

It Be Like That Sometimes

A collection of short stories
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Author's Note:

My name is Katie Martensen, and I'm a senior at Tufts University. I've been blessed with the opportunity to write a Creative Writing Senior Honors Thesis this year with a focus in short stories.

I took my first creative fiction writing course at Tufts during the spring semester of my sophomore year with Professor Ted Weesner. Before then, I had written for fun as well as publishing my own blog, but I had never gotten the opportunity to deeply workshop my stories with an intimate group. The course inspired me to take an intermediate creative writing course with Professor Jonathan Wilson, my senior thesis advisor, and the rest was history.

What appeals to me so much about short fiction is the ability to create an entire universe in such few words. Writing has given me the opportunity to explore a number of topics that I wouldn't regularly think about in my day-to-day life. I feel that my writing style strongly reflects my own personality, candid and to-the-point. I've enjoyed the opportunity to explore dark and obscure topics in my writing that aren't always discussed.

This senior thesis has given me the opportunity to delve into my writing on a much deeper level. It's taught me how to formulate and execute ideas from start to finish, to accept (and sometimes reject) constructive criticism, to be flexible and go with the flow, and to let myself express emotions through words on a page. Not all of the stories I strived to write for the collection were successful, including a couple that literally ended up in the trash can. I've learned a lot about my style of writing as well as discovering the fact that sometimes the creative process can get cumbersome, difficult, and messy.

While writing this senior thesis, I've undergone a number of life changes, both negative and positive, that have inspired its title, based off the popular meme culture saying: It Be Like That Sometimes. Many of the stories have served as a way for me to laugh, cry, and express and let go of little pieces of myself.

I would like to extend a sincere thank you to everybody who has helped me along this journey. I'd specifically like to thank my thesis advisor, Jonathan Wilson, for his dedicated readings and helpful feedback. I'd also like to thank my second reader, Sonia Hofkosh, for the time and effort she put into not only helping with my collection, but also for singlehandedly running the thesis support program for English majors. Lastly, I'd like to thank my parents and friends, particularly Kelly Moran, who convinced me to get my head out of my butt and actually do a thesis.

I hope you enjoy the collection, and just remember that

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
It don't always be like that,
But sometimes it do.

Bricks

My older sister is a slut. Our dad has no idea. He thinks that Serena is enjoying the summer before her senior year of high school working at Flora's Boutique on the Santa Monica pier and spending weekends at her friend Lucy's, but I know the truth. On Saturday nights, while I'm watching porn in my room, Serena is screwing her way through the population of eligible – and sometimes ineligible - bachelors of California. It's a miracle she hasn't gotten pregnant.

Every once in a while, my sister takes me shopping at the nearby strip mall. She thinks that being a year older gives her an excuse to treat me like her own personal Ken doll.

Right before the school year ended, Serena dragged me to three different department stores to pick out my tie for our school formal, eventually settling on one that was navy and embroidered with minty green fish. I didn't bother to tell her that preppy man-whore isn't exactly my aesthetic.

I did end up making out with Jeff Anderson after the dance, though, so I trust her fashion sense. She left with Jeff's older brother, Riley, and didn't come home until the next morning. At the crack of dawn, she waved to me as she snuck back to her bedroom, and I noticed that her dress was wrinkled a little bit in the back.

Serena lives in constant fear that our dad will figure out what she's up to, and her paranoia works in my favor. I know she'll loan me money for pot without question, and she'll never tell our parents about my adult videos or how I like boys. Our house is full of secrets.

A few weeks into summer vacation, Serena brought me clubbing.

"You're almost sixteen, Gabriel," she said. "It's about time you stop going to those stupid

high school parties."

I rolled my eyes instead of reminding her that she was still in high school too. She was too ready to graduate, to grow up. But deep down, I was glad that she wanted to bring me along.

That night, our dad was flying out for a work event in New York City, just like he did practically every weekend. As soon as we heard them close the front door, Serena pulled a glass handle of cheap vodka out of her underwear drawer and displayed it majestically on the bathroom counter. After curling her long blonde hair and painting on a skin-tight black dress, she handed me a shot glass that she had nicked from Flora's Boutique.

"Cheers to the mother fucking weekend," she said, clinking her glass against mine.

The vodka burned as it went down my throat. I cringed and resisted the urge to spit it out into the sink, wishing I was getting high instead of drunk.

Looking into the bathroom mirror as Serena pushed gel into my hair, I saw two whores instead of one.

"Hey, Serena, what do you call an Italian hooker?" I asked as she poured me another shot.

"What?" she said.

"A pastatute," I said, laughing, and she punched me in the shoulder.

"I'm not a prostitute, you idiot," she said. Her comeback was halfhearted.

We left the house arm in arm, ready to take on the world. We stepped onto the half-finished brick pathway leading from our front door to the street. Our dad is replacing the old bricks with new ones, but he's never around enough to finish. I kicked one of the bricks with my

side of my shoe, waiting for a jab of pain that never came.

When we arrived at the night club, a line of drunk girls wearing six inch heels and men looking to get laid snaked around the corner of the building.

“Confidence is key, Gabriel,” Serena said, mussing up my hair. She draped her arm over my shoulder and pulled down the front of her tight-fitting dress.

We strutted over to the bouncer. Serena ran her fingers down the arm of his leather jacket and whispered something in his ear, and he opened the door for us. We got a few dirty looks as we bypassed the line.

Seconds after entering, I noticed Serena's latest and greatest boyfriend, Nicholas, ambling in our direction, a mixed drink in each hand.

Nicholas – not Nick, never Nick – was a senior at the Art Institute of California, and he exuded a sense of dark and mysterious sensuality. He came to our house for dinner a couple of days ago. After a few glasses of wine, my dad forgot about the large age gap between his precious daughter and her newest fascination, deciding that Nicholas was a "gentleman." I wonder if he would still feel the same way if he saw Nicholas hand Serena one of his drinks and slide his hand a little bit too low on her back.

Serena loves to tell the story of how she and Nicholas met. On the third day of summer, she had bought a smoothie and was walking down the pier to work at Flora's when she tripped over an uneven plank. Right before disastrously spilling the smoothie all over her low-cut tank top, Nicholas swooped in and caught her from behind. From the very first ass grab, she knew he was the one.

Riley Anderson used to be the one. And before that, Peter Quincy. And Jake Straub.

“Hey, Serena, what’s the difference between a prostitute and a Kit Kat?” I had asked in the bathroom mirror an hour before.

“What?” she said.

“You only get four fingers in a Kit Kat!”

She rolled her eyes and brought her shot glass to her glossed lips.

Standing next to Serena and Nicholas in the club, I wished that Nicholas had given one of his drinks to me. I admired the front of his tight leather pants and wondered how a petite high school girl like my sister managed to corral that pony. Anyways, I hadn’t heard of a straight white man genuinely wearing leather pants since the twentieth century. I hoped for my own sake that he played both ways, because he was definitely my type.

I wondered what Serena would do if I started making out with her boyfriend.

Serena pulled us both onto the dance floor, flashing lights reflecting off of her gyrating hips. I watched from a few feet away as she started rubbing as much of her body as humanly possible up against Nicholas. He had a content smile on his face, eyes glazed over. I probably should have felt uncomfortable, but my mind was too fuzzy to care.

A generically attractive girl came over and flirtatiously tugged on my shirt.

“I’m Carly,” she yelled over the pounding music. “Wanna dance?”

At any other time, I probably would have turned her down out of courtesy, but I was feeling pretty loose, so I nodded submissively and allowed her to press the small of her back into my stomach. Her body was too soft and the boobs were a turn off, but it was better than dancing

alone. I wondered how old Carly was. I wondered how old she thought I was.

I allowed her to move up and down my body, all the while watching Nicholas. His tight V-neck shirt accentuated his defined arm muscles. I didn't know art majors could be that buff. I wished my hands were running over his chest instead of holding onto Carly's flimsy waist.

After a while, Carly turned around and leaned her face towards mine, so I slipped away to the side of the room to avoid any sort of miscommunication.

I leaned my head up against the wall, closing my eyes and soaking in the pulsing rhythm of moving bodies. I imagined myself grabbing Nicholas's shirt with both hands and pressing him against the bricks, my mouth attacking his neck. When I opened my eyes again, Serena and Nicholas were standing by my side.

"Can we get out of here?" I said. "I'm tired."

Nicholas nodded in agreement, his hand stuck so tightly to Serena's thigh that not even a jackhammer could break it off.

The three of us left together.

"Hey, Serena, who makes more money, a drug dealer or a prostitute?" I said three hours ago, grabbing the bathroom counter for dear life after choking down another shot.

"Who?" she said, coughing.

"A prostitute, because she can wash her crack and reuse it."

We headed back to Nicholas's apartment for the night. Nicholas nodded at a leather couch pushed against the exposed brick wall, signaling that it was my bed. Serena stumbled a little bit, giggling, as the two of them retreated to his bedroom.

I spent a while lying on the couch and staring at the ceiling, listening to their muffled laughter and moans. My toes felt numb.

Questioning why I had decided to come in the first place, I drifted off to sleep to the sounds of my sister and her boyfriend aggressively fucking.

Our dad thinks that Serena is a virgin. He is so proud of his little girl for spending her summer working full time, and he thinks she's as pure as a daisy. A while ago, he found one of Serena's thongs on her bedroom floor. It was black and lacy, and he held it up between his thumb and pointer finger like a dirty diaper. Serena assured him that Lucy must have accidentally left it after sleeping over.

I wondered if the thong looked as incriminating on the floor of Nicholas's bedroom as it had on hers.

A few nights before the end of summer vacation, while our dad was away on another business trip, I was watching porn when Serena unexpectedly walked into my bedroom. She sat down on the edge of my bed, and I cracked open the window to diffuse the smell of pot.

"Gabriel," she said, her voice cracking. I've always appreciated how she calls me by my full name. It makes me feel older, like Nicholas.

She looked at the bare asses on the television screen and her eyelids fluttered. I grabbed the remote and pressed pause, noticing that Serena's eyes were rimmed with red. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ears and took a deep, shaky breath.

"I'm pregnant."

I stared at her, trying to swim through the clouds blurring my mind. Pregnant. That

meant she was going to have a baby. She would get fat for nine months. There would be a tiny person in her stomach. A little fetus of life. I wished Nicholas would have gotten me pregnant instead of her. I really needed to stop smoking so much.

“Doesn’t Nicholas use protection?” I finally responded.

“It broke once,” she said, a teardrop escaping from her eye and sliding down her cheek. “He didn’t notice until after, and he said it wasn’t a big deal.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked. It would be pretty cool to be an uncle. If I was an uncle, I’d be a fun uncle. My head was starting to throb, so I took another hit. Serena watched me, starting to shake, so I put my arm around her and brushed my fingers along her hair. She was getting my tee shirt wet with her tears, and the cool fabric tingled pleasantly against my skin.

