

Tattered Cloth.

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You should know this.

My parents didn't have a nasty divorce when I was four. My father never left, my mother never died. I never had a stepfather, and he never sexually abused me. My grandfather wasn't my surrogate father, and he didn't die when I was young. My older sister didn't get knocked up at fourteen. I never tried to run away. My mother wasn't an alcoholic. Nothing terribly tragic happened to me at an early age, no dark memories to suppress, no horrible happenings caused me severe pain and turned up during adolescence, when everything bleak and awful empties out of a secret hiding place.

I wasn't a loner. I wasn't overweight. My chubbiness, the lack of affection from my mother, neither of these caused me to distort my body image, to develop an eating disorder. I was never hospitalized for anorexia or overdosing on pain killers or attempted suicide. I never cut myself to watch the blood drip, to feel the sharp blade in my soft skin. I didn't smoke cigarettes or cut class. I didn't sit out in gym or pep rallies and look down on the kids with school spirit. I never had an affair with a teacher or with a man old enough to be my father. I didn't get into Fiona Apple or Tori Amos or angsty local bands. I didn't drink cheap black coffee in Styrofoam cups. I didn't dye my hair weird colors on a weekly basis. I never watched movies like *8 and 1/2* and *La Dolce Vita* so I could name-drop Fellini and tell everyone I knew that the only films I watched were foreign ones with sub-titles. I didn't want to get the hell out of my suburban town to sink into the dark anonymity of Brooklyn. I wasn't a pothead. I didn't lose my virginity when I was twelve, and I wasn't raped.

I never knew a junkie. I was never fearless enough to wander the streets at night looking for a quick fix. I never lived in a residential treatment facility. I didn't have split

personality disorder or bipolar disorder or even OCD. I never did drugs, I hardly drank, I didn't smoke pot until college. I never used sex or Ecstasy to embrace my emptiness. I never knew danger, I never experienced rebellion in any form more serious than talking back to my parents.

I'm not that girl. But I want to be.

The summer smelled like water. I can't explain it any other way. I'm not even sure what it means. Almost like the scent of nothing, flowing through my brain.

Apparently, I needed to be fucked.

Granted, I had been doing just fine without it for twenty-one years, but Sam, having met me only two months earlier, evidently knew what I needed better than I did.

“You definitely need to be fucked.”

It was all turning into some sort of awful Lifetime movie masquerading as a porno, and I’m not going to lie—I was kind of enjoying every awkward second.

“Not having sex with you.”

“Think you will.”

“Then you’re clearly delusional. Besides, you don’t want to sleep with me. I’ll bleed.”

“Probably not.”

“Are you serious?”

“You think I’ve never fucked a virgin before?”

All right. I get that he was trying to appeal to my twisted sense of hotness, but come on. Note to desperate twenty-six-year-old British guys: when attempting to steal some chick’s virginity, you should probably avoid using “fuck” and “virgin” in the same sentence. Instead, say something like “make slow sweet passionate love to a virgin.” It’ll work a hell of a lot better.

I guess I can’t really blame him. I mean, a twenty-one-year-old American chick with a certain body type should’ve had sex already. It wasn’t his fault he assumed I was normal.

However, the following *was* his fault. After that night, I didn’t see him again. So naturally, being the twisted freak that I am, I decided I was in love with him.

I came to London three months ago, expecting to have the life I always knew I would. This kind of thinking gets me in trouble. People always tell me that the expectations I have for my life could only be fulfilled in a movie. I don't deny it; I do (not so secretly) wish that I was this tragically misunderstood headcase on a teen drama.

The decision to study in London was made kind of haphazardly. I knew that I wanted to go abroad, but I didn't have my heart set on one particular place—I had my heart set on every place. I wanted to be an artsy French chick in Paris, I wanted to go on an archeological dig in Turkey, I wanted to take Literature classes anywhere that had a monarchy, I wanted to intern at a film production company in Cannes, or Berlin, or India, I wanted to study Celtic myth in Ireland, I wanted to do creative writing in Wales, I wanted to live amongst the Walpiri in Australia, I wanted to trek the ancient ruins in Peru. To this day, I'm still not sure why I decided to study History and Culture in London.

The day I arrived, the weather was cool; glassy rain fell in fresh, clean sheets on the cobblestones, then disappeared into the ground. I should've taken it as a warning sign. Instead, I thought it was delightful—really, I actually remember thinking that word; that it was utterly brilliant that I was finally in a place that lived up to its image, that somehow rainy gray London actually turning out to be rainy gray London meant that I was now in a setting where I belonged.

I met Sam a month into my program, at a nightclub. I was with my flat mates, girls who at twenty and twenty-one were more interested in embarrassing each other than in being each other's friends. Margo, Chloe, and Tiphany loved to go out in Piccadilly Circus. Piccadilly is basically the Times Square of London, an exciting, bright area full of streaming colors and lights, chain restaurants, and cheap-for-London clubs-that-are-still-rip-offs flowing with overpriced drinks.

Since we had been in London for a full month, I felt that we had been given ample opportunity to get to know the local scene and pretend to assimilate. I had no interest in creating an obnoxious community of American girlfriends who acted as if they were still in the states while abroad. After all, my ultimate goal is to become an expatriate—à la *The Sun Also Rises*. It's really too bad that I suck at French.

On this particular night, the tourist trap of choice had a name so ridiculous I couldn't even make it up if I tried. I later learned that Tiger, Tiger was an infamous spot for picking up Eastern European chicks.

Sam must have thought I was from Prague.

"I'm in modeling," he told me, and when I looked up in disbelief, almost laughing, mostly because a random guy attempting to flirt with me was beyond my understanding and only partially because his short stature and decent-looking brown hair and (I should've known) obvious Jewish nose could in no circle be found model-attractive, he cracked a wide, mischievous grin and added the adjective "*financial* modeling."

This kind of wit—a line so stupid it just has to be the funniest thing you've ever heard, delivered by a guy so goofy he just has to be the coolest boy you've ever met, used

its transformative powers on the interaction and I burst out laughing, very attractively spitting out a mixture of various alcoholic beverages.

I figured with a line as amazingly lame and therefore wonderful as “I’m in modeling—*financial* modeling” I now owed it to myself to actually talk to him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Studying your monarchy.”

“And what do you think of Her Majesty?”

Note to all British citizens: you are bizarre when it comes to your queen. In case you didn’t get the memo, she has no power whatsoever! It’s amazing how you act like she does.

“I’m more interested in her ancestors. Like Henry VIII and his six wives.”

“So you’re a historian?”

In truth, I didn’t know what I was. I had spent three years studying Writing and dabbling in History before suddenly, as if the most poignant scene of my life were pasted on a wide screen in a movie theater, I realized I could no longer write a single word.

I don’t mean to be melodramatic. What I mean is, I was in the middle of writing a short story and right then and there, my fingers became paralyzed, and I couldn’t press any of the keys on my computer.

I had been reading Salinger, one of the Glass stories, so I wondered if maybe I was just being psychosomatic and projecting Seymour’s or Buddy’s eccentricities onto myself. It’s not that uncommon for me, actually. In fact, it’s always been my problem. I adopt so many characteristics of my favorite literary figures that I no longer know where their traits end and mine begin.

So I thought that maybe it was all in my head. But I woke up the next morning, returned to the computer screen, and found once again that my fingers were physically unable to stretch the quarter inch they needed to touch the keys.

It was becoming ridiculous, so I picked up a pen, smoothed out a clean sheet of white notebook paper, and started to write a sentence. But my pen refused to slide along the loose-leaf, unable to leave a mark, a trace.

After that, I ignored all my school work, and when I told my mother about it, she made me talk to my psychologist. The next day, I was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder.

Naturally, I refused medication, making it all the more difficult not only to indulge in my literary passion, but to complete my major. So I switched to History. It seemed like a nice thing, an anxiety-free thing, a venture for me to move through courts and palaces and old bones, a way to discover other people's stories without having to write my own.

But when Sam asked me that question, I felt that my decision had become more of a cop out than a branching out of my academic pursuits. So I was surprised. I had never thought of myself as a historian, someone who concerns herself with the past without creating anything new, but I guess if you study history, that's what you are.

“Something like it.”

“Fascinating.”

It seemed like he really meant it, but I couldn't help but think he could see through me, too.

When I think about it now, though, he may have only been trying to see through my clothes. I say this because at that very moment when he seemed to transcend all my Jane boundaries, tall, tight blockades of skin layers that made it impossible for another person to know how I was feeling, that ridiculous Kanye West song “Stronger” came on. You know the one—that rap/hip-hop concoction that makes even the most adamant club-song hater (namely, me) want to dance. Sam reached over, grabbed my hand, and started to lead me to the dance floor.

“I don’t do dancing,” I told him, very seriously.

He looked at me as if I was playing some sort of game, like I was lying. British guys always think you’re playing games. Considering I don’t even know what games are, I find it humorous when a guy gives me more credit than I deserve.

I was not prepared for what happened next. Sam grabbed me, and just as I was ready to pull away, thinking he wanted to dry hump me on the dance floor, he twirled me around, ballroom style, dipped me, and then kissed me. To understand the total ridiculousness of this picture, I once again must reiterate the fact that he dipped me, nineteen-twenties style, in a crowded nightclub to bad rap music, amidst couples, well, coupling. The fact that I’d had absolutely no romantic interest in the kid twenty seconds earlier was now completely forgotten.

