy instead.

The addict is not sorry. She is not regretful or disappointed. She does not resolve to try again. As she sinks into the comforting familiarity of her headache – its heaviness, its inescapability – she is just relieved that the resistance is over – that she does not have to keep living with a want she can’t give into.

There was another woman in AA, who would come in every ten days or so and say, “I relapsed. I had ten days and I gave it all away.” The addict thinks of this woman now, of her grief over the time lost and the shame that flooded her every ten days. The addict is not built to carry that kind of repetitive failure. She decides that she would rather fail once and fail hard, thinking, *it’s only a relapse if I try to get sober again*. If she doesn’t try to get sober, then this is just her life.

The tan boy dresses and leaves.

When her parents call a few days later to check in, they ask how her sobriety is going.

The addict laughs and says, “It’s college.”

\*

On Halloween, the addict puts on a revealing black dress, but forgets the animal ears, and spends all night telling people, *I was supposed to be a cat, but without the ears I’m just a slut*. She finds a sophomore from her creative writing class. In an hour she is making out with him, all of her weight leaning against him so that she won’t fall down. She is desperate and slobbery, but not afraid. She doesn’t care what happens to her. She doesn’t care about anything.

The next morning, the addict sits outside and smokes a cigarette for breakfast with her best friend, Clara. It’s raining lightly, and the addict can feel water soaking through her shorts, and the stone of the ledge where they sit is cold against her thigh.

“It was fun last night,” the addict says. “I’m glad you came with me.”

Clara looks down, takes a drag before answering. “People were worried about you, Mattie.”

“Who?” the addict asks.

“People at the party,” Clara says. “They asked me if you were going to make it home, if you even knew that guy.”

“Oh,” the addict says, “Yeah. Well, I wasn’t even that drunk.”

\*

Second semester, the addict goes to a Valentine's Day party off campus with Clara. Before going, she says that she's not going to drink that much since she's driving, and they both believe her because she's kept it pretty high functioning since New Year's Eve. They are among the first people there, and the addict waits fifteen long minutes before someone offers her a drink.

"We have Tito's or Fireball," a girl in a crop top says with a squeaky voice. "What mixer do you want?"

"I don't mix," the addict says.

"Do you want a shot glass?" the crop top girl asks.

"I don't do that either." Finally, the girl just hands the addict a plastic cup and disappears back into the living room. The addict fills it about half way with Fireball, says *this is all I'm going to drink*. Clara is in the other room packing a bowl, and the addict goes on the porch with her while she smokes it.

"Isn't that a lot?" Clara asks, nodding towards the cup, which is now leaning towards half-empty. Before the addict can answer, Clara takes a hit, opaque smoke fading out of her mouth after a brief pause. In a few minutes, she forgets the question, and then the conversation entirely. The girls go back inside and sit on the couch. Clara looks dreamily around the dark room, illuminated by purple and green Christmas lights, and the addict tries to pace herself. For a while she has the attention of a senior physics major, but he leaves after asking if she's a Freshman. Some people stop and smile at Clara, who is slowly disappearing from her body.

"She's good?" crop top girl asks, and the addict pats the top of Clara's soft head. *Never better.* The addict refills her cup because she can't even feel it yet. After the third refill, the addict can feel the room changing around her in a way that it has not for a while. The bodies are growing larger, seeming to throb with the music. Something in the air is suffocating, but in a way that she likes, that she has missed. She slips down again next to Clara, closing her eyes as everything spins softly.

Clara leans in close, almost putting her mouth on the addict's neck. "Can we leave soon?" she whispers. "I'm starving."

The addict says yes, and goes to the kitchen again to grab her keys. She takes two more gulps of whatever liquor is left, and they go to the car.

The addict is too drunk to drive, and Clara is too high to notice. The addict tries to focus on the road in front of her, but the landscape on either side slowly melts and obscures the road. She does not see lines or letters or shapes – only colors. She follows them just the same. When she pulls into Waffle House, she can't remember how they got there. While Clara eats, the addict sobers up. When they drive home, the road is still fuzzy, but visible.

The addict drops Clara off at her dorm, and parks the car. The deck is empty and fluorescent. She walks back to her dorm slowly, arms folded around herself. She stops on the land bridge that connects the two halves of campus. The train tracks run steely and silent underneath her, and she wishes a train would come by and make the air rush around her. She feels something that she can't name, something unfamiliar, and she struggles to find the words before realizing with a rush of recognition that it is defeat. *I'll grow out of this*, the addict thinks. Then a small, unreachable voice, surfacing without warning: *No*, it says. *You'll grow into it*. The addict feels something slip out of place, like a verb tense changing midsentence. She knows with a sureness she can't explain – it might never go back.

\*

The addict is thirty days sober. Sixty days. Ninety. She stops dying her hair. Then she stops sleeping around. She stops smoking, for the most part. She starts running. Three miles. Five miles. Eight miles. She starts taking meds. They make her slow, but subdued. It's harder to write, but easier to live. She counts to seven all the time. Then less. Then almost never. At first, her sobriety time means everything to her, and she keeps track of the days with vigilance. Then one day the number

eludes her, and she watches as time continues to pass anyway. She goes another day. And another. Day one, day one hundred – it doesn't matter. As long as she doesn't drink, the days are all the same. She falls hard into recovery. The same desire gives shape to her world, just in a different way. She becomes a negation of herself, her center of gravity shifting again, this time from Drinking to Not Drinking.

