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Eastern Illinois University

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Where We Can't Follow:
A collection of short stories.
(TITLE)

BY
Megan Holt

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts - English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2009
YEAR

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Where We Can't Follow

Short Stories

Megan Holt
Eastern Illinois University
2009

Abstract

This humorous collection of short stories revolves around the lives of the patrons and employees who frequent the bars. When men and women come together to congregate over drinks, their conversations turn towards every topic except the important aspects of their various relationships. As underlying conflicts rise to the surface, and the situations become more comical, the characters are faced with a brief epiphany about the true nature of their personalities. Rather than becoming inspired by these moments of clarity, these men and women resist the urge to change. The liquor continues to flow, inhibitions flounder, and these characters hurtle down a path that can only lead to more comical situations.

For the barflies

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Preface

This humorous collection of short stories is a continuing project that focuses on the idea of the “anti-epiphany moment.” When men and women sit down to converse over a round of alcoholic beverages, truths about their own personalities and relationships subtly rise to the surface. However, rather than becoming inspired to change their behavior, these characters resist the urge to change and instead continue to exhibit the same type of flawed behavior they’ve always demonstrated. Although the characters may in fact desire a change of events within their lives, they fear becoming vulnerable by altering their usual behavioral patterns. Instead of taking the initiative to spark something new, they drink a few more cocktails, talk about everything other than what is important, and proceed to create some more comical blunders and distractions.

These narratives also remain connected through the theme of “unspoken conversations.” The men and women of these stories either cannot or will not speak about certain aspects of their personal lives. The characters attempt to distance themselves from uncomfortable conversations, and even though they go to great lengths not to speak about their relationships, readers become enlightened to the truths about these characters by the silences that surround the idle chatter. Although the conversations are often filled with jokes and laughter, readers and characters alike realize that something crucial is being concealed by the amount of effort it takes for the characters to continue their conversations.

In this collection of short stories, laughter and humor is another concept that is shared by both the readers and the characters. This project seeks to reflect truthful, if not honest aspects of human behavior. In past trends of narrative technique, authors relied

upon ideas such as repression, fear, anger, or sadness to build tension and suspense within their narratives. However, now, many contemporary authors, such as Binnie Kirschenbaum, Roald Dahl, and Rebecca Barry, are exploring the idea of using humor as a way of building suspension. Following in the path of these authors, these narratives also utilize laughter and jokes, as a way of increasing tension that is both felt by the readers and the characters alike.

Humor becomes a focal point for all these narratives because it has a deeper meaning than slapstick comedy. The characters make jokes and silly comments as a way of concealing some deeper, more emotionally charged statement. As the characters of these narratives struggle to avoid discussing certain topics, they continue to drink more liquor and display more comical behavior. And while their inhibitions fail, the characters do achieve a moment of clarity. However, all of the men and women of these narratives are creatures of habit, and instead of making some life altering decision, they drink some more and proceed to make some rather surprising decisions that can only lead them down a humorous path.

All of these concepts: humor, “the unspoken conversation”, and the “anti-epiphany” moment are all modern narrative techniques that are intended to reflect an aspect of realistic human interactions. Similarly, because men and woman often avoid certain poignant topics, refuse to change their behavior, and fill their conversations with humorous topics to deflect their true feelings, this collection of short stories also focuses on the idea of a realistic bar/pub setting. While the characters may not intend to discuss their private thoughts, they are often revealed over a round of drinks in an unlikely setting. These characters are no longer in their home or work environments, where their

actions can be predictably plotted by their surroundings. Instead, these men and women are faced with alcoholic beverages and a room full of virtual strangers, where some of their most honest, unscripted emotions are revealed. In the end, these characters realize that perfection is an ideal, and sometimes it is easier, or at least more entertaining, to embrace their flaws.

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The Whiskey Swing

Only the faint creak of the porch swing welcomes Claire home. There are no lights shining from inside of the house, and the familiar, blue minivan isn't parked in the driveway. House keys dangle from Claire's hand, but as she stands with her back to the front door, she can't help but to stare across the porch.

It's almost autumn now, and the sky is growing darker a little earlier each day. A quick glance down the street tells Claire that in the several years she's been gone, her little town has changed. There are new housing developments dotting the street, but Claire shivers, unnerved to realize that the sun stills sets in the same exact way. She turns her head, and just as she'd expected, the last few rays of sunlight bounce off the freshly painted porch swing, seeming to illuminate the seat in a dusky glow.

Claire spins on her heel and jams the key into the lock. She marches into the house and begins flipping on the lights, every last one of them that she can find. She pauses when she gets to the living room. The big bay window overlooks the porch, and with the curtains pushed aside, she can still see the swing, her swing, hanging motionless as it collects falling leaves.

Claire was seven the night her father told her he had an important announcement. He patted the seat of the swing and motioned for her to sit beside him. There was a gap between them, but Claire still remembers the scent of her father's aftershave lotion and the faint smell of Johnnie Walker coming from his breath. She hugged her knees to her chest, waiting while her father's long legs rocked them back and forth.

"I'm going to marry Marla," her father said. "She's going to come live here, with

us.”

Claire tipped her head to the side and pondered this information. She could not recall a time when Marla had not been around. She didn't live with Claire and her father, but every day, Marla was there, baking dinner or greeting Claire when she came home from school. Claire's eyes drifted to the dirty, fraying bracelet knotted around her ankle. She and Marla had made it together, at the Brownie's annual mother-daughter sleepover event.

Claire met her father's gaze, and she decided yes, she approved of his newfound decision. She thought of the way Marla pecked her father on the cheek each evening, before scooping up her purse and returning to own her home across town. Claire didn't think other people had homes like hers, but now she could envision being one of the normal kids who had two normal parents.

“Should I call her Mom, now?” Claire asked.

“No,” her father said. It seemed an eternity before he answered Claire's question. “No. You've always called her Marla. I'm sure that will be fine.”

There was a distant expression in her father's eyes, and Claire remembered thinking something seemed very different. Of course, she had always known her father wasn't like the other dads. Her father seldom played with her in the park, and he wasn't the sort of man to pop open cans of beer during the football season, but Claire adored him all the same. She thought her father's silver hair was handsome, and that his evening glass of whiskey made him appear dignified and even regal.

The chains suspending the porch swing squeaked and groaned, and as Claire watched her father, she remembered thinking for the very first time, he looked old. It

suddenly struck Claire that her father's news made perfect sense. She was a clever girl, and Claire understood that grownups were not allowed to have children until after they were married. Claire mulled this over, and since she figured it might be fun to boss around a little brother or sister, she asked her father if Marla was going to have a baby.

Her father opened his mouth as if to reply, but no words came out. He tugged on his shirt collar. It took a few attempts of opening and closing his jaw, but after a series of strangled, choking noises, Claire's father replied, "I don't think we are going to have any children."

"But, Dad," Claire persisted, "Don't you want more kids?"

Claire tilted her head back and met her father's silent gaze. His hand lingered beside her face, and for a moment, Claire was certain he was going to stroke the side of her cheek. Her father cleared his throat. His voice was raw and gravelly, but he told her he could never love another child as much as he loved her.

Her father abruptly stopped rocking the swing and rose to his feet. A hand reached down and clumsily patted Claire on the head.

She craned her neck, alerted to a sound she didn't quite recognize. The door to the house clicked shut, but not before Claire caught a glimpse of her father, pressing a hand to his mouth, as though stifling a sob.

At first, Claire only noticed the sound of the crickets filling the air. Her throat began to feel tight and constricted, and then she remembered tasting salty tears as they overflowed onto her lips. She had seen that wistful look in her father's eyes before, as if he could gaze into her eyes and discover something that was never there.

Claire hugged her knees closer to her chest, crying until her throat ached and her

body felt hollow. She remained in that spot, motionless and silent until her father called her to come inside. Claire climbed to her feet, and though she felt a little silly, she thought maybe if she focused her eyes on the brightest star in the sky, and maybe if she said a wish aloud, maybe it might come true. She sucked in a deep breath of air and tilted her head back, preparing herself to say, "Mom, I wish you were here." Nothing happened.

Claire instantly realized her mistake. She'd stepped back too far and the overhang of the porch blocked her view of the sky. Claire sighed and walked to the front door. She turned around one last time, and when she spotted the porch swing, she thought of her father.

Claire touched her lips. Her dad said she had her mother's smile. She didn't remember thinking the words in her head, but as Claire pushed open the door, she found herself whispering, "I wish I could miss you, too."

Claire yanks the curtains shut and sits on a couch. The bright, digital numbers of the mantle clock flash 8:10. Claire knows that Marla and her father will be driving back from the park soon, returning from their evening stroll.

Claire rubs her hands together, telling herself it's just a leftover chill from the cold outside air. She receives letters from Marla, one per week, containing updates on her father's condition. Except for special occasions and holidays, Claire never replies. But for some reason, Marla keeps sending the notes and Claire keeps them filing them away.

Claire shakes her head from side to side. "Idiot, idiot, idiot," she mutters. She

doesn't know why she hangs onto the letters, or why she keeps them in a box beside her bed. Claire knows she should just throw them in the trash. The notes aren't exactly the type of keepsake she ever imagined herself hanging onto, and they certainly aren't the type of thing she'd pass on to her kids.

The thought of children makes Claire's lips twist into an ugly smile, and she thinks, at the rate she's going, she'll be lucky if she brings home a goldfish.

The sound of the front door opening causes Claire to spring to her feet. She reminds herself she's prepared for this, and she knows the rules. Claire mustn't act surprised if her father behaves strangely, and under no circumstances is she to remind her father of the memories he's lost.

"I knew that was your car out front," Marla says. She steers Claire's father through the doorway, then holds her arms open for a hug.

Claire peeks over Marla's shoulder. She can smell the aftershave lotion even before she sees her father's face.

"Well, say hello." Claire isn't sure who Marla's comment is directed towards, but both she and her father seem mute and rooted to the floor.

Marla pats her husband on the arm. "Lou, doesn't she look pretty?"

Claire feels as if there's something clogging her throat. Her father looks older now, but then again, that seems to be the case for everyone these days. He's still tall and broad shouldered, and since Claire never inherited her father's height, he still towers above her head. She thinks it isn't fair, and anyone who can't remember his own life, or his own daughter, just shouldn't look the same.

"Hello," her father says.

Claire mouths the word “hi” but can’t seem to find her voice.

“Who are you?” her father asks.

Marla starts to rub her husband’s back, but before she can intervene and respond for her stepdaughter, Claire forces a smile to her face.

“I’m Helen.” Claire silently curses herself, and wishes she’d come up with any other name. “Helen” is the alias title she goes by when she hands out fake telephone numbers to the drunk, persistent men in the bars.

Marla’s brow creases, and though she can’t possibly know the reasoning behind Claire’s fake name selection, she seems annoyed just the same.

Claire looks down and realizes that her father has extended his hand. She pauses before sliding her fingers across his outstretched palm. She revels for a moment, thinking his hands are just the same, strong and permanently callused from the years he labored in the grain factory. Her father yanks on her arm. Claire pitches forward, releasing a shrill squeak as she tries to regain her balance.

Her father pulls her close, and with his free hand, he thumps her on the back.

“Good to meet you.”

Claire’s father releases her hand and proceeds to walk away. He does not ask how she knows Marla, or how she even got into the house, but instead begins picking up decorative throw pillows on the couch, searching for something that appears to be missing.

“You could’ve told him your name.” Marla shakes her head and sighs. She wanders over to the coffee table and picks up the remote. Marla pushes a button and the sounds of fans cheering at a baseball game fill the room.

Claire waits until Marla returns to her side. “He doesn’t remember anything, does he?”

“You look good.” Marla smiles a sad smile as she inspects Claire’s appearance from head to toe. “It’s been a long time.”

Claire clears her throat. She notices the dark circles under Marla’s eyes and the way she now hunches over. Claire realizes that if they were standing on a street, a casual observer might think Marla were her elderly grandmother. Claire whispers, “You look great.”

Marla bobs her head. “I keep busy. I guess so do you.”

Claire begins to fidget, not liking where this conversation is heading. She’s a college student now, an Economics student in a graduate department. She’s older than most of her peers, and though she’s turning thirty-one next month, she seldom notices the age difference. Marla doesn’t need her here at home anymore. The initial shock of Claire’s father’s condition has long worn off, and now Claire relishes having a life and a schedule that requires all of her attention. Claire sees the soft smile on Marla’s lips and she ducks her head, looking down at her feet.

“We’re both very proud,” Marla says.

Claire flinches. “He isn’t proud. He doesn’t know who I am.”

Claire turns her head and watches as her father claps and cheers “go Cubs.”

Marla wraps an arm around Claire’s shoulders. “He’s in there, somewhere. You’ll see.”

A weekend visit, Claire tells herself, just a few days out of the year. She rolls over

in her old bed and opens her eyes. A picture of her father and mother embracing on their wedding day smile back at her. Claire yawns and reaches out a hand. She lifts the picture frame up in the air and holds it in front of her face. Her father had been right; she really does have her mother's smile.

She sets the photograph back into place and pulls herself up in bed. She refuses to look at the picture again, and instead kicks off her blankets. The picture still gives her a funny feeling, and Claire just can't envision her father ever being romantic with anyone.

The smell of bacon and eggs wafts into Claire's room. Her stomach rumbles and she hops from her bed, stumbling down the hall. She passes Marla and her father's bedroom, spying the two perfectly made beds out of the corner of her eye.

Claire groans and spins right back around. She untangles the sheets and drags the comforter up from the foot of her bed. It's a sloppy clean up a job in comparison to Marla's handiwork, but a significant improvement all the same.

Claire makes her way downstairs and plops down at the table. There's a plate of bacon waiting at her spot.

"I can't believe you get up this early," Claire says, in between cramming her mouth full of food.

"You look you haven't eaten in a month," Marla says. "Do you want anything else? I can make you eggs and toast. Oh, there's cereal too. And waffles in the freezer."

Claire laughs. "I forget to grocery shop. This is fine."

"Well, do you want milk or juice? How about coffee?"

Marla doesn't wait for a response, and sets a steaming cup coffee in front of

Claire. She turns around and walks to the refrigerator, returning with the carton of milk. Claire motions for Marla to have a seat. The older woman scoots a chair back, and sits across from Claire. They each have a mug of coffee and for a minute, the only noise Claire hears is the sound of Marla blowing on the steaming liquid.

Claire stands up and moves to the silverware drawer. She tugs on the drawer, but it only opens a crack. She pulls again.

“I think your drawer is stuck,” Claire calls over her shoulder.

Marla appears at her side. “Here, let me.”

Marla expertly slides a finger in the crevice and pushes down on a piece of plastic Claire had overlooked. The drawer slides open and Marla hands her a spoon.

“Is that a child proof tab?” Claire reaches out a hand and pulls on a cabinet door. The same thing happens, and the door barely opens.