“What choice do I have?” she said. “I have to get rid of it. I can’t be the girl who’s pregnant her senior year of high school.”

I imagined Serena standing by her locker, stomach bulging from underneath her tank top. Maybe people would just think she ate a lot over the summer. She violently sobbed, and my eyes snapped back to attention.

I knew that Serena would never tell anybody else about this. Not our dad, not Nicholas, not Lucy. It was a weight that she would carry on her own for the rest of her life, and the least I could do was share it with her. We already had enough secrets together. Why not one more?

“I can help you,” I said, soaking up her tears like a sponge.

For some reason, our dad thinks that I’m the screw up child. When he found an empty vodka bottle tucked under some newspapers in the recycling bin, he kept asking me how I managed to get my hands on alcohol. I don’t even like vodka. It burns my throat. I insisted that

it wasn't mine, but he grounded me for a month. I didn't really mind taking the fall for Serena because our dad wasn't home enough to enforce the punishment anyways.

He doesn't realize that I'm not so bad. At least I won't ever get knocked up.

Serena was too scared to go to the doctor. She wanted her little problem to disappear so she could get back to life as usual. She hadn't spoken to Nicholas since she had missed her period. Sitting on my bed, Serena showed me a compilation of passive aggressive text messages. He started off with how he needed her, needed her body, and a couple days later changed tactics, claiming she was easily replaceable.

I felt my longing for Nicholas starting to twist into disdain. Although he was clearly a fuckboy, I wouldn't have guessed that he was a clinger.

Serena told me her plan of action. Once I had absorbed her tears, I helped her to stand up and we walked to the garage. She ran her manicured finger along a pile of bricks on our father's tool bench. She wiped the dust on her jean shorts as I walked over and stood by her side.

"Are you sure about this?" I said.

She nodded silently and walked over to the middle of the empty garage. She laid down and closed her eyes. I placed my joint precariously on the edge of the tool bench. Taking a deep breath, I grabbed a stack of rusty red brick, their rough edges scratching against my palms.

"Positive?" I asked, hesitant.

"It worked for Amy Anderson when she got pregnant her sophomore year, and she told people that it didn't even hurt that much," she said. "Just do it, Gabriel. Please." She squeezed her eyes shut even tighter.

With that, I aimed and dropped. Her cry of pain was brief and short.

My joint fell off of the edge of the tool bench and onto the cement floor of the garage. A faint trickle of smoke climbed towards the ceiling.

I took the bricks off of Serena's stomach, scooped her trembling body up off of the ground, and carried her to the bathroom. I placed her on the toilet. A single drop of blood fell into the clear water, sending ripples through the bowl. Serena clutched at her stomach, and I could see thick blue bruises blossoming out from her hip bones. The air was thick with pain, so I shut the bathroom door and went to light a new joint in my room.

No matter how many hits I took, I couldn't block out the sound of her sobs. After half an hour, I heard the toilet flush. Serena's muffled footsteps led back to her room. I stood up and joined her as she curled up, motionless, in the middle of the carpet. Dirty clothes were strewn around our feet, but I didn't see her black thong anywhere.

I laid down and wrapped my arms around her, feeling her flinch as my fingers brushed her stomach. Her shirt had slid up a couple of inches, and the bruises had crept around her sides. She started to shake uncontrollably, silently.

I didn't know what to do, so I picked her up off of the floor and placed her gently on her bed. I joined her under the covers, stroking her hair, and we laid there together for years.

I wasn't even sixteen yet.

"Hey, Serena," I said the night we went clubbing as she screwed the cap back on her handle of vodka and placed it back in her underwear drawer. "What do bungee jumpers and hookers have in common?"

"What, Gabriel?" She was starting to get pissed.

"They both cost a hundred bucks, and if the rubber breaks, you're screwed."

Once I felt Serena's breathing slow, I carefully extracted myself from the sheets. I looked down at the outline of her broken body under the sheets, empty and hollow. This was not the Serena I knew, ready to take on the world.

It was my job, my brotherly duty, to destroy who had done this to my sister, and that person was Nicholas. Therefore, the only logical solution was to find the sex god himself and to bash his beautiful face in.

Remembering that my preferred form of physical exercise was walking to the drug store when I got the munchies, I figured I would need some liquid courage to face my sister's physically imposing boyfriend. I quietly slid open Serena's dresser drawer, fingers grabbing the cool glass neck of her vodka, and tiptoed downstairs.

I stood in the middle of the pathway outside of our house, uncapped the handle, and tipped my head backward. I drank until the remainder of the vodka was gone and then stared up at the dark sky pockmarked with stars so that I wouldn't have to look down at the pain beneath my bare toes.

"Cheers to the mother fucking weekend," I whispered, throat burning and head spinning.

Then, as any responsible brother would, I started walking purposefully down the pathway to pay a visit to Nicholas's apartment.

I could picture my fists tearing into Nicholas's rock-hard abs. My knuckles pummeled his skin, and I smashed the empty vodka bottle over his sharply defined cheekbones. With each dizzying blow, I felt better and better. I threw in one extra punch to erase what was left of my former attraction to the man. Nicholas's face contorted and he cried out in pain.

Wait.

The cry hadn't come from Nicholas's lips, but from my own. My toe slammed into a pile of stray bricks, causing my body to topple forward, and my elbows connected hard with the ground. The handle exploded against my palm, and my skin sparkled with glistening glass shards. Blood and alcohol coated the insides of my cheeks, and I felt bile rising up my throat. For a split second, the stars disappeared from the night sky and everything went black.

I hated my dad for not finishing the pathway.

I hated Nicholas for getting my sister pregnant.

I hated my sister for being such a slut.

I lay face down in the darkness, spinning, defeated, and barely able to breathe. It wasn't Nicholas who had hurt Serena today. I had dropped the bricks. It was my fault, and now I shared my sister's pain.

I hated myself.

The next afternoon, Serena and I sat together on the steps outside of our house and watched the sun set. She was waiting for a ride, and I was trying to get rid of my hangover-induced migraine with some fresh air.

Serena wore a flowy tank top that was loose around her stomach. She carefully avoided twisting her midsection as she turned to look at me, taking in the scrapes on my cheeks and the tan bandage on my left hand.

"What are you going to tell Dad when he gets home?" Serena asked me, breaking the silence.

"I tripped," I replied. She snorted, and then her eyebrows converged with a grimace. She reached out and carefully smoothed down a corner of my bandage.

“I broke up with Nicholas,” she said.

“He was a tool anyways,” I said, shrugging. I thought about his muscular arms wrapping around someone that was not my sister and not me and didn’t feel the slightest bit of longing.

“Lucy and I are going to Riley Anderson’s party tonight,” Serena said. “I decided that high school parties aren’t so bad after all.”

“Are you sure you’re ok to – ”

“I’m fine,” she said. Fine. I immediately thought of a number of adjectives that described the situation more appropriately, but some things are better left unsaid.

“I’ll be back by midnight,” she continued, looking out at the street. “I’m not going to stay over.”

A shard of glass winked by my left foot, reflecting the sunset, and I kicked it into the grass. I stared down at our shadows, black outlines intertwined with secrets. Our toes were numb and unfeeling against the unfinished brick pathway.

Life Isn't Perfect,
But Your Hair Can Be

When I was five years old, I got my hands on my first pair of scissors. They were children's safety scissors with lime green handles, and they were meant for righties, so my small left-hand fingers fumbled to get a grip on the plastic.

It was the third week of kindergarten at Fort Worth Elementary, and my class was learning how to cut shapes out of construction paper. Triangle. Square. Circle. My personal favorite was the star, but sometimes I had trouble cutting where the lines came to small points.

I looked up from my paper, eyes locking onto Sarah Abram's luscious dark braid trickling onto the desk in front of me. It cascaded down her back like a rope, begging to be touched, caressed, brushed.

Snip, snip.

That was the first time I was ever sent to the principal's office.

That was also the first haircut I ever gave.

"Hope, can you take a 4:30?" Janet calls over to me from the receptionist's desk with her southern twang. She adjusts her apron over her enormously pregnant belly. Child number 5 on the way. God knows how she does it. "Gal named Danielle wants a cut and color."

"Sure thing," I respond while cheerfully sweeping up the remains of Mr. Gartrell's weekly beard trim. Each sweep of the tattered broom reveals another inch of well-worn linoleum tile, and I herd the collection of grey hairs into a pile while humming under my breath.

"A little grey hair is a small price to pay for this much wisdom," Mr. Gartrell always says with a tip of his wide brimmed hat.

It's Monday afternoon, and Texas Tim's Trims is currently pretty quiet. Janet and I are the only two on shift for the day, and we've only had three reservations and two walk-ins.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Janet says, maneuvering her stomach away from the desk and back towards her work station. She’s in the process of administering a severe bowl cut to an unwilling 3-year-old. Poor kid will look back on childhood photos in twenty years and wonder who thought the style was a good idea, but his mom is standing by his side with a huge grin on her face, and neither Janet nor I have the heart to intervene.

Other than that, the other 4 salon chairs are empty. Let’s be real, Monday is not the ideal haircut day. People are more focused on surviving their tedious nine-to-five’s, getting to spin class on time, and swinging by the grocery store for pre-packaged, microwavable dinners. If Monday was a haircut, it would be a mullet. We get more customers later in the week once schedules start to die down.

The bell above the door tinkles, and I look over to see a teenage girl with long blonde hair and severe makeup sidle up to the receptionist’s desk. She’s wearing a thick black choker that cuts across her neck in such a way that she looks like the Headless Horseman. Kids these days. Janet greets the girl, who announces that her name is Silver, with a toothy welcome. She points Silver towards the chair on my left, the one whose fabric isn’t as worn thin as the others.

“I can take her, Janet,” I say, anticipation bubbling in my stomach. Or maybe that was just the chicken pot pie I had reheated for lunch. Either way, the corners of my eyelids crinkle as I head over to set up the chair. “I have some time before my 4:30.”

Silver slowly scans her eyes up and down my body, looking from my comfortable Sketcher Go Run’s all the way up my pin straight body to my coarse brown pony tail, held back with a hot pink headband. She squints a little, as though my bright clothing is hurting her eyes. Her eyes pause as she notices my lack of curves. I smile so brightly back at Silver that my chapped lips crack a little bit.

I set down the broom and take a swig of water, popping my daily pill out of my pocket and swallowing it with a gulp.

“Thanks, doll,” Janet calls to me.

Everybody has a passion. For some people, it's sports. For others, it's cooking. Some people really, really like dogs. But everybody, every single person, has that one thing that makes them feel happy. For me, that thing is cutting hair.

Sure, I may not be able to shoot a free throw or fillet a fish to crispy perfection, and I have no idea what a labradoodle looks like, but I can cut, color, and style any head with precision in under two hours, and I'm dang proud of it.