Enthralled, I let him lead me back to the couch. He entered my number into his phone, kissed me again, and then “let me get back to my friends.” He left as quickly as he came, almost gliding away, as if he now had the power to transform the club into a ballroom just by walking across it. I sat there, dumbfounded, wondering what the hell had just happened.

Before I'd left for London, my mother tried to understand me.

“Why do you think you're ugly?” She was crying. I was laughing.

“I don't, Mom.”

“Then why did you tell Dr. Loden that boys don't find you attractive?”

Dr. Loden was my psychologist. So much for doctor-patient confidentiality.

“That's not exactly what I said, Mom.”

“Oh?” She looked hopeful.

“I just said that guys my *age* don't find me attractive.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because it's true.”

It is true. The only guys that have ever been attracted to me are the ones who've either known me since I was twelve or who happen to be much older men. Seriously. The doctor at my sleepaway camp was only one of the many men over sixty who used to call me Julia because he thought I looked like Julia Roberts.

“But you're so beautiful!” Mothers have to say this. After a while, it gets kind of annoying.

“I don't think I'm ugly, Mom. I just know that guys my age don't really find me attractive. It's okay, really—I've accepted it.”

She started yelling at me, and that's when I walked out and closed the door.

I didn't want to leave.

It was a scary thought. Ever since I can remember, I had always wanted to leave. But I didn't. Not anymore.

I wasn't sure why. Really, I wasn't. It's not like I had so much going for me in New Jersey. No one was even there. And it was amazing that I wouldn't have to deal with my parents for three months. I was beginning to think that my mother's inability to understand me was more than just normal mother-daughter relationship issues. That the fact she tried to medicate me for a different psychological disorder on a monthly basis was scary and had no basis in fact, that maybe she was just mean-spirited.

My father never let me do anything. I was twenty-one and I still had a curfew. These were the last times I had to be carefree, with friends I had grown up with staying in the same place. He wasn't fair, not at all.

My older sister Ryan never came home. And when she did, it wasn't pretty. Somehow, she had always been allowed to do whatever she wanted. My mother thought she was brilliant, more brilliant than me. And she found a way to never let me forget it.

I wouldn't have anything to do. Maybe I'd wait tables at a nearby restaurant, or sit around my back yard applying to internships I wouldn't get. I'd be forced to spend every night with my parents, constantly pressuring me to do the things I was already doing: trying to think seriously about my future, keep my grades up, be responsible. When they told me to do things I was already working on, it was like my initiative had vanished, and now they got the credit. It wasn't worth it anymore.

Once I was accepted into the London summer program, looking at my plane ticket I imagined bustling city streets, filled with glamour and beauty and fashion, stylish

parties, gorgeous British boys with accents, a place where maybe I could finally be somebody.

And still, I didn't want to leave.

And then everything sank. The water in my brain had drowned it all out.

I had placed myself in the classic tale: the American girl goes abroad. Only I wasn't having the time of my life, exploring a city, gallivanting around, flitting from one foreign lover to another. Not that that's what I did at home—I mean, the whole flitting from lover to lover thing. Now that I think about it, it's downright irresponsible for Eileen Dundy and Gertrude Stein and even the closet geniuses who write the Olsen twin movies to portray so forcefully this idea as universal. It's just false advertising and utterly misleading to show girls that no matter how quirky or intelligent or charming they seemed, even if they were ignored in America, in Europe they get noticed almost immediately. So came forth my dilemma: I so wanted to live out this dream of sophisticated suitors and sophisticated soul-searching while simultaneously subverting the “clearly too fictional” plot.

The first month I had no one. No friends, no romantic interests, nothing. I took to wearing all black and creepy, dramatic eye makeup to mourn the loss of my social life. I'd ride the tube to nowhere, listening to The Killers too loud. It wasn't that I thought they were the best band; it was just that something about their music, the guy raving sadly about the lonely girl, the way the music took depression and made it kind of beautiful—it was that, in listening to the album straight through, I was able to see everything wonderful and destructive at the same time. Watching people on the tube while I listened to my version of their soundtrack must've been my way of pretending I was Sally Jay Gorce (Eileen Dundy's wonderful protagonist: the modern Francophile's icon leaves America for Paris and has the most covet-worthy adventures I can think of.) It was okay that I wasn't happy because I wasn't supposed to be—I was the depressed

artsy girl who wasn't actually real, because when I listened to the music on the tube I was transported into a world where I was under a camera's gaze, all the while aware of it and accepting it as no big deal.

I wanted to be in Paris. I was just convinced that riding through the Chunnel to France would transport me to this whole new world, this bright world waiting for me, one where I was meant to be.

When I think about Sam, I think about this:

Camdentown. The market. Loud, rock fervor. Punks (who apparently still exist), spiked green hair, cheap, dirty clothes. This does not describe him. This is the absolute opposite of him. There must be some sort of irony, that this prissy English kid who talks like the queen lives in the weirdest part of London.

Indian food. Mexican food. Market smells tingeing my clothes, all clothes. His clothes. So proper. Pants too short. Caught him wearing black socks. He should've understood. His flat. Beautiful, spacious. The balcony. The meals he cooked for me. Stir fry, pizza, tiramisù.

The fact that I wasn't even attracted to him until the fourth date. Because he kissed me like he loved me and wanted to kill me at the same time, and he didn't even like me. Explained this to my sister—didn't understand. Passion, I said. He's passionate. (It's a literary thing.) Once, when he walked me back to the tube, he talked about his job. Financial modeling. It sounded awfully boring. Told me: "I think you know that I'm a passionate person." Told the whole street. Could've been awkward. Implying to strangers that I did what I didn't do. Can't understand him, really. A total contradiction. Basically the equivalent of dispassionate work, yet he's passionate about it. About me. But not. Didn't even like him. But his kissing, his everything. Felt nothing. Felt everything.

When my older sister Ryan called me, telling me she had a layover at Heathrow en route to Bangladesh or Pakistan or Thailand, I almost didn't want to see her. I could imagine it already: all five-foot-eight of her, strutting through the airport, various duty-free shopping bags in her hands. Random guys would stare at her perfect light brown hair, her perfect almond-colored eyes, her perfectly tailored clothing. In a word, she was perfect. Certainly not in a way I would want to be: Ryan is devoid of all edge, all funkiness. But she's perfect nonetheless.

She's that typical kind of It Girl, the kind that will always exist but is slowly creeping away from mainstream aspirational culture. She graduated from the University of Michigan after spending four years slightly studying Communications and focusing all of her energies on putting together beautifully elaborate outfits for the hundreds of costume parties she attended with her sorority sisters. Not to sell her short, she also spent every Saturday morning getting wasted with said sorority sisters before watching the football game.

So that sounded kind of mean. I didn't mean to judge Ryan, I just didn't want the life she had. I'm starting to think maybe I was wrong, but I always felt I had the potential to be Ryan, and then I just decided I didn't want it. Mom had bought me the same beautiful clothes, I had gone to the same sleepaway camp that practically forces you to join a sorority at school, and I was slender enough to latch onto her reputation and forge my own. But her prototype was boring and at times meaningless; I wanted something more.

What exactly that was, I don't know. I wanted to be Marla Singer and Sally Jay Gorce, Rory Gilmore and *Hamlet's* Ophelia. Shades of everybody, but nobody;

completely myself. A junkie, minus the junk. A rock band groupie, *Almost Famous*. The multitude of young, beautiful actresses, trying to market themselves as the new kind of It Girl: funky, quirky, well-versed in the classics of pop culture. Zooey Deschanel, Amber Tamblyn, Evan Rachel Wood (minus the whole Marilyn Manson relationship—that’s just creepy.) I blame *Nylon Magazine*, I guess, for writing their beautiful interviews, showing girls like me that maybe girls like them are not like the girls we thought they were, but more like the girls we would like for them to be, for us to be.

But that day, I didn’t have anything better to do, so I took the hour-long tube ride to Heathrow, finagled my way into her terminal, and found her trying on clothes in Reiss.

“Jane!” she practically squealed.

She hadn’t made an effort to talk to me for more than three minutes in the past year, so I wasn’t sure why she seemed so excited to see me, but I went over to her, acquiescing to her quick hug.

“So where are you off to, world traveler?”

“Oh, the company’s covering Angelina’s latest service trip to Cambodia. Then I’m back to L.A. to run some Young Hollywood party.”

Ryan worked at a PR firm, the kind that plans events for movie stars.

“Exciting.”

As much as I wanted to show my disdain for the pathetic world she lived her life in, I couldn’t help but be enamored, in a delusional sort of way, with the fantasy world of the rich and famous.

“So how are things?!”

Her utter enthusiasm, mixed with the horrible time I'd been having, made me want to rip her hair out. The fact that she was asking this question also showed that she had failed to read the mass e-mails I sent to her and Mom and Dad.

“Actually, hold that thought. Gotta jet, little sis.”

She air-kissed me (seriously), then glided off to make her plane. I watched her walk off, then turned up The Killers on my iPod, sprinting to catch the tube as if I had the most urgent meeting to get to, as if I had anywhere to get to at all.