The addict gets a boyfriend who is also sober. He's a lot of other things, but this is the only one that matters. When she has six months, he takes her to the west coast, to an ocean that does not know her. An ocean that has not watched her stumble around in the sand, or drink until she wishes she was dead, or wake up, hours later, and reach for another. Floating in the Pacific, she has always been the kind of girl that she is right now – freckled and wholesome and trying so earnestly to be herself.

“Oh, babe,” the boyfriend says that night. “Look at your sunburn.”

The addict looks down, pressing a finger into the skin of her exposed abdomen. It turns white before fading back to red. “I'll take a hot shower,” the addict says, the words pushing through years of forgetting to find her here, on a different beach in a different life. “It'll take the sting out.”

“Elegy For The Boy You Still Love”

I imagine it like this:

He’s driving with one hand on the wheel, honey brown hair slicked back, street lights casting shadows that cut his face in half. He comes around a curve and cracks his car open on a telephone pole. There is no screeching, no squealing tires, just the thick, satisfying sound of metal against wood, a skull against the windshield. *Like that*, the doctor says, snapping his fingers together. *On impact.*

No one even bothers with blood alcohol levels. Telephone poles do not splinter in sober people at two thirty in the morning in Muscle Shoals, Alabama. *Everybody knew that boy was just like his daddy*, someone’s spinster aunt, or outspoken grandparent says on a back porch at dusk, cigarette hanging out of their mouth.

His girlfriend is appropriately crushed, but with enough Facebook likes she’ll be just fine.

His sister does not recover. “Drugs,” they say a few years after the accident. “She never was the same.” And she really wasn’t.

His mother is hysterical, inconsolable. *Not my boy*, she says, and claims him as her own for the first time in years.

His father is nowhere to be found, no way to be told.

He will be missed, the obituaries say. He might even be forgotten.

## “The Clara Piece”

Two girls sit on the steps and smoke cigarettes. It's natural for them, an extension of their own bodies, a sixth finger they put between their lips. Smoking is when they feel most natural, and closest to each other. A year earlier, Emory became a tobacco free campus. Cigarettes are now Highly Illicit. So, these two girls are feeling pretty pleased with themselves. They don't care about the *rules*. They don't follow the *law*. At least until some jerk blows a cloud of smoke right into the outdoor detectors the school installed near the renegade Smoking Spot, and sets the alarm blaring. Then, those two girls are up and out so fast, it's impossible to tell if they took the time to put out their cigarettes, or just swallowed them, still lit. The alarm only goes off for a minute or so, and then stops. No campus police. No tickets. No expulsions. The girls walk back to the steps, heads down and embarrassed. *Now everybody knows we're pussies*, one of them says to the other. They start chain smoking, lighting the next one with the dying flame of the previous, to reassure everyone that they're serious smokers. *Cherry-licking*, is what the first girl, Mattie, calls it when you light them this way, one after the other. She likes what it implies. Mattie has long, artificially colored hair that she's constantly brushing back, over her shoulders, so everyone (boys) can see the low neckline of her dress. She smokes Pall Mall menthols, because that's what she used to steal from her older brother's room. She's sentimental like that. The second girl, Clara, has a choppy pixie cut and wears Doc Martens. She always looks a little bit angry, but only because she's always a little bit angry. Clara smokes American Spirits because they're organic. A week ago, Clara decided to stop wearing bras. She also decided to become a nun. Mattie agreed to try, too, but the next day a boy with a Russian accent asked her for a light and her phone number. It hurt to walk up and down stairs without a bra, anyway. Clara is only mildly bothered by Mattie's lack of commitment. In her heart of hearts, she knew Mattie wouldn't last. “I support your celibacy,” Mattie said, “But he's a *Junior*.”

\*

**Rule #1**

Don't cut your hair. Spend four long, tangled years growing it out and out and out, and then don't cut it. You will meet someone who loves your long hair. But you don't love the way it collects in the drain, or sticks in tiny knots to your lace underwear. You don't love the nest it turns into at night, or how long it takes you to brush it out each morning. *What if I cut it*, you ask him, *Just to, like, here?* You point to the dip in your skin just above your collar bone. *I love your long hair*, he says without looking up. *Do what you want*. You still don't cut it, because you want him to want you more than the idea of short hair – more than anything else. You are afraid that he won't love the empty space, the absence it will leave. You resent yourself for keeping it, for the fear of spending another four years watching it inch down your back, waiting to be desirable again. The thing is, you do love your long hair, but it's easier to believe that you want to be desirable for him than it is to look at yourself and know that, really, you just want to be desirable. You resent yourself for being so shallow, for not having the nerve to do something you might regret. When is the last time you did anything worth regretting?

\*

“Do *not* drink the punch,” I tell Clara as we walk up the steps of a fraternity house, the Greek letters above the door just shapes to us.

“Why?” she asks, straightening the red leather skirt that she borrowed from me, a gesture she has repeated every few seconds since I warned her that the zipper has a habit of falling down on its own accord. It looks better on her, anyway.

“I dunno,” I say, shrugging my shoulders, “That’s just what my mom told me.”

Dateless boys mill around outside, waiting for unchaperoned girls who might help them get into the party. They look hopefully at me and Clara as we pass. There must be one guy to every two girls. These are the rules. One of the brothers in a pastel Polo sits on a folding chair by the door.

Without pulling down his dark sunglasses, he waves us through. “If you come without a date, you *always* get in,” I say, because it’s my first fraternity party and I already know everything.

We’re unfashionably early, but I was afraid of being late, and of all the alcohol being gone. We don’t know anyone here, so we just wander the halls for a while. The floor is sticky, and my sandals pull like Velcro each time I take a step.