I learned everything I needed to know at the Dallas School for Hair and Beauty. I'm a proud graduate of the Honors Program with a concentration in highlights and two-toned colorings. To this very day, my gold DSHB sweatshirt is a staple part of my wardrobe.

Never once have I felt that I missed out on the “college experience.” Most of my former classmates are trapped in cubicles up in Houston, creating pointless Excel spreadsheets one day and then creating new Excel spreadsheets the next day because the old ones are no longer relevant. The rest of them joined the military just so they could get out of the countryside and shoot some guns without being judged by the rest of the country.

Not me. No way in heck would I ever squeeze myself into a pantsuit or a camo uniform. I opt for my apron, spray bottle, and scissors.

As I always say, a woman who comes to get her hair cut is about to change her life. I get to be that life changer.

I amble over to Silver's chair, looking at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes are circled in black eyeliner so thick that she looks like a raccoon, and as I get closer, I notice the glint of a nose ring. I think she's going to some sort of teen angst vibe, but her hair softens the look.

Silver's hair is long and blonde, spilling over the back of the salon chair in tendrils. It seems to roll in and out like the waves of the ocean, even as she's sitting still. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling can't manage to dim the shine of her mane.

I freeze for a second. That hair. It looks so familiar. Where have I seen it before?

I stare at it and feel another twist in my stomach.

"Hi, Silver, how are ya today?" I take a deep breath and ask, picking up a spray bottle and spritzing her locks with water. "You have absolutely gorgeous hair, by the way."

"Uh, thanks," she replies. Her voice has that tone where she's trying to pretend that she's disinterested in whatever I have to say.

"Is it natural?" I ask, trying to figure out where I've seen that blonde hair before. Television? A childhood friend? Nothing comes to mind.

"Yeah, it is," she says. She rolls her eyes a little and fiddles with the sleeve of her black hoodie as though she's asked this question often.

"Well, it's beautiful," I press on, forcing the conversation. I run a comb through her hair, feeling the thick strands arduously tugging through the bristles. "So thick and shiny."

Silver doesn't say anything, so I keep a smile plastered on my face and ask what kind of haircut she would like. I reach over onto the counter and grab my favorite pair of scissors, reveling in the heavy weight of the handles between my fingers.

"I'd actually like to chop it and dye it black."

Immediately, my cheeks turn redder than a cherry tomato, and my fingers lock. The scissors topple out of my hand and smash across the linoleum tile with a crack. They break in half, sliding underneath the salon chair.

Silver's raccoon eyes widen in horror. The effect is so dramatic that she looks like that famous painting, *The Scream*.

"Are you ok?" she asks, a hint of concern creeping into her seemingly blasé façade.

I quickly drop onto my hands and knees to search for the pieces of scissors. It's the perfect excuse to hide the tears that have started sliding down my cheeks.

I've finally remembered where I've seen hair like Silver's. On a young woman throwing her golden graduation cap into the air, starting a new job at Texas Tim's Trims, living life to the fullest. That hair belonged to me thirty years ago. Young, fresh, and full of life. Nothing like my current brown, raggedy mop that can barely even be called a hairstyle.

Silver isn't me. I never wear more than a dab of mascara, my wardrobe consists of bright pops of color, and I would never let my nose be punctured by a needle. But for some inexplicable reason, I see myself in Silver's long, blonde hair. I see a past version of myself, a nervous wreck about to enter the working world, scared out of my mind but unwaveringly hopeful about the future.

"Hope, what's going on over here?" Janet's voice snaps me out of the past. I quickly brush off my cheeks, grab the two broken halves of scissors, and stand back up.

Silver is eyeing me like I'm a nuclear bomb.

I bring my hand up to my nose and feel a trickle of blood dripping out of the left nostril.

“Nothing,” I say in a shaky voice. “Just dropped my scissors, that’s all.”

Janet takes one look at my soggy face and says, “Hope, would you mind grabbing me the Tresemme shampoo samples from the back room real quick? I’ll take care of Silver for ya.”

“Sure thing,” I stutter. As I practically sprint towards the back of the salon, fingers pinched over my nose, Silver’s voice pierces my stomach like a knife.

“I was thinking of a raven black, or maybe midnight. And cut just below my ears.”

“Pleeeeeease, Mom?” I whined, giving my mom my best puppy dog eyes.

“Pleasepleaseplease?”

“No, Hope, you most certainly cannot!” she replied firmly. “Your hair is beautiful just the way it is.”

“But Mom, Eileen and Karen did it!”

School started in two days, and the latest craze was dying a streak of your hair some obnoxious shade of neon. I couldn’t possibly show up to McClean Middle School without a strand of bright blue hair tucked behind my ear. My social status would absolutely plummet.

“Sweetie, I don’t care if the President of the United States of America has a blue streak in his hair. There’s no way in heck that I’m letting you tarnish the blonde that God has given you.”

I groaned, leaning forward in the back seat of the minivan, scrunching my nose in a pout.

“But it’s my hair. I can even pay for it myself. I have babysitting money saved up,” I tried once more.

“Hope, women all around the world dye their hair just to be the same shade of blonde that you have. Protect your hair with your life. The answer is no.”

Flopping back onto my seat with a sigh, I pondered what my mom had said. I picked up a strand of blonde and twirled it through my fingers thoughtfully.

Eileen and Karen didn't have blonde hair to protect.

As soon as I enter the back room, the aroma of hundreds of different brands of shampoo hits me like a brick wall. I can pick out TIGI's Bed Head and Suave's Peach Shampoo, but the rest all blur together in a mix of fruits and nature scents.

I push open the staff bathroom door and sit down on the top of the toilet seat. Now that I'm in private, I let the tears stream down my face and intermingle with the blood gushing out of my nose. I know that I'm ugly-crying, but I don't even care.

My stomach pain becomes too great, and I have to flip open the toilet seat. Reheated chicken pot pie spills out of my mouth and into the toilet bowl, splattering the pristine white ceramic with different shades of browns and greens. Once, twice, then my stomach stops contorting and settles down.

I stand up, flush, and head over to the sink to wash up. At least the tears have stopped and my nose is slowing down. I turn on the faucet and fill my hands with warm water, splashing it over my cheeks. Their splotchy red color slowly fades back to pallor.

I look up into the mirror and stare. I see a chubby, middle aged woman with choppy hair the color of burnt toast. Her nose is red with a chunk of toilet paper stuck in the left nostril, and her mascara has dripped down her cheeks. I reach my hand up to touch my pony tail, tugging out the hair tie so it falls to my shoulders, and the woman in the mirror follows suit. We both tangle our fingers in the mess of coarse brown strands.

As we drag our fingers down and into the air, they bring with them a chunk of hair. I look away from the mirror and examine the hair, matted and bristly. Nothing like what it used to be before the first round of chemo, blonde and smooth.

With a sigh, I toss the chunk of hair in the trash, wipe off my face, and make my way back to the salon. I see Silver, her hair covered in strips of tin foil. Janet throws me a supportive smile, and I know she's thinking about my cancer.

"Your 4:30 will be here soon, sweetie," Janet sings. She comes over and pats me on the shoulder. "You beat it once already, Hope. You're gonna be just fine."

I smile back at her, fingering a shaving razor on my work bench.

The first bald hair dresser. I never would have guessed it when I graduated from the Dallas School for Hair and Beauty. The second round of chemo will only get worse, so I might as well take it in stride.

Life is too short to have boring hair anyways.

Please

Ramón picks at a dried stain on his tie, remnants of the cringe-worthy meatloaf his wife cooked for dinner the night before. She knows he abhors the unidentifiable mix of carcasses yet insists on making it every Monday in a lack-luster attempt at creating the illusion of a sit-down family dinner. It's so early in the morning that Ramón's dinner still isn't completely digested, and his stomach grumbles in discomfort.

He lifts his suitcase with two fingers, taking a step forward in the security line. In front of him is a large family, both in numbers and in girth, all wearing the same vomit-colored shirt that says "Annual McCladden Family Reunion." The McCladdens are predictably an Irish bunch, and the shirts clash horribly with their ginger hair. They look like reverse carrots.

A couple of them ended up behind him in line and are pressed up against Ramón's back, frantically trying to reunite with the rest of the herd. One McCladden, an enormous man, almost manages to get by, but Ramón doesn't feel like letting him pass and plants his loafers into the linoleum, maintaining his ground.

He shakes his arm to push back his jacket sleeve and glances at his watch. Four thirty in the morning. An ungodly time, far too early to be awake, but it's a necessary evil because Ramón's flight takes off at a quarter past five. His eyes have started to close, but he's jolted back to attention when the McCladdens all at once migrate to an open security podium, licenses and tickets thrust out in front of them. The two McCladdens behind Ramón desperately try to inch past him, to no avail.

"Next," calls out a security guard.

Ramón heaves up his suitcase and shuffles over. The young guard's Boston Logan Airport uniform is covered in enormous sweat stains. For some reason, his right armpit is perspiring more than his left.

Ramón digs through his pockets to find his ticket and license and hands them to the officer.

"Where are you going today, sir?" asks the officer. He grins cheerfully, ruddy face beaming, and Ramon wonders how the man has so much energy so early in the morning.

"Business trip in Vegas," Ramón responds without smiling in response.

The officer examines Ramón's ticket and then looks up with a frown.

"Sir, you've given me a Visa card instead of your license. I'm going to need to see a real form of photo identification."

Ramón sighs in exasperation and thrusts his hands back into his coat pockets. He can't think straight. His wife didn't wake up early enough today to make him his morning coffee.

"Is there a problem here?" the officer asks nervously, glancing back at the restless line of people jittering behind Ramón. A bead of sweat drips past his right eye and down his neck, inching towards his already-saturated armpit.

Ramón rolls his eyes, not bothering to respond, and eventually fishes out his photo ID.

"Thank you," says the officer, no longer smiling. He signs the ticket in an illegible scrawl and returns the license and credit card to Ramón.

Ramón continues to where everyone is removing their shoes, taking off their jackets, and putting their suitcases through the x-ray machine. He looks at the clock again. Quarter to five. He only has twenty minutes before his flight starts boarding, and his cheeks flush with the

thought of missing the departure. He's already on thin ice after the latest annual employee review, and missing the flight to Vegas would definitely get him sacked. Ramón pushes his way forward in the line to speed up the process.

A lone woman in front of him is attempting to unzip her knee-high leather boots. She's wearing a tight black dress and wobbles from side to side on her stiletto heels as she bends over precariously to reach the zippers, trying not to flash anyone. Ramón rolls his eyes when she contorts her body in a jumble of limbs to sit on the floor, playing with a stuck zipper on one of the boots. When her eyes are averted towards the ground, he casually slides by her and quickly slips his suitcase onto the conveyor belt.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?" The woman screeches. When she gets up from the floor, she shimmies her dress down a couple inches to cover her bare thighs. She has one boot still on, and she struggles to stand because of the height imbalance of her legs.