“Well,” Marla says. “Sometimes it’s hard to keep an eye on your father.”

Claire looks around, surprised she hadn’t noticed that the usual cooking utensil and kitchen gadgets are no longer covering the countertops.

“What happened?”

“Oh,” Marla says. She begins opening various cabinet doors and pulls out a bowl and a box of cereal. “I think he saw a commercial on TV around Easter time.”

Claire returns to her seat and waits for Marla to continue.

“He found the food dye and decided to decorate the eggs. I was in the shower, but by the time I got back, there was dye everywhere.”

Claire’s eyebrows creep upward as the sudden impact of Marla’s words begin to register.

“Here, dear.” Marla sets a bowl of cereal in front of Claire and reaches for the carton of milk. Claire watches as Marla fills the cereal bowl until the little cheerios begin to float. She reaches over and splashes some milk into Claire’s coffee cup, as well.

“Do you mean?” Claire twists in her seat, peering after Marla as she returns the milk to the fridge. “Do you mean that Dad dyed all the eggs?”

Marla nods her head.

“All the eggs? All the raw eggs?”

A soft chuckle escapes Marla’s lips. “Every last one of them. Good lord, you should have seen his hands. He was blue and green up to his elbows for a week.”

Claire stirs the liquid in her mug before the licking the spoon. She’s just about to plunge her spoon into the cereal, when her head snaps up.

“Where is he now?”

Marla returns to her chair, groaning as she eases into the seat. “Reading the paper. He likes that.”

“Is he ok by himself?”

Marla clasps her mug between both hands. “Oh, sweetie. His brain is just a little-”

“Scrambled,” Claire interjects. She immediately regrets her words and looks down at her cereal bowl.

“He has plenty of good days,” Marla says. “Even if he can’t remember everything, he’s still capable of intelligent thought.”

“What about the eggs?” Claire shifts her weight and wiggles in her seat.

“I didn’t say there weren’t occasional glitches.” Marla’s voice trails off. “But he’s not as gone as you might think.”

Claire doesn't know what to say, and since she's not sure if she is willing to believe Marla's words, she finishes her breakfast in silence. Claire is chasing the last of her cheerios around the bowl when Marla's voice catches her attention.

"You know, your father always gets up at five o'clock."

Claire shrugs her shoulders. Her father always used to get up at that hour, every morning, even on the weekends when he didn't work.

Claire scoots her chair back and begins collecting her dirty dishes. She'd offer to wash them, but of course, Marla would only tell her to set them in the sink.

"It's just a biological clock thing," Claire says. "He doesn't remember."

She excuses herself to go take a shower when Marla's voice stops her in her tracks.

"I told him you were coming."

Claire stops in the doorway and turns around.

"I told him Claire is coming."

"And?" Claire says. "It didn't mean anything, did it?"

"I think it did." Marla's voice is soft and Claire has to strain to make out her words. "He painted your swing that same exact day."

They don't tell Claire's father it's his eightieth birthday. He wouldn't understand. Marla drives them to O'Flannery's that evening, a little Irish pub and restaurant. Claire sits quietly in the backseat of Marla's minivan, trying desperately to think of something to say. They'd driven here countless times before, when Claire was younger, and it seems strange that this is the first time she can't think of a word to say.

Marla begins to hum along to the radio and Claire rests her forehead against the window. There'd been a time when she used to love this routine. Claire would chatter away at dinner, and later, at home, her father would tell her stories on the porch swing until it was time for her to go to bed. Claire sighs. She knows things will never be the same, and she wonders: what's the point?

They're seated in a booth when Claire hears a voice say, "Hi. My name is Bill. I'll be your server tonight."

Claire turns her head and sees there's a laminated nametag dangling near her face. She notices that it reads "William."

"Bill?" Claire says. The chubby waiter smiles down at her. "Why does your nametag say William?"

"Claire," Marla hisses. "Don't be rude."

"Who's Claire? I thought your name was Helen."

For a second, there's a silence. Claire's mouth drops open as she sees the confusion etched on her father's face.

"Umm," Claire says. "I am Helen. Marla's just confused. She must've mixed me up with someone else."

There's an awkward silence at the table, and Claire ducks her head, avoiding Marla's icy glare.

The waiter coughs. "My name is William. But people call me "Bill" for short."

"Wouldn't it make more sense if people called you "Will" for short?" Claire asks.

The waiter makes a funny sound, and Claire thinks it must've been his attempt at

a laugh. "I guess I could take it up with my parents, but it seems a little late for that."

Claire's father slaps a palm to the table, and even though it doesn't make a loud noise, Claire, Marla, and the waiter all turn to stare.

"Well, holy hell," Claire's father says. "If you've all figured out your names, I'd like to order a drink." He smiles as though he's made a wonderful joke. Claire tilts her head to the side, thinking it's a little strange that the most confused person at the table seems to have the best grasp on the situation.

Bill clears his throat. "What can I bring you all tonight?"

Marla orders an iced tea, Claire asks for a vodka tonic, and then her father requests a whiskey. Not just any whiskey, but a Johnnie Walker on the rocks.

"You're drinking that?" Claire gasps.

"Why not?" Her father says. "It's only one."

The waiter's gaze flies to Marla's face, and by his horrified expression, Claire can tell the man thinks he's not supposed to serve liquor to such an elderly customer. "Is it ok?" the waiter asks.

"Of course it's ok," Claire's father says. "Why wouldn't it be?"

Marla bobs her head. The waiter's shoulders relax and he lets out a sigh.

"Oh, Lou," Marla pats her husband's hand. "Everything's fine."

Claire looks down at the table and as their waiter departs she mutters, for no particular reason, "Bye, Will."

"You know." Claire looks up and meets her father's speculative gaze. "You're a rather strange woman."

Claire laughs. "My father used to say I was the reason his hair turned gray."

Her father begins to chuckle. "I bet he was right. He sounds like he was a good kind of man."

Claire's gaze shifts to Marla's face. There's a faint trace of a smile as she holds Claire's steady gaze. "Yes, her father is a wonderful man."

They'd ordered dinner, and Claire had asked for a salad, just to placate Marla. Claire's stomach had gurgled and whined, and earlier she'd felt certain her internal organs were attempting to turn themselves into knots. She's had a martini now, and two vodka tonics. There's a warm, tingly sensation in the pit of her belly, and Claire sighs with relief.

"Heather?" her father says. "No. no. Wait a moment. That's not it."

Claire looks at her father's face and sees that an angry scowl is beginning to form. She remembers reading in Marla's letters that her father will sulk all day if he becomes aware he's forgotten something.

"Helen," Marla says. "Her name is Helen."

"That's right," Claire's father says. His face relaxes and he smiles once again. "Tell me, Helen, why haven't you mentioned your mother?"

"I never knew her," Claire carefully keeps her face calm and expressionless. "She died when I was a baby."

"Oh. Well, that's just tragic," her father says. "But how did she die?"

Claire turns her head to look at Marla, but the older woman simply shrugs her shoulders and looks away. Claire twirls the stem of her martini glass between her fingers. Nothing seems to have jogged her father's memory yet, and she supposes,

there's no harm in answering his question.

"In a car crash." Claire takes a sip from her glass. "A semi truck hit a patch of ice and lost control."

"I see." Claire's father bobs his head. "And it hit your mother's car."

Claire nods.

"Well that sounds like a gruesome ending," her father says. "I hope you were not in the car."

Claire finishes the remainder of her drink in one gulp. She sets the glass down and shakes her head. "I was at home. With my dad."

Claire swings her legs out of the booth and excuses herself to use the restroom. When she returns to the booth she passes Bill, or William, or whoever that man is that's been waiting on their table. She asks if he can bring her another vodka tonic, and to make it stiff.

"Now what are you drinking?" Marla points at the glass the waiter sets on the table.

"Vodka tonic." Claire takes a sip from the straw.

The waiter begins clearing their empty plates. When he sees Claire's virtually untouched salad, he asks if she is finished. She plucks a cherry tomato from underneath a leaf of lettuce, then nods that she is done.

"You sure do like those tonic things, don't you?" Claire's father says.

Claire feels the tomato explode between her teeth before she swallows. She nods her head. "Vodka tonics," she says, "vodka martinis, cranberry and vodka. I think I just

like vodka.”

Her father laughs. Marla leans in and asks the waiter to bring them their check.

Claire’s enjoying the fuzzy effect of her alcohol, and she decides she should be bold and should further their conversation. She gestures to her father’s nearly empty glass. “My father always said that it was important to take the time to enjoy the finer things in life. He was a whiskey drinker, too.”

Claire’s father looks down at his glass. He picks it up and tilts it in the light.

“He only had one a night,” Claire says, “except on special occasions. Then he had two.”

Her father extends his glass across the table, and Claire realizes this is his signal for a toast. He looks at Marla, and she too reluctantly raises her glass of ice tea.

“Here’s to a special day,” Claire’s father says. “I got to meet you.”

The three of them clink their glasses together. Claire’s father takes a final sip and places the glass on the table. He leans in, motioning for Claire to come closer.

“Good idea,” he says in a loud whisper. “When I get home, I’m going to have another.”

It’s a silent car ride home. Marla doesn’t hum or sing along to the radio, and both Claire and her father stare out the windows. Claire’s father makes a beeline for the porch swing once Marla parks the car.

“Just go,” Marla says. She tilts her head in the direction of Claire’s father. “He’s waiting for you.”

Claire’s father scoots to the side, and she doesn’t even have to ask him if she can

sit beside him. She sits stiff and erect, wondering how long it's been since she sat in this spot.

"I'll have a glass of whiskey," her father says, as Marla shuffles past. Claire's father juts out his thumb in her direction. "Bring one for Heather. No, wait. Bring one for Helen here, too."

"Oh, no. I don't need one." Claire springs to her feet. She sees the circles under Marla's eyes instantly feels ashamed. "I'll get it."

"No," Marla shakes her head. "You just sit. I'll get it."

Claire sinks back down onto the swing, listening as Marla's footsteps fade into the house.

"Nice night." Claire's father begins to rock the swing back and forth.

"Won't be long before it's too cold to come out here."

"I used to have a swing," Claire stares onto the street. Nothing moves. "It was my favorite part of the house. I always thought I'd have one when I grew up."

"Well, don't you?"

Claire shakes her head. "I go to school. I don't have a house."

"Aren't you married?" Her father leans in, as if inspecting Claire's hand for a ring.

Claire tips her head back and laughs. "I don't even have a boyfriend."

Her father clucks his tongue. "Well, that's not right. A pretty girl like you should have a boyfriend."

Claire smiles and looks at the thoughtful expression on her father's face. "I don't think I'd know what to do with a boyfriend, even if I had one."

Her father pats her knee. "Sounds to me like you don't want to grow up."

Before Claire can think of a response, the front door swings open. There's a glass of Johnny Walker on the rocks in each of Marla's hands. Claire takes her drink, noticing that it's mostly ice with a splash of whiskey. She sniffs the glass and her stomach makes an audible rumble. She never really did like the stuff.

"Is this for me?" Claire's father takes the other glass in his hands.

Marla nods her head.

"Well, that's a surprise." Claire's father begins to raise the glass to his lips. "It must be my lucky day."

Claire pats the seat. "There's room for you, too."

"No thanks, Dear. I'll let you two catch up." Marla frowns at the drink clasped in Claire's hand. She bends down and kisses her stepdaughter on the head. "My two little drunks." Marla sighs. "It's a good thing I love you."

It's nine-thirty when Marla reappears in the doorway. It's pitch black out and the light above the porch bathes Claire's father's face in a swirl of shadows. He's already forgotten her name. He doesn't even call her Heather, anymore. Her father's in the middle of explaining the tale end of the Cubs' winning season when Marla announces she's going to bed. Claire's father hoists himself to his feet.

"I guess that means it's lights out," he says. "I have to get up in the morning."

It's on the tip of Claire's tongue to inquire why her father must get up at five o'clock in the morning, but she knows she must not say this.

"Aren't you coming?" Her father pauses, with his empty whiskey glass in hand.

Claire stretches out her legs. "I'm going to stay out here a while longer."

Her father seems to think nothing of this, and he walks inside without saying so much as "good night." Marla tells her not to stay out too long, but then she leaves and closes the door behind her.

Only the distant sound of a dog barking keeps Claire company. She doesn't know how long how she's been sitting there, but eventually Claire's gaze drops to the empty glass beside her feet. She reaches down and picks it up. She doesn't particularly like Johnnie Walker, but it's the only liquor in the house.

Claire tiptoes back inside, careful not to wake anyone. She finds the whiskey bottle in a kitchen cabinet. It takes a few attempts at fumbling with the childproof latch, but eventually she's able to pull the bottle from its usual shelf. Claire refills her glass. She's about to return to the porch when she glances down at the Johnnie Walker label. With a drink in one hand and a bottle in another, she teeters her way back to the swing.

The first few tentative sips make Claire wrinkle her nose. The golden liquid leaves a funny taste in her mouth, but as time wears on, she gradually forgets to notice. Claire never entirely drains her glass, but whenever it gets a little low, she pours in a bit more whiskey.

Claire stares at nothing in particular, wondering if she has a favorite memory on the swing. She has so many of them. Before Marla and her father exchanged vows at City Hall, Claire had laid on her back and dangled off the swing. She'd fallen of course, and smashed her nose on the ground. Her face had been a gooky mess, but Marla didn't scream and yell the way some mothers did. She scooped Claire up in her arms, and

gently dabbed away the blood. She waited until the following morning before scolding Claire: “ Proper young ladies did not behave like monkeys.”

There were other memories, too. Claire remembers when she used to do her homework on this swing. She thinks of how she sat here and painted her nails, and how she and her date posed here for pictures for her senior prom.

Claire looks at the empty street in front of her. On the morning of her first driving lesson, her father sat here, reading the morning paper. Marla had told her to put the car in reverse, and so that’s what Claire had done. She’d waved to her father over the steering wheel and for a while it seemed that nothing was wrong. Claire didn’t recall thinking she had ran anything over; she never felt a bump.

Her father had jumped to his feet and begun to wave his arms in frantic circles. Claire pressed the brake and put the car in park. Marla told her to step out of the car. Claire had backed over the trash can, had gotten the damn thing latched onto the back bumper. There’d been a trail of the previous night’s dinner winding down the street. Little, gnawed on chicken bones and soggy corn cobs decorated the pavement.

Claire reaches down and refills her glass. She yawns and peers at her drink.

Claire thinks her best memories of her father are tied to the swing. When she was younger, she hadn’t noticed the long hours her father worked. Claire hadn’t given a second thought to the danger he faced, and how her father never complained about operating heavy machinery or repairing the factory’s metal vats. Claire supposes she’d been a naïve child, or at least sheltered one. But she did remember thinking her father was a gentle man, and even though he couldn’t afford to take her and Marla on an exotic cruise, once a week he’d treat them to dinner.