The best way I can describe how I wanted to see myself is as a Free People model or a ballerina on acid—the latter really being a cracked out ballerina. Free People is this ultra-expensive clothing brand, completely hippie-chic and fake vintage store and totally glam-grunge. The clothes are modern-day interpretations of hippie style (hence the Free People name), with colorful, baggy sleeveless shirts, beautiful, dirty dresses, boyish boots, and girly tights. They also only look good on five-foot-ten anorexic models. It's unfortunate, considering all five-foot-five inches of me are certainly not anorexic. Ironically, if anyone could wear Free People well, it would be Ryan.

For Halloween last year I was a ballerina on acid. In the college world of slutty border control officers, Hannah Montana costumes, Eighties aerobic instructors, slutty bumblebees, slutty nurses, slutty anythings, this costume idea was clearly unusual. I had read the phrase “ballerina on acid” in some crappy teenage novel, describing this girl wearing an awesome black dress, purple shoes, and her hair slicked back in a high ponytail. I decided to incorporate the phrase into my own ideology, meaning that I wore a black leotard, a black tutu, ripped black tights, black ballet slippers, and a ton of “cracked out” black eye makeup against my very pale face. I wanted to wear my hair straightish and limp, but I put it up in an angry, messy sort of bun. The costume ended up looking pretty bad (again, Ryan would've worn it well), not nearly as good as my artsy French chick one year earlier (all black and a beret), but it was the epitome of my style ideology, and, as various friends reminded me, an excuse to become, at least for one more night, the stereotypical English major I always knew I should be, wearing all black and (pretending) to smoke too many cigarettes.

I was born with the innate ability not to see myself clearly. It wasn't until I was eighteen that I realized this fact.

I started leaving the house in ridiculous outfits, all sorts of ripped tights and dark boots and men's T-shirts and frayed skirts, at fifteen. I saw myself as impeccably skinny, long-legged, taller than I was.

My hair was wavier, less frizzy, longer; my skin paler, less red. My clothes didn't fit; they hung loosely, almost beautifully, acknowledging their imperfect perfection, their ends flowing through the air.

In college, I found this mirror. It was white-rimmed, clean-edged, glassily reflective. My dad hammered it onto my door. I didn't realize until the middle of freshman year that it was angled, slanted, that I wasn't actually as tall or as thin as my distorted reflection.

So I did the only reasonable thing I could think of. I continued to wear the ridiculous outfits, the ripped tights and dark boots and men's T-shirts and frayed skirts. I continued to see my hair as wavier, less frizzy, longer; my skin as paler, less red. My clothes fit, they hung loosely, almost beautifully, their ends poetically flowing through the air.

Even then, I preferred distorted reality.

I met Lauren before my freshman year of college. We were at a country club, gathered awkwardly at a reception for accepted students. I was very much in my anti-preppy stage, and standing amongst polo-shirt clad future yuppies at a country club was definitely not my scene. I had also decided to regress to age six, meaning that the possibility of me attending college at a ridiculously preppy institution of higher learning had caused me to see my mother surrounded by some sort of magnetic force field. If I tried to escape it, an invisible electric fence would shock me before I moved three steps.

Aside from my seriously embarrassing attachment to my mother, my long reddish hair, awful collared shirt, and athletic body probably looked as though I belonged in the sea of prep school kids. But Lauren's brown crew cut, chubbiness, and Doc Martens didn't stand a chance. My mom, actually terrified that the daughter she had been trying to get close to her for the past five years was now somehow permanently attached to her body, saw Lauren, thought she was unintimidating enough, and introduced us.

Lauren turned out to be totally crazy, seriously pretentious, and just interesting enough for me to continue talking with the entire evening. We stayed in touch until college started, talked a couple times at school, then basically ignored each other until we tied for first place in a poetry contest, after which she decided that I was worthy (meaning artsy enough) to hang out with her.

The next year, Lauren, who had spent the previous semester telling me about all of the times she had been raped, hospitalized, and beaten, left school to enter a residential treatment facility.

I should be embarrassed to admit this, but I have always been intensely jealous of her. Yes, a melodramatic amount of trauma happens to her on a daily basis, but Lauren

goes through with things. She decides she wants to cut herself, she cuts herself. She decides she wants to lose weight, she gets an eating disorder. She decides she can no longer deal with school, she overdoses on a bunch of drugs and gets hospitalized for six months.

So when I got an e-mail saying she was passing through London on her way to some fancy old-fashioned sanitarium (despite her weirdness, her parents were super proper and filthy rich, meaning that they insisted on sending their daughter out of the country for rehab so as to cover up her six-month stay as a semester abroad) I agreed to meet up with her. The day we were set to meet, I woke up late, cursing my faulty alarm clock. I skipped washing my hair, quickly showered, dressed, brushed my teeth, and flew out the door with my glasses, having no time to put in my contacts. I ran to the tube, waited the five stops to Covent Garden, and went to meet her at the coffee shop across from Gardening Club, another touristy nightclub frequented by American students on Tuesday nights, due to their special two-pound pitchers of alcohol. I walked through the door of the coffee shop, slightly surprised that Lauren got up, gave me a hug, and led me to her table.

I'm always amazed that people recognize me when I wear my glasses. I'm convinced I look incredibly different, nothing like myself, and can't fathom how anyone can tell it's me. It's interesting that the means I use to see better makes me think other people can't see me.

"I've changed my name to Zooley," she announced. Lauren can't help but be theatrical, even if I'm the only one listening to her.

"The way Salinger spelled it, I assume?"

“You know me too well.”

The truth was that I didn't really know her well at all. I only knew myself, or rather the person I so wanted to be.

“It's terribly ironic, isn't it? That I'm naming myself Zooey, even though Salinger's Zooey was a boy.”

“I wouldn't exactly call it ironic,” I countered, getting annoyed. “Why the sudden need to change your name?”

She shrugged. “Lauren no longer suits me. I will be Zooey, no last name.”

“Ah. Like a pop star!”

She gave me a dirty look.

“I'm only kidding.”

She seemed to soften a little. “Read this.” She pushed a file of papers towards me. “I think it's my best stuff.”

This, truly, was the reason I had come. Her writing could sometimes inspire me.

“Have you been writing?” she asked me.

I didn't want to tell her the truth, that I'd been blocked for a year. It felt like giving out this information would be like losing the rivalry between us that she had created in her mind.

“A little,” I mumbled, not convincingly. I swear she had a smirk on her face.

“The director at the last hospital I was at has an old friend who got an MFA at Iowa. He gave my stuff to his friend, who told me I should apply.”

She was trying to make me jealous; anyone could see that. I didn't need her attitude, considering I lived with three girls who acted this way all the time.

“That’s fantastic,” I told her, picking up our bill.

“You’re going?”

“I’m sorry. Paper due tomorrow.” I went to hug her, handing her writing back to her.

“Keep it,” she said, “I’ve made copies.”

She may have been rubbing it in my face, but I took it anyway, eager to read it on the tube home.

“And pay particular attention to page seventeen,” she called after me. “I’m now bulimic,” she announced grandly, as if she had just told me that she was about to receive the Nobel Prize. “It tells my struggle in a really, you know, real kind of way.”

I rolled my eyes. I wanted to be sympathetic, but every time I saw Lauren she seemed to acquire a new disorder. I’m pretty positive I only attract friends with serious psychological problems. I’m not exaggerating—at least eight of my best friends that I’ve had over the years have all been anorexic, or bipolar, or bulimic. (I’ve yet to examine what this says about me.)

“Write me!” She waved, completely carefree, as if she hadn’t just tried to shock me with startling news.

“I’ll try!” I didn’t have her address.

Sometimes, I do this thing. I'll be walking down a street, maybe it's dark outside, maybe it's not. In the absence of another person, I create one. Don't get me wrong. It's not like I need constant companionship. In fact, more often than not, I can't wait to get to my room, my bed, lights off, no one around, just so I can participate in some internal dialogue.

In the movie that is my life, my name is Aylie Haddock. I choose it because it's a bizarre name, an unreal name, something unique and full of character.

Scene 1: Dressed in all black, I walk down Gloucester Road to the tube, jamming to the musical stylings of Radiohead. Like all self-proclaimed quirky girls, my iPod is the soundtrack to my life—only my soundtrack is actually a real soundtrack, because my life is being recorded. “Fake Plastic Trees” starts playing, a song about meaninglessness, invoking complicated tales of misplaced love and the quest for a deep life. The camera zooms in on my profile, transitioning into a flashback.

Scene 2: I'm shown in a series of photos spliced to create a montage. In each one, I look more fabulous than I can ever hope to look. The shots depict different romantic entanglements; in each one, I'm in a different place with a different boy. We laugh, we fight, we cry. This gets old.