Before coming here, Clara wanted to get high, so we had crept over to the park on campus and skidded down one of the small ravines that line the path. I had only come along to hold the flashlight, and help Clara cross the street afterwards.

“What if there are murderers?” I whispered to Clara as she pulled out a water bottle and small grinder. “Or *cops*?”

“We’re *fine*,” she said, but I was unconvinced. I’d been high a few times before, and certainly watched other people pass bongos or bowls around at parties, but it had always been in the private, fluorescent lighting of someone’s kitchen or garage or patio. Crouching in the damp leaves and swatting at the last mosquitos of summer while Clara assembled something too mechanical for me to follow felt distinctly criminal, and I was sure we’d be caught.

Clara had asked if I wanted to smoke, too, but I declined. Being high always seemed to get in the way of getting drunk.

Finally, Clara held up a lighter. The bottle filled with pearly smoke. Clara placed her mouth over the opening, and the whole cloud disappeared into her lungs, only to reappear a few moments later, smelling bitter and illicit. Her face softened in a way I had never seen in the few weeks we’d known each other. She pulled out the Marc Jacobs perfume that she had snagged off my counter, and dowsed us both until we were so sickly sweet smelling, even the mosquitos left us alone. Clara seemed fine as we climbed back up to the path, and walked out of the park. It was only when we reached the stop light, where we were to cross back over to central campus, that I felt her drifting

away from where we stood on the sidewalk. I held on to her elbow gently as we crossed the street, guiding her across the blinding headlights, each one like a spot light turned on us. When we reached the opposite curb, she held onto my hand briefly, and turned her whole face to me. “Thank you,” she said, her eyes widening, pupils threatening to eclipse her irises.

So, by the time that we are wandering the sticky halls of Alpha Omega Whatever, ghost-like and lost, Clara is dreamy and meditative. Music starts to play, and we follow the vibrations up a narrow set of stairs.

The source is a bedroom full of boys and speakers. An American flag hangs above a red futon-turned-couch opposite the door. “What’s in those?” I ask a guy who’s leaning against one of the school-issued desks stacked with cups and Gatorade coolers.

“Punch,” he says, as though this is my first fraternity party and I don’t know anything. Clara and I both fill plastic cups with syrupy blue liquid, and go sit on the futon. The room is beginning to fill up, and I try to catch the eye of anyone who walks in the door, but each person who files in seems to glance over both of us as if we have grown into the dark fabric of the futon. Other girls arrive, monotonously dressed in shorts and crop tops with hair meticulously styled to look accidentally perfect, making Clara and me somehow look both overdressed and underwhelming.

“This doesn’t even taste like alcohol,” I say close to Clara’s ear, tilting my now empty cup towards her.

“I think that’s the point,” she says.

In half an hour the punch tastes like chlorine, but goes down like its water. The first level of the house has been cleared into a dance floor. Girls grind against each other on tables against the far wall. From my spot leaning in the doorway, I can see Clara on the dance floor, strobe lights cutting her movements in half. Landon – a guy I’d been sleeping with – is standing in front of me, explaining why he doesn’t think we should sleep together anymore. “But it’s not because you slept

with those other guys too,” he says, by which he means his friend and his hallmate. As he’s finishing his speech, stating for the record that he just doesn’t want a girlfriend right now, I start breathing in hard, short gasps. This happens when I drink, sometimes. The room is suddenly too close and too loud and my lungs feel too small. There is not enough air left for all of us.

“Oh my god,” he says, taking a step back. “Are you gonna throw up?”

“No,” I spit back. My breathing slows. I’m more insulted at the thought of being called a lightweight than a slut. I know how to hold my liquor. I know, also, that I need a cigarette. He walks away now, having said everything he needed to say, feeling relieved of any guilt. I peel myself out of the door jamb, and pull Clara out of the room.

Outside we sit on the edge of a low brick wall, and I pull out two Pall Malls. Clara has not yet developed a taste for more expensive cigarettes, and so she doesn’t complain. We light each other’s because someone told me that pretty girls never light their own cigarettes, even if they’re drunk and not looking especially pretty. Clara says that she’s not high anymore. She tells me about the two guys on the dance floor. “One of them said he didn’t want me and pushed me towards the other,” she says, pausing to take a shaky drag. “And then that one said that he didn’t, either.” Clara’s face has lost the relaxed, dream-like expression entirely. Now, she just looks worn down. Now, she just looks on the verge, but of what I’m not sure. It is not until later, in that small, sobering place before sleep that I realize Clara is struggling to remain life-sized. She is struggling not to shrink underneath what she has just told me. She is struggling to remember herself as separate from the people who do not want her. But I am just struggling to stay upright on this brick wall that is threatening to throw me onto the unforgiving pavement. I cannot see her fighting.

Another boy approaches us, and I vaguely remember him as a freshman from my floor. “Can I bum a smoke?” he asks, and despite the fact that Clara and I are both smoking, we all understand that he is speaking to me.

The next morning, after the guy has stumbled out of the door and down the hall to his own room, I can see Clara through the pounding in my head, blinking on the dance floor. Her body sways in the milky air, flashing lights changing her from blue to green to red and back again. I can see the two guys, dressed in their dull polos and baseball hats, pushing her malleable body back and forth as if they are entitled to refuse her. I can see her face harden as she registers what's going on, what's happening to her. My ibuprofen kicks in, and these images fade with the throbbing in my skull. I understand immediately that I will never understand. I am wanted by the wrong people, or in the wrong ways, but rarely have I felt not wanted at all.

But that afternoon, Clara is herself again – defiant, immovable. She did not shrink. A part of me – the part that would have bent underneath rejection – is taken down by what she would not let concern her for more than a night, for more than a single cigarette. Spineless and shrinkable, I wonder how that memory will feel years from now, all the time her carrying it, refusing to let it touch her.