At O'Flannery's, Claire's father would quiz her about her day at school. He'd ask about her friends, and when he should expect her report card. But later, in the evening, he'd sip on that glass of Johnny Walker while he perched on the swing. Claire listened to stories about how he and her mother met. He'd waited until late in life to get married, but as her father said, you couldn't rush a good thing.

Claire finishes the glass of whiskey. She pulls her feet onto the swing, and just like she'd done so many years ago, she hugs her knees to her chest. Everything seems to sway back and forth, and though she's not certain if she's just feeling the effects of the whiskey, Claire thinks the swing is gently rocking. Her eyelids begin to droop, and it isn't long before Claire closes her eyes.

It's not the bright rays of sunlight that wakes Claire; it's still too early for that. She hears the noise of a door opening, and forgetting where she's at, she rolls over. She makes a muffled thud as her back lands on the ground. Claire's eyes aren't even all the way open when she says, "Oh, God. That's going to leave a mark."

Claire tilts her head and sees that two pairs of eyes are staring down at her. Her father looks confused. Marla's narrowed eyes seem almost black and glittery.

Claire jerks on the pant leg of her jeans, realizing that her foot is still entangled in the chain of the swing. Her body slides all the way onto the floor and Claire's shoulder knocks over a glass. She watches as the empty glass rolls past her head. She sees the bottle of Johnnie Walker, too. It doesn't look as full as it did the previous evening, but at least Claire didn't land on that.

"Good morning, sunshine," her father says. In one long stride Claire's father

steps over her body, taking her place on the swing. He shakes out a newspaper and unfolds it so that the sports page blocks Claire's view of his face.

Claire drags herself to a seated position. She groans. She looks at the sleeve of her father's heavy sweater. Her nose feels congested and clogged, and when she breathes through her mouth, her breath hangs in the air. Claire cannot recall noticing a drop in temperature, and she decides it must have happened overnight, while she was sleeping.

Marla doesn't look at Claire. Her footsteps shuffle away and Claire watches as the door swings shut. Claire wobbles to her feet. She feels stiff and disoriented as she flops onto the swing. Her father grunts. The swing lurches back and forth, but the man beside her doesn't speak or even lower his paper.

Claire sits with her hands clasped in lap, debating what she should do next. She turns her head at the sound of the front door and the scent of fresh coffee.

"Here," Marla holds a mug out to Claire. "Take this."

Marla's lips are pursed and thin, but she doesn't say another word. Coffee sloshes over the rim of the cup as Claire grasps the mug between both hands. She tries not to squirm. "Hot," she says.

"Mmmhmm," Marla says. "It's strange how the coffee pot makes it like that."

Claire groans and rises to her feet. "I think I need aspirin." She follows Marla back inside. "Wouldn't you know," Marla calls over her shoulder. "We're fresh out."

Later, Claire showers and dresses, concealing the bags under her eyes with layers of makeup. If it weren't for the way her knees occasionally tremble, she'd think that last night's drinking binge had never really happened.

Marla doesn't lecture Claire. She doesn't say much of anything. She'd clucked her tongue once and murmured, "What will the neighbors say," but then she'd turned away. She'd grown silent after that, and Claire has a heavy feeling that she's become a bit of a disappointment in Marla's eyes.

Claire packs her bags into the trunk of her car. She exhales a deep breath before returning inside, where she knows her father and Marla are waiting.

"It was nice to meet you," Claire says to her father, for lack of anything else to say.

"Indeed," her father agrees. "What's your name again.?"

"Helen," she says.

"It's Claire," Marla interjects. Her hands are on her hips.

Claire's father leans in and peers into her face. "Young lady, shouldn't you know who you are?"

Claire bobs her head. She's silent until she's certain that she can trust her voice not to crack. "I'm Claire."

Her father seems to accept this answer, and he tilts his head to side. "I like it. It suits you."

Claire turns to Marla and announces she'd better be going. Her father and Marla walk with her onto the porch. Claire turns to hug Marla goodbye, and she surprised at the strength of the little, old woman's embrace. Claire squeezes her back.

"Come back," Marla whispers in her ear. "You're always welcome."

Claire steps back and ducks her head. She hears her father muttering "Claire" over and over again.

“Dad-” Claire’s father doesn’t pay her any attention. He doesn’t notice his daughter’s slipup or the way Marla flashes Claire a warning stare.

“Claire,” he says. A wide grin covers his face. “Clear and bright. That’s what it means. Did you know that your names means clear and bright?”

Claire gasps. There’s something sure and certain about her father’s tone of voice. Although she could dismiss his words as some sort of gibberish or nonsense, she knows he’s speaking the truth. She accepts that this is one of her father’s memories. It escaped that mental barrier, and as quickly as it floated to the surface, she knows it will swiftly float away.

Claire’s eyes feel heavy and watery, but she smiles. “I didn’t know that.”

Her father unexpectedly pulls her into his arms. Claire’s face is pressed against his shirt and the scent of aftershave lotion fills her nose. He lets go of her and takes a step back. There’s a funny expression on his face as he holds Claire’s steady gaze.

“You remind me of someone,” he says.

Claire’s breath catches in her throat, and for a moment she allows herself to hope that maybe her father still remembers her. Her father shakes his head. The complacent stare returns to his eyes.

“Don’t forget to visit,” her father says.

Claire backs away and waves once she reaches the edge of the porch. “I’ll try to come more often.”

Claire slides into the seat of her car, and when she looks up Marla and her father are still waiting. She starts her car and cracks the window. She’s too far away to hear her father’s words, but as the man looks at his wife he says, “Come here more often? Has

she been here before?”

Marla giggles. “Oh, Lou.”

The man shakes his head and returns to the porch swing. He waves to the woman driving down the street. He turns to Marla and says, “You know, I think that girl is still confused.”

A Toast to the Terminally Single

It's an ugly pub, by most anyone's standards. The blazing, red zit on Georgetown's upturned nose. People like to pretend that Tippy's Bar isn't there. They'll avert their gaze or cross the street, whatever it takes to distance themselves from the eyesore sitting directly opposite the town's Presbyterian church.

The employees love it, the hypocrisy that is. Everyone knows that it was the church's subtle attempt to run them out of business, buying up all the surrounding land. Tippy's is the only bar, and the only establishment for that matter, without any nearby parking. It was a brilliant plan intended to dissuade customers from frequenting the pub. It was genius in theory, anyway, until it backfired. Now, instead of allowing customers to stagger off to cars parked in reasonable proximity, the town is left to contend with drunks wandering loose in every direction. It's not unusual to see the staff at Tippy's scanning the newspaper's police reports after a busy night. There's even an article about a preacher discovering a man passed out, spread eagle on the church's doorstep stapled to the wall.

The churchgoers usually just wag their fingers in disgust, as opposed to admitting that Tippy's isn't going under. It's easy to blame the moral demise of society on a bunch of twenty-something-year-olds packed around a bar, but there's still something taboo about the whole situation. Nobody likes to admit that even on slow days, Tippy's crams in more customers than the church with all its offers of divine, spiritual guidance.

She couldn't hold it any longer. Christina hated the women's bathroom in Tippy's. It was cramped with only three stalls, and there was usually a line trailing out the door on Friday nights. She'd been the opening bartender this afternoon, and ever

since her shift ended, she'd been re-circulating her paycheck on drinks she didn't need. She'd been drinking all day and holding it in for as long as she dared, but now Christina's bladder seemed to whimper in pain and she knew she'd have to break the seal. At first, when she pulled open the bathroom door, she'd been relieved there was an open stall. Now she didn't know what to do. The stall on the far end was clogged, and there was someone revisiting their dinner in the first one. It didn't seem safe, squatting on a toilet when at any moment projectile vomit might shoot across the floor and drench her feet. She'd have to wait.

A girl knocked on the closed door. "Are you ok," she called to her friend.

Christina adjusted her miniskirt and pretended to fix her makeup in front of the mirror. A golden-bronze face with deep-set eyes stared back at her. Other than lip-gloss and suntan lotion, she didn't bother with cosmetics; she didn't have to. Her sloppy ponytail and dark complexion suited her. Either people liked her or they didn't—she doubted lipstick and mascara would make a bit of difference. She watched in the mirror as the friend knocked on the stall door.

"I just want you to know," a slurred voice responded from inside the stall.

Christina heard the unmistakable splash of vomit hitting the toilet. She tried not to flinch. The friend guarding the door met her gaze and mouthed "sorry."

"I just want you to know that if I don't tell you later—" The vomiting started up again. There was a pause. Christina heard the girl tear off some toilet paper.

"If I don't tell you later, I had a really great time." The girl started coughing and spluttering again. Christina and the puker's friend looked at each other. They both began to laugh.

“So what are you girls celebrating, tonight?” Christina didn’t recognize the girl guarding the stall. She looked dressed up, wobbly too, probably not in much better shape than her friend. Definitely not the type of girls to make heavy drinking a habit, she decided.

“Her boyfriend just broke up with her,” the girl whispered.

Christina bobbed her head. She chewed her lip, looking as though she were deep in thought. Under normal circumstances, the situation would’ve irritated her; she still had to pee. Lately, though, she’d developed a weak spot for the drunk and the pathetic. Christina gently rapped her knuckles on the door and asked the girl to let her in.

She listened as the girl dragged her body across the floor. The door creaked open. There was puke everywhere: in the toilet, down the toilet, stuck to the wall, a little bit dripping from the ends of the girl’s hair.

Christina smoothed her skirt and crouched down to the girl’s eyelevel. She couldn’t tell if the girl had been crying or it was due to the gag reflex, but her eyes were red and swollen and her cheeks streaked with tears.

Christina tore off a wad of toilet paper and dabbed at the girl’s face. “It’s ok,” she said. “It feels better, doesn’t it?”

“What’s a guy have to do get a drink in this place,” a man shouted. He and his friends had been drinking all night, though clearly they didn’t know how to tip. “Man, I just need some shots. What’s the hold up?”

Ally walked past him. “And for you?” she asked the woman next to him.

“Oh come on,” the man shouted. He waved a wad of crumpled dollar bills in

Ally's face. She ignored him, retrieving the beer the woman had ordered instead. She'd let Craig handle this one. Craig was an asshole, everyone said so. Either he'd make a bouncer haul the guy out the door, or he'd just handle the situation with his usual anti-social charm.

The drunk stopped hollering for a moment. Ally pushed a strand of hair out of her face, watching him out of the corner of her eye. She knew the type. Polo shirt, gelled hair. He'd probably just signed up for the ROTC.

Ally watched as the man's attention switched to another girl standing at the bar. She looked uncomfortable, folding her arms over her chest. The guy teetered back and forth, leaning in to peer down her shirt. Ally wondered if she should call a bouncer over before the man tried to burry his head in her cleavage and motorboat the poor girl. She craned her neck, scanning the room for Nick. She couldn't catch his eye. Some old lady kept rubbing his arm. There was a new bouncer on duty tonight, but they never knew what to do. Ally sighed. It was one of those nights.

Craig wandered over. He propped his elbow on the counter, resting his chin in his hand. When the drunk swung around to start yelling again, he came eye to eye with Craig, their faces separated by mere inches. He jerked backwards, letting out a high, pre-pubescent shriek. People began to laugh and point.

Ally smothered her own laughter as she watched some of the dollar bills the man had been clutching float to the ground. He bent down to snatch them up. He looked flushed and embarrassed as he straightened back up.

Craig towered over him. "What do you want, Princess?" People started to snicker.

The guy's face turned an even more alarming shade of red. He cleared his throat. "Four shots of Crown." He puffed out his chest.

Craig turned his head and looked towards the top shelf of the bar. He looked back at the drunk. "You want four shots of Crown, what?"

The man looked confused.

Craig smiled, one of his infamous, condescending grins. "You want four shots of Crown, *please*," Craig said. The man's eyes widened. "Come on say it," Craig urged. He lowered his voice into a mocking whisper. "Say please. Say pretty please."

"Please," the man squeaked. "Pretty, pretty please."

"I have to get back to work." Nick backed away from the large woman in front of him.

"Why do you always look so angry?" She leaned in, stretching out a hand to run her fingers over his biceps. "Every time I'm here, you look so mean."

Nick wrinkled his nose as she moved towards him. She was even more unattractive up close. There were crows feet around her eyes, her halter-top exposed some sagging flesh, even her lips were coated with ugly brown-red lipstick. Great, a cougar.

Nick looked for somewhere to run, but she had him cornered, his back pressed against a wall. She looked down at the crotch of his jeans. He jerked his head away. She reeked of overpowering perfume and cigarettes. He could see her dark brown roots and gray hairs from this angle.

"I'm not mean," Nick repeated. "I have a job to do. You're in the way."

“What’d I do?” the woman protested. She straightened her shoulders. Her shirt rode up, exposing a roll of fat. Nick slapped a hand over his mouth.

“You have to go,” he said. “I’ve already asked you to leave twice.”

“I did leave,” the woman said. “But I came back to see you.”

God, she was drunk. Where was Christina or Ally when Nick needed them? They usually jumped at the chance to play resident cock-block. “Leave,” Nick said. “Just leave, and don’t come back.” He’d kicked her out the second time for sneaking in the back door. “You’re drunk and you’re causing a disturbance.”

Nick peered over her head. There was something going on at the bar, people were jeering at some guy in a polo shirt. He couldn’t find Christina. Last he’d checked, she’d been drinking at the bar.

“Ok, ok, baby.” The woman stumbled and flung her hands out to brace her fall. Nick caught her by the arm before she crashed to the floor. She recovered her footing, blushing and tugging down her shirt. Her eyes looked glassy, as if threatening to spill a few tears.

“I think you should sit down,” Nick said. Something in voice changed, and he sounded almost tired, or maybe defeated. He wanted to despise the woman; she really was a nuisance. He might’ve let her nosedive onto the floor if she hadn’t reminded him so much of his own mother, a woman who’d wasted her entire life drinking in trashy bars and bringing home equally sleazy men. Nick had spent most of his childhood being introduced to “Uncle Jimmy” or “Uncle Ray.” He didn’t even know his own father. Hell, the man probably didn’t know he had a kid either, so maybe it was a fair tradeoff.

The woman jerked her arm out of Nick’s grasp, as if just realizing he’d been

propping her up. "I'm fine," she said, dabbing at the corners of her eyes. "I don't need your help. I'm fine."

Nick smiled, his patient smile, the one he'd perfected years ago to placate his mother after she'd woken up from one of her mid afternoon naps. "I know," he said. "You're better than fine."

The woman paused. Her eyes narrowed, searching Nick's face for some hint of mockery. She gave him a weak smile. "It's these shoes, you know. I don't usually wear heels."