Scene 3: You learn that this montage is actually not a flashback but a couple real memories mixed with a whole lot of “wish-they-occurred” moments. The best of these shots shows me wearing what I am wearing today, but with much edgier eye makeup and a great haircut with pieces falling all over the place. I'm walking down the very same path that I am currently walking on, getting stopped by a stranger. Perhaps he bumps into me, I'm late for class, all of my shit falls out of my bag, and I'm angsty and pissed. *Shit, dude*, the stranger says, *I'm so sorry. Let me help you.* I'm in a shitty mood because my (nonexistent) boyfriend just dumped me, and if I'm late for class one more time the tutor said he'd lower my grade a full point. So this asshole who-couldn't-watch-where-he-was-going's whole nice act is pissing me off. *It's fine*, I say rudely, gathering up my things, about to stalk off angrily in the direction of the tube. *Wait up*, annoying stranger

calls, and so I turn around, notice that he's kind of cute but the kind of cute where I can tell he thinks he's God's gift to everybody, and I shout back, *Sorry, but I'm really fucking late*, and I forget about him until I walk into seminar eleven minutes late and the tutor tells me he will speak to me after lecture.

Scene 4: I somehow convince the tutor not to lower my grade. Later that night, I'm at Roadhouse, the "unique" touristy nightclub where rock cover bands play. I look up at the stage and can't believe what I'm seeing. Asshole from this morning is playing guitar and singing, looking straight fucking at me.

Scene 5: After his set, he walks over to me. *You again*, he says, attempting to sound clever, *just can't get enough of me, huh?* I smirk, try to walk away. *Let me buy you a drink*, he says, *it's the least I can do*. I'm annoyed that this kid seems to be stalking me, but I let him get me the most expensive drink I can think of.

Scene 6: Turns out homeboy's not that bad. After twenty minutes of talking, he has to go back to the stage. He asks for my number. I oblige. He kisses me goodbye, and I'm embarrassed to admit he's the best kisser I have ever kissed.

Scene 7: A rush of girls moves towards me. *Ohmygawd*, they screech obnoxiously, *was that Jeb Daniels?* I look at them strangely, confused. Maybe Jeb gets around. I nod. The rush of girls looks at me incredulously. Turns out Jeb is famous, the next big thing.

Scene 8: I'm in my flat, it's early morning. I'm stalking Jeb online. He's pretty legit. I decide I can't ever talk to him again. I do this sometimes, when I meet a guy and think he's on my level and then it turns out his popularity is more suited to international stardom.

The next bunch of scenes consists of me randomly bumping into Jeb, while he is with his entourage, and we have witty banter. He consistently tries to get me to hang out with him. I won't. I'm too rough and affected to date a pretty boy rocker. But I start to see him more and more, at parties, with friends, and the camera can't help but mark our undeniable, forbidden attraction to one another.

I tell myself that I will write. I say that I'm going to a coffee shop, all too aware that the creative atmosphere I so crave is really commercial pseudo-artsiness.

That's the thing about writing: no matter how much you love it, especially if you know it is the thing you are meant to do, you can never do it unless you have to. "Have to" means fierce deadlines, big black letters in bold not even remotely set by yourself.

The writer is really the master of not writing. She knows how not to write exceedingly well. She can go anywhere, armed only with a notebook and a pen or her computer, some place where there is absolutely nothing else to do but write, and still not write. She will spend a full hour searching online for a book that she saw at Urban Outfitters, one of those edgy almost cult-classics by an as yet unknown author that describes perfectly the desires of the anti-teen dream. It's no longer on Urban Outfitters' web site, which is bogus, really, because she just saw it there three days ago. After searching *The Bell Jar* and *Prozac Nation* and other such titles on Amazon for related books, she comes across it only when she types in *The Wrecking Ball*, which is far more superficial than the one she was looking for, *The Torn Skirt*. She needs to read excerpts from *The Torn Skirt* to get inspired, to know what direction she should take her style. Really. Anything but write.

The summer I turned thirteen I started seeing floaters. My dad had warned me about them after the fact.

I would sit outside, staring through the air, watching. These milky black dots, elusive forms, would appear at the edges of my eyesight. Soon, they were floating through space, swaying. Then, they stopped flowing and started soaring, flying, traveling faster than my eyes could keep up with. More and more shapes would move past my eyes, to the sides, blocking my vision.

They were far more exciting to watch than anything else I saw. Only, I shouldn't have been seeing them. I didn't tell my dad about them until later. The floaters were too beautiful to watch.

That may have been when I stopped seeing things clearly.

When I think about Jack, I think about this:

Lockers, slits. English class. How he never fucking introduced me to his parents. High school. Even though they knew me, they knew everyone, our town had three people in it. How I let him drive my car. It was one night. Bizarre. How we dated for almost three years. Tool. My bedroom window. Herman Hesse. His version of a love note, and how he wanted it back, so he could publish it. His monologue. About jerking off, and God being dead. Beauty of science in nature, in art. How he used to hold my hand while he drove his car. How he wouldn't even kiss me for four months. How his friend Chambers did. Secrets. A Perfect Circle. Fiona Apple. Blaring speakers. Watch out for moving walls. His friends, Brad's house. Sweatshirt, his sweatshirt, he left it in my dorm room and I kept it after we broke up. It smelled like my cedar closet; disgustingly intoxicating. To this day, I'm still convinced that no one will ever love me as much as he did. Should've had sex with him.

The day after meeting Sam at the club, Tiphany, Margo, and Chloe all got phone calls from their respective men. I didn't really care at first; after all, once the excitement of being twirled like I was a girl who was actually romantic wore off, all Sam had on me was witty banter and a perfect accent.

But then I remembered how Sam was the first guy I had kissed since Jack. The first guy I had kissed in over a year. So I did the only thing I could think of: I allowed myself to become a cliché. A full week later, after waiting anxiously by my phone and eating too much Häagen-Dazs, he called.

I think it all started with Becky Thatcher. I never even finished *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but I did take one thing from the book, something I'm sure Mark Twain never intended. Becky Thatcher must be the ultimate It Girl. Or maybe she was just the original one.

I'm guessing that sounds kind of weird. I mean, in the most legitimate sense, Tom's "first girlfriend", Amy Lawrence, was the actual It Girl prototype. Clearly pretty, popular, kind of larger than life, and probably had a bitchy streak. But Becky Thatcher had it all: It Girl leadership and a sweet, girl-next-door quality. I never wanted to admit this to anyone, but I'm beginning to think I somehow always associated myself with this Becky Thatcher type of personality, with being extraordinary, and I'm only just starting to realize the reason I'm terrified of mediocrity is that it may very well define me.

The things I want to write. Poetry, colors, breakdown. I'm mainly interested in breakdown. There's a kind of beauty in it—in the nothing, in the everything.

Then there's an attraction to what must be this historical, archetypal, for lack of a better word, girl appeal: parlor doors, Jane Austen, courtly love, the like.

On the day of my first date with Sam, I found myself scouring Kensington High Street, searching endlessly for something to wear. I had this weird kind of feeling; it was like I was playing the role of some female character in a dizzy romantic comedy, bouncing in and out of every store on the street, desperate to find that perfect outfit. Each minute was part of a carefully collected and produced montage—the ones where the girl tries on the ridiculous hat, or when she topples, arms full of shopping bags, over on the street, or the shot when she and the salesperson finally agree that this dress is “the one.”

Even my fantasies were starting to get nauseating.

I wanted to be a star. (The dream was not that uncommon.) I'd perform Broadway reviews in my house, standing on top of this wide window ledge in my living room. The sun streamed in through the glass, providing a natural spotlight. I felt like I was shining, in all aspects of the word.

Eventually, I realized that despite the fact that I "just knew" I would become a movie star, despite the fact that every other kid wanted to and it was a pretty unrealistic thought to have, that I was, in fact, just another naive little girl. But I never gave up on the idea.

In a bizarre way, when I was on stage in my living room, despite the fact that I was clearly visible to a number of people, I was playing someone else—Jane was invisible. The more I changed from the fun-loving girl I was to the subdued teen with depressive angst, the more my mother screamed at me, the farther Ryan drifted away from me, and the less my father understood me.

I used to catch fireflies in a jar. It'd be around dusk during hot summer nights, and the crickets were screeching. I'd run around in my backyard, barefoot on the grass, my sundress muddy and my hair waving wildly, waiting until the fireflies filled the entire plastic container. Then, I'd take them out and smash them all up. I'd rub my hands together and, carefully, then vigorously, like I was washing the skin, I'd touch my hands to my face. And then I'd start to glow.

For my first date with Sam, I would say I was about twenty-six minutes late. In fact, I was late before I even left my flat. I think we were meeting at seven, and leaving my flat at six forty-five meant I would only arrive at the tube station at seven. I felt kind of bad about it, but I just kept staring at the mirror in my room, waiting for something to happen.

I thought that maybe I should feel anxious. After all, this was technically my first date. I mean, I'd gone out with boyfriends, but before I left for London I was convinced that the whole "we meet because our lockers are next to each other, we meet in the grocery store, the guy gets your number, calls you, and you go on a real date" was an event reserved solely for the movies or at least the 1950s. I realized now that Sam was under the impression that I was an Eastern European chick from the 1950s.

But meeting up with a twenty-six-year-old guy at the Tottenham Court Road Station so we could go to dinner and a music club for which he would presumably pay was something so far from my reality of driving Volvos around culs-de-sac at one AM or seeing my entire grade at the twenty-four hour Dunkin Donuts afterwards that I had no idea how to act.

When I got out of the underground, my phone was ringing.

"Jane," he trilled, "are you here?"

"I think so," I said, stalling for time. I had gotten there, sure, but there was another problem: I had just remembered that I couldn't remember anything about the way he looked.

"Ah! I see you."

Thank freaking god, I thought.