\*

## **Rule #2**

No, you're not hungry. You are *never* hungry. You might eat sometimes – you don't want to look suspicious. The only thing more unattractive than eating is having an eating disorder. You might have a salad at lunch, or an appetizer at dinner parties, or a bowl of pasta the size of your face late at night, alone in your kitchen. But you are never hungry. Not when you haven't eaten all day. Not when you've been living on coffee and almonds all week. Not when you take laxatives every twelve hours. Not when you lie to your mom about it. Not when your favorite jeans slide down your hips. Not when your cigarette shakes in your hand. Not when you spit food out into the trashcan at home. Not when the stomach you've spent the last few weeks shrinking stretches painfully to hold

that entire box of toaster waffles that you just binged on. Not afterwards, when you hate yourself for being weak. Not when you swear off eating again, for the last time.

After one of these little episodes, your boyfriend might express concern. This is all you have wanted – for someone to notice, for someone to care. He notices, he cares. This is the first time he’s seen you like *this*, eating without even pausing to breathe, scraping your plate. He didn’t know you could binge like this. Before now, he probably thought – just like you wanted – that you weren’t hungry.

\*

When I decided to write about the eating thing, my teacher asked me when it started. *College*, I said without hesitation. *No, high school*. I thought about it more. *Maybe when my parents separated for the first time*. This is how it went – each time I tried to pinpoint a moment of origin, it retreated farther back in my memory. This is what I know:

There was a boy in third grade who told me I was fat. *No*, I had said back without hesitating, *I’m not*. In that moment, I defended myself with certainty. I was sure that I knew myself, that I knew what I was and was not. I was *not* fat.

His little brother, probably only six, joined in. *Yeab*, he said with no idea what he was saying, only that he wanted to do as his older brother did, *She’s fat*. I continued to defend my body because I was sure – I was not fat. No matter how many times they said it, I didn’t falter. Those words meant nothing to me then, so they waited. They nested. They festered. *She’s fat*. It could have been the next day, it could have been years later, but one day I looked in the mirror and I wasn’t so sure. Maybe my body was not how I had always thought of it. *She’s fat*. I felt the boundaries between me and not-me fall, a silent demolition. All of a sudden I stretched across the whole room. My body felt monstrous, like I had no edges, no end. All I wanted was to be able to touch the walls that defined me, but I couldn’t reach them.

Sometimes, I'm sure that it has to do with my father. *Mattie eats like a field hand*, he'd say, stretching out the syllables in the silky southern accent he adopts for telling jokes. *No wonder she can't get a date*. I can say with confidence that this is when I stopped eating around boys. I ordered salads, took two bites, and then pushed the rest around my plate. The first time someone told me I ate like a bird, I almost swelled with pride. *I already ate* became my mantra when even salads were no longer safe to eat in public. I'm told that one boyfriend actually complained about this, that we could never go out on a real date because I always ate beforehand.

Of course, after my date left, I'd go to the pantry and destroy whatever I could find. My mother would come in, find me eating ice cream over the kitchen sink in the dark. *What are you doing* she'd ask, already pulling another spoon out of the drawer.

I wasn't the only body my father felt invited to comment on. "Your mom was always on one diet or another," my half-sister told me once. We were at my favorite restaurant near her apartment in Washington Heights. "Dad always made her feel like shit about her body," she says. "And mine," she adds. I've seen this in live action. *Too fattening*, he would say if my mom offered him some of her dessert. *Are you really going to eat that?* he'd ask my sister over breakfast. I look down at the empty plate in front of me. My body feels so heavy, so large that I can't imagine taking it with me anywhere. There are no hand holds, nothing to tie it to me with. It just drags behind me, like a stuffed animal on a leash.

One Christmas, he bought my mom a beautiful pair of tights to wear out to dinner. When we were getting ready, I went to her bathroom to ask about borrowing a necklace. It took a while to get her to open the bathroom door, and when she finally did she was almost in tears, telling me that the tights didn't fit, that she felt fat.

The tights fit my mother just fine, actually, but I knew that didn't matter. I knew that it was impossible to feel like anything fit when you could not feel the boundaries of your own body.

For two weeks, once, I ate only apples, and I could feel every corner of my body close in. It went taut around me, circling me. It felt as though I had finally stepped into the right mold. It didn't matter that my hands shook sometimes, or that my body began to bruise so easily. A boy left purple fingerprints on my side just from holding my waist. It did not matter that my head ached, that I was dizzy every time I stood up. I felt a hard line where my body began, and the rest of the world ended. I was self-contained. I was small. I was safe.

It wasn't a problem until I went to college – that's when I went from not eating in front of people to not eating at all. Part of this was because my only option was a dining hall, and part of this was because I could. No parents checking in, no one to notice my eating or not eating – I could do whatever I wanted. I had the freedom to choose *not* to do something. So I didn't eat. This is an exaggeration. I didn't eat much. I wasn't starving. I ate enough to keep going, to survive, to get through my day. I was just hungry all the time.

After I met Clara, it got easier. I could eat with her. I could even eat in the dining hall with her.

So, for an entire semester, I was a vegetarian with Clara because I couldn't go to the other stations by myself. For an entire semester, I said, "I'll have the same," to the ladies that served breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I ate what she ate, otherwise I didn't eat at all. It was only when Clara asked me to get something for her from the dessert table that I had to explain. Food was hard enough. Being able to get dessert for myself or anyone else was unthinkable. "I can't get food up there by myself," I said.