Nick nodded his head, agreeing they were certainly to blame for her lack of balance. He suggested she sit on the bench outside, to get a breath of fresh air. He offered her his arm and escorted her out the door.

"You have a baby-face," the woman said. Nick settled her onto the bench before releasing her arm. "You do, you know?"

"I do what?" Nick began to wonder if maybe he should get her some water.

"You have a nice face." The woman began to swing her legs back and forth. "It's not just those muscles that make you attractive. You know how to take care of a lady, I can tell."

Nick tried to laugh, but it came out as a strangled, choking noise. If any onlookers had bothered to notice, they would've considered him a gentleman, tending to a slightly older woman. It was the one leftover perk from all his years of high school football; he'd never been offered a college scholarship, but he still could support a person and make it seem effortless.

Ally flipped the switch for lights, signaling the bar had closed. She turned off the jukebox and picked up the microphone. "Thank you for coming out, but we are all done serving." She pocketed a pack of cigarettes she'd stashed behind the register and started shoving her way towards the front door.

Groups of people lined the sidewalk. Ally made her way over to the front window where Craig already stood. All the employees smoked in that nook. She lit a cigarette. Neither of them spoke.

"Can I bum a smoke," a skinny girl asked. Craig handed her his pack.

The girl looked at Ally. "Do you have menthols?" Ally shook her head.

"Beggars can't be choosers," Craig said.

The girl pulled out one of Craig's cigarettes and hand him back his pack. "Right on, right on." She pulled a lighter from her pocket. "So it was pretty busy tonight, huh?"

Ally looked down, acting as though she were fascinated with her shoes. Craig gave an almost imperceptible shrug. They lapsed into silence.

"So you guys doing anything after this?" the skinny girl asked. Craig arched his eyebrows.

"Know of any after hours parties?" the girl said.

"I don't know," Craig said. "What's it to you?"

"Jesus, what's your problem?" The girl looked to Ally for help.

Ally focused her gaze straight ahead. She ignored the twinge of pity she felt for the girl. She used to be like that—a people pleaser, a person that couldn't bear the sound of silence. Ally cleared her throat. "Have you seen Christina?"

"It wasn't my turn to watch her." Craig flicked his cigarette into the street and

walked back inside.

“What an asshole,” the skinny girl said.

Ally shrugged. She took another drag.

“Do you ever say anything?” the girl persisted. No response. “Do you even have a personality?”

Ally tossed her cigarette onto the ground, grinding it out with the tip of her shoe. She walked away.

“Ok, nice talking to you,” the girl called after her. “Yeah, good talk.”

Ally shook her head. She’d learned her lesson ages ago; people didn’t go to the bars to make friends.

Christina leaned on the bar, “Hey, Ally, give me a phone book. I have to call a girl a cab.” She extended her arm to grab the phonebook. She couldn’t quite reach. She scooted forward, balancing her full weight on the counter top. Her feet came off the ground.

Craig’s gaze traveled down from her legs to her flip-flops. “Weren’t you working today?”

“Yeah.” Christina pushed herself off the bar. “Why?” She flicked open the phone book to the yellow pages.

Craig came around from behind the bar. He slipped one foot out of his flip-flops. He reached down, twirling the shoe in his hand. He pulled back his arm, building momentum to use the rubber shoe as a paddle. It made a pleasing *thwap* noise as it came down on Christina’s butt.

She let out a yelp, whirling around to face him. She clutched her backside.

“What did I tell you about open toe shoes?” Craig asked. Christina’s gaze shifted to the flip-flop in Craig’s hand. He dropped his shoe onto the floor, pushing his foot back into the sandal. The corners of his mouth twitched. “I’m management.”

“What the fuck?” Christina shook her head. “Fucking asshole.” She found the number for the cab company and flipped open her cell phone to make a call. Nick came up behind her just as she hung up. “Have fun cleaning the bathroom tonight.”

Nick groaned.

“Hey, there’s still a girl in there.” Christina gestured towards the bathroom. “Her friend can’t get her off the floor. Can you go help? I already called a cab.”

It took both the bouncers to haul the puker to her feet. Each of them grabbed an arm and directed her to a booth. “Make another announcement,” Nick yelled. “Get these people out of here.”

Ally nodded her head. She stopped wiping down the counter and grabbed the microphone. “All right, bitches. We are all done serving. Thanks for coming out, but it is time to go.”

Ally spotted Christina lounging in a booth. She wished she could be more vibrant like that. Ally's usual jeans and t-shirt, her straight hair, and even her tiny stature, seemed meek and somehow muted in Christina’s presence. Ally's friend radiated confidence, and even just sitting there, babysitting some girl slumped in a booth, Christina made a bold impression. “I’m going to count out the drawer,” Ally called to

Craig. She grabbed the register drawer and headed towards the basement office.

“Consider this your initiation.” Nick grinned at the other bouncer. “Welcome to the bar. Now you’ll know what to expect on busy nights.”

“No way. Rock, paper, scissors,” the other bouncer suggested.

“Hell no,” Nick said. “It’s not my turn. I saw macaroni and cheese in there.”

Christina laughed.

The girl in the booth made a feeble attempt to raise her head. “I didn’t eat that. I had pizza.”

“Are you sure you didn’t eat macaroni?” Christina sounded amused.

“No,” the girl mumbled. “Not since yesterday.”

“Aww, poor thing,” A smile spread across Christina’s face. “You really had to reach back for that one, huh?”

“Ughh.” Nick tried not to shudder. He punched the other bouncer on the arm and pointed to the bottle of bleach Craig hoisted onto the bar. “There’s some sausage chunks in there, too. You better double mop the floors.”

By the time Ally emerged from counting out the register, the last few customers were filing out the door. The puker had vanished. Someone must have helped her into the cab. Christina and Craig sat in a booth, counting out the tips. She caught a glimpse of Nick outside, sweeping up the cigarette butts.

“Yeah the girl was trashed,” Christina said. She scooted over to let Ally slide in beside her. “I gave her my hair tie.”

“Gross, you held her hair back?” Ally wrinkled her nose.

“You saying someone’s never held your hair back before?” Craig stood up to grab an ashtray.

“That was different.” Ally blushed. “At least you knew me.”

“You held her hair back?” Christina said. “No way. Shut up.”

“I’m a classy guy.” Craig slid back into the booth, belching and blowing the air in Christina’s direction.

“I’d just found out my husband cheated on me.” Ally’s cheeks still looked a little pink. “I drank that blueberry beer. Bad idea.”

“She didn’t make it to the bathroom,” Craig reached for his cigarettes.

“Blue foam everywhere.” Ally pointed to floor by the front door. “I tried to aim for the trash can. I missed”

“Done,” a voice boomed. Nick walked through the front door, his arms raised in victory. “And I’m not helping clean the bathrooms.”

Craig looked up at the clock. “Looks like we’re going to be here for a while. Who wants to drink?”

There was a chorus of “me.” It would screw up the daily shot count, but the owners would never know. They’d been packed tonight. Nothing ever came out accurate when they were busy, anyway. It’d been a long tradition, passed down through the generations of bartenders, to sit around and drink after the bar had closed. The cops never busted them, probably because the sheriff was one of their best customers.

The four of them filed towards the bar, filling up shot glasses and mixing cocktails.

“You know the girl’s boyfriend just dumped her, too,” Christina said, “The one I found on the floor tonight.”

“Looks like all you ladies are sloppy drunks,” Nick teased.

“Don’t even start that.” Christina shook her head ever so slightly. She and Nick locked gazes before she turned to pick up her drink. “One night. One bad night and you never let it go.”

“Closer to every night,” Craig said. “Remind me again—who’s responsible for breaking that mirror?”

Christina didn’t respond. Neither did Nick. It was her secret, that she’d been sleeping with her ex, Riley. It shouldn’t have been a big deal. Christina figured most people made that mistake at least once in their life, going back to one ex or another. Riley had a girlfriend, though. The bar’s owners’ daughter.

It’d been one thing to know her ex had a girlfriend, it’d been something entirely different to see them kissing and groping right before her eyes. Christina had been replaced, and she might as well have been invisible. Riley didn’t even spare her a glance, didn’t look remotely apologetic, didn’t even have the decency to duck out the door. She’d felt powerless, and that was the worst part.

Christina had stood there mesmerized, as if she were rooted to the floor. Riley slung his arm around the girl’s shoulders. That used to be her, and that’s when something inside of Christina began to hurt. Since when had this become such a one-sided affair? Had she really been hoping this guy was different? It wasn’t like Christina to avoid confrontation, but something stopped her from marching over there and exploiting the whole scandal. Not that she’d ever admit it, but she knew it was all her fault. People

never had sympathy for the "other woman"; they weren't supposed to. Had it been anyone else in her place, Christina would've claimed this was fair and the girl got what she deserved.

Christina had been scheduled to bartend that night. Not that it stopped her from downing some shots. When she went to the bathroom, she slipped on the tile and crashed into the mirror. It shattered all over the floor. She only cut her hand a little. But it was seven years of bad luck, right?

"Yeah. Like you guys never do anything stupid," Ally said, rising to her defense.

"I know, I know." Nick laughed. "Settle down."

Christina watched as Nick threw his hands in front of himself, pretending to shy away from Ally. Sometimes it still surprised her, how gentle he was considering his size. He'd found her downstairs after she broke the mirror, rooting around for a Band-Aid. She hadn't meant to have a meltdown, but she started to shake. He steered her to a chair and found a bandage for her. He wrapped it around her finger.

"I know," he said. She started to cry. "I saw the look on your face." He didn't ask questions, just held her for a while. He said he'd clean up the glass.

"You know, I think I'm getting fat." Ally poked the underside of her arm. "I mean what is this? When did I start to jiggle?"

"No way." Christina shook her head. "You're a twig."

"I don't know." Ally tugged on her belt loops. "My jeans are getting tight, too. I think I'm getting muffin top."

“Hey fat-ass, move over.” Craig reached over to shove Ally. “I have to go to the bathroom.” The girls were perched on barstools, the boys standing behind the counter.

“Yeah right.” Ally sounded annoyed. “You have tons of room to get around.”

“I know.” Craig smirked. “I don’t have to go to the bathroom. Just wanted to say that.” Nick laughed.

“Jerk.” Ally tugged on the edge of her shirt. “You’re such an ass.”

“Hey speaking of fat chicks,” Nick said, “Did you see the one I got tonight?” Christina shook her head no. He filled them in on his encounter with the cougar.

“Oh, God.” Ally coughed. “One day that’s going to be me.”

“Nah.” Christina cocked her head to look at her friend. “You’ll get married again.”

“I don’t know.” Ally took a sip of her drink. “I don’t usually attract the winners. Remember George?” She meant one of the former bouncers; the one Craig had hired Nick to replace.

Christina bobbed her head. “Yeah. That guy was a creep, and he always hit on you.”

Ally looked down at her lap.

“I’m glad he got fired.” Christina didn’t appear to notice the nervous way her friend’s fingers began to dance along the counter top. “You know, he kinda gave off a stalker vibe.”

Ally knew precisely what Christina meant. Even before her marriage was on the rocks, George used to stand behind her when she bent down to reach beers from the lower coolers. “Blue or purple,” he’d say, trying to guess the color of her underwear. At

first she just laughed, thinking maybe one of these days she'd invest in belt. But then George started asking her other questions, "boy shorts or panties?" Sometimes, "G-string or thong." All the guys in the bar made it their personal mission to give the girls a hard time, but even so, George was the only one to ever make Ally's skin crawl.

The day she signed her divorce papers, she went out for an after hours celebration. She might have been a little drunk, but she didn't care. She stayed at a friend's house. Craig and George were the only co-workers to witness her falling on her ass. People were encouraging, telling her she'd find a better guy in no time. Someone took her to a spare bedroom and tucked her in for the night. They even helped her out of her shoes.

She didn't remember passing out. Some time must have passed before she opened her eyes and discovered George lurking in the doorway. She told him to go away, she didn't want company. She rolled to her side, hoping he'd take the hint. The floorboards squeaked when he entered the room. Ally felt the mattress shift as he sat on the edge of the bed. She curled into a ball, praying he'd leave.

It was dark in the room, but the curtains to the window were wide open. Ally tried squeezing her eyes shut, but the room spun faster. She felt George's arms wrap around her body. She forced her eyes open. There was just enough light for Ally to see the pile of clothes, George's clothes, heaped on the foot of the bed.

She started to shriek. It took a few tries. Her lips, her eyes, even her arms, felt heavy and weighted—damn near impossible to move. George hushed her, acting as if she were a hysterical child. She shrieked some more. He pinned her to the bed, his fingers digging into her arms.

Craig found her, of all people. He didn't even like her. He could barely speak a

sentence in her direction without his words dripping sarcasm. He flung the door open and dragged George out of her bed. She heard the unmistakable crash of George's body hitting the wall outside her bedroom. She didn't look up. She squeezed her eyes shut and rocked her body to the rhythm of the swaying room. Ally didn't have a husband anymore. And a house full of drunk people wouldn't soothe her fears. She let the alcohol take its effect, passing out like nothing happened.

George got fired a couple of weeks after that. Ally never asked Craig what happened. The owners let it slip that Craig said George wasn't pulling his weight cleaning up the bar after they closed, but she heard that later, months after the fact.

Ally grabbed her vodka and cranberry, draining almost half her drink in one gulp. Craig seemed preoccupied, throwing ice cubes at Christina. Good, she liked it better when people didn't talk.

The bouncer finished cleaning the bathroom. He returned to the bar, scowling and shoving cleaning supplies back into place. Craig told him he still had to turn off all the lights.

"After work drinks?" Craig asked. Any time the employees worked a full shift, the owners allotted them one free drink of their choice. The cocktails they'd been sipping didn't count.

"Something strong," Christina said. She raked her fingers through her hair. There was still a kink from where she'd removed the rubber band she'd given to the girl.

Ally watched as Craig and Nick turned their attention to Christina. They seemed fascinated. Ally had known that Nick had a thing for Christina, ever since she'd broken

the bathroom mirror. The two girls told each other everything, or most everything, anyway. Ally still didn't know what'd caused her friend to get so rattled that night. It wasn't like her to get drunk and moody. Craig kept watching Christina. Ally wondered what else she'd missed. She cleared her throat. "Shots?"

Craig grabbed up the mixer and scooped some ice into it. They never asked what he made. It'd be strong, and his concoctions didn't usually have a name.

Christina yawned. "I'm ready for bed." She yawned again. She looked up to see Nick grinning at her. She smiled and ducked her head. He'd always been a sweet guy, even before her mortifying break down. She wondered if she should start something with him; he probably wouldn't make the first move. There was something strange about the way he'd flirt with her and then just disappear. Maybe it was a sign that she should stay away from co-workers.

"Christina, grab some plastic cups." Craig swirled the shaker back and forth. He never made regular size shots for himself. They wouldn't fit in a normal shot glass.