There was a very tall guy walking toward me. This was interesting, because I didn't remember Sam being particularly tall. In fact, everything about him was far different from what I remembered. This seems to happen to me a lot. Every time I see someone for the second time, I realize he's nothing like the person I thought I met.

As he walked closer, I noticed that in addition to being quite tall, he was broader than I remembered, although still very thin. He had a Jewishish nose, reddish skin, and the waves of brown hair I remembered had obviously been chopped. Overall, pretty nondescript.

What he did next, however, was very descript. He put his hands on my cheeks and kissed me on the lips. It was quick, but nevertheless, there it was: a girlfriend greeting.

We walked down the high street, talking. The conversation seemed much more forced, awkward, and less interesting than the extraordinarily witty banter we exchanged on the phone and at the club. I was getting uncomfortable, wondering how long random first dates last, when after walking up and down the street two times, we found our destination.

Sam walked up to the bouncers, and asked them when the live entertainment started. I stood some paces behind him, trying to snap the full mental shot of this moment. The camera in my mind wanted to record this door, with its boarded up windows and black gleaming walls and collage of band posters smacked against bulletin boards. With my black cotton dress and black Converse high tops, the scene could be a part of some dark and edgy Indie film. I was a little dazed, trying to send Sam a silent mental message to move three quarters of an inch to his left to flood the frame with the

last rays of sunlight, when I overheard the bouncers telling him there was, in fact, no live band tonight. Sam waved me over, and led me down the street, again and again murmuring, “I can’t believe it, I made sure to check the website twice.”

I now think he never intended for us to go that music place, meaning that he had certainly checked the site twice, but only to make sure there was *no* live band.

The next part is a little hazy. He somehow got me on a bus (London’s appeal would be lost without those sleek, red double deckers.) The only thing I remember about this ride was the angle in which my head leaned against the window and the view I had of this factory. I visualized a shot of my hair wisping over the glass, combining with the wisps of smoke curling out of the factory’s big black pipes. And then I was being pulled off the bus and walked along the street.

I remember hearing Sam say something about “this really nice pub” that we just happened to walk by and went inside. He got me a glass of white wine, which in theory would have been totally fine if I had remembered that for some ridiculous reason (trying to fulfill my fantasy of being an anorexically chic artsy chick) I had forgotten to eat anything that day except for a delicious cupcake from the Hummingbird Bakery and a skim mocha five hours earlier.

So, being the absurd human being I had decided to be that day, I drank my one glass of wine in three minutes, and sat outside in this beautiful rock garden, occasionally listening to Sam’s mindless chatter about how he wasn’t that *fromm*, which apparently meant he wasn’t that observant of a Jew.

I mean, really I told my best friend Cate on the phone a day later, leave it to me, the Irish-looking girl that no one believes is Jewish, to find the only Jewish boy in Protestant England.

The next thing I remember he's talking about this delicious ice cream flavor he's dying to have, like chocolate cookies and cream or something. Fat kid at heart that I am (I had never skipped a meal in my life till that day) and not having eaten anything substantial since the day before, I got pretty excited. Leaving the pub, I'm thinking we're going out for ice cream.

He led me through a dark alley, and all I could think about was not the scary implications of walking through a deserted alley with a twenty-six year old guy I hardly knew late at night, but the fact that the scene totally belonged in a movie.

Not until he types in a security code at a door do I realize, oh, he meant ice cream—at his place.

Right when we got to his apartment, I noticed a mezuzah on his front door. Considering he had told me only moments earlier that he wasn't super observant, it was the funniest thing I had experienced all night. Somehow, I figured the logical conclusion to my predicament was that at least he wouldn't rape me because he was Jewish, because then he'd cry to his mother or something equally ridiculous.

I now know for sure that he never intended on doing anything but attempting to seduce me at his flat that night. (This was proven by the fact that his flat mate was walking in at exactly the same time as Sam was walking me out.)

When I started to guess this, though, I realized I was already in this dude's apartment, drunk off one glass of wine. Classy, maybe not, but comical, absolutely.

The more I thought about it, the more secure I began to feel. Note to idiotic drunk-off-your-ass-stupid-twenty-one-year-old-American virgins: do not, under any circumstance, get hopelessly intoxicated in the flat of a twenty-six-year-old British guy you hardly know. It will cause feelings of fake security.

Then Sam asked if I wanted “the grand tour,” and despite my obvious inexperience (read: lack of sex), I’ve happened to watch a good amount of bad television to know that “seeing the bedroom” means “*seeing the bedroom.*” So I looked at him with a smirk that said *I’m not an idiot, and no, I do not want to go have intercourse in your bedroom*, and he countered with the *I know you’re playing the sweet, innocent yet fabulously quirky girl, but I promise that you do, indeed, want to have intercourse with me in my bedroom.* After this absurdly witty non-verbal conversation where we somehow magically read each other’s thought bubbles, he insisted that I at least “just see everything,” so he took my hand and led me to the kitchen, balcony, TV room, and then, the dreaded bedroom. He pointed out some things, and then asked if I wanted to go back to the living room, to which I replied with a very firm “yes.” He said okay, and then slammed me against his bedroom wall, putting his mouth over mine. Being the socially inept genius that I am, due in part, I hope, to my noxious intake of alcohol, I awkwardly announced, “I’m not having sex with you.” He assured me, continuously, that that was “fine,” drawing out the syllables in what would be whining if not for the musicality of his accent.

Since my experiences have convinced me that every British male is twenty-six-years-old, I will use Sam as a generalization. Apparently, twenty-six-year-old British

males find me to be an Eastern European chick from the 1950s who has some elusive form of dyslexia which causes her to think that “no” in fact means “yes.”

And I’m not going to lie; once he slammed me against the wall, I was lost. I dig the “hot mean” tactic—all I had to do was picture Sam as Harrison Ford in *Bladerunner* and me as Rachel the robot. Sam/Harrison is panting, sort of screaming “tell me you love me” over and over again as he gently slash fiercely pushes Jane/Rachel against the wall and proceeds to make out with her, and Jane/Rachel is crying out “no! no!” while secretly digging the sexy rape. I’m aware that rape is horrible and never sexy, but I can find no other adequate description for Sam/Harrison’s wall pushing hotness.

So now that I’d been transported to this alternate universe where I not only meet guys in nightclubs and go on dates with them, but ones in which I go home with them (of course, not being fully aware that that was what I was doing when it happened), I now found myself jumping into the fuzzy world of *Bladerunner*. Since I was no longer myself, it seemed only natural that I allowed Sam to lead me to his bed.

I’m embarrassed to say what happened next. It’s become appropriate to talk about sex, write about sex, intercourse, but somehow, the things before sex are still just vile acts, bereft of tact. It’s intriguing, really. If Sam had stolen my virginity, it’d be better than the truth: that after a few minutes of heavy petting, I found I was no longer wearing my underwear and his finger was inside me. Or ten minutes later, his tongue was between my legs.

Considering these were things I had only done with Jack, who I dated from the end of high school to the middle of college, I was amazed at my uncharacteristic sluttiness. So after doing nothing to Sam, I explained that I needed to go, it was getting

late, I had to meet my friends at Walkabout (a tourist cannot enter Piccadilly Circus without hearing of the infamous “Walkabout Wednesdays.”) He held my hand, walked me to the bus, and even took it with me a few stops. Then he kissed me goodbye, jumped off the bus, and told me he’d call next week.

I tried calling Chloe but I had no idea what she was saying over the noise in the background, so I decided to take a bus back to our flat. But once we neared the Victoria & Albert Museum, I suddenly got really nervous that the same night bus I always took (the N16) was going to start riding in a different direction, one from which I wouldn’t be able to find my way home, so I got off.

Now it was about one-thirty in the morning, and I was an intoxicated twenty-one-year-old American girl, lacking all street smarts, meandering down dark roads in the middle of the night. Again, this was something I should have avoided, but considering my night, I felt I had suddenly aged ten years and was starting to finally live my sophisticated London life.

CHARACTER STUDY:

Chloe hailed from some rich town in Connecticut, like Greenwich or the nice part of Hartford. She went to some super posh boarding school, like Choate Rosemary Hall or Andover or Exeter, and loved every second of it (naturally.) Then she went to Fordham because she didn't get into Middlebury, and decided that a city school would be much better for her, and Middlebury would've been just like high school, part two. And where's the growing in that? Only, Chloe no longer gave a shit about growing, and was miserable at Fordham but refused to transfer, because that would mean defeat.

The first couple of days she was probably my best friend. And then she started acting like a seventh grade catty bitch, making fun of me for every stupid joke I made or awkward comment I said. That's probably when she started bonding with

Margo, the anorexic alcoholic. For all you nonbelievers, I assure you this is possible. Margo ran cross country at Williams, and didn't let us forget it: she woke up at six AM to go running in Hyde Park, every day, without fail. I gave her tons of credit, because she was somehow able to do this despite the fact that she almost always got unbelievably trashed the night before.