Ramón intently examines the x-ray machine, watching his suitcase brush against the plastic strips hanging across the entrance.

"You can't cut me in line like that," the woman continues, her voice grating.

Ramón looks at her and blinks slowly but says nothing. He taps his fingers against the side of the x-ray machine, waiting for his bag to pop out of the other side and willing the conveyor belt to move faster.

"Excuse me, officer. This man cut me in line," she yells at the security guard behind the machine. The guard, grey haired and uninterested, glances over to see if his attention is required. Ramón recognizes the glint in the guard's eye when he sees a middle aged man of color standing next to a scantily clad white woman and knows he has to get out of there before he gets pulled aside to be searched.

“Oh my god, lady. Leave me alone,” Ramón quickly attempts to alleviate the situation as the woman starts to raise a fuss. As she stamps her one stiletto on the floor, his suitcase finally emerges from the x-ray machine. He grabs it and pushes his way past a growing crowd of spectators to enter the airport terminal. He can hear the angry screams of the woman in the background, but he does not look back.

Now it's five past five, and Ramón has to run to his gate, A25. Of course it happens to be the gate that's farthest from security. His suitcase thumps precariously behind him, barely managing to remain upright on its wheels. He almost takes out a little kid, but luckily the child's mother pulls her out of the way just in time.

Suddenly, Ramón is forced to plant his heels in the ground and come to a quick stop. A group of thirty young foreigners is gathered in the center of the walkway, blocking the way. Each one has two large, unpleasantly colored suitcases, and everyone is playing on their smart phones and speaking rapidly in what sounds like Mandarin.

“Excuse me, I have to pass,” Ramón yells at the crowd. Nobody looks up or even acknowledges that they've heard him.

“Excuse me!” He shouts again. Nothing.

“Last call for Gate A25, departure for Las Vegas. Last call,” the terminal's intercom crackles ominously.

Ramón hears the stewardess's voice projected into the intercom only a short distance past the crowd of students, and he can see the light at the end of the tunnel. He starts to push his way through the crowd, kicking people's bags out of the way with his foot to create a path. Most

of them don't even look up from their phones, and only a couple mutter with annoyance as he jostles them.

When he can finally see the end of the group, he makes a big push to the other side. His foot hits a pink suitcase, and it falls like a Lincoln log tower toppling in slow motion, smashing open on the ground.

“Ah!” A teenage girl exclaims in surprise, stopping mid-text message to look up. Her blouses, jeans, and panties are spilled across the floor. She bends over and scoops up an armful of the clothes, trying to save her personal belongings from the oscillating wave of her classmates' sneakers.

Ramón kicks a silky yellow shirt to the side and continues in the direction of gate A25. The teenager starts shouting angry Chinese at Ramón.

Without turning around, Ramón responds, “I'm late, I can't understand you.” The girl's voice fades in the distance.

As he starts to run to A25, he yells behind him, “Speak English, we're in America.”

All the passengers have already boarded the plane, and a stewardess with bleached blond hair and absurdly red lipstick is in the process of closing the door when Ramón finally arrives.

“Wait, stop! I'm on this flight!” Ramón gasps, running to the door with the suitcase in one hand and the suit jacket in the other. He places his hands on his knees and sucks in as much air as humanly possible. The crisp corners of the stewardess's mouth tighten, but she reaches out and takes Ramon's ticket between two perfectly manicured fingers.

“Seat 22C,” the woman says to him, voice nasally. “All the way back, on the aisle.”

Without thanking her, Ramón pushes through the door, boards the plane, and tries to find his seat. It's the second row from the back. The vast majority of the seats on the plane are full, and each person Ramón passes individually glares at him.

A number of the passengers near the front of the plane are wearing puke green shirts, and Ramón recognizes them as the McCladdens. He smirks at one of them and pushes past.

He pays no mind to the animosity he senses from his fellow passengers and feels a weight off his shoulders. He has made it to the flight on time. His job is secure, at least for a while longer.

Ramón's suitcase barely fits down the aisle, stuffed a bit too full as it is with various suit jackets and loafers. As soon as he finds an open spot in the overhead compartment, he heaves it above his head and forcefully shoves it in, squishing a tote bag and a briefcase in the process.

When Ramón reaches row 22, he sees a huge man squeezed into the aisle seat, working intently on the New York Times word search. The man is wearing an Annual McCladden Family Reunion tee shirt, and it's stretched to its full capacity trying to cover his stomach. The man's swollen hands move between a bag of chips on the armrest and his salivating mouth, and the skin of his chin moves from side to side as he chews.

Ramón looks at the man, down at his ticket, and back up again.

"I think you're in my seat," he says. McCladden looks up from the word search. He squints, a flash of recognition crossing his face.

"What did you say?" He growls loudly, incessantly chewing.

“I. Believe. You’re. In. My. Seat,” Ramón enunciates. He shoves his ticket beneath the man’s nose and points dramatically at the seat assignment, 22C.

“I’m already sitting here. Find another seat,” he replies, chin jiggling. His voice is higher pitched than Ramón had expected.

“It’s my seat! My company paid good money for this ticket. I want to sit here,” Ramón says loudly.

McCladden puts down the word search. Other passengers are beginning to titter, impatient for takeoff. The blonde stewardess makes her way back from the front of the plane towards the noise. She tosses back her hair.

“Excuse me, gentlemen. What seems to be the problem here?”

“This man is in my seat, and he won’t move,” Ramón explains in what he thinks is a calm tone. The stewardess turns her gaze towards the fat man.

“Sir, can I please see your ticket?” she asks him with an entirely forced, toothy smile. Ramón notices a smudge of red lipstick on her front tooth.

McCladden’s round face contorts.

“There are other available seats,” he replies to the stewardess. “I’m already sitting here. Can’t he just move somewhere else?”

“This is my seat,” Ramón argues. “I can help you move.”

With that, Ramón snatches the bag of potato chips and dangles them in the air.

McCladden immediately rises to his feet. He’s so tall that he has to bend his neck so that his head doesn’t hit the top of the plane. It’s like his stomach had been squeezed tighter when he was sitting down, and now expands like a balloon to fill the extra space. The stewardess takes a step back, eyes wide and open mouth.

"Give me back my chips," he growls slowly. Ramón considers how his high pitched voice really ruins the intimidating vibe he's clearly striving for.

The rest of the plane's passengers are now silent, waiting to see what happens.

Ramón had to get up at four in the morning to get to the airport to travel for this stupid work conference. He had to wait in the long security line and deal with that annoying lady. He had to run through a crowd of students to get to his gate on time. He thinks it's not too much to ask to be allowed to sit in his own seat.

In an act of defiance, he takes a deep breath and steps forward.

"I'll touch your chips if I want to. Now move."

With that, McCladden socks him in the nose.

Ramón wakes up strewn across a row of seats next to gate A25. His feet are propped up on an arm rest, and his head is laying against the leather. A group of stewardesses and a couple of security guards are congregated around him in a haphazard circle. When he opens his eyes, everyone stops talking. The blonde stewardess approaches.

"Sir, are you ok?" She hands him an ice pack for his nose. Ramón realizes that his nose feels like it's been pummeled with a sledge hammer. He touches it with his hand, and it's broken for sure.

He pauses, wincing.

"I'm fine. Help me get on the next plane to Las Vegas," Ramón says. He looks around at all the worried faces surrounding him and takes a deep breath.

"Please."

The Big Finish

“So, Hunter, where are you going to college next year?”

My knuckles clenched around the arms of the lawn chair I was sitting in. I had been mentally preparing myself to hear this question around Christmastime or maybe even Thanksgiving, but definitely not as early as the annual Thompson Family Fourth of July Extravaganza. The gears of my mind whirred frantically.

Aunt Carla smiled in anticipation, leaning out of her chair to better hear my response over the buzz of conversations. She had clearly consumed one too many hard lemonades, and her black hair was falling out of her American flag bandana.

“I’m not sure yet, Aunt Carla,” I said. A bead of sweat jiggled by the corner of my mouth as I laughed nervously. I wiped it away, pushing my glasses up the bridge of my nose. “I still have to take the SATs, and early action applications aren’t due until November.”

“Your mother told me you want to be an engineer,” she pressed on. “What schools are you looking at?” A fly buzzed lazily by her ear, and she swatted it away while fanning herself with humid Rhode Island air.

“I’m still trying to figure out what I’m looking for,” I responded. I was desperate to make an escape. “I’m going to go get a hot dog.”

I stood up and slipped away into a crowd of family members. I positioned myself next to the picnic table covered in food and loaded up a paper plate with a wiener, a couple slices of thick crust party pizza, and some watermelon. The evening sky grew dark, and my relatives became increasingly loud as they drank more and more.

Right as my teeth bit into a juicy wedge of watermelon, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see my cousin Caleb grinning, his black hipster band tee shirt and tight jeans causing him to stand out against the sea of red, white, and blue. Caleb was one year older than me, about

to start his freshman year at the Community College of Rhode Island. What Caleb lacked in intelligence, he made up in charm; he was the family's beloved troublemaker. Although we only saw each other a couple of times a year, he was definitely my favorite cousin. In my opinion, he was intriguingly unstable.

"Hey, Hunter, want to go and watch the fireworks with me? Uncle Andrew is setting them up now." Caleb turned towards the street, knowing that I would follow. I left my plate on the edge of the picnic table and trailed after.

He stopped by the drink coolers, flipping open the top of one and winking at me.

"Think fast," he said, and my hands flew up to catch an ice cold can of beer. He tucked his own can under his tee shirt to avoid detection, motioning for me to do the same. Never one to break rules, no less the law, I looked down at the can with a combination of fear and scientific interest. I had no desire to actually consume it.

"Don't be a pussy," Caleb teased, noticing my reluctance. "It's just a beer."

Not wanting to disappoint, I decisively closed my fingers around the can and followed Caleb to the curb of the street.

We chose a spot a few feet away from our younger cousins and cracked open the beers. Not sure what to expect, I nervously took a sip and wrinkled my nose at the stale taste. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Caleb smile. I wasn't sure if this meant he was happy with my decision to drink or if he found my reaction to the taste comical. We sat in silence for a few moments, watching Uncle Andrew haphazardly position grocery store firecrackers around the pavement.

"So, Hunter, where are you going to college next year?" Caleb asked.

My head whipped to the side, and I spilled a bit of beer on my shirt from turning so fast. Caleb doubled over in laughter, a lock of black hair falling over his eyes.

“I’m just messing with you, man,” he said, relishing my dramatic reaction. “I heard you talking to my mom earlier.”

I took a long swig of my beer because it seemed like the right thing to do.

“The whole thing sucks,” Caleb said, more seriously. “They expect you to have everything figured out. Where you want to go to school, what you want to study, what you’re going to be when you grow up.” Caleb pushed his hair away from his eyes. His pupils were darker than the night sky, and they seemed disproportionately large.