Christina hopped off a barstool and spread five cups along the bar. Sometimes she wondered why Craig never lectured her about that day she'd broken the mirror. When he'd seen the Band-Aid, he suggested maybe she should take a break, but that was all. Sure, Craig still taunted her every chance he got, but he never actually asked if anything was wrong. She looked at him, squinting her eyes. She knew he was in his mid thirties, older than the rest of them. He didn't look it though, clean haircut, groomed facial hair. Maybe Craig just knew. He'd been around the bar long enough. Sometimes it was wiser not to ask questions.

"What?" Craig demanded. Christina looked confused. "What are you staring at?"

“You’re ugly face.” She stuck out her tongue. “Just pour the shots, already.”

“Yeah, man,” Nick agreed, “I have to work in the morning.” That was the way it was with him, always playing catch up, working two or three jobs to pay the bills. He didn’t see Christina that often. She’d probably never go for a guy like him. Nick just didn’t have much to offer. He watched as Craig elbowed Christina out of his way. The guy didn’t say much. Nick looked at the cups. “I’ll take the short one.”

“Whatever that means.” Ally grinned. The shots were faintly pink, as if Craig had used a splash of juice to camouflage the liquor. They were huge, too, almost full size drinks.

“Poor guy.” Craig tossed the mixer into the sink. Someone would clean it in the morning. “You’ve got it so rough.” He smiled at Nick, handing him the largest drink of the lot. He wondered if there was something already going on between Nick and Christina. The girl was always going through guys. Well, she had in the past. She wasn’t as fragile as Ally. He’d only seen Christina lose control that one night, and in the history of bar employees, that was a pretty good average. Craig thought he could be with a girl like that. He watched as Nick and Christina laughed and joked. Maybe he shouldn’t make a move. Now he wasn’t sure. Something to consider, anyway.

“Come on,” Ally called to the other bouncer. “Shot time.”

“You’re slacking,” Craig shouted. He watched as the bouncer struggled to shove the mop bucket back into a tiny closet. A new guy. He’d be more cautious now. It’d been by chance that he’d caught George in Ally’s bedroom.

He’d just been looking for an open bathroom when he saw the bedroom door pushed shut. Craig had left it cracked, in the unlikelihood that Ally might stir from her

coma to use the restroom. She'd been ridiculously drunk all evening, and he'd finally scooped her up and carried her to bed. "You're a good guy, ya know?" she'd said, as he set her down. Ally tried to point her finger at him, but she ended up aiming at the floor. "You just pretend you're an asshole, but you're not. You're like my knight in a ratty t-shirt." Craig had smiled and messed up her hair. She'd never remember in the morning, so he let the comment slide. He even unbuckled those annoying, strappy shoes while she snored. That's the way he'd left her, but later he saw the door pushed shut. Nobody had even been on that side of the house all evening. It could've been the wind, or crooked door hinges, but when he heard the yelling, he'd started to run.

The other bouncer jogged over to join them. "That was disgusting."

"Get used to it," Nick said. "Women are dirty. You wouldn't believe the things they clog the toilets with."

"On that note," Christina's voice trailed off. She gestured towards the shots. Everyone picked up their plastic cup. "What's our toast, tonight?"

"To trusting the wrong men," Ally suggested.

"To sleeping with the wrong men," Christina said.

"To avoiding cougars," Nick chimed in.

Craig shook his head. "You're sick. Those don't even apply to all of us." He cocked his head to the side. "How about to being terminally single?"

Everyone but the new bouncer nodded their approval. "I have a girlfriend, though," the new guy said.

Everyone turned to stare.

"Sure you do," Craig said. "Keep telling yourself that."

“Do you love her?” Ally asked.

The bouncer seemed at a loss for words. “Yeah, I guess.”

Christina snorted. “Well that sounds convincing.”

“Whatever,” he said. “I really have to get home.” He picked up his shot and began sucking it down. He asked if he could leave. Craig nodded.

“Wow, that was bad shot etiquette,” Nick said, after the door swung shut behind the guy. “You always wait to toast with your co-workers.”

“Well he’s not part of the group yet.” Ally clinked her cup with Christina’s.

“What was it? To being terminally single?”

They all tilted their cups and began guzzling their drinks.

“So he has a girlfriend,” Craig said. “That’s interesting.”

“Not for long.” Christina swiped the back of her hand across her mouth. “Not if he’s going to keep working here. I mean really, who works in a bar and has a functioning relationship?”

Nobody spoke.

Craig gathered up his keys and ushered everyone towards the door. Sometimes they kept on drinking at his apartment, but everyone seemed ready to call it a night. They’d scatter off in their own directions, saying goodbye before venturing home.

“Hey, Nick. Maybe you should get one of the girls to make sure the coast is clear.” Craig kept a straight face. “That cougar might still be out there, waiting for you.”

“Asshole.” Nick scowled as the girls laughed at his expense.

“Come on, man,” Craig said. “You wouldn’t even have to buy her a drink. She’d be ready to go. Mmm, think about all that loose skin.”

Ally and Christina began to groan and covered their ears.

“Hey, Craig.” Everyone was clustered on the sidewalk. He’d been turning the key in the lock, when Craig heard Nick call his name. He glanced over his shoulder.

“This is for you.” Nick flipped Craig off with both hands, a dual birdie.

They all departed, going off in search of their cars. “I know,” Craig shouted, “I’m an asshole. Everyone says so.” He could hear their laughter, even from a distance. He glared as he passed by the church. At least he wasn’t the only one parked a mile away. As the sounds of his co-workers faded, Craig thought at least he wouldn’t be the only person making a long, solitary trek tonight.

Where We Can't Follow

Alex glared at the bumper sticker in front of her: *Jesus Loves You*. Well, clearly Jesus had never spent any time driving behind this old bat. Alex inched her car into the oncoming lane of traffic, attempting to pass the Buick for what must have been the thousandth time. The unmistakable bulk of a semi truck drew closer. She groaned and eased back into her own lane.

It was about a 450 mile trek--a full day's worth of driving, even if she hadn't been stuck behind the old woman. Alex cursed herself for getting directions off the Internet. Like Hell Alex believed that these two lane, back country roads were the fastest route. At least people on the interstate didn't drive five miles below the speed limit.

She'd tried honking her horn, riding the woman's bumper, she'd even attempted to catch the old lady's attention in the mirror, but nothing could persuade the woman to budge from her steady 55mph pace. Alex scowled at the old lady. A puff of white hair protruded over the driver's seat. She hated old people. They were always teasing up their hair, as if compensating for the diminishing effects of osteoporosis, and now they were slapping tacky religious sayings on the back of their cars.

Something beeped in Alex's purse. She reached a hand down, flipping open her cell phone. She caught a glimpse of the faded ink stains on the back of her hand. She'd showered this morning, washing away the smoky scent in her hair. She'd even popped some aspirin and used eye drops to reduce that bloodshot appearance, but the *over 21* stamps on her hand just wouldn't disappear. Initially, she'd been annoyed that she couldn't scour off the ink, now she almost enjoyed the reminder of last night's bar crawl ingrained in her skin.

The screen on her phone glowed. A new text message from Beth. *I need u. where r u?*

“Good question,” Alex muttered. She’d spotted a sign a ways back, “Welcome to Michigan.” She’d passed the state border, but she doubted that would be a helpful answer. She began to type back a response with a certain dexterity that came from years of practice of multitasking while driving. *Deliverance Country.*

Alex set the phone in her lap. She craned her neck, trying to peer through the windshield of the Buick in front of her. There was a gap in the oncoming traffic, a narrow one, but an opening never-the-less. She started to floor the gas pedal. “Go car, go,” Alex screamed. She didn’t bother with turn signals. She swung around the old woman and veered back into her own lane, narrowly avoiding an oncoming van. The woman behind her flashed her brights.

“Bitch,” Alex hissed. She pressed on her brake. She watched in her rearview mirror as the old woman struggled to slow down her car. The Buick loomed closer. “Do it,” Alex chanted, “do it.” She’d been wanting a new car, anyway. She’d love the lawsuit. The woman missed, using the shoulder of the road to avoid crashing into Alex’s Neon.

The cell phone buzzed again. *Hurry. When will you get here?*

Alex texted a new response. *Tonight. Im coming.* The lane in front of her appeared empty. Damn that old woman. Alex began flooring the gas pedal.

Alex didn’t know why she was rushing; she doubted she’d be of much help. But like a good best friend, she’d answered that 4am phone call. “Beth, what’s wrong?”

she'd asked. Only one person would call her that early, or rather, late in the evening. Alex never liked to sleep for long periods of time, and she was always awake, wandering about at that strangest hours. But she'd actually been in bed when her phone went off.

"You're sleeping." Beth sniffled.

Alex fought back a yawn. "I keep my phone on for you."

There was nothing dramatic or intriguing about their friendship. They'd been next-door neighbors in college, and best friends ever since. They'd made a pact, years ago, to always answer their phones in the middle of the night. Alex remembered the evening she'd gone home with the hot, blonde guy, Philip, from her Advertising class. In the aftermath of their one night stand, Alex rolled over in his bed and dialed up Beth. "Guess what?" she'd said, not waiting for a response. Phillip had looked a little bit stunned. Beth sounded delighted.

When Alex returned home, she sat down with Beth and rehashed all of the really juicy details about her latest fling. The women had been in Alex's bedroom, and as Beth flopped onto the bed and sprawled on her back, she said. 'It's perfect. Some day you're going to look back on this and remember all of the wild times. Even when you're old or married, you'll still have your stories.'

Alex had snorted and dismissed her friend's comment with a wave of her hand. "I don't sleep with men for stories. It's not like I'm going to write a book. It's fun and new." Alex paused and looked at the way Beth shook her head in disbelief. Alex laughed. "Don't judge me. I don't even want to think about getting old."

She and Beth giggled some more and resumed their discussion about Philip's enormous arms. Later, that day, the two friends formed their pact and agreed to always

answer their phones. Sometimes one girl would call the other one in the middle of the night, sobbing for no particular reason, other than she'd been moody and had a bit too much to drink. They developed this agreement to answer their phones for the simple fact that sometimes the need to share their wild, drunken escapades could not wait until the morning.

Even now, four years after they'd graduated, Alex still kept her phone beside her bed. The calls were fewer now, mostly on account of Beth getting married. She'd been intent on wedding the first guy she met out of college, and Alex thought she'd played the role of the supportive friend rather well. She'd even been a bridesmaid in the wedding. Still, there was something disappointing about her friend's new life, something stale and almost stagnant, something Alex couldn't understand.

"I don't know what to do," Beth's voice rang in Alex's ear. "Jason got a promotion. He'll be traveling all the time."

Alex sat up in bed, trying to focus. "Have you been drinking?"

"No." The sobbing stopped. Her friend's voice took on a bitter tone. "It's not like that for me, anymore."

"Sorry."

Beth sniffled again. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. But I'm so scared. Everything's changing and I feel like I'm going crazy. I can't even talk to him. You have to come. Say you'll come."

Alex guessed that this phone call signaled the end of her friend's marriage. Beth's ragged breathing and noisy sobs obligated her to rush to her friend's side. She didn't mind using up the last of her sick days at work, but even as she packed her bags,

Alex secretly wondered why she was going.

“You’re here,” Beth squealed. She flung open the door and grabbed Alex’s duffel bag from her shoulder. “Why didn’t you just walk in?”

“I didn’t know I should,” Alex said.

Beth made a frantic motion with her hands. “Oh, people don’t lock their doors around here.”

Alex nodded her head. “Makes sense.”

Beth led her to a couch in the small living room. She’d be crashing there for a few nights. The girls talked for a while, Beth seeming eager to hear all about Alex’s latest crappy job, a secretarial position with a fancy title. Alex tried not to stare at the hideous floral couch or the kitchy ornaments decorating the walls. She tried her best to avert her gaze, but the eyes of a ceramic cow seemed follow Alex’s every move.

“Well, Jason’s already started traveling. So you won’t see him.” Beth’s eyes began to tear up. “At least we won’t be interrupted. We can do anything you want.”

“You need a break,” Alex said. She looked at her friend’s oversized sweatpants. They were folded over at the waist, presumably to keep them from falling down. Her husband’s clothes, no doubt. “Get dressed. We’re go out.”

At dinner, Alex regaled her friend with tales about the single life. She told Beth about meeting a man at the coffee shop. “Yes,” she told Beth, “Paul and I locked gazes over our blueberry scones, and we’ve been together ever since. Isn’t it romantic?” Beth started to giggle.

Alex looked around the restaurant. It was a chain establishment, which was a pleasant change of pace from the wooded landscape she'd encountered all day. She noticed Beth wasn't drinking. Alex had convinced the girl to shower and do her hair, but she still looked a wreck; bags under her eyes, not a hint of makeup. She asked Beth to take her to a bar after they'd paid the bill. A few shots and a cocktail later, and Alex knew her friend would spill the details about why she'd begged her to come.

"So get this," Alex said. "Paul, you know, the new guy I'm sleeping with--has restless leg syndrome. He didn't tell me that. The first time I spent the night, he kept twitching and waking me up."

Alex watched as Beth started to grin. "Did he kick you?"

Alex bobbed her head. "Yeah. Out of bed. I literally hit the floor. I don't think he's going to last much longer. He's a danger to my health."

Beth's shoulder's started to shake with laughter. "I don't know where you find these guys, but some things never change."

At least the bar had a jukebox. Alex could hear the angry lyrics of a pop-princess blasting from the speakers even before they'd walked through the door. All things considering, Beth's town wasn't nearly as bad, or nearly as desolate, as the ones Alex had driven through. She ordered a rum and coke.

Beth shook her head. She only wanted a coke, she was pacing herself.

"Why?" Alex had to shout over the music. "It's a ladies night out."

"I don't drink anymore." Beth shook her head again. "I don't have much of a tolerance."

The girls settled into a booth, watching the couples swarm around them. The pool tables were packed. Alex decided she'd better get the hairy details of Beth's marriage out of the way. Then she'd get her friend drunk. For once, Alex appreciated the fact that it was too loud for conversation. She flipped open her cell phone and motioned for Beth to do the same.

So?? Alex texted. She waited a while, watching her friend type a lengthy response.

Hes the co's head promo guy. He has to travel all the time. Sux. I miss him. I hate being home alone.

Alex pursed her lips. She mouthed "sorry" to her friend. *What about ur job tho? Keep u busy?* Last she'd checked, Beth adored her job in the dental office. Something about wrenching people's teeth out seemed to please her. It was one of those strange characteristics about her friend that Alex never understood. Beth was such a quiet girl, but for some reason she possessed a subtle, hardened quality to take on some of what Alex considered, the most gruesome tasks. Alex looked at her friend's face and began to wonder just how much had changed.