I felt like we could've connected—she was smart, witty, and fun-loving. But I wasn't myself that summer. These girls made me feel like I was in seventh grade again, the only one out of my group of ten “friends” who was unable to sit at the lunch table, because

there was simply no room for another chair. I'm sure that Margo found me to be boring and stupid and incredibly annoying, and I almost don't blame her, but the way she talked to me—like my very presence was an attack on her sensibilities—well I don't think I can ever forgive her, especially because she seemed to take so well to someone who was actually the most awkward person I've ever met,

Tiphany. I mean, really. Who not only names her daughter Tiffany, but has the nerve to spell it incorrectly? (Is she a drum or something?) She might as well have been, actually. Her voice was deep and hollow, so loud that every time she spoke I thought I heard banging. She spent her time feigning sick, discussing the merits of *Twilight*, and playing *World of Warcraft*.

I admired her for her confidence in her utter dorkiness, but mocking *Jane Eyre* and *War and Peace* in favor of middle-school fantasy novels was just bad form. Before I realized how mean Margo and Chloe actually were, I was kind of jealous that they had chosen Tiphany as their pet project—not that I wanted to be someone's pet project, I just wanted to be somebody's friend. But when the three of them were together, their favorite pastime was making me feel like the most worthless person alive, and really, that just hit too close to home for me.

A B+ is the dirtiest thing you've ever seen.

You are thirteen. It is second period. You have not yet discovered that you absolutely suck at Math. Excellent grades have come naturally, up until now. It's not like later in your educational life, where you'll do anything for a B in Science courses in college. You are still at the age where there are smart people, and there is everyone else. A smart person doesn't need to try and doesn't fuck up. Smart somehow means *fucking genius*, and *okay* means smart. People who are *okay* are smart, you guess, but they study a whole lot and still only get B+'s. They may even have gotten a B or two. You have to be the best, simply because you've always been the best, because really, that's all you have. You don't tolerate B+'s. When Mrs. Sembers gives you your math test back, she looks at you with concern, probably because you look like you're about to cry. You stare her straight in the face, giving her a look that has to show that you're not just anyone, you're not *okay*, that she has to know this and change your grade immediately, and then when you realize she won't do this, you give her another look, almost daring her to say, "A B+ isn't bad, it's good in fact, it's perfectly okay." You stare at her so hard you're almost begging her to show her stupidity, because a B+ is not good. It is almost worse than a B, because if you get a B you had no chance of getting an A to begin with but if you get a B+ you're right there, you're almost good enough, you worked your ass off and all you got was a fucking B+. She asks you quickly if you're okay, and you want to scream at her, saying: "No! I am not okay, I am not *okay*!" But you just smile at the upper corner of her ear, wait for her to leave, and hide your ugly, red B+ deep inside your Trapper Keeper, wondering, now that you are *okay*, how you will ever be okay.

Most girls want to be prom queens. They want the perfect boyfriend, the perfect body, the perfect piece of high school royalty.

My problem's simple.

I want to be that girl so I can destroy her.

Let me explain.

I'm attracted to grit. I wear tattered cloth dresses over opaque tights and short boots. I apply black eyeliner or super dark brown eyeshadow every morning. I wear my hair wild and wavy and loose. I put on moisturizer to make my skin pale and cherry ChapStick to keep my lips as red as they can be without looking scary. Sometimes I wear all black.

I envision myself as this girl who was made to be a prom queen, who's fairly pretty and thin and socially apt and smart, but who had enough of being normal and boring and popular. Shit happened to her, bad shit, which made her turn away from that world she belonged to and towards the world of edge and darkness and thrift stores. She's tough and hip and freaky, incredibly well-read and well-versed in all the classics of pop culture: music and film and art. She wears edgy crap because she perpetually feels like edgy crap. She saw *Fight Club* and decided her goal in life was to be Marla Singer: the queen of drug overdoses, crazy black clothing, promiscuous sex, suicide attempts, anything to embrace her emptiness, to feel something.

But this is where our similarities end. She should skip school to hook up with guys behind the parking lot, or smoke pot and snort coke on weekends, or go to indie rock concerts when she's still in high school and meet friends from other towns who party with the bands.

The problem with this paragraph is that I'm too scared to do drugs or have sex or disobey my parents. The hipster rebel within is real, but despite the fact that she hasn't been able to shake her clinical depression since she was fourteen, she's not fucked up enough to live out her anti-teen dream fantasy. She's not hard core enough to go to rehab or acquire an eating disorder or try to kill herself. She's just a typical girl from suburbia who played soccer and got good grades and sang in musicals and became chemically unbalanced and wants the life of a willowy junkie but is too freaking scared to go through with it.

Basically, I'm fucked up.

I used to remember the grades I'd been in by the books we read. Ninth grade was *To Kill a Mockingbird*, tenth grade *The Catcher in the Rye*. I'd create this time line in my head, and after a while, the only things I could really remember about the years would be the novels, the perfectly placed words.

When Sam called me for a second date, I didn't really know if I wanted to go. But when he mentioned how it "it was a lovely day outside" and "we could eat lunch in the park" I felt that I was getting a chance, one that I was sure I wouldn't get again, to experience the age-old notion of English pastimes.

But once again, Sam had me fooled.

I agreed to meet him at the Camdentown tube station, and when I arrived, about thirty-six minutes late, he was waiting patiently against a railing.

"Glad you decided to show up."

I scoffed, giving him a "you're-so-funny-I-can't-even-stand-it" look, and started to walk in the direction he beckoned, but he pulled me aside, and there it was again: a girlfriend greeting, in all its PDA glory.

Completely grossed out, I pulled away and he led me to Sainsbury's, that magical English supermarket.

After he bought some Pimm's and frozen pizza, I started to have a sneaking suspicion that we weren't going to be picnicking in the park. When he started to lead me towards his flat complex, I knew that my suspicions were correct.

"I thought we'd eat first, then go to the park," he stated.

So we did. And then he tried to seduce me, part two.

Note to British-guys-trying-to-get-some-from-American-chicks: your technique is backwards. Normally, it's much more effective to take a girl on a nauseatingly romantic date and then, post outing, attempt to get in her pants.

Mid-seduction, I think he was finally beginning to realize that he wasn't going to be getting any. So, shirt off, face red, and hair strewn, he got up, and cheerfully announced, "Shall we feed the ducks?"

Naturally, I burst out laughing.

Sam didn't seem to understand why I found the scene so funny.

"Personally, I'd much rather flatten you out and fuck your brains out, but you seem to not want that, so shall we feed the ducks?"

We fed the ducks. He rented a boat in Regent's Park and we fed the ducks.

He then spent the next three hours walking hand-in-hand with me, talking, acting as if he hadn't just tried to lure me into his bedroom at one in the afternoon.

And of course, at the end of date number two, he gave me a proper send-off, planting the most gentlemanly kiss on my slightly parted lips.

Sometimes, before I go to sleep, when I let myself really think about it, I'm convinced that I'm going to die.

It's not an obvious realization. I don't think about how I'm going to die eventually, like when I'm old and happy and have lived a full, long life. It's more of a sudden thing, when I'm about to fall asleep and I'll be wearing a tampon for far longer than the eight hours total you're supposed to and I'm terrified that I won't wake up the next morning because I'll have died of toxic shock syndrome in the night.

It reminds me of this time that I was taking the train from New Jersey to a cousin's in Connecticut. I was staring out the window, flirting with the idea of dropping out of school. This was unusual. Never before had I ever entertained such an idea. The more I sat on that train, looking at the towns we were passing, I became enamored with the idea of jumping out at one of the next stops, one that was small and anonymous, shown to passers-by only via the assistance of an Amtrak regional train, perfect for disappearing into a life that no one would want. The longer I stared at these nothing towns, the more convinced I became that I was going to do it. And then we rolled past a body of water and bridge, outside of New York City, but close enough to see the infamous skyscraper imprint on the background. The lake looked smooth and oily and blue, like a painting, but not in the way you would think. It wasn't beautiful, it just sat frozen, not moving. Even a boat in the distance, clearly moving, looked as if it hadn't stirred an inch. This water, with the floating elements of movement, must've been flowing only moments earlier, but for the three minutes I looked at it, it stayed solid, cemented, stuck in a perpetual sense of sudden death.

I was beginning to prove Oscar Wilde right. You destroy the thing you love.

For my fifth birthday, I got this stuffed pink polar bear I named Mushy. She was bright, soft, brand-new. I started carrying her around everywhere, all around the house.

By the time I turned six, she was brown and dirty, and basically looked like she'd been gang-banged, beaten, and left to die.

My sister Ryan used to put Mushy in my garbage can, just to joke around. I'd always find her well before the wastepaper basket was emptied into the big black garbage bag my dad would take out on Sundays, or the housekeeper would take out on Wednesdays.

Once, trying to do the same thing to Ryan, I took Jessica, her beautiful, brown teddy bear, and stuck her deep into my sister's trash can. It must've been a Wednesday.

I forgot what I had done, thinking that Ryan, like me, would have noticed Jessica in her tall, garbage basket long before the housekeeper came in.

I don't remember when I got Blanky. Blanky was pink, with long, clean white lines. Wherever Mushy and I went, Blanky came too.

Eventually, my mother had to put Blanky—or what was left of it, the candy-striped remains—inside an old light blue blanket cover, once in the possession of an older male cousin who no longer had any need of such a plaything.

Blanky got so tattered that we had to put the real blanket, which by now had become just puffy pink pieces of cloth, on a shelf in my closet, and I took to carrying around the light blue blanket cover as Blanky.