"Why?" Clara asked, and it was obvious by her tone that she had noticed me trailing her each day.

"I can't eat in front of other people," I replied, but added, "Except for you. I feel okay eating in front of you, but other people I can't. Boys, especially."

“I mean, I get the boy thing,” she said. “They always make you feel like shit about eating. Like you’re not *supposed* to get hungry, but everyone?”

After that, Clara started bringing me food without asking, and making me elaborate ice cream sundaes with the few resources in the dining hall. She told the baristas at Starbucks when they had made my drink wrong. She carried my basket at our favorite desert-buffet place, and let me point to things behind that glass case that she would put in it for me. She worried for me when she wasn’t around, asking, *Are you eating?*

Our first summer apart was a thin one. When I came back to school, having studied in New York for two months, I had gaunt cheekbones and tiny wrists. “Look at you,” Clara said, wrapping her fingers all the way around the base of my hand. “I could crush you.” Over the summer Clara had grown strong from days spent outside, laboring for a summer job at a hotel resort near her home in California, and nights spent climbing at the rock wall. She could crush anyone.

When I told her about only drinking coffee and eating almonds for days at a time, she looked sad. “I’d eat a tiny bit of dark chocolate when I couldn’t stand it anymore,” I said, “Usually right before class, so I could write things down without my hands shaking.”

It is only after my boyfriend – the one who noticed, who cared – confronted me about it, that I realized I had to eat. I had to eat when he was around, three times a day. I had to eat when he offered me food, even when I actually wasn’t hungry. I had to eat even when he wasn’t eating, when he didn’t offer, just so that he knew I was. He was angry with me for hiding it all these months, for having presented myself to him as someone who was well. “I swore I would never date a girl with an eating disorder again, but I’m in love with you now,” he said, as though it were too late. I had to eat because, otherwise, he would leave. *Would you let Clara do this to herself?* he asked me, and we both knew that I wouldn’t. But he was a musician, and often left town for weeks at a time to tour, and

sometimes I would stop eating again. I hated when he was gone, but I also got a sick satisfaction out of it, out of doing what I wanted with my body again, even in secret. But I wasn't as committed as before. *Would you let Clara do this to herself?* I'd hear him say, standing in front of my empty fridge. *No*, I'd think, and go out to get something to eat. *Yes*, I'd think other times, *if that was what she wanted*, and close the door, go to bed instead.

"I'm proud of you," he said one night, back home, watching me eat the chicken dinner he'd cooked for us. "I know these things don't go away overnight, but ever since we talked about it, you've been eating."

*Sometimes*, I wanted to add to that sentence, *I've been eating sometimes*. I swallowed the food in my mouth, too ashamed to do anything else, too scared of losing him to admit what I'd been doing – too hungry from barely eating the day before.

Maybe the eating thing can't be traced because it isn't just one thing. At one point, it was about body image. It was about getting thin, becoming desirable. At another point, it was about control, it was the *only* thing I was capable of controlling. Sometimes it was a means of pulling my body closer to me, of creating a form out of what felt like a shapeless thing. At another point, it was about punishment – punishing myself, indulging in my own self-loathing, or about the boyfriend that wasn't here, punishing him for being gone, as if I could use my body to show him the loneliness I felt when he was away. When I needed it to be a secret, something that could be just mine, it was that too.

The eating thing has changed and morphed so many times, become whatever I needed it to be, that it is now unrecognizable, the only proof of its existence in my body, in the way it responds to starvation and excess, unable to do anything except adapt.

Two girls sit on the steps and smoke cigarettes. Mattie is desperately texting Ben or Cory to find out who's down to get trashed on a Wednesday night. She knows that Eddie from her English 181 class probably has alcohol, which is what she's actually interested in, but she'd have to sleep with him to get it. *As long as he gives me some beforehand*, she reasons, *he's not so bad*. The last time she saw Eddie, she came home with bruises like dark purple roses around her neck that she could barely remember him giving. *He marked you*, Clara had said when Mattie sent her a picture. *I don't like that shit*. But Ben and Cory are busy, and Mattie's running out of options. She texts Eddie.

Clara is telling her about the French guy who lives on her floor. She thinks he is *very* cute, the kind of cute that might even be worthy of an ideal self. Mattie has never seen him, so she can't comment. "I was in the elevator with him today," Clara says, "And just wanted him to, like, push me up against the wall." Mattie agrees that would be pretty hot.

"Have you talked to him?" Mattie asks, but Clara just gives her a look out of the corner of her eye. Apparently he is already sleeping with another girl from their floor.

"Is it just me," Mattie asks, "or is everybody already dating someone that they met, like, the night after we all moved in?"

"Everybody except for us," Clara responds.

"I thought it was going to be like that with Landon," Mattie says.

"Preston?" Clara asks, which is Landon's actual name, since he goes by his middle name.

*Preston Landon Pastures*, Clara had said when she found out. *You mean he passed up the chance to be Preston Pastures? With a name like that, he's one dead family member away from being a DC comic book character.*

Clara curses because her cigarette has gone out, again. "Maybe before we die," Mattie says, holding up a hand to help her cup the flame against the wind, "you'll be able to keep one going." Mattie starts coughing, barely getting out the last few words. She's choking down one of Clara's American spirits, which she hates. But it's better than no cigarette at all. Mattie doesn't approve of

any cigarettes that cost seven dollars. *But they're organic*, Clara says each time Mattie tries to convince her to try something cheaper.

*Then enjoy your organic cancer*, she always replies. Usually, she likes that Clara smokes them because she can finish two Pall Malls in the time it takes Clara to smoke a single American Spirit.