Beth shrugged before typing into her phone, again. *I dunno. It helps but the nights are lonely.*

Alex squirmed in her seat. Her legs still felt cramped from the long drive. *B thankful. I still have a bruise from when Paul kicked me out of bed. Hurts.*

Beth started to laugh. A woman came over to their table, a drink in hand and a man whom Alex presumed to be her husband in tow. Alex watched as Beth reached up to give the woman a quick embrace. The two bent their heads together, screaming into

each other's ears. The woman flashed Alex a smile. She must have just been introduced. Alex gave a half-hearted wave. She always felt awkward at moments like this. It was if Alex had just said, "Yes, I don't know you, we'll never talk, but hey--great to meet you." The woman and her husband disappeared.

Beth punched some more keys on her phone. *Something has to change.*

The song blasting from the jukebox ended. Alex cleared her throat. "Are you saying you might get a divorce?"

"No." Beth shot backwards in the booth. "Of course not, but it's harder now."

Alex began gulping down her drink. "Spell it out for me. I don't understand. What did you need me for?"

"I'm sorry I dragged you away from your busy life." Beth folded her arms over her chest.

"No," Alex said. The first few notes of a new song drifted through the air. Alex had the rush to get the words out in time. "I just don't have that much time off of work. You have to tell me. Stop worrying me."

The music grew louder, forcing the girls to resort to text messaging again. Alex tried to force a concerned look onto her face. When they were in college, Beth never used to snap at her. Alex tried to shrug it off, thinking maybe her friend was just stressed.

Beth stared into Alex's eyes, as if scrutinizing her. She typed again. *Im unhappy. I want a family.*

Alex choked on her drink when she read the message. Her throat felt raw, as if it were on fire. Her eyes watered. She looked at Beth's plain, plastic cup of Coke. Alex

picked up her phone. *R u Prego?*

Beth shook her head.

R u sure?

No baby. But we talked about it.

Alex looked at her friend. Part of her wanted to blurt out, "Don't pop out any kiddies. You already look like hell."

Haha. I know that look. One day u'll want a family 2.

Alex sipped on her drink. Didn't Beth know her better than that?

Alex wanted to like her friend's husband, but the man was too dull for words. She couldn't find a single, minute detail that tipped the scales and made her like him or hate him, one way or the other.

Jason was a stocky guy, pale complexioned, grayish-blue eyes. Alex asked Beth if he always looked red in the face. She'd received some long-winded answer about rosacea. Alex shrugged. She didn't care if there was a medical term for it. Every time she looked at man, she was reminded of a little kid running to make it to the bus stop on time.

Beth couldn't stop gushing about the guy, though. When Alex showed up a few days prior to the wedding, Beth told her she wanted her to meet Jason's friend. If ever there'd been a question about her right to the title of "best friend," Alex knew, without a doubt, she'd earned her status. She'd been pawned off as the groomsman's date.

He could've been a decent guy, good smile, great body. But within two minutes of meeting the man, he'd informed her that he was a cop. He told her fantastic little

stories, like that the light above her license plate was burnt out. He'd pull her over for that.

At dinner, Alex turned her cell phone to vibrate. She sent Beth a message before pocketing the device. *He's that zit that just won't go away!*

He's sweet. Give him a chance.

After dinner, they went out to see a local play. Alex didn't remember whose genius idea it was to pack into her little car, but then her "date" began twirling the radio station dial. It'd taken her ages to find a decent hip-hop station. She turned to glare at the guy. "What are you doing?"

"I like country music." He lounged back in the passenger seat.

There was a nervous giggle from the back of the car. Alex reached over and adjusted the dial. "Well I don't."

To Alex's surprise, the guy changed the station back for a second time. "This isn't your car," she said, through clenched teeth.

Her date didn't seem perturbed. He just grinned and said, "Well if you like me, then you'll learn to like country music."

Alex felt her hands squeezing the steering wheel. She was certain that at any moment, her rising anger would cause her to spontaneously combust. There'd be little bits of her hair and her recently digested dinner splattered all over the place.

Alex paused a moment, waiting to pull up to a stoplight. Heaven forbid she'd get a lecture from a cop about keeping her eyes on the road. She flicked the radio off, her gaze never leaving her date's face. "No risk there," she said. "I don't like you that much."

They drove the rest of the way to the theatre in silence. Just before the play started and the curtains pulled back, Alex sent Beth another message. *If he were a dog, I'd smack him on the nose with a newspaper.*

Beth told her later, she should've been nicer. Alex laughed, but Beth kept insisting that her behavior only drove men away. Alex watched as Beth's eyes took on a curious gleam. There was something harsh and critical about the way Beth peered at her. They'd always had their different views on relationships; Beth, the eternal hopeless romantic, dreamed of candle lit dinners steeped with intellectual conversations. Alex, on the other hand, fantasized about a man who skipped straight to the dessert menu before whisking her off to some trendy bar. The way Alex understood it, they were destined for different things, but they'd been equals, hadn't they?

"Don't you ever want to get married?" Beth asked.

Alex faked a grin. "Maybe. It's hard to say. Relax, Beth. At best, I only would've slept with the guy."

Beth sighed. "I know. That's all you ever want."

Alex held up a finger, signaling she'd be back in a minute. Beth probably thought she'd excused herself to use the restroom. Alex wandered over to the bar, ordering another drink for herself, a tequila sunrise for Beth, and two fruity shots--the bartender's choice. She expertly balanced the drinks, carrying them back to the booth without spilling a drop. She divvied up the drinks, pushing a shot and a cocktail in front of Beth.

Beth's eyes widened. She picked up her shot glass and clinked glasses with Alex. They downed their shots. Alex breathed a sigh of relief. Beth would never drink if she

thought she were pregnant. Alex flipped open her phone again. *Does Jason want kids?*

Beth smiled, her cheeks beginning to blush. *We've talked. I think I'm ready.*

Alex wanted to vomit. She took a swig of her new drink. *Is he?*

Beth chewed on her lip. *I'll stay at home. Why wouldn't he be?*

Alex wondered if this is what it felt like to communicate with an alien. Beth didn't talk about her job, her friends, nothing. It was always Jason's job, Jason's colleagues, and now Jason's baby. Alex pictured this non-existent child, a plump rolly polly, with its daddy's flaming red cheeks and monotone personality. Alex tried not to cringe.

I wanted u to know. He'll say yes. But how do I tell him?

Alex's fingers itched to type back, *Don't reproduce. The planet is already overpopulated.* She was a better friend than that. She punched some buttons and gave a generic reply. *I'm happy 4 u.*

It'd been a whirlwind of liquor that evening. Alex carted Beth home before she puked in the bar. Someone eventually turned down the volume to the jukebox. Alex wished they hadn't done that. She could no longer drown out Beth's voice as she slurred, "I better drink now. I'll have to go nine months without any of this."

Alex watched as Beth winked. She probably thought she was being discreet. Alex tried to hush her friend. From the way she was talking, people might think she was already pregnant and boozing it up regardless.

Later, Alex set the alarm clock feature on her cell phone before flopping across Beth's sofa. It was a restless night. She'd consumed enough liquor that when she closed

her eyes, the room began to sway. Opening her eyes proved to be of no help, either. The window in the living room let in just enough light to illuminate the gaudy, floral couch.

Alex must have dozed off, though. The persistent beeping of her alarm brought her to her senses. Careful so as not to wake Beth, she showered and dressed, her usual hungover routine. She made a pot of coffee and waited.

"You're leaving," Beth said. She stood in the kitchen, staring at Alex's packed duffel bag.

"Do you want coffee?" Alex hopped out of her seat and grabbed an empty mug.

"I thought you were staying."

Alex looked up from pouring the hot liquid. Beth's hair poked out of her ponytail in funny little peaks. "You look like Hell."

"Why are you leaving?" Beth rubbed her eyes. "You have to stay. Help me think of what to tell Jason when he comes home."

"I don't know what to say." Alex walked towards her friend, holding out the mug. "This really isn't my department."

Beth took a sip, scrunching up her nose when she burned her tongue. She plunked down in chair. "Why are you leaving?"

"I used up most of my sick days. I should get back." Alex's response sounded weak, even to her own ears.

"I wanted you to be a part of this." Alex turned away from the pathetic, pleading look in Beth's eyes. She refilled her mug, sitting down across from her friend. For a while, the only noise in the room was Beth blowing on her steaming hot coffee.

“You should at least stay for more coffee, or lunch,” Beth said.

Alex shoved her duffel bag into the back of the car, slamming shut the trunk. “I can’t. More coffee will just make me have to pee. And you know I hate stopping to take bathroom breaks. It’ll take me forever with all the traffic, anyway.”

“Take the back roads.” Beth shaded her eyes from the sun. “They’re faster.”

“Umm. No thanks. I’ll take my chances with the expressways.” Alex jingled her keys.

Beth looked down at her feet. “You’re going to hit a lot of road construction. You should’ve planned another route.”

Alex twirled the keys in her hand faster.

“But I guess that’s not your thing.” Beth kept staring at her feet.

“I’ll manage.” Alex reached over and gave her friend a hug. “Maybe you can come visit me soon.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” Beth frowned. “I’ll have to--”

“Check with Jason,” Alex said, finishing her friend’s sentence. “Yeah, I know.”

Beth flushed, making Alex regret ever opening her mouth. Alex walked to the driver’s side door, sliding into the seat and rolling down her window. “Take care of yourself,” she called.

“You too.” Beth raised her arm and waved goodbye.

Alex pulled out into the street. She wondered if she’d ever come back to visit, or if now she should turn off her phone before going to bed. Alex had driven a few blocks, when the idea came to her. She dug her phone out of her purse. *Miss u already.* Alex steered her car towards the intersection, placing her phone in her lap. She looked down at

the phone's blank screen one more time before accelerating the car. She half expected Beth to respond her usual message: *I miss u more!* But for once, the phone did not ring.

A Connoisseur's Preference

There comes a point in a person's life when it is no longer publicly acceptable to begin the morning with a beer breakfast. Well, that's what Lucy believes. It's not to say that she doesn't miss her college years, when she'd pop open a can of beer, pull up a ratty lawn chair, and join her friends on the front yard as they mocked the homecoming parade marching down the street. It's just that Lucy is almost thirty now, and even her binge drinking has taken on a more mature level of sophistication.

It's the winery where she and T.K. and Mercedes now lounge their weekends away. A few years ago Lucy would've wrinkled her nose and declared imbibing wine to be a boring and pretentious habit, but that was before she understood that wineries are the havens for the more seasoned, veteran drinkers.

Now, on scorching summer mornings such as these, Lucy almost welcomes the long drive, lounging in a passenger seat as Mercedes navigates the winding roads to Starling Vineyards. They're always among the first customers to arrive at the winery, and it strikes Lucy that maybe she hadn't considered the full potential of her post-college years.

She turns down the radio's volume, breaking the spell of the conversation-less car ride. "You know, I think I used to believe that life was all downhill when you reached a certain age."

Mercedes makes a disapproving "humph" sound, but keeps her eyes focused on the road. "What? Like one day you would wake up and suddenly realize you were destined to be boring and sober?"

"Well." Lucy leans her head back against the headrest. "I didn't say I believe it

anymore. But I just figured that one day I'd feel like an adult."

Lucy tilts her head and sees that Mercedes is grinning. As Lucy reaches down to crank the radio back to full blast, she says: "I guess everything in life is just matter of perception."

"I'm getting a bottle of white wine," Mercedes says, as she strolls through the door. "Chardonnay, I think."

It's cool and air conditioned in the wine tasting room, and the chilly blast of air feels good on Lucy's skin. She'd almost rather stay inside and drink, but everybody knows that you come to Starling Vineyards for the scenic view. It doesn't even occur to Lucy that drinking somewhere other than on the back patio is even an option. She grabs a wine list off the bar, trying to decide what she wants.

"I'm never any good at this." Lucy turns to look at Mercedes. "Do you even have a favorite?"

"Red, white, dessert wine." Mercedes shrugs. "If it tastes good and gets me drunk, it all goes down the same."

Their server, an older gentlemen, inquires what he can get the ladies, today. Mercedes immediately places her order before turning to look at Lucy.

"Do you know what you want?"

Lucy shakes her head. "I never do. Maybe I should just get that red wine."

Mercedes arches her eyebrows. Lucy knows that her friend is waiting, silently amused. Their server doesn't ask Lucy if she wants to sample a wine; she's tried them all before. Lucy sighs, thinking if Mercedes weren't there, flashing her a mocking grin,

she'd probably just go back to her old favorite: the semi-sweet red wine.

Lucy looks down at the list still in her hand. "I hate decisions," she mutters.

There's a thoughtful expression on their server's face as he holds up his index finger. "Just a minute. I have a new one for you." He walks toward the row of the perfectly spaced bottles. He hands Lucy a bottle, a dark blue one she doesn't recognize. She reads the label: a blush wine with hints of strawberry and blueberry.

"It's our summer wine," the server says. "We only stock it a few months out of the year, so you won't find it in the stores. But it's a good one."

"It sounds perfect." Lucy thanks their server and passes him her credit card. He's not a talkative man, and since he seems accustomed to the waiting on the girls, he automatically rings up the two bottles of wine together. Lucy realizes that she and her friends have come here frequently enough, that their server probably just assumes that by time T.K. arrives, one of the other girls will pick up the tab for their next round.

"You know," Lucy says to Mercedes. "I have this feeling that our taste in wine says something important about us, but I don't know what."

Mercedes nods her head. "I believe it. Like wine reveals something profound about our personalities."

The server uncorks the bottles of wine and hands them two glasses. He places a pen and the credit card receipt onto the counter. As Lucy scribbles something that resembles a signature, she says: "I wonder what it means?"

Mercedes picks out their table, a little square wrought iron one in the shade. The sun isn't beating down on their heads, but Lucy still squirms in her seat and fans her face

as little beads of sweat dampen her skin. She steals a glance at her friend, trying not to be envious.

It's as if Mercedes doesn't even notice the heat. She stretches out her tan legs, oblivious to the attention her tiny, green dress draws as people turn to stare. It isn't the first time that Lucy has secretly wished she possessed such an aura, one that just seems to command attention. Of course, this is usually just a fleeting thought, and Lucy knows that there's a certain effort that goes hand-in-hand with being outgoing, something that she knows she could never pull off.

They're about halfway finished with their bottles of wine when T.K. finally arrives. In Lucy's mind there are three categories of people: the fashionably late, the exceedingly tardy group, and then T.K. They always save T.K. a seat because she eventually pops up, but it's a rare occurrence when the other two women haven't already started drinking without her.

"Sorry, I'm late." T.K. sounds breathless. She plops into an empty chair. "Next round is on me." The sun has moved positions, and T.K. tugs on her baseball cap to shield the sun from her eyes. There's always something haphazard about T.K.'s appearance, but Lucy smiles and thinks that the ponytail poking out the back end of the hat somehow suits her friend.