Now, Blanky's in tatters. All that remains are two small squares—brilliant, blue pieces of cold, like sky.

At the beginning of high school, I started to notice how I ruin books. I wasn't sure how it kept happening; I always tried to take care of them. Senior year, my favorite class was European History. I got a brand new textbook, smooth white cover, no bent corners. At the end of the year, when I had to return the book, my teacher asked me why I had left my textbook out in the rain and let it get run over by a pick up truck. I told her that I loved history. I wore the book in. I wear out every book.

The worst was when my Creative Writing teacher let me read his past student Helen Lee's folder. Something about her writing just got me. I kept it way longer than I should've. It was like she was me, writing the way I wrote for myself, describing perfectly things I felt or did but was unable to articulate.

I was a mess when I realized I might've ruined her portfolio. I was nervous about putting it into a new manila one. How could I explain that I had been so very careful with all of her work but it still looked like a wreck? At the time, it didn't make sense. So I slipped her poetry into a new folder and gave it back. Before I handed it in, I tried to read the parts that really made me feel something. But, alas, at that moment, I couldn't find them. I wondered if they had already been destroyed.

I started going to sleepaway camp in sixth grade. I fell in love with that place, I was obsessed with that place. When I was on the dock in the lake, surrounded by four of the girls who meant everything in the world to me, I'd stick my feet in the freezing water, icy blasts banging off my skin, and I'd sit there, thinking, finally, this is how I feel, this is real.

I spent seven summers there, and then I left. Just packed up, drove away in my mom's green Volvo station wagon, with the air conditioner on high despite the fact it was raining and cold. I must've been trying to freeze myself, but I couldn't even feel it.

Maybe you're normal—you destroy the thing you love. But it's never been like that with me. I destroy everything I love.

A month later, I knew it would all be gone. I could see it already: I step off the plane and walk to Chambers's house. There are no connections, no rides that I take in between the two. I belong off the plane, I belong in his house, in his bed, not sleeping with him. He is letting me in, holding my face, ignoring his best friend Jack's phone call. And I am sitting, perched on the edge of his bed, his blanket wrapped around me, breathing in the burnt smoke of a cigarette that has somehow landed in my fingers. I smell the ash, and watch the smoke burn a hole in the air, scarring more than just two people.

Jack tells me it's his birthday. I look out into the snow.

When I told Ryan that I should have my own reality show, she kind of laughed and said, “I don’t think your life is as exciting as you think it is.”

“*Is*” has become the most powerful word in literature,” Lauren told me, completely seriously. “Present tense is the new avant garde.”

I thought about this. I mean, I think of this.

When I was eleven, I convinced myself that my future lay in becoming an ambulance driver, specifically in wartime. I was sure, as all naive kids are, that I would become a renowned author, so this activity, one in which writers I admired—Ernest Hemingway, e.e cummings—had participated in, caused me to think that ambulance driving was the logical next step in my “career.”

When I informed my parents that I would be enlisting to fulfill my destiny, they thought it was cute that their suburban late-twentieth-century daughter wanted to emulate World War I veterans, so they humored me.

I became more and more convinced that to become a writer I needed not so much to read obsessively, write compulsively, and attend university, but to drive an ambulance. Only at sixteen did I realize this was not, actually, the case.

I found another way. Poring over these great writer/ambulance drivers’ works, I saw that just about everyone had settled in Paris and become, for at least some amount of time, a member of “the lost generation.” I researched Montparnasse, The Select, the Latin Quarter—anything remotely French. By the end of my sophomore year of high school, I had decided that I would be studying in Paris during my junior year of college.

And then I went to London. Life sabotages you like that.

The third “date” with Sam was a disaster.

I was humoring him, mainly because I romanticized the walks I took home from his place—me, standing tall, listening to The Killers and living out the life I had imagined of having a carefree romance.

It was after his birthday, and he invited me “out for drinks.” Once I arrived at his flat and he offered me a homemade bowl of tiramisù, I knew for sure that he was a compulsive liar.

Our conversation was stilted, awkward. I can’t explain what happened, but as much as I knew that I didn’t have deep feelings for him, I wanted to fully live out my fantasy—I wanted to be a femme fatale.

That was the night he figured out I was a virgin, and at the time I was pretty sure that he knew and he may have known that I knew that he knew, but I had this idea that I would make him say it out loud by engaging in foreplay. Once he figured out that I didn’t want him, though, he drove me home, dismissing me in the cruelest power shift I could’ve imagined.

I was convinced that I was done with him. That is, until I realized I had left my mobile at his flat.

When I think about Rob, I think about this:

Roadhouse. Gray dress. Lions and their lion tamers. The Killers, the cover band playing in the background. Skinny. Too skinny. Pursued me, half-assed. Bought me a drink. I bought him coffee. The way he moved, almost poetic. Like his body was just shapes and curves sliding through the air. Almost feminine, not what I like. But him, his motion. The poetry of calisthenics. Joyce. Rob's not like Joyce. He reads self-help books. And plays the accordion. His friend talks about his "nimble fingering skills." Pretty crass.

I can't figure out the lines his body draws. He was so clearly this great guy, this strange guy, and now there are new pictures of him with at least five different girls every single day. I am not exaggerating. Enigma. I give him credit. Who knew he was such a pimp? Kind of pathetic, yes, but he's slick nonetheless. Asked me to stay with him for a week. Should've done it? Didn't really like him either. But can't be another notch in his belt. What a bad saying. How does he get so many girls?

Covent Garden. Trafalgar Square. Leicester Square. Piccadilly Circus. Embankment. All at night. We walked. He held my hand. I was late. Every time. The talking; perfect. Sleazy, I guess he was sleazy. I didn't notice it at the time. He liked me, for three days. Before he found out I wouldn't fuck him. Maybe Sam was right. Maybe I do just need to get fucked already.

And somehow, yet again, I found myself at Sam's flat.

This time, though, he had no plans to seduce me. (At least I didn't think so.)

Usually, he'd arrange to meet me at the tube and then walk me back to his place, but this time, since I was always so late, and I clearly didn't have my phone to "coordinate" (like, really—who spells coordinate like that?), I was forced to seek him out.

When I called to tell him to let me into his complex, he shouted to come right up to his flat. I saw him, shirt off, lazing on his balcony.

"Throw it down!" I shouted, laughing, but kind of seriously.

"Just come up!"

I didn't want to, but just like the time we rowed the boat in Regent's Park, I felt that if I didn't go up, I'd be missing out on the opportunity for Jane to become Aylie.

I took my phone from him, but then he started offering me beverages, and asking me to hang out and watch TV, which we actually did, for a surprising three hours. I didn't understand how my fierce hatred of him had turned into an actual friendship in the course of three hours, but I went with it.

In the middle of a scintillating show involving two guys who had no experience in Arctic exploring, Sam brought up something about decisions.

"I'm incapable of making them," I replied, my eyes glued to the screen.

"Well then I'll just have to make one for you," he said, cupping his hand over my cheek and kissing me.

It was incredibly corny, and actually unexpected, but he took my hand, and before we could leave the living room I awkwardly announced (in what I'm sure I thought had a charming quality to it) "I've been here before..."

He looked at me, slammed closed his bedroom door, and then proceeded to get me more naked than I'd ever been before.

And then he tried to get me to fuck him.

I can never understand first impressions. First off, I get them all wrong. I don't think this was always the case, but it certainly is now. Mostly they're observations that don't matter except for my own sociological interest: girls I think are incredibly dorky and find out they're amazingly slutty and cool, guys I think are on my level, dorky-chic-cool, and find out they were beyond popular in high school.

But what really gets me are the pictures you get in your head of people. The day after I met Sam, I couldn't remember what he actually looked like. I pictured him as shorter, less dorky-looking, a more squooshed in face, and different hair. The same thing happened with Rob. Even his voice sounded different: deeper. I pictured him as darker: darker hair, darker eyes, darker eyebrows. His face looked totally different than I thought it would. In fact, the first two dates I went on with each of them, I was terrified because I honestly didn't think I would recognize them. In actuality, this wasn't very far from the truth.

The night after I decided I was in love with Sam, I met Rob.

We were at Roadhouse, and the only way I can explain how I had gone from attracting nobody between the ages of thirteen and fifty-nine for seven years of my life to having two decent looking foreign men take a liking to me had to be some newly acquired feminine wiles I had no knowledge of gaining.

His friend had come up to Chloe, Margo, and I, explaining how he was a lion tamer. When Rob walked over to join his friend, I asked him if the story was true.

“Indeed. And I’m the lion.”

Somehow, I decided that this corny response was an adequate one, and three days later we were walking around Covent Garden, trying to accomplish our separate agendas—his was getting me to go home with him, and mine was not.

As we passed through the darkened streets, I imagined all of the people who had walked there before us, wondering if they, too, had such lofty goals as trying to get into a girl’s pants.

We sat down on the steps to The National Gallery, staring across at the concrete square. Something about the statues reminded me of books I used to read, ones where pictures come alive, bathed in moonlight. I started to trace my finger in the air, spelling out the letters of “moonlight.”

“What are you doing?” Rob asked.

“Oh. I write in the air.”

“What do you write?”

“Words, things. Names. But I write the letters in a weird way.”

“Why do you do that?”