“They don’t give a shit about all the work you have to do,” Caleb continued, a hint of resentment in his voice. “The SATs, the essays, the applications. They have no idea how hard it is, how stressful.”

Unsure of what to respond, I nodded and waited to see if he would continue talking. I knew from my mom’s gossipy phone calls with her sister that Caleb had been rejected from a lot of schools, not even good ones, and that he had been struggling recently with his ADHD.

Caleb’s eyes locked on Uncle Andrew as he lit the first of the fireworks. The faces of our younger cousins were illuminated by the pops and crackles of light flashing across the street, and their innocent laughter bubbled infectiously. Caleb smiled bitterly. Then, amidst the bangs and snaps of the firecrackers, he turned towards me.

“Hunter, let me help you out,” he said. A red sparkler reflected in the lenses of my glasses.

“What do you mean?” I said, finally opening my mouth. Although Caleb was definitely clever, he was not book smart. I was confused as to how my cousin, the future community college dropout, would be any help.

Caleb glanced around to make sure everybody was distracted by the fireworks and then reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a small silver pill box. He gave it a little shake, and I heard the clinking of loose capsules. I looked down in surprise as Caleb pressed the container into my palm, and he closed my fingers around it so no one would see.

“Take one when you need a little extra focus,” Caleb said.

“Get ready for the big finish, kids,” Uncle Andrew yelled as he set off the remainder of the pyrotechnics all at once. All of our younger cousins started cheering at the bright lights whizzing through the air.

Caleb winked at me again, fireworks reflecting in his large pupils.

“Hi, sweetie, how was your last first day of school?” my mom asked as I threw myself theatrically onto the living room couch. She had gotten home from work minutes before me and was still wearing her waitressing uniform. Although her face was young, there were bags under her eyes. Yet all the weariness left her face as soon as I walked through the door, and she joined me on the couch, eagerly awaiting a response. I buried my face in a throw pillow, grumbling.

“Mom, it was awful. Senior year sucks,” I said, putting my feet up on the couch cushion. “I have so much homework already.”

She pushed my feet off of the couch and chuckled at my complaints.

“I’m expecting you to get stellar grades this semester, Hunter,” she said. “Colleges will be looking closely at your transcript.”

“On top of that,” I continued, ignoring her interjection, “my English teacher said we have to submit drafts of our college essays by next Friday.” My mom perked up at the mention of Friday.

“Don’t forget, the SAT tutor is coming that afternoon!”

I groaned and shot her a dirty look.

“Don’t give me that sass, young man. I’m putting all of my tips towards this tutor so you can get into a good college,” my mom chastised. “Now go get your homework done while I start dinner.”

I reluctantly trudged to my room. The floor was covered in clothes, and the bed was unmade. My desk was coated with colorful pamphlets I had received in the mail about different colleges and universities. All of the students on the brochures were ethnically diverse and sported enormous smiles, clearly ecstatic to be attending said institutions.

I pushed the pamphlets into one large stack and turned it upside down to cover the tauntingly smug faces. Then, taking a deep breath, I decided to tackle my English assignment first – a draft of my college essay.

I opened my notebook to a blank page, uncapped a pen, and held it poised over the top line of the paper. I pressed the tip of the pen onto the page, but no words came out. Typing the essay would probably be better, so I returned the notebook to my backpack and opened my laptop. Everybody always says the hardest part of writing is getting started, so I opened a new document and saved it to my hard drive. Boom. I was now officially started. That wasn’t so hard.

“Hunter, dinner is ready!” my mom called. My eyes snapped to attention. The screen of my laptop was still as white as freshly fallen snow. Two hours later, I hadn’t written a single word. Sighing, I shut the laptop and plodded to the kitchen.

My mom had already changed into her pajamas, cotton capris and a matching top covered in daisies meant for ladies twenty years older than her. She was scooping macaroni and cheese out of a pot and handed me a plate.

“Did you finish your homework?” she asked me as I shoveled noodles into my mouth.

“No,” I mumbled, mouth full of cheese. “I can’t figure out what to write my college essay about.”

“Show those engineering schools how smart you are. You just have to focus,” she encouraged. “Write about something you’re passionate about!”

“I’m passionate about mac and cheese,” I said, looking down at my empty plate. It was one of those cheap holiday plates, and a snowman beamed up at me. My mom laughed and stood up to clear the table.

She wouldn’t be much help with my essay, as she had never written one herself. She had become a waitress straight out of high school. Having a kid when you’re 17 limits your options, I guess. It was no wonder she was pushing so hard for me to go to a good college. She never had the opportunity to do so herself.

“Go finish your homework, sweetie,” she said. “I can take care of the dishes.”

I licked my fork clean and placed it on my plate, pushed in my chair, and headed back to my room to stare at my blank laptop screen until I fell asleep.

A week went by in a blur of study groups, tests, and homework assignments. I wasn’t sure how I could keep up with my ridiculously heavy workload for the entire school year. My head consistently throbbed from a lack of sleep. The draft of my college essay was due

tomorrow, and I had made minimal progress. Now, the document had “Hunter Thompson’s Common Application Essay” bolded and underlined at the top of the page.

I wondered if I could submit it how it was. I’d tell colleges that an engineer has to be able to think outside of the box and that I cannot be described by a mere 1,000-word essay.

Shaking my head, I slammed my fingers against the keyboard, random letters spilling onto the page. The clock on my desk read 9:45 PM. My mom was already asleep, but I knew I had a long night ahead of me if I was going to get this assignment done.

My eyebrows furrowed and I aggressively shoved the stack of college brochures off my desk in frustration. The photographed college students plummeted to the floor, smiling the whole way down.

Sighing, I leaned down to pick up the mess. A glint of silver on my desk caught my eye. It took me a moment to recognize Caleb’s pill box.

“Take one when you need a little extra focus,” Caleb had said.

I ran my finger along the silky edge of the box and shocked myself by clicking it open. Inside was a pile of round, orange capsules. I had never seen them before in person but recognized them from movies as Adderall.

My first instinct was to throw the pill box in the garbage. If my mom ever discovered the pills in my room, I would be dead meat. But as my hand hovered over the trash can, my fingers suctioned themselves to the container. My college essay, homework, tests, and the SATs exploded like fireworks in my brain.

There was nothing wrong with taking one little pill so that I could hand my essay in on time. Right? My stomach turned, but I pinched one of the circular pills between my nails.

I could hear Caleb’s voice in my head.

“Don’t be a pussy,” he said. “It’s just a pill.”

Pushing all hesitations from my mind, I popped it into my mouth and swallowed. Then, I tucked the pill box into my desk drawer and placed my hands over the keyboard of my laptop. I began to type slowly, ideas formulating in my brain.

Then, I blinked, and it hit. When I opened my eyes, my brain flew into hyper drive, my eyes darted across the screen, my fingers moved at the speed of light and my blank page filled with letters that turned into words that turned into sentences that turned into paragraphs that turned into an essay and I printed the essay and I stapled the essay and I shoved the essay into my backpack and the clock said it was only 1:00 AM and I decided to clean my room and I picked up all of the clothes from my floor and I organized my closet by color and I lined up all of my shoes and I picked eight pieces of lint off the carpet and then the clock said 4:00 AM and then I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

My eyes jolted open as I felt my mom’s hand nudging my shoulder.

“Wake up, sleepyhead,” she said. “Time to get ready for school.”

I groaned and turned over to face the clock. 6:45 AM. I rolled off the bed, feet touching bare carpet instead of the usual pile of dirty clothes. My head felt like it was the launch pad for Uncle Andrew’s fireworks.

“Hunter, breakfast is ready,” my mom called from the kitchen. The noise exploded in my eardrums, and I clutched at the sides of my head to make sure blood wasn’t gushing out of my ears. I fell into a kitchen chair, unable to look at the plate of scrambled eggs and toast arranged neatly at my seat. My mom was wearing her waitress uniform, which somehow already had a stain on it, and was adding onions to her omelet on the stovetop.

“Mom,” I mumbled, “I feel sick.”

She spun around and rushed over to my side, pressing her hand against my forehead.

“You don’t have a fever,” she said. “What’s wrong? Does your throat hurt? Do you have a stuffy nose?”

“My head hurts so bad, Mom,” I said.

“What time did you go to bed last night?” she asked, concerned.

I made a split second decision, stomach twisting into a knot. “Midnight.”

“Well, if it’s only a headache,” she frowned, “you have to go to school. Your grades are very important and you can’t be missing class. Take some Advil. It’s in the medicine cabinet above the sink.”

I pushed myself up from the table, leaving the plate of food untouched. As I trudged out of the kitchen, my mom called after me.

“Hunter, don’t forget, the SAT tutor is coming over after school today!”

When I got home from school, an unfamiliar car was parked in the driveway next to my mom’s beat up Volvo. I almost turned around and walked away, but realizing I had absolutely nowhere to go, I rubbed my temples and walked inside the house.

An older man was sitting next to my mom on the couch. He wasn’t what I’d expected an SAT tutor to look like. He wore scuffed jeans and a short sleeve button down shirt that stretched over his large belly. Nor was he as young as I had expected. The SATs probably didn’t even exist when he was my age. The tutor had extremely bushy, grey eyebrows that looked like mops above his watery eyes. My mom was in deep conversation with him, clearly trying to fabricate

an in-depth knowledge of standardized testing. They both turned their heads when I walked through the door. I managed a grimace.

“Hi, sweetie,” my mom bubbled. “How was your day?”

“Great,” I replied.

“Hunter, this is Mr. Reynolds,” she said. “You two can head to the kitchen and work towards that perfect SAT score.”

I cringed internally and led Mr. Reynolds to the kitchen table. I knew that my mom wouldn’t be able to afford any more tutoring sessions, so I didn’t bother making small talk. After an awkward pause, Mr. Reynolds realized I wasn’t going to say anything.

“So, young man,” he said, “I hear you want to be an engineer.”

I nodded in affirmation, fighting to keep my eyes open.

“Do you have any idea where you want to go to school?”

Although I figured this question would come, my left eyelid twitched in panic. I pushed my glasses higher on my nose and looked Mr. Reynolds directly in the eyes. One of his eyes was watering more than the other, and there was green gunk wedged in the corner.

“With all due respect, sir,” I said, “I have absolutely no idea.”

“That’s quite alright,” Mr. Reynolds chuckled. “We’ll just jump into it then. You’re taking the test at the end of the month, correct?” I nodded. “I’m going to give you this pretest, and then we can review what you should focus on studying.”

Mr. Reynolds pulled a packet out of his briefcase and slid it towards me. I squinted at it in confusion. He’d given me a pretest in a different language, the letters squiggles that I couldn’t understand. Then, I blinked and was able to pick out English characters. I was so tired that I could barely even read the test. There was no way I would be able to focus on the tutoring

session in this state. I cleared my throat and saw that Mr. Reynolds' bushy eyebrows were crawling up his forehead expectantly.