"So, what's new girls?" T.K. asks. She's already grabbed a glass from inside, and she helps herself to some wine from Lucy's bottle.

"Nothing." Mercedes pulls an enormous pair of sunglasses from her purse and slides them onto her face. "I don't have anything new to tell."

The women have a strict policy whereby they never discuss their jobs or their co-

workers over drinks, as they fear it will counteract their buzz. When nobody says anything, they all shift their attention to look at the bank of the pond. There are more potted flowers than usual, and gauzy white bows decorate the handrails of a gazebo. Somebody has even gone to the trouble of lining rows of white chairs along either side of a stone walkway.

“Another wedding.” Mercedes shakes her head. “Idiots.”

“Why not?” T.K. asks. “It’s the perfect place.”

Lucy watches as water flows from a waterfall that has been strategically installed at the base of the pond. She supposes T.K. has a point, and that it is a gorgeous Tuscanesque winery. The backdrop of the wedding pictures will no doubt resemble something off an exotic travel magazine cover, but the idea of getting married on such a carefully molded landscape puts Lucy ill at ease.

“It’s trashy,” Mercedes says. “Not the winery, though. I mean the wedding party. Just watch. They’re always the same.”

The girls crane their necks, peering at the limo that has just pulled into the parking lot. There’s no sign of a bride or a groom, but the hordes of women in pink, crinkly dresses can only be the bridesmaids.

“I know what you mean.” Lucy leans back in her chair. “I bet you anything the bride is going to be fat, and she’ll be wearing something that looks like a cheap prom dress.”

“I guess you’re right,” T.K. says. “They do all start to look the same.” She finishes her wine, and begins to fill her glass with some of Mercedes’ Chardonnay.

Lucy watches as members of the wedding party began to file past their table.

Other customers began to point and smile, commenting on the beautiful day for a wedding. Lucy's scoots to the edge of her seat, narrowly avoiding a brush with the hem of a pink dress. She realizes that while Mercedes' term, "trashy," isn't necessarily the way she would describe the wedding party, there is something undeniably predictable about the whole scenario. She wonders how many brides have danced with their fathers to that same, tired song about butterfly kisses, or how many couples have posed for photographs under the arch of the gazebo. Lucy averts her gaze and drains the contents of her glass in one giant gulp.

"Well maybe it isn't so bad," T.K. says. "Don't you guys want to get married with all of your friends and family around?"

Mercedes shakes her head. "I think people have big weddings just so they can show off."

"Come on." T.K. rubs a fingertip around the rim of her glass until her wine goblet begins to make a shrill, humming sound. "Don't you think people get married because they love each other?"

"Look at the divorce statistics," Mercedes says. "They get married for the wedding, and once the novelty wears off, it's one big disaster."

Lucy sees the frown on T.K.'s face and the stubborn tilt of Mercedes' chin. Lucy tries to sound cheery. "Well, sure love is ideal. But, who doesn't want a rock on their finger to flash around?"

"Would you get married just for the wedding?" T.K. asks. "Just for a diamond ring?"

"Tell you what." Lucy smiles, letting a wicked grin linger on her lips. "If I get

married, I hope it's for the best reason of all."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mercedes demands.

"Forget the wedding ring and the dress and the ceremony. It's only good for one day." Lucy begins to wiggle her eyebrows. "Give me a rich man who doesn't have a prenuptial arrangement, and then I might just fall in love with him."

Mercedes begins to snicker, and even T.K. flashes Lucy a little grin.

"See," Lucy says, "It's all about finding the right balance."

Lucy notices that her friends seem to have temporarily forgotten their conversation, and T.K. is actually bouncing in her seat.

"Come on, girls." T.K. says. "Finish your drinks so we can get the real party started. I want sangria next."

"I think you're right." Mercedes turns her head to look at Lucy.

"Of course I am." Lucy picks up Mercedes' bottle of wine and divides the last of its contents among the three glasses

"Don't you even want to know what I think you're right about?"

Lucy sets the empty bottle down and smirks at Mercedes. "Oh. Yeah. Of course I do. So what am I right about, today?"

"You ordered a blush, seasonal wine," Mercedes says. "T.K. wants pitchers of sangria. And I bought Chardonnay." Mercedes leans forward. She tells T.K. about Lucy's theory, about how maybe a person's character is connected to their taste in wine. Mercedes asks, "What do you think it means?"

T.K. pushes her chair back, and jumps to her feet. "I think." She pauses. "Well, I don't know. I think it means we drink too much and our livers are probably flopping

around out here, somewhere.” Lucy and Mercedes laugh as they watch T.K. pretend to peer under the table, searching for her missing internal organ. “And on that note,” T.K. says, “I’m going to get some sangria.”

The guests for the wedding have arrived and are already seated around the gazebo when T.K. returns with a pitcher of sangria in each hand. There’s a good amount of distance between the porch and the gazebo, but the faint sounds of a band playing still reach the women’s ears.

Lucy turns her attention back to her friends. They clink their glasses together, as a toast to another ladies’ day out.

“So, any plans for you and Bill to move in together?” Lucy asks. Her voice is steady, and she attempts to keep a straight face.

T.K. starts to cough and little pink droplets of liquid burst from her lips. “God, don’t do that,” she says. “I was drinking.” She swipes the back of her hand across her mouth and glares at Lucy. “No. No, I am not moving in with anyone.”

Lucy and Mercedes both laugh. T.K. is the only one out of the three of them who’s any good at keeping a relationship going. Lucy would consider her friend’s long-term relationship a fairly amazing feat; except that T.K. has never expressed any desire to move further than her boyfriend/girlfriend status.

The guests seated by the gazebo rise to their feet, and the three friends turn as the bride slowly descends down the path leading toward her groom. Lucy squints, leaning in to get a closer look. She can’t help but smile with satisfaction. The bride, who obviously went to great lengths to arrange this picture perfect wedding, will surely end up with

some of the ugliest wedding photos. Lucy touches her face, wondering how badly her own makeup is smeared, now that she's spent all this time in the sun.

"So, how long have you and Bill been together?" Mercedes asks, though none of the girls are looking at each other.

"About five years." T.K. continues to peer at the wedding party, but Mercedes and Lucy lean back in their seats.

"Do you think you'll ever get married?" Lucy brushes the condensation from her glass before taking another sip.

"Oh, I'll get married." T.K. turns to look at her friends. Her lips twist into a funny little pucker. "And if I ever have a daughter, I'm not naming her Theresa."

Lucy tries not to giggle as she flashes her friend a sympathetic grin. Something like seven generations of women in T.K.'s family have all been named Theresa. Last year, Lucy had been invited to T.K.'s house for Thanksgiving dinner. Literally, sitting in a row at the dinner table, there'd been the great grandmother, Tessa, the grandmother Theresa, the mother, Terry, and then T.K. At least life seemed organized in that family. All of the women were content, or at least settled. T.K. might've been the oddball, the one that was always behind schedule, or showing up to family functions in sweat pants, but Lucy figures it makes perfect sense. Anyone who can hold onto a man for five years, and make it look effortless, probably does belong in a family where everything is mapped out.

There's a pause in conversation and the girls sit quietly, sipping their wine.

"Do you think it's bad?" T.K. asks. "That I've been with Bill for five years and I can picture my wedding but not the face of my husband?"

Lucy and Mercedes turn to look at each other, both of them gawking in surprise. There's a pause while none of the women speak. Mercedes starts to snicker, and for some reason, Lucy finds herself snorting with laughter.

When she stops giggling, Lucy pushes her chair back and begins to scan the back patio. The sun has shifted now, and the glare of the sun is more than she can tolerate. She lifts a hand to shield her eyes until she spots an empty table with an umbrella several feet away. Lucy picks up her wine glass and motions for her friends to follow.

The crowd by the gazebo begins to cheer, and the three friends glance over as the bride and groom lean in for their first kiss as husband and wife.

"T.K., I thought I knew you pretty well." Mercedes climbs to her feet, gathering her belongings. "I don't think I expected you to be the one with such a weird outlook on weddings, though."

"Me neither," Lucy says. "But I can appreciate the fact that you can't picture your groom. I think I have whole new level of respect for you."

When they settle into their new seats, Mercedes asks Lucy if she's still sleeping with her ex.

"No. Not any more." Lucy pokes a finger in her glass, trying to catch the piece of cork floating on top of her sangria. When she looks up, she sees that both Mercedes and T.K. are gawking.

"When did this happen?" T.K. asks.

Lucy shrugs and resumes her quest to capture the fragment of her cork. "I haven't

slept with him in about a month."

"Does he still call?" Mercedes sips from her glass.

"Sometimes." Lucy finally traps the cork under her fingernail and picks it out of her glass. "Gotcha." She flicks the little speck away and meets her friends' gaze.

"But you've stopped answering?" Mercedes says.

"I haven't in a while." Lucy raises her glass to her lips. "It's always the same. Like clockwork. He calls at 2a.m. and then he pretends that he doesn't have a girlfriend. Like I really don't know."

"Booty call, Booty call." T.K. bounces in seat, wiggling about as though she were dancing in a club. An older couple at a nearby table glares at T.K., but she ignores their dirty looks. "One day his girlfriend is going to bust him. She's going to see his text messages and how often he calls you and she's going to be so pissed."

"I doubt it." Lucy sets her glass back onto the table. "If it hasn't happened yet, it never will."

"I can't believe you didn't tell us this sooner," Mercedes says.

Lucy blushes. She doesn't respond. She'd dated Parker on and off again for over a year. There'd been a span of several months where they'd simply lost touch all together. If Lucy hadn't dated around in that period of time, she might've thought it was strange that all the complications with Parker came about after they'd stopped dating. But she's learned a few things since the official separation, and Lucy understands that to declare you're broken up doesn't actually mean that the relationship is completely over.

"Why do you save the messages if you aren't going to use them?" T.K. says.

"I just like to know I have them." Lucy drums her fingers on the table. "I'm

never going to send them, but it's nice to know that I could be a bitch."

"How come his girlfriend never catches him?" Mercedes frowns. "If I'm seeing a guy and he picks up the phone at 2a.m., you better believe I'll be eavesdropping."

"I think she has a night job. And if she is home, he calls me when he's out walking the dog." Lucy picks up her glass again. "Damn. I'm really getting buzzed."

"Yeah, me too." Mercedes picks up the pitcher and refills her glass. "Well, at least he's semi-smart. His lies aren't that bad. Too bad your both friends with the same people."

Lucy flinches and looks over at the wedding party. The guests appear to be packing up, going off in search of the reception party destination. Lucy's thankful that her friends don't ask the really difficult questions. She can't even justify to herself why she's never confronted Parker about having a girlfriend and seeing her on the side. It'd be such an easy task, to ruin his new relationship, but then, Lucy knows that would probably destroy her little affair, too. She's not under any delusion that she and Parker will ever end up together, but breaking up with her already ex-boyfriend is a headache she'd rather put off until another day.

"Hey, T.K.," Lucy turns to face her friends. "You know how you asked if it was bad that you can picture your wedding but not the face of your groom?"

T.K. nods her head.

"Well." Lucy clears her throat. "Do you think it's bad that I can't picture my wedding, but I can picture my divorce?"

All three of the girls burst into laughter again.

"And how do you see that going?" T.K. says.

"Oh, it's going to be gruesome." Lucy's eyes widen with excitement. "I'm going to throw stuff. Take him to court for all his money. And after I win the divorce settlement, then I'll tell him that I was the one who was sleeping around."

Mercedes tips her head back and laughs. "Now that's the true definition of personal growth. You're going to go from being the other woman to a woman who has a man on the side."

"Where's the faith?" Lucy twirls the stem of her wine glass between her fingers. "Maybe it'll be more than one guy."

When all of the giggling subsides, T.K. asks Lucy if she's really through with sleeping with Parker.

"I doubt it," Lucy says. "If he calls me tonight, I'll ask him to spend the night."

It's late afternoon now, and the women have to relocate their table to the new patch of shade. They ignore the hostile stares they receive as they drag their table closer toward the cranky, old couple.

The wedding party has dispersed, and the chairs have been moved somewhere back inside. All that remains of the celebratory event are the potted flowers and the bows dangling from the gazebo.

"What about you?" Lucy asks Mercedes. "I know we're not the only crazy ones. What's your weird hang-up on weddings?"

The three friends have slowed their pace of drinking, but Lucy knows that all of them are still rather intoxicated, which she deems appropriate, given the nature of their conversations.

"I don't know." Mercedes tips her head to the side, as if trying to determine how she really feels about the entire concept of marriage. "I don't have an issue with weddings."

"Well, you never date," Lucy points out.

"I see people." Mercedes' eyes begin to narrow.

"No," T.K. says, after she swallows her drinks. "You sleep with men. Lots of men."

Mercedes' shrugs, but there's a tiny smirk on her face. "So I like sex. By the time I'm married, maybe it'll be nice to only sleep with one guy."

"I can't picture you married," Lucy says. "You'll probably end up divorced like me."

Mercedes waves her index finger back and forth. "Wait, wait, wait. I'm not getting a divorce. Period. Whoever I wind up with is going to mean it when he says *until death do us part*. The fucker is going to die before he gets out of that commitment."

The old couple seated behind them, shove their chairs back and move to a table further away. Lucy clamps a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter as she hears the old woman mutter something about a "trash mouth." The bent over, old man lends his arm to his wife, and as they teeter off, Lucy hears him say something about "tramps."

Mercedes' shoulders begin to shake and T.K. is dabbing at tears collecting at the corners of her eyes. Lucy braces a hand against the table, unsure if it's the alcohol or the way she is physically suppressing her laughter that causes the patio to sway.

"Hmm," Lucy traces her fingertip along the rim of her glass. "T.K. can picture her wedding, but her boyfriend isn't in it. I can picture my divorce, but not my wedding."

And then there's you." She pauses to meet Mercedes' gaze.

Mercedes takes a deep breath and juts out her chin. She'd look appropriately defiant, if it weren't for the way her lips keep twitching upwards. "What's your point?" she asks.

Lucy tilts her head in T.K.'s direction. "And Mercedes can't picture her wedding, but she can picture her homicide trial."

All three of the girls laugh. Lucy checks to make sure that everyone still has some wine left before raising her glass for a toast.

Mercedes pulls her glass towards her. "Well, here's to being a little crazy."

"To being institutionalized." T.K. says, lifting her own glass into the air. "Because it's going to happen to all of us."

There's a pause, and Lucy's friends wait to hear what she'll contribute. She clears her throat. "To having company. We're all going to end up in our own private, padded room, but I bet we'll be in the same asylum."

The girls clink their glasses together, and for a few moments, there's a silence as each of them finishes their glass of wine.