“I don’t know. The lines of the letters look nicer when my fingers draw them.”

“I like that.”

“It’s pretty strange.”

“No, it means you’re always thinking, always recording what you see. You’re a writer.”

“Because I write words in the air with my fingers?”

“You love writing, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

He was right, of course. I was beginning to think that the reason I wrote so much in the air was that everything looked beautiful and perfect against a colored background: pink walls, sky blue, midnight black, unlike against a blank, white computer screen you’ve been racking your brains over for three hours.

“The way your fingers move when you do it—it’s feverish. Passionate.”

“My mother thinks it’s weird. She thinks it’s a tick, that I have Tourette’s or something.”

“Do you?”

I laughed, and then he started scribbling furiously near the ground, only he wasn’t writing on anything, just through the air.

“Now you’re mocking me.”

“So mock me.”

“Fine. What are you even doing here? Don’t you have, like, no job?”

“Ah, you had to bring that up. I have a job...I’m just quitting.”

“Right, that is so much better.”

“Well, I took this computer programming job so I could move to London.”

“Where did you live before?”

“Bristol.”

“That bad?”

I still remember what he said after that, ten months later.

Because actually, it was the most amazing place I'd ever been, so naturally I had to leave.

And then there was the time that Rob forced me to go home with him.

I'm not exaggerating. He actually carried me onto the tube, all the way from Piccadilly Circus to East Aldgate.

"I'm not having sex with you" was becoming my mantra, and he seemed to be okay with that. In fact, I ended up staying over, and the next morning, taking the ultimate walk of shame across the London underground, I felt unbelievably powerful and cliché and classic and a fraud, all at once.

It was like a dream come true.

When I think about Chambers, I think about this:

High school. He wanted to ask me to prom, but his and Jack's other friend Brett beat him to it. Barnes & Noble. The mix CD he made for our drives. Buddha. Taoism. How he's read every fucking book written, and only recently started making me feel like an ass for not. How our witty banter was incredulous, how when trying to choose between him and Jack I always thought that Chambers gave me credit for my intelligence. Spanish class. Online relationships, New Year's Eve, after he kissed me, when he didn't know I was seeing Jack.

How he pretends to be macho, because he doesn't have a father. Everyone thinks his parents are just divorced, but apparently his dad's in jail. He didn't tell me this. There was a time when I wished he had.

That time he took me to his abandoned house, heavy boxes, empty spaces, poetry in its edifice. We lay down on our backs, staring at the ceiling, pretending there were stars. There weren't, of course. Chambers was always all wrong, he was always all wrong for me.

I stared out the window, into the chaos that was Newark Airport. Car lights sped down the stretch, bright blues and reds and greens flickering angrily against one another. The whole road seemed to be moving somewhere, faster and faster until it looked like it wasn't even going anywhere, ahead of me. We just drove on quietly, breaking its animated pattern, in the middle of it all.

The day after I got off the plane, I went with my mom to a flea market.

It was in a well-to-do town. And it was held in a parking lot.

I think my mother thought that it would remind me of London, and she was right.

It was too small, not nearly bustling enough, and there was no way that you could pretend that behind the last white line there were miles ahead, stretching out before you like on Portobello Road, but it was full of character, of charm, and that was enough.

It was stifling, but I insisted on wearing a black t-shirt, a black, ruffled mini skirt, and heavy, hot black Frye boots. I thought I was being clever, wearing black to mourn my sophisticated European life.

I left my mom at a table that was selling prepared foods, frozen pastas and chicken dishes and the like. I wandered past a woman selling hand-made soaps, a booth boasting perfect cupcakes, a garden of fresh flowers strewn about a table.

I put my sunglasses on as I passed a man selling ice cream.

“Is that you?” The voice was far too familiar, far too impossible.

Feeling dizzy, I stared into the hot, dusty space, not daring to actually see whether this person was who I thought he was.

“Jane be Jane/You're better that way/Not when you're trying/Imitating something you think you saw.”

And then, against all laws of any universe that should make sense, Rob offered me an ice cream cone. But before I could say anything, he grabbed my face with such intensity, like it would disappear if he couldn't hold on to it. And when he kissed me, my knees, embarrassingly enough, felt weak.

Except, that's not what really happened. Leave it to me to have a Ben Folds song in my fantasies, right? All I wanted was for Rob or Sam to magically show up on my doorstep, proving to me that the summer could last, that I could remain the star of "Jane's travels abroad" indefinitely, that I could live this beautiful life forever. But somehow, I knew that as soon as I stepped off the plane in Newark Airport, it would all disappear. And I was right.

My legs were stiff, weird. I felt like, in the strangest way, that they had stayed in London, without me. And the rest of my body was doomed to travel the streets of suburban New Jersey, unaware that another part of me was off somewhere, living the life I should be.

We go dumpster diving.

I've never done this before, and I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do. Watch him, go inside the dumpster, impress him with my fabulous (lack of) wit. But he's riding his bike now, looping it around in circles in the street, waiting for me to decide.

It's the kind of thing I used to do, or I think I used to do, or I want to do, or I always knew I should do—lately, I find that these things, all these things, are swirled into thin sheets of dust that mix together and get thrown out, so I'm no longer sure of anything—my memories coexist with desire, and I can't tell what's "real" and what's "my real."

I start to get this feeling. We've been talking for about an hour, in the cold, on the sidewalk in front of the dilapidated two family house I inhabit a block from our college. He was on his way, and he stopped, for me. Invited me along. I guess that I'm scared, and later, when I find that we're going to be biking over three miles across highways at two AM, my fears are warranted. But college hasn't worked out the way it should have, for me. Not that it's bad, it's just—I used to "know" what I was like and what I deserved and what I was capable of, and the terrible irony is that I looked down on people who thought they were special when I knew they really weren't, and I'm pretty sure that now I fall into that category.

And I'm feeling strange. I'm remembering how I'm not graduating with high honors, or getting some sort of passion-filled job, or going on to exciting graduate school work. How my mother still thinks I'm just smart, just okay. How my sister is successful, how my father got Phi Beta Kappa. And I'm starting to think about bicycles.

I don't own one, at least not in this state. My roommate's boyfriend has an old one, never used, propped against our living room wall. I'm thinking that maybe I can ride it.

So I go upstairs and change into sneakers, and I'm looking utterly ridiculous. This is spontaneous—I have no time to change out of my smelly blue tights and tie-dyed blue tattered tank dress, or my long black winter coat. The only sneakers I can find are my red Converse without the laces, and those have dirty white strings poking out. When I come downstairs, I look like a homeless woman, a bag lady, a prostitute that got lucky at a thrift store.

And then we ride. The bike is small with a very low seat. I'm positive that my ass will never feel the same. I used to be a hard-core athlete, and now pedaling on this bike with no gears is the most tiring exercise I've gotten in a year. It feels kind of painful, but I love to hurt myself. I can't remember when I started being so sick.

So now we've been riding for twelve minutes, and he's asking me about Beckett. I don't know what he said, because it doesn't matter. What matters is that he likes Beckett, and he likes Beckett because he thinks there's a completion, wholeness, a beauty in emptiness.

And that may be why I'm riding a bike for three miles with no gear that's too low to the ground, after having participated in no physical activity in a year. We're crossing the highway, and I'm terrified. He laughs at me, tells me it's fine, and then I get off the bike and sprint as fast as I can to the other side. Mocking me, he leisurely rides his bike across the four-lane highway, cars rushing past, laughing lightly, and I almost think dangerously.

There's a camera near the dumpsters, and he notices me watching it. "Don't worry," he says, "I've never gotten caught."

So we walk past the blinking red dot and he jumps inside the garbage, but finds nothing. He looks into another dumpster, and still no luck. Then we cross the street and find the back of a bakery, a place he's dived before.

"It's cool," he says, "they know me here."

He talks with the workers loading the loaves of bread into the vans, presumably for late night delivery. He asks them if they have any extras, but they can't give us any.

So we resort to a far more disgusting option. This time, though, I take the dive.

He looks at me as though he's seen me before but only now is he starting to recognize me, to reaffirm that I am, in fact, who he thought I was. I sift through the trash, feeling at first like I'm covered with filth, and then more like I'm covered with earth, with dust, with everything. The more I think about it, the more I see that dirt has never looked so clean, so colorful, before. I find a sealed bag of rolls, and drop them out of the dumpster.

"Okay!" he tells me, "That's great. We've got enough."

He's saying this because in addition to the rolls, the workers have a change of heart and give us a free, fresh loaf of dumpster-free bread. At first, it smells delicious, but the longer I stay in the dumpster, I find its appeal wearing off.

He asks me if I'm ready, and I tell him I need a couple more minutes. He's surprised, but then he climbs into the dumpster, next to me. I'm going to have to take a day long shower, but I think it'll be worth it. In the cool, damp dumpster, I don't feel like I need to go anywhere. I can just stay there, staring through slats of sky, which are made

of the same thing as the dust that's now sticking to my clothes. And I remember he's lying next to me, our backs to the garbage, and I think that I may stay here longer than a couple minutes.

We leave.

“Sorry we didn't find anything good, besides food, and I know that grossed you out.”

He's right, at first it grossed me out. But the next day, I sit down, freshly scrubbed, outwardly clean, and eat every single roll sealed in the bag.