“Do you mind if I go and grab a pencil from my room?” I asked. He bobbed his head encouragingly.

As soon as I entered the room, I collapsed onto my bed. The worn-in comforter enveloped my arms and head, and I wanted nothing more than to close my eyes and sleep for fifteen years. However, I knew my mom had paid an exorbitant fee that she certainly couldn't afford to arrange this tutoring session, so I lifted my head out of the warm cocoon and dragged myself over to my desk to grab a pencil.

I shuffled around some papers but there were no pencils on the top of the desk. I pulled open the top drawer and dug my hand into the clutter. My fingers brushed against something metal, and I pulled it out – Caleb's pill box.

I thought back to my experience the previous evening. I had been so focused, had gotten so much done. I imagined how well I would do on this SAT pretest with a little help. Plus, I was so tired. A little boost couldn't hurt, could it? Shaking off nagging feelings of doubt, I cracked open the box and popped one of the small orange tablets. I patted my cheeks a few times to wake myself up, grabbed a pencil from the bottom of the drawer, and headed back out to the kitchen.

Mr. Reynolds was waiting patiently. He nudged the pretest towards me as I sat down. The letters still looked like squiggles, but if I squinted enough, I could make out numbers, so I flipped to the math portion and started there.

Two problems in, I blinked, and it hit. My pencil started to fly across the paper and I solved linear inequalities and simplified equations, then I flipped to the reading section and read

about scientific advances in the field of cloning and the history of the meatpacking industry, and then I flipped to the writing section and corrected comma splices and penciled in Oxford commas, and then I scribbled an essay discussing an important piece of literature and how it impacted my life, and then I threw down my pencil and tossed the test at Mr. Reynolds.

He blinked in surprise. I had finished fifteen minutes early. I tapped my leg as he flipped open the exam. His eyebrows wiggled as he went through the test with me. They climbed higher and higher on his forehead as he realized I had gotten a near perfect score.

“Well, Hunter, it seems as though you’ve got the math section down pat,” Mr. Reynolds said. “As long as you review the grammar, you have an excellent shot at getting a perfect score.”

I drummed my fingers on the table and then picked up the pencil and started twisting it.

“I know you said you aren’t sure where you want to go to college, but if you do this well on the real test, you’ll be able to go anywhere you want,” Mr. Reynolds said as he stood up.

The man and his eyebrows left, and my mom came back into the kitchen. She had changed into her pajamas again, the same ones from the week before.

“How did it go?” she asked excitedly. I shot her a thumbs up and left the pretest on the table for her to examine, racing back to my room.

My mind was full of energy and knowledge and power. I toppled into my desk chair, shuffling through the college brochures on my desk until I got to the ones from the Ivy League schools. These were my future. My hands couldn’t control themselves and crumpled up the other pamphlets in a chaotic mess.

I carried the Ivy League pamphlets over to my bed and scanned the pages until I fell asleep. Right before my eyes shut, I looked over at the clock. It was only 7:00 PM. I realized I hadn’t eaten anything all day.

Over the next couple of weeks, I found myself regularly digging into the stash of Caleb's pills. Gone were any doubts in my mind – Adderall was a miracle worker. I was able to get my work done in record time and my grades were higher than ever before. I knew how precious the pills were and made sure I had enough to last until my SATs.

The Friday night before the SATs, I sat at the dinner table with my mom. She had refused to turn the heat on even though the September air was turning chilly, and she was wearing an old, oversized sweatshirt.

“So, Hunter, are you nervous for tomorrow?” she asked.

“A little,” I muttered, pushing bits of chicken around my plate. I was struggling to keep my eyes open, having spent the entire afternoon attempting to suck in as much standardized testing information as possible.

“Is something else wrong, sweetie?” she asked. She fiddled with the string of her sweatshirt. “You’ve been very quiet lately.”

“No,” I said. “I just have a lot going on.”

“Is something wrong with your chicken?” she said.

I had started stacking the pieces of meat on top of one another in a tower. As soon as she said this, I knocked the tower over with my fork.

“I’m not very hungry,” I said in response.

I stood up, scraped my dinner into the trash can, and returned to the safety of my bedroom. However, as soon as I laid down, a hundred fireworks exploded inside of my skull.

Then, I was hit with the most intense craving I had ever experienced. If one of those orange pills didn't enter my body in the next five seconds, I was going to die. I was so tired yet so awake at the same time, and it felt as though my had heart skipped a beat.

My body must have been used to taking the pills at night. I shot out of bed, tore open the drawer of my desk, and cracked open the pill box. Inside was one small pill surrounded by a vast expanse of emptiness. The one pill I had saved for the morning of the SATs. My palm quivered, fingers itching to toss it down my throat.

"Hunter, sweetie, are you in there?"

I panicked at the knock on the door, tossing the pill box towards my desk.

"Yeah," I said, my voice cracking. "Come in."

My mom pushed open the door with her hip and entered, holding a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies. She looked at me strangely and I realized I was standing frozen like a statue in the middle of the room.

"I noticed you didn't eat dinner, so I brought you a snack," she said. Her eyes crawled over my room, trying to figure out what was going on. She came over and perched on my bed, patting the comforter. I sat on top of my hands so she wouldn't see them trembling.

"Look, sweetie, don't be nervous for tomorrow. I know you've been working very hard lately. You barely even leave your room anymore, for goodness' sake!"

I heard the words through the bangs of fireworks.

"I just wanted to let you know that I am so proud of you," my mom said.

She never talked like this, but all I wanted was for her to leave. She put her arm around my shoulder, giving me a pat. My bicep twitched in discomfort and the corners of my mom's mouth turned down when I didn't say anything in response.

“Well, get some sleep,” she said. She stood up and carried the plate of cookies over to my desk. “I’ll leave these here.”

She placed them on an empty space on my desk and straightened out some papers.

“Let me throw this trash away for you,” she said. I fell back onto my pillow, spinning, as she grabbed a pile of crumpled papers from the desk. She carried the pile out of the room, shutting the door, and I breathed a deep sigh of relief. My eyelids twitched unstoppably, so I forced them to stay shut until I eventually fell asleep.

The next morning, when my mom tapped me on the shoulder to wake up, I shot out of bed. This was it. This was the day that I would secure my future. I took a look in my bedroom mirror. My eyes were bloodshot.

I went over to my desk to find the key to my success, the pill box. It wasn’t in its usual drawer, so I shuffled through the Ivy League pamphlets on top of the desk. Nothing. I got down on my hands and knees and searched around the desk in case it had fallen off. Still nothing.

I desperately started tearing through the piles of clothes on my bedroom floor, grabbing anything that looked silver or small. Then, my eyes locked on the untouched plate of cookies on top of my desk, and my stomach turned. My mom had taken some of the crumpled college brochures to throw away the night before. What if the pill box had been in the pile?

Frantically, I sprinted into the kitchen. My mom was in her waitressing uniform, car keys in hand, and she stood up from the table when she saw me.

“Mom,” I panted, “what did you do with those papers from my desk last night?”

“I recycled them,” she said, looking at me inquisitively. “Are you about ready to go?”

“No!” I shouted.

I ran out to the garage where the blue recycling bin was pushed up against the unfinished wall and tore open the lid. There wasn't much inside of the bin aside from a couple of old toilet paper rolls and my crumpled college brochures. I leaned as far as I could into the tall bin, almost falling inside. My fingers scraped along the bottom, searching for the feeling of cold metal.

"Hunter," my mom snapped. "What do you think you're doing?"

I pulled my head out of the bin and stared at her with wild eyes.

"I'm looking for something," I said.

"Well we need to leave immediately or you're going to be late," she said.

"I need to find it!"

"Find what?" she asked, jingling her car keys.

"I can't tell you," I said. She stared at me for a moment.

"If you can't tell me what you're looking for, then get in the car," she said. "We need to go now."

My glasses were crooked and on the tip of my nose, so I straightened them to hide the tears welling up in my eyes. There was nothing else I could do. I shrugged my backpack over my shoulder and slid into the car.

The Art of Love in the Twenty-First Century

Falling in love begins your freshman year of college, most likely at a frat party. You won't actually be in the frat, but you'll manage to convince one of the frat bros that you're also a bro, even though you're technically hurting the ratio, because you're planning on trying out for the club lacrosse team in the spring.

The theme will either be Jersey Jueves, Flannels and Handles, or Stoplight. Stoplight's by far the easiest to navigate, so shoot for that. Girls wearing green crop tops and booty shorts signify that they're single and ready to mingle. Yellow, proceed with caution because things are complicated. Don't even waste your time on the girls in red – they're taken, and they want the world to know it.

See that group of girls over there in the corner? Most of them will be wearing green, but in the form of as little clothing as humanly possible. It'll look like some of them have painted on straight up lingerie, but you're not sure if it's considered fashion. They'll be waving their red solo cups in the air and complaining about how they don't actually drink beer because it has soooo many calories while all of them are most certainly drinking beer. You'll know that they're freshmen by the amount of fucks that they give – too many, but they'll tell you zero.

That one girl in particular, hey, she's kind of cute! She'll definitely have blonde hair, but a brunette wouldn't be too bad either. The thicker the eyeliner, the greater the desperation. Her best friend, the chubby one, will knock her solo cup out of her hand when "All Night Longer" by Sammy Adams comes on. Here's your chance.

Take a deep breath, count down from three, and swoop in for the save. Grab her by the waist and pull her out of the way right before droplets of beer splatter across her green crop top. Her chubby best friend won't even notice that she spilled her friend's drink when she screams straight into your eardrum, "Tell the bartender make that mother fucker stronger!"

Ask the blonde if you can get her another drink. But then make sure to grab her fallen solo cup from the sticky linoleum floor because the frat house won't have enough cups to go around. Bring it over to the keg and wait about thirty-seven hours behind a bunch of meaty juniors from the division III football team as they tap the keg wrong and end up with cups full of foam. Finally fill up her cup, as well as your own, and try to locate the same throng of girls you were with before. Be careful, because approximately seventy-eight percent of the girls in the room look exactly like her.

Once you find the blonde, take a moment to enjoy her beaming smile as she graciously accepts the red solo cup filled with Natty Light, or maybe Coors. She definitely whitens. Watch as her friends, especially the chubby one, all give you the side eye. Don't worry, they're just making sure you didn't roofie her drink. As soon as she takes a sip and doesn't immediately keel over and start foaming at the mouth, they'll lose interest.

Tell her your name, and then ask for hers. It'll be something unisex because the school you chose to attend is full of crunchy, granola kids with gay parents and too much money to know what to do with. Let's go with Cam.