“Are we going to smoke tonight?” Clara asks. Mattie says that she can’t, that she’s hanging out with Eddie.

“Snake-eyes Eddie?” she asks, and Mattie nods.

“His friend, Jay, is really into you, you know,” Mattie says, “I bet he’ll come if you do.” Clara laughs, and denies it. No way. He couldn’t possibly.

“Jay only likes me because he saw my skirt ride all the way up my ass the other day,” she points out, and Mattie laughs. “I swear to god,” Clara says, “it must have been like that for ten minutes before I noticed.”

“He really does like you, though,” Mattie says, but Clara shakes her head, so she drops it. Clara *is* beautiful, especially when she smokes, but it’s not the kind of beauty that boys appreciate yet, and Mattie realizes that Clara is wary of anyone who does. In sync, they both take another drag. Two pairs of lungs, a cloud of pearly smoke hovering, then gone.

\*

### **Rule #3**

Yes. The answer is always yes<sup>1</sup>. Do you want something to drink? Did you come alone? Do you want to take a hit? How about a line? Do you want to go to my room? How about another shot, don’t you want another shot? Do you want to go upstairs? How about a threesome with me and my buddy? How about that bathroom stall right over there? Can you deep throat? You like that, don’t you? You can make it home by yourself, right?

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<sup>1</sup> For exceptions see Rule #2

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When I get back from fucking Eddie, I open a new pack of razors and, with a pair of pink tweezers, pry out a single, shiny blade. It's been several months since I've done this, and I'm clumsy. I'm also drunk. So, the blade is bent at a hard angle at one end. This bothers me, but I don't have the patience to try again. Without hesitation, I dig the sharp side into the skin of my right thigh, and drag it down. Pink flesh opens up, and the image of a fish's mouth flashes across my mind – out of water, open and gaping. I am seeing a part of myself that I am not supposed to – like I am telling myself a secret.

It hurts, but not as much as I want it to. These cuts feel dull, not painful. Alcohol makes it as though I am watching, not feeling – completely disassociated from my body. I know that this should hurt, and from experience that it does hurt, but I only feel memory traces of pain like old, leftover flashbacks.

So I do it again. And again. Until eleven pink gashes are yawning up at me, slowly filling up and over flowing. When I stand, the blood runs down the side of my leg and makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I mechanically put on a pair of dark cotton sweatpants, and find my way across the street to Clara's dorm.

When she opens the door, I am bent over, pressing the fabric of my sweats into the cuts. "What are you doing?" she says, and I ask if she has any Band-Aids. She seems to know that they are not for a papercut or a skinned knee, and comes back with the whole box and some Neosporin.

Clara has seen the older scars – exactly the same, just higher up on my thigh, so she already knows about this habit. And I have seen the thin, self-inflicted stars on her hips and pelvis, so I know that it was something we shared. So, when she takes me to the private bathroom at the end of the hall, and I pull my sweats down to my knees, she does not flinch, or gasp or do any of the things

that my mother might have done. I think, if anything, she is disappointed in me. This is new. I have scared people and worried people and made them incredibly angry by cutting, but no one has ever been disappointed. I realize for the first time that what I am doing to myself is not noble, that I am, in fact, better than this – something that Clara seems to know already.

I sit down on the edge of the bathtub, and Clara opens the box of Snoopy Band-Aids in her hand. She hands me some paper towels and Neosporin. I wipe away the blood and that strange syrupy liquid that comes out of us, but hesitate with the Neosporin. I cringe as I push my finger, covered with the stuff, into one of the cuts, knowing that somewhere I am hurting and unable to feel it.

“Why now?” Clara asks, opening one of the Band-Aids and pulling away its protective folds. She holds it up for me to take, careful not to touch the sticky side.

I shrug my shoulders, feigning nonchalance about the whole thing, as though this was just Thursday night. “This is what I do,” I say. “I always come back to this. Anyway, it didn’t hurt. I was too drunk,” I say, and then correct myself. “I *am* too drunk.” Clara nods.

She continues to hand me the too-small Band-Aids until each fish mouth has been poorly closed, vulnerable flesh still visible in places. The cast of *Peanuts* looks disappointed in me, too. I stand and begin pulling my sweatpants up. The cotton on the inside, usually soft and comforting, is cold, and wet with blood that smears on my legs as I slide them up.

“If you are going to keep doing this,” Clara says, carefully folding the tabs of the box back into place, “You need to get your own Band-Aids.”

The next morning, a sharp, hot pain shakes me out of sleep, and it hurts so badly that I am afraid to move, as though all the unfelt pain from last night has just been waiting to flood me all at once. It has never hurt it like this before – not in four years of sticking razor blades in my thigh. I finally get out of bed, manically peeling off Snoopy and Woodstock and Charlie Brown, leaving

them scattered on the floor. I wet a towel with warm water in the sink, and lie back down before pressing it against my leg. It stings extra for a moment before settling back into the same pain as before. I keep waiting for my body to get used to it, but it remains sharp and demanding. I try to fall back asleep, but can't. So, I just lie there and count to one hundred, and then back down again. I keep doing this, starting over whenever I lose count. Suddenly, the pain recedes. I can feel it drain out of me like water, and I sink back into sleep.

\*

#### **Rule # 4**

Do not trust your body. Your body does horrible things to you. It bleeds. It cramps. It gets wet, gives silent consent. It makes you twist with wanting, and twist harder when that wanting is relieved. Your body is where your desires start, and so you must never trust it. You will give into it eventually. You will give up - this can't be helped. But you must never think of it as part of yourself.