You probably won't feel comfortable with calling her a boy's name at first. You'll try to call her Cami or ask if it's short for Cameron, but she'll tell you to just call her Cam. So you'll call her Cami for the rest of the night.

Without prompting, Cami will start to tell you about her classes as you try to chug your beer without it being too noticeable. She'll be taking one of those lab sciences, Intro to Psych, Ec 5 with Professor Rothbottom, and The History of Rock and Roll because it sounds "super interesting and fun!" - aka, she needed an art credit. She won't be sure what she wants to major in right now, but she'll end up choosing PolySci spring of sophomore year because she still can't make a decision.

Finally, the kid in the too-tight jeans who finagled the aux cord will play "Mr. Brightside," and then everyone will start to leave. It'll be around twelve forty-five, and Cami will discover that her friends have walked back to her dorm without her, even though they'd promised, like, five times to all walk back together. Her dorm will be called East Hall or West Hall or any direction of Hall. It'll be warm enough outside for September that you can walk her back to her dorm.

While you're walking back, maybe she'll say she's cold. If there are other people around, don't put your arm around her. Just agree and change the subject.

Once you arrive at the entrance to East/West/directional Hall, she'll take out her school ID from that little plastic thingie that girls stick to the back of their phones that holds credit

cards. Ask if you can come inside and hang out. She'll know what you mean, so she'll smile and say she's too tired but would love to see you again.

Now's the time to kiss her goodnight. Don't put your hands on her waist or anything. Just lean in from a few inches away, and immediately attempt to use tongue. The kiss should last about twenty-five seconds and involve one or two switches of head tilt. Then, when it's over, she'll giggle and tell you that you taste like beer. She's a real thinker, that one.

Stare at her ass as she retreats inside her dorm, then realize that you never asked for her number. Oh well, you'll probably see her in the dining hall two weeks later, make awkward eye contact, and never speak to one another again.

Repeat this process somewhere between eight and twenty-seven times throughout the course of freshman year. The average human kisses twenty-one people in their lifetime, but you're you, so aim high and shoot for the stars, and if you fail, you'll end up being normal.

You'll probably have a mediocre fling over the summer with a girl from home who was way too ugly for you during high school but somehow gained two cup sizes since going to college. She's not worth the effort of maintaining a Snapchat streak with once you return to school, so don't even bother trying.

Sophomore year is when you should establish a more consistent hook up pattern. If you're feeling ambitious, you can try for multiple girls at once, but sticking to one for a few weeks at a time and then switching to another is easier to navigate. The girls you hook up with will all be different shapes and sizes in the beginning, but by the time winter break comes around, you'll discover that you prefer C cups with sort of flat asses. That's about fifty-five percent of your school's female population, so you've got options for sure.

Some Saturdays will be for the boys, and you'll crush brewskies and bar downski ferdaa with the other club lax guys until about midnight or one. You'll watch too many episodes of Letterkenny to be considered cool anymore. That's when the consistent hookup comes into play. She'll even be willing to walk to your dorm room because you managed to finesse a single this year by telling housing that you have insomnia (you don't) and her roommate definitely has a squash meet the next day so needs to get a good night's sleep.

If you're feeling buzzed, shoot her an iMessage. It can be as simple as, "hey, u up?". As soon as Read: 12:18am pops up and a typing bubble appears at the bottom of the screen, shotgun one more Bud Light and head back to your room to get ready.

Getting ready will consist of throwing all dirty socks and underwear underneath the bed and spraying your new cologne, Sauvage by DIOR®, a few times too many around the room. You'll also make sure you're wearing your nice underwear, the black Calvin Klein ones your mom got you for Hanukkah last year. Maybe gargle real quick so your mouth doesn't taste like wet skunk, aka Natty Light, and spit it out in the trash can. Ah shoot, you forgot to put in a trash

bag. Oh well. Throw on a hoodie and some athletic shorts because you don't want to look like you actually put in any effort whatsoever.

She'll text you at twelve thirty-two that she's outside your dorm building. Her name will be something a little more generic, like Jenna, and you'll go let Jenna inside. This will be the worst part of the night by far because you have to make small talk with her as you walk back up to your room on the third floor. Hopefully she'll complain about the stairs and how there's no freaking elevator in this freaking dorm like she has for the past two weeks because then you won't have to show any real interest in her life.

Once the two of you get back to your dorm room, you'll both squish onto your twin XL bed and try to figure out what Netflix to watch. TV shows are definitely better than movies because they end earlier so you don't have to awkwardly ask to pause in the middle and then never go back and figure out how the movie actually ends. Half hour shows are by far the best option because they're good for a quick laugh and don't require too much attention or previous knowledge. Recommend something like *New Girl*. Jenna will appreciate that you suggested a show with a female main character. Pick season two, episode fourteen because it's far enough in to prove that you've watched the show before (you haven't).

Put your arm around her shoulder as you lay next to one another in bed, and then pray for the next twenty-six minutes of the episode that your arm doesn't fall asleep. It will.

Finally, when the episode ends, close your laptop and attempt to place it on the floor without it smacking aggressively against the linoleum. It probably will, and both of you will cringe a little, but that's okay. Now's the time you've been waiting for. You don't even need to say anything, just start making out and continue for like half an hour. She'll pull away every once and a while to tuck a strand of hair behind her ears and giggle. When you feel like you're finally getting somewhere, slide your hands under her shirt. She'll become more willing to do things the later it gets.

Once it gets to be one forty-five, you should stop what she/you are doing and yawn. You'll say how tired you are and how you have a lot to do the next day (you don't). She'll start looking for her shirt and you'll jump off the bed and try to help her so that she doesn't see all of the dirty socks and underwear that you stuffed under your bed earlier that evening.

Once she finds her shirt, she'll slide it on, stand in front of the floor length mirror hanging on the back of your door, and run her fingers through her hair. Maybe she'll start putting it up in a ponytail. Pay attention, because this part's important. Come from behind and put your arms around her waist or shoulders, depending on how tall she is, and lightly kiss her neck. Tell her you had fun. Hook, line, and sinker. That part that keeps her coming back weekend after weekend. She thinks you might actually like her. Then graciously show her the door, pop a couple CBD gummies, and pass out for eleven hours.

Eventually, Jenna will start texting you too much. You'll ask her to grab dinner one time and she'll take it the wrong way. She'll probably stop hooking up with other guys and will

eventually expect you to do the same. When the time comes around to DTR (Define The Relationship - avoid at all costs!), slowly phase out the late night texts and don't respond to all of her messages. She'll probably be pretty sad at first and block you on Instagram and tell her friends how she really did like you and how she thought you'd make a cute couple and stuff, but she'll get over it after a few weeks or so.

Find a new hookup. Keep that going for a while until she pulls a Jenna, then peace. This cycle should keep you entertained for the vast majority of sophomore year.

Junior year is when everybody falls in love. Even you.

You'll think it's real love because you'll need to win her over. It'll be that chick who's sort of quirky in an attractive way, Penelope, from your Creative Writing: Poetry class. She'll be sort of skinny but not too skinny and wear Warby Parker glasses on some days, contacts on others. She'll be late for the first day of class because she was buying a venti iced coffee with a shot of toffee nut and cream at Starbucks, and her mobile order wasn't ready for pickup on time.

You won't even notice her at first. Your poetry professor, who'll tell everyone to call him Paul, will make everyone go around the room and say their name and a fun fact about themselves. You'll say that you're on the lacrosse team, and you'll conveniently leave out the word "club". The rest of the kids in the class will be complete weirdos, but hey, you need an easy art credit to fulfill your distribution requirement. Then Penelope will say her name and you'll

look over and see a faint smile dance across her lips as she says her fun fact is that she knows how to make the best homemade gnocchi from her great-grandmother's recipe.

You'll notice her perky breasts and her thick eyebrows and think to yourself, hey, that girl's kinda cute. You won't be sure if you think she's actually cute or if you're just comparing her to the overweight ginger with too many freckles and the anorexic Indian girl sitting across from you. But when you leave class, you'll spend the entire walk back to your off-campus apartment analyzing other girls, and you'll come to the conclusion that she is, in fact, attractive.

Make sure to end up sitting next to her next class, but in a way that seems like there were no other seats available. Ask to take a picture of her syllabus because you forgot to grab one last week, and then ask her what her name is again because you didn't catch it last class (you did). She'll say, Penelope, and you'll watch as her tongue rolls out all four syllables.

The second class is always when the professor makes you decide on a date later that semester to present a partner project. Good thing you're sitting next to Penelope, right? You'll look around the room like you might have another option, then turn and casually ask her if she'd be down to work together because you really need an A in this class and she has the syllabus so she clearly knows what's going on. She'll blush a little and say yes and you'll ask her to write her number on your wrist because you still haven't bought a notebook for the class.

As the semester goes along, you'll notice that when you start to do the required reading, the poems will start to make you feel sort of weird. You won't really be sure why, but you'll read

John Keats' "Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art" three times instead of once and jot notes on the margin of the page, and the words will seem to mean something... more.

It'll finally come time to work on your partner project, and you'll pull up Penelope's contact on your phone. Why do you read over your message asking her to meet up twice and delete a couple words and then add a couple words and wonder if you should include punctuation or add a haha at the end? It'll take her eighty-three minutes to respond because she was stuck in class, she says, and you'll be playing Fortnite on your phone the entire time so that you'll see the message as soon as it's delivered.

You'll meet up at the Campus Center because she'll be running straight from class. She'll have a half-empty venti in hand, and every once in a while she'll stir around the ice with the green Starbucks straw. She won't even realize she's doing it.

She'll end up doing most of the work. The assignment will be presenting a PowerPoint on the poet of the week – your boy, John Keats – and then conducting a co-teaching lesson, and she'll have done similar projects in other classes. You're along for the ride, and she'll know exactly what the two of you should do to get an A.

You get an A. This'll give you the perfect excuse to text her saying, "got an a on the project, guess we make a good team" – and maybe throw in a little winky face at the end. But not the emoji. Use the characters, semi-colon parenthesis. You'll banter back and forth for a while until mid-November, when you'll finally work up the nerve to ask her out to dinner. She'll say

“sorry but i’m too busy this week, how about next week?” You can’t be sure if she’s politely rejecting you, so all you can do is respond “sure, sounds good.”

To your surprise, she’ll text you the next week and offer an alternate time. Then, she’ll ask where you want to go. Do NOT say, “idk, you can choose”! Girls can’t make decisions, and you need to assert your dominance by choosing a restaurant. Pick somewhere classy but not too expensive – max thirty dollars per person, because you’re ballin’ on a budget. Maybe suggest The Foundry and tell her to order the steak frites and brussels. She’ll say yes and send a smiley face emoji, the yellow emoji and not just colon parenthesis, and you’ll feel weirdly excited for the opportunity to eat food next to her.

When the night of reckoning finally arrives, give yourself adequate time to prepare. You’ll have to sprint home from lax lift, but make sure to spend enough time in the shower so that you won’t smell like a walking armpit. Definitely don’t ask your friends what to wear, but feel free to text your younger sister, Emma, because high school girls know everything about fashion. Emma will immediately FaceTime you and start asking a gazillion questions about the mystery girl, but you’ll eventually get her to settle on picking out a dark green long-sleeve henley, slim fit khackis, and a navy Vineyard Vines vest. Her goal for you is ‘preppy but not douche’. You put on said outfit, spray a couple squirts of Sauvage by DIOR®, and walk through the mist.

Time to meet Penelope outside of her dorm. She’ll come out right as you’re walking up, and you’ll be glad you arrived a couple of minutes early so that she’s not waiting. She’ll be

wearing a flowy floral dress with a chunky black sweater and booties. You'll walk next to one another and chat about how classes are going, and you'll say how Paul's such a boring weirdo and how some kid named Craig reviewed Paul on RateMyProfessor and said "staying awake in his class is an unnecessary and uphill battle." She'll laugh like sunshine.

As planned, you'll convince her to order the steak frites. Thank God she's not vegan, you'll think, because that would be a deal breaker. Not because of her being vegan, but because of how vegans only talk about being vegan. But she's not, thank God. So you'll both order steak frites medium rare and waters, and you won't take your eyes off her, even when you're trying to cut your steak and squirt a little of the steak juice onto your henley. You won't be sure if she doesn't notice or if she's too polite to point it out. Everything she says is the most brilliant thing you've ever heard, and then when she says something else, that, in turn, becomes the newest, most brilliant thing you've ever heard. You won't want the waiter to ever bring the check because you'll be content staying at that table forever, staring at Penelope.

Time will start to fly by in a blur of first kisses, first makeouts, a couple drunken formals, watching her cook homemade gnocchi for you in the kitchen of your off-campus apartment from her great-grandmother's recipe, waving to her as she sits on the sidelines of all your club lax games, being terrified as she meets your parents for the first time, being even more terrified as you meet her parents for the first time. You'll get the red heart on Snapchat and you'll start tagging her in memes on Facebook, and she'll post a photo of the two of you in the Boston Commons on her Insta and get forty-seven comments from friends, ranging from the heart eyes emoji to "WHO IS HE?!". You'll start to fall into a routine, texting her every day when you

wake up to remind her that she's beautiful, and it seems soft at first, but you get used to it. You'll start skipping frat parties to stay in and drink boxed wine and watch stupid-ass movies like Monty Python and Borat together and wonder how you managed to find a girl who's willing to watch stupid-ass movies like Monty Python and Borat. You'll never get sick of the girl named Penelope. Not even once.

She'll make you wait to sleep with her. For seven months. This is the longest you've ever had to wait for anything in your entire life. She's never slept with anyone before, and she'll want it to be special. You won't be exactly sure what special means, but you'll take her out to dinner at Top of the Hub and book a hotel room in Back Bay because that seems pretty damn special to you. It'll do the trick. She'll be nervous, which will for some reason make you nervous. But she'll say she's ready. It'll be a night that you'll never forget, no matter how hard you try. The next morning when the two of you wake up, you'll tell her you love her for the first time. She'll say it back without hesitation.

Next thing you know, it'll be August. It'll have been nine months since your first date. The two of you have survived the terrors that are winter break and spring break apart from one another and have been smooth sailing together all the way through your summer internships. You'll be doing finance at JP Morgan Chase and she'll be doing grunt work for The Boston Globe to pay her dues, and you'll both be staying in your off-campus apartment for the summer. At first, she'll think it's dirty and gross and attack every surface with Lysol wipes, and you'll – gasp – help her. Every morning, you'll put on your slacks and button down and she'll don her

skirt and blouse, and you'll kiss her goodbye and tell her you love her. It'll feel mellow and safe, and every single morning that you tell her you love her, you'll mean it.

Her internship will end a week before yours, and she'll spontaneously decide to fly home to Bethesda, Maryland, to spend time with her family before senior year begins. You'll tell her that you'll miss her a lot and that you can't wait to see her in two weeks when everybody comes back to campus. She'll smile and tell you that she'll miss you a lot too, but that you'll talk every day and that she'll be back soon. When you drop her off at the airport and tell her you love her, she'll tell you she loves you too.

Her flight will arrive safely and her parents will pick her up from the airport. She'll text you that she's landed and that she has a lot of plans at home with friends she hasn't seen in a while, so she probably won't be able to talk very much for the next couple of weeks. You'll be finishing up your internship and trying to network for a full time position, and you'll barely even have time to talk to her anyways, so it's ok. You know you'll see her again in two weeks.

One week goes by, and your internship comes to an end. You won't get a full time offer, but only a couple of kids will and they're the really nerdy ones in obscure IT positions, so you won't take it personally. It'll be Saturday morning and you'll wake up without having to set alarm, and you'll relish the freedom that is summertime. Then you'll get a text from Penelope.

It'll say, "hey you, hope your last week of work went well! want to hear about it, but also gotta talk to u about something. you free to chat?" You'll text her back yes right away and get

excited to hear how her week at home was. You'll stare at her phone, waiting for her contact photo to pop up on the screen. It's a solo shot you took of her posing with the turtle statues in the public gardens. A few minutes later, she'll call.

Right off the bat, you'll be able to tell that something's... off. She'll answer all your questions and ask a couple of her own, but she won't really seem to care about your answers. You'll wish you could see her face because talking on the phone is just awkward and uncomfortable, but she'll say she doesn't have good enough service to FaceTime. Eventually, you'll ask what she wanted to talk to you about, and she'll hesitate. You'll ask if her parents are ok, if her dog is ok, if everything's ok. Then she'll break up with you.

What.

The.

Fuck.

Why is it that the girl is always the one who gets to cry? How is it fair that when she breaks up with you, she's the one who gets to cry?

She'll say it's because she sees your paths going in different directions. She'll say she cares about you as a person, but that she just doesn't feel the same way that she did in the beginning of the relationship. She'll say that she thinks she's a little more mature than you, and

that you'll be able to find someone else because you're a great guy and you deserve it. Literally none of the things she'll say will constitute a valid reason to break up, but there's absolutely nothing that you can do about it. You'll ask if she's serious, and she'll say yes. You'll tell her that you still love her and that things can change, and she won't say anything back. You'll just have to sit there and take it like a man as this girl named Penelope fucking rips your heart out of your chest.

She'll end the call by saying that she's always here for you if you ever need anything. You'll think to yourself, what the fuck. Because she's literally just told you that she won't be here for you ever again. She'll be the one to hang up first.

You won't know what to do, because the last thing you said to Penelope in person was that you love her, and the last thing that she said to you in person was that she loves you too. And now, one week later, she'll decide she doesn't love you. How can a person decide so fast, after so much love, to just... stop? It's not like deciding to cancel your Spotify subscription because Apple Music is better, or deciding to drop Advanced Principles of Economics because the professor is a dipshit who grades on a curve. It's like deciding to kill yourself. Penelope is no longer alive, no longer creating new and vivid memories in your own version of reality.

You won't know where to go from here. You'll never kiss her again. You'll never fuck her again. You'll never even talk to her again. You'll wonder if there even is anywhere to go from here. You'll wonder why you were put on this planet and if you should even be here any

longer because clearly you're not good enough for the one person you love (loved?) more than anybody else in the entire universe. You'll think that you'll never love anybody ever again.

You'll start having dreams about her every night and wake up feeling like she should be in your arms, because she was for the past two months of summer. You'll wake up and feel peaceful and happy and then feel the empty space in the bed next to you and remember.

You'll talk to your mom, who will tell you that everything will be okay and that she loves you no matter what, as though that helps in some way. You'll talk to your dad, who will tell you, son, I never liked her anyways and you could do so much better. He'll say, look at your mother, she's not the first woman I ever loved, but she's the best. You won't talk to Emma, but she'll start sending you funny memes every once in a while and try to convince you to take up karate or something, so you'll know that your mom told her what happened. For months, none of it will help.

School will start again, and life will go by in a blur. You won't see her walking around campus because she won't want to see you walking around campus. You'll wonder what classes she's taking, what building she'll be doing homework in, which Starbucks she'll mobile order her morning coffee to. You'll consider haunting those spots in hopes of another glimpse of her. Whenever you catch a glimpse of chunky glasses or a venti iced coffee, you won't be able to stop staring until you're sure it's not her. Every time you get a notification, you'll snatch up your phone, thinking it'll be from her. It never is. After a few weeks, you'll feel certifiably insane.

You'll throw yourself into club lax practices, absolutely tanking people, and you'll study more for Quantitative Econ and Accounting than you ever have in your entire life. You'll feel so fucking soft that you won't tell any of your friends how you're struggling. So instead, you'll drink more, and Juul more, and do anything you can possibly think of to forget the image of the beautiful girl etched into the back of your eyelids. You'll try fucking some other girls, but it won't ever be the same. Because nothing will ever be the same, not once it's already happened.

You'll feel like things will never get better. That you are an incomplete human being, a cripple. That you lost the one true love of your life. You'll feel like the whole world is ending.

And then, you won't.

You'll stop running off the lacrosse field after practice and immediately checking your phone to see if she's texted you, and you'll go to Chipotle for burritos with your teammates instead. You'll delete her hundreds of selfies off your phone one by one, day by day, and instead replace them with funny pictures of your buddies doing keg stands and acting like the complete idiots that they are at parties you'll attend. You'll start going out more and staying out later because you can. You'll get so much stronger in the weight room that your coach will notice because you spend an extra half hour there every day doing leg presses and pull ups. You'll actually start going on runs and end up becoming best friends with the second-to-last treadmill at the gym that never lets you down on the bad days. You'll buy a new cologne, because Sauvage by DIOR® actually sort of smells like burnt macaroni and cheese. You'll start asking other

people if they've ever been in love and finding solidarity, strength, and friendship. Or maybe you won't, and you'll keep it to yourself. Either way is fine. You'll buy some new posters to hang in the room of your off-campus apartment, and you'll find a new favorite playlist on Spotify of songs you've never heard before. You'll buy some pre-made gnocchi from Trader Joe's and learn how to cook it on your stovetop because your great-grandmother is dead and didn't leave you her recipe, and because who the heck even has the time or the energy to make their own homemade gnocchi? You might even (gasp!) clean your room.

You'll love Penelope forever, but a little less every day. You might fall in love with someone else one day. But not now. You'll learn to love other things. Your friends, your teammates, your family, your sport, your classes, your food, your bed. Yourself.

You'll look back and remember that party freshman year. The Stoplight one. Who was that girl again? Ah well, her name doesn't really matter. What matters is how far you've come from freshman year. You might not even recognize yourself anymore, and that's okay.

You won't ever feel completely whole again, and that's just life. But every day, you'll feel a little more like you. Trust me, it's all part of the process.