\*

The first time I get my period, I demand a hysterectomy. I can barely pronounce the word, and my mother almost chokes on her coffee. "You're thirteen," she says. "You're not old enough to get your tubes tied."

"When?" I ask her.

"Later," is all she says back. She doesn't say anything about wanting kids someday – she is the only one who believes me when I say *No way* every time someone asks me about babies. I realize that this is also what she said. Someone had already let it slip that I was an accident. *Surprise*, she always corrects me. *You were a surprise*. Actually, I was just improbable. My mother, thirty-nine, a professional, was apparently an inhospitable host. Her body betrayed her, too, doing the one thing she thought it wouldn't – couldn't – do. Maybe when she found out, she did want me. Maybe she had harbored a secret want of kids her whole life. I don't know. I know she loves me, even if she

didn't expect me, but her body kept a secret from her, harboring its ability until she was sure it was gone – until it was too late.

I'm sure that my body is angry with me, and that's why it's bleeding. It sheds itself. It peels away its own lining. It self-destructs. How can I trust something that turns on itself every 28 days?

I stop having periods when I'm sixteen. Instead, I have birth control pills. I have a small, plastic ring, like a bracelet, that slips inside of me. I have a wishbone shaped wire contraption implanted. When I get my first IUD, I forget to take the muscle relaxant beforehand. They do the procedure anyway, and I feel everything between my shoulders and hips contract. My vision goes white around the edges, and my eyes start watering. It feels like I'm turning inside out, my body rejecting the foreign object.

It's over in a few minutes. *Most people experience bleeding for a few weeks. We'll see you again in thirty days just to make sure everything is in place, but it can stay in there for up to five years.* I sit up, and the room spins. A nurse gets me a diet coke and some crackers. For the next six months, my body bleeds.

A hot twitching desire wakes me up in the middle of the night, so strong that it startles me. I did not know I could feel this way, that desire could feel so large, be so demanding. I reach for the boy in bed beside me, the same place where he fell asleep after we had sex a few hours before. I nudge him with my hands, my hips. He doesn't open his eyes, but his movements become deliberate. He's awake, and understands what I'm asking. He pulls on my hips until I'm on top of him. Everything is dark, out of focus. I stop when he comes, rolling off him. The whole thing couldn't have been more than ten minutes, and in five more I'm asleep again.

*Why did you want to fuck me again last night?* he asks the next morning as I'm getting dressed. *You practically forced me.* After that, I'm embarrassed. Maybe even a little bit ashamed. I'm reminded of being ten years old, discovering my body over and over again at night – each time swearing that I wouldn't do it again. No one taught me how. No one told me that my body would respond to touch

like that. I instinctually found pleasure, and had instinctually known that it was bad, that I was bad. Just like I am now.

Clara and I talk about this shame that we both felt. “You come from a religious background, though,” I tell her. “You were conditioned, right?” Clara rolls her eyes at this.

“Southern Baptists certainly look down on it,” she says around a mouthful of fried rice. “Do you want some?” I shake my head, no. She studies me for a moment before she keeps eating.

“Nobody told me that it was bad, or that I would go blind, or that girls weren’t supposed to do that,” I say, leaning forward on my elbows. “Nobody told me about it at all. So how did I know that it was bad?”

“*Thought*,” she corrects me. “You *thought* that it was bad.”

Apparently, my father is a sex addict. My mother likes this more than all his other diagnoses – including but not limited to narcissism, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism. Once a week he sits in a circle with other sex addicts, my mother a few offices away, surrounded by the other victims of their spouses’ sex addiction. “But your father doesn’t watch porn,” she says, almost prideful. “All the other husbands are crazy about porn.”

*Wouldn’t you rather he watch porn? I think, but know better than to say. Isn’t that better than fucking the nanny?*

I’ve been called a sex addict. First, by the same boy who says I forced him, then again in therapy – although, the second time it isn’t an insult, and I don’t cry.

“I’m sexually compulsive,” I flaunt to a man I’m falling in love with. “So I’ll want to fuck all the time.”

That’s the best problem I’ve ever had,” he responds, flipping us so that he’s on top.

He wants me. For a long time, he wants me three times a day. Then twice, and then once.

The sex is always amazing, and it is still often, but not *as* often. *If I was more desirable*, I’d think at night

as he breathes deeply beside me, that same twitching need still awake in my abdomen, refusing to give in to sleep, *He would want to fuck me more.*

When I say this out loud in therapy, it sounds ridiculous. My therapist points this out, I agree with her, but then we are both quiet with the knowledge that I still believe it. *But it's true, isn't it?* I think on the drive home, the thought coming from that elusive place where false truths fester, where they take root, where you cannot lose them.

Regardless of how often he wants me, he loves me. The two are – should be – mutually exclusive. So why does a rejection of the body, even this body that keeps me awake, that bleeds, that I cannot trust because even though I live in it, it is not me, still feel like a rejection of everything?

\*

#### **Rule #5**

You are just like other girls. You are not *different*. You are not *special*. When he says that you are different, what he really means is *be* different. *You're not like other girls* because you'll do the things that the other girls won't do. Maybe that's going home, meeting mom and dad. Maybe that's getting on your knees in the bathroom stall. *You're not like other girls* because you wait by the phone, you're willing to only exist when he pays attention to you. *You're not like other girls* is the ultimate compliment because, after all, it's a competition between you and all those other girls that you are just like. They will get on their knees. They will stand up, wipe their mouths, go back to the party. Nobody wants to be just like other girls. Not because nobody wants to be just like everybody else, but because who would want to be just a girl?

\*

Clara has never had champagne, which is probably the only reason I'm sharing it with her. She sits cross-legged on the floor of my dorm, watching as I carefully tease the cork from one of the bottles, the other one already open and breathing vapor. Stolen out my parents' cabinet when I went

home for dinner last Sunday, the two bottles of Prosecco were plucked from a whole case left over from my sister's engagement party. Otherwise, we would be sucking down vodka shots from an eight-dollar handle of Burnettes like all the other freshman. I am in the middle of explaining how much skill it takes to do this when the cork rockets into the overhead light, going off like a gun. We both shriek. Then freeze. We wait for the condemning sound of a Resident Advisor running down the hall, but none come.

I have never read *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which is probably the only reason Clara is sharing it with me. This doesn't come up until after I have polished off my own bottle, and most of Clara's. She never complains when I finish her drinks. She seems to know that I need it in a way that I don't entirely understand. I'm chasing a feeling I'll never reach, but that alcohol gets me closer to.

I do not know how the conversation leads us to T.S. Eliot, but suddenly I am leaning back against the wall, listing to Clara's voice, softened but not slurred by the liquor, read something beautiful. *The muttering retreats of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells.* There is only the sound of her voice, and the soft shutter of my eyes opening and closing in time with the syllables. *In the room the women come and go Talking of Michael Angelo.* I love her so deeply in that moment, I cannot fathom the isolation that surrounds her. *I should have been a pair of ragged claws Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.* I can hear it in Clara's voice, the way this poem speaks to her in a way that it does not to me. *I have heard the mermaids singing each to each.* Like a song in a beautiful language that I can't speak. *I do not think they will sing for me.* All of me is transfixed by this window into Clara that has opened up, spoken words exposing her to me. *Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach? Isn't a girl who loves beautiful things beautiful too? We have lingered in the chambers of the sea. By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

She stops. I realize I'm crying. Not the usual flushed cheeks, wracking body sobs that come out of me when I'm drunk. These tears are raindrops on a car window. These tears do not hurt my

sinuses to shed. “I cried the first time I read it, too,” Clara says. It doesn’t look like I’m going to stop, so Clara rereads some of the passages.

*For I have known them all already, known them all – Have known the evening, morning, afternoon, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons.*

After we met two months ago, Clara and I became friends almost instantly, suctioning to each other for reasons we didn’t really know. Something in each of us had recognized itself in the other, but, language-less and intangible, it had no name. We came from such different places and by such different means, we could not understand that we now stood in the same place.

*I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker, And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, and in short I was afraid.*

When I look at her now, I can see it take form, given shape by poetry and champagne. For a moment I am overwhelmed by it, memories, some that we’ve shared and others that we’ve witnessed roll through my head. Face after face rolls by of boys who I shrank myself for, and boys who rejected Clara because she wouldn’t. I can see the fathers, both of them big men who know how to make their daughters feel small. The empty bottle is suddenly heavy in my hands, my head even heavier on my shoulders.

*And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! Smoothed by long fingers, Asleep....tired...or it malingers, Stretched on the floor beside you and me.*

Memory requires language. We can only recall what we can describe, what we can give a name. I could not have identified this truth that we both share before now because I did not have the words. I’m tentative to share it with her, afraid that our friendship isn’t old enough to allow honesty, but I’m compelled to say it anyway, to make it real.

And again: *We have lingered in the chambers of the sea. By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*

“You don’t get a lot of male attention,” I say, interrupting her. Clara’s round face turns to clay. “So, you feel like nobody sees you. I do get a lot of male attention, and I feel like nobody sees me,” I finish. Her face had fallen as I spoke, her soft cheeks pulled towards the floor, finally settling on a look of recognition, as though she is for the first time seeing me as I am. Now Clara cries, too. We see each other, and this should be enough for us to feel seen, but we know that it’s not. We cry because we wish it was. Suddenly we remember that we are young and drunk – two very good reasons *not* to cry. So I hide the empty bottles in a trunk already full of empty bottles, and we go outside to smoke, to stop crying.

\*

Two girls sit on the steps and smoke cigarettes. – There’s nothing else left to do. They’re talking about boys, or fathers. Probably boys. Sometimes they hate themselves for wasting so much conversation on men, but can’t seem to help it. They shouldn’t care about boys, and they shouldn’t want boys to care about them. Mattie’s therapist tells her that *should* isn’t a good word, that self-actualization isn’t a one and done kind of thing. Mattie doesn’t believe her, and after she tells Clara, neither does she. Mattie thinks maybe they just aren’t trying hard enough. “Nobody’s going to save us,” Clara says with a look of determination, as though this is some kind of opportunity, “We can’t hold out anymore.” Mattie agrees, but somewhere deep in a place that she cannot reach, where she cannot extract it, she believes that against all odds somebody will. Selfishly, she hopes that Clara harbors this same, shameful belief.

“One more cigarette,” Mattie says, “Then we go study.” But they both end up having two, stretching out that light-headed weightlessness a little bit longer, two tiny stars blinking in and out.

\*

At the end of the semester, I will empty out the trunk of bottles, placing each one gently into a black garbage bag, which I will drag down the hall, trying and failing to stop them from clinking

together, from giving me away. But the sound will not remind me of the many boys who gave me those bottles, or what I gave them in return. It will not remind me of the solitary nights spent choking down just one more and one more and one more sip of vodka so cheap it made my eyes water, or the rusting razor blades that inevitably followed. Instead, I will think of coffee spoons, peaches. The taste of menthol and slant rhyme. I will think of impossibly long eyelashes, wet with tears that were years in the making. Of Michelangelo. Of mermaids. Of drowning, or waking up.