By the time they leave, the sun is starting to set. Lucy looks at the packages each one of them has clutched in their hands. They never leave empty-handed and their server has always wrapped their purchases in brown paper bags. Lucy looks at their identically camouflaged bottles, knowing she doesn't need to see a label to predict what each one of them has selected.

Mercedes is carrying one red wine and one white, and now she's temporarily

stocked for any occasion. T.K. has two bottles of the dessert wine nestled in her arms. She pairs them with strawberries for special occasions, and if it's any kind of a party, which it usually is, she'll go through both of them in one sitting.

"I had fun." Lucy pauses at the passenger side of Mercedes' car to say good-bye to T.K.

"Maybe next weekend?" Mercedes unlocks the car doors.

"I should be free. Call me," T.K. shouts. She turns around and begins jogging towards her own vehicle.

Lucy waves to T.K. as they pull out of the parking lot. She's breathes a sigh of relief when Mercedes flips the air conditioning switch. As they resume their usual car ride, zipping around the long stretch of uneven roads, Lucy stares out the window, marveling at how their return trip always seems to go by so much quicker. She turns to face Mercedes when she hears the radio being turned down.

"What are you doing, tonight?"

"Nothing." Lucy wiggles in her seat and stretches out her legs. She doesn't mention anything about possibly meeting Parker. Lucy won't see him until it's almost the early morning hours, when he drives to her apartment and leaves several hours later, and that's only if he calls.

"Get a hold of T.K." Mercedes says. "Tell her we're going out to the bars, later."

"Thank God." Lucy picks up her cell phone and begins to type a quick text message to T.K. "I thought I was the only one who wasn't ready to call it quits."

There's a silence in the car as Lucy punches the buttons of her phone. She doesn't

specify what bar they'll be at, or when they'll be arriving, simply leaving it to fate that T.K. will eventually turn up.

“You got the new blush wine, right?”

Lucy hits the send key, watching as a little envelope floats across her phone's screen. “You know I did.”

“We do know each other pretty well.” Mercedes is still wearing her giant sunglasses that take up half her face, but Lucy can see that her friend is smiling.

“And you got the semi sweet wine,” Mercedes teases, her fingers drifting towards the radio dial.

Lucy turns her head, peering out the window as she waits for the familiar sounds of music to fill the car.

Seconds before Mercedes cranks the dial, Lucy is surprised to hear her friend's soft voice. “It wouldn't be that different, if you just called him. Why not tell him to come out, tonight?”

Lucy jumps when a voice singing “name your poison, name your passion” blasts from the speakers. As their car angles around a steep curve in the road, Lucy thinks she hears the muffled thump of the wine bottles rolling around in the trunk. She doubts her words are audible over the music, but as Lucy smiles and peers out the window she agrees: “It really wouldn't be so different.”

They Smile When They're Mean

We're all assholes. It's the human condition. I couldn't be a History major and possibly believe otherwise. After spending four years studying the rise and fall of various empires, I can say with complete certainty: People build things so they have something to destroy. I once told an ex-girlfriend my theory that humanity will never evolve. I explained that humans only pretend to strive for harmony. But in all honesty, the concept of world peace is a myth, or at best, a temporary situation. It's the struggle, the battle, and the eventual destruction of everything we've created that humans secretly crave. If we aren't attacking enemies, we're fighting amongst ourselves. I've stopped running my mouth about these theories. I especially don't repeat them around women. They tend to take it personally. There I was, chatting about warfare and evolution, in what I thought was a typical date conversation, when my girlfriend cut me off. In between shrieking an astounding array of four letter words, she informed me, in no uncertain terms, that I was a jerk, a prick, and a womanizer, completely incapable of committing to a meaningful relationship. It took a while to register, but eventually I realized that she'd interpreted my views on battle and my approach to intimate relationships to be one and the same. Apparently what I'd really said was code for *hey baby, I want to get down your pants so I can break up with you afterwards.*

I could tell from the way she jabbed a finger in my face and made wild, violent gestures that I was supposed to apologize. So I did. I told her I was sorry for everything. I even apologized for the entire male gender. Nothing worked. I waited the standard two days grace period before venturing to call her. Part of me didn't expect to hear her voice on the other end of the line, but she must've wanted the final word.

When I asked her if she still hated me, she said it was a shame it couldn't work out between us; I was attractive when I didn't speak.

I've been dating Sarah for almost six months, my second longest relationship ever. We're both graduating from the University of Indiana in the spring, but she's one of those Political Science nuts, all opinionated and perky. She actually voted during the presidential elections. I knew things were getting serious between us when Sarah suggested we spend Christmas break with my parents. The towers of dirty dishes, my mother belting out Aretha Franklin songs from the shower, or my stepfather passing out drunk and burning a casserole in the oven should've scared her away. I had half a dozen apologies prepared, but all Sarah asked for was the number to the pizza place. "I can't believe you," I tell her. "I figured you'd dump me after you met my parents." We curl on the couch, waiting for our pizzas to arrive. I'm a sausage and mushroom kind of guy, but Sarah won't eat meat. In my experience, it's usually the skinny, whiny girls, the ones who poke at their protruding hip bones and complain they're fat, who are vegetarians. So when Sarah first ordered a salad in front of me, I started scanning the room for the nearest exit. I half expected her to ask me if her jeans made her ass look big, but as it turned out, she's opposed to the hormones injected into cattle. "Oh, Mike." She laughs. "I think your parents are funny. It explains a lot about you." "I don't think that's a compliment." "So are you going to show me around town, after dinner?" she asks. I bob my head before leaning in for a kiss. I'd already planned on taking her to Winston's, a little pub about twenty minutes away. It's a tiny hole in the wall, but the drinks are cheap and there are shuffleboard tables lining the back wall. "Taking you

to my favorite bar,” I tell her. Sarah kisses the corner of my mouth in approval. It’s not that I’m a liar, but ever since getting dumped for saying the wrong thing, I’ve learned to quit volunteering certain information. There are some details that Sarah just doesn’t need to know.

I don’t tell my girlfriend that I used to be one of the best customers at Winston’s. And for that matter, I also don’t explain that I stopped going on account of one of the bartenders, Kayla, my ex-fiancé. It could be an awkward conversation considering I’ve never told Sarah I used to be engaged.

It’d go completely against my newfound “don’t ask/don’t tell” policy, to admit that lately I’ve begun to wonder if it’s the bar or all the memories tied up with Kayla that I’ve begun to miss. Kayla is long gone now; I’ll probably never see her again. It’d just be silly to mention any of this to Sarah. Besides, I figure since Sarah’s never asked if I was engaged, then it must not be important.

“It’s just like 217,” Sarah says. She wraps her hands around my arm and gives a gentle squeeze. She sounds excited. Winston’s is smaller and more narrow, but its aura does resemble the atmosphere of the bar where we’d first met. I vaguely remember seeing Sarah around campus, but it wasn’t until I was buzzed off a few beers and sitting at the bar that I’d ever paid her any attention. I like to tell her that she intimidated me; that’s why I waited so long to approach her. Now she thinks I’m romantic. “I knew you’d like it,” I say. “Anything to get out of the house.” “I want a beer.” She tugs on my arm and directs me toward the bar. I start to scan the room. It seems more crowded than I remembered. It’s a bizarre mix of townies and college students, but apparently everyone needs to toss a few back during the holidays. Sarah and I stand at

the bar for several moments. I turn my head to inspect the new band advertisements stapled to the walls. I can't tell whether the paneling is crooked or if it's the angle of the posters, but everything looks a little unbalanced. "I'll have a Bud Light," I hear Sarah say. I turn to order a drink, thinking I'll buy us some shots too. "And for you, Mike?" the girl says. She hasn't changed. Same short hair, same heavy eye makeup, same nasty smile. "Hey, Slickman," I fake a grin. Her first name is Nora, but nobody calls her that. "I'll have a double whiskey and coke and three shots of Goldschlager."

I notice Slickman and the head manager are the only ones behind the bar. Just my luck. They're probably the only two employees left who remember me. "You know her?" Sarah says, after Slickman walks away. She pokes me in the ribs. "Yeah," I respond. At first I'd never understood why Kayla liked the girl. All a person has to do is look at Slickman to know she's a rampant bitch. I clear my throat. "I used to come here a lot." "When?" Sarah asks. "Oh, you know." Slickman returns with our drinks, saving me from having to answer any more questions. She pours the shots in front of us. Sarah gives me a quizzical look. I hand Slickman a wad of cash. "Keep it," I say. I nudge one of the shot glasses towards her. "Thanks." Slickman eyeballs Sarah. "You didn't have to do that." I start to wonder if she still talks to Kayla. All three of us raise our shot glasses. "What should we cheers to?" Sarah asks. "To reunions," Slickman says. She and I tap our glasses on the edge of the bar before gulping down our shots. Sarah drinks hers immediately. "Why'd you do that?" she asks. I watch Slickman sneer at Sarah. She takes in every detail—Sarah's ponytail, her sweatshirt, the Democratic Party pin on the strap of her purse. Crap. I've seen that stare before. Slickman definitely keeps in touch with Kayla. I could bet money that she'll be calling

Kayla tonight. Sarah nudges me with her elbow. It takes me a second to figure out what she's asking me. "Oh. It's a toast to the bartender." I grab our drinks. "Come on. Let's go play shuffleboard." I didn't go to college right after high school. I took several years off, for no particular reason. I met Kayla back home, when she was still bartending at Winston's. The place has a pretty high turnover rate for employees, but at the time, I knew the entire staff.

Before I scooted off to college, I used to sit at the bar until they closed. Afterwards, when the employees finished cleaning and counting out the registers, we'd head upstairs to the office space and play drinking games until the sun came up. Even though I knew Kayla from all those after-hours gatherings, we didn't start dating until both of us wound up at U of I. I'd just enrolled and she'd transferred from a community college, and things just went from there.

I used to think Kayla didn't fit in at Winston's. She's definitely hot (which seems to be the main prerequisite for the female staff) but she wasn't like the rest of the girls. There were a few loud, athletic ones, a chubby girl with massive tits, and of course Slickman. She's a lifer. She'll work there until the place burns to the ground. I'll admit the girl is decently attractive, but she deserves to be locked up in a padded cell somewhere. I've actually witnessed her dump a drink over a man's head for grabbing her ass. I felt sorry for the guy. He was drunk and tripped over his feet. It looked like he needed something to hang onto.

Kayla was quiet, though, almost unnervingly so. She could've been Slickman's polar opposite. I used to watch old men tip her twenty bucks a drink because they said she was too sweet to work there. At first, I agreed with them. It was easy to get

distracted. Her small frame and wavy, brown hair. Her blue eyes. Great body, too. She just didn't look hard enough, or unapproachable enough, to be waiting on drunks. It should've tipped me off that I had the wrong impression when she became buddy-buddy with Slickman.

They were always wasted on the job. Slickman showed her where all the blind spots were on the cameras, so the owners wouldn't catch them drinking. They even invented strategies together for dealing with sloppy drunks. Kayla took on the forefront, smiling innocently and offering to make tall drinks for customers who were obviously too intoxicated to continue drinking. She'd grab a large glass, pour a dribble of alcohol on the straw (making it taste nice and strong), charge them for a double, and walk off with the money. Slickman knew the drill. The entire time Kayla was charging customers for non-existent liquor, Slickman lurked in the background, pouring shots for themselves that they'd never paid for. They kept the game going until the customer stopped ordering cocktails. Eventually one of the girls would motion for a bouncer to kick out the drunk, and nobody ever seemed the wiser that they'd been duped by the amazing duo behind the bar.

It wasn't Kayla's drinking that made me leery. That was one of my favorite traits about her. It was the way she and Slickman got along—I just couldn't fathom it. I've always known that anyone who associates with that demon-spawn is bad news. The problem with Kayla, though, was that everything about her seemed perfectly hidden.

“Do you think your parents will be in bed when we get home?” Sarah asks.

“Maybe,” I say. “Stop worrying. It doesn’t matter.” It’s not noticeable in the dim lighting, but I know she’s blushing.

She takes a sip of her beer. “It’s so weird though. They’re cool and all, but I don’t like sharing a room when they’re right down the hall.”

“I didn’t know you were such a prude.” She ducks her head. I give her a little pinch. “Well maybe if you weren’t so loud.”

Sarah laughs. “Let’s go smoke.” I follow her outside, joining the other smokers on the sidewalk.

“Hey, man,” says Joe, the head manager of Winston’s. He passes me his lighter. “What’s going on?”

I light my cigarette. “Not much. Just home on break.”

“Visiting the rents?” He looks at Sarah. His lips twitch. I make the hasty introductions. Joe nods in her direction.

“Anyone still work here that I know?” I ask.

Joe shakes his head. “Just the beast.”

“So I noticed,” I respond.

“How long have you worked here?” Sarah interrupts.

Joe takes another drag. “Six years.” He blows a stream of smoke over our heads. I can tell Sarah’s not his type. He doesn’t do the whole small talk thing.

I remember to hand him back his lighter. He flicks his cigarette butt into the street. “I gotta get back inside. Slickman’s trashed.”

“Imagine that,” I mutter.

Joe turns around before he opens the door. “I’m thinking of having a few beers

after work, if you want to stick around.”

“After hours?” Sarah asks. Joe nods. I can see the hopeful look on Sarah’s face, the silent plea that we don’t spend another night watching a James Bond marathon while my mother rambles on and on about Sean Connery’s tush.

“Yeah. Sounds good, man,” I say. I hope that Sarah notices all of my efforts to impress her. We’ve passed out the last few nights, cuddling, but skipping all the fun stuff. Maybe if I lubricate her with enough drinks, she’ll forget my parents are home.

“Really?” Sarah asks. “Where is after hours at? Promise we’ll stay out tonight?”

“Promise,” I say. “It’s upstairs. It’ll probably just be a few of us sitting around, playing card games. Won’t be much.”

“Thanks.” Sarah kisses my cheek. “Don’t get me wrong. I like your family, but sometimes they’re a little much.”

“We’ll do anything you want,” I assure Sarah.

“Ok, but you don’t have to buy me any more drinks.” Sarah frowns. “I know you’re broke.”

“It’s my treat. I have to take care of my girl.” Sarah’s an earthy girl, not at all high maintenance. She just assumes that all college students are broke. I’ve never even had to try to hide the fact that I’m really in debt because I’m paying of Kayla’s old engagement ring. “I never worry about money with you,” I say.

We finish our cigarettes and head back into the bar. “By the way, that girl bartending, Slickman,” I warn Sarah, “is a total bitch.”

“Yeah, well have you ever met a nice girl in a bar?” Sarah rubs her hands together. “I’m freezing. Lets get those drinks.” She starts to push her way through the

crowd. "Don't worry about me," she calls over her shoulder. "I'll stay away from her."

We wait at the bar, and this time Joe grabs our drinks. We snag a few bar stools and sit across from him. He asks if we need shots. I tell him not yet.

I don't know how much time has passed, but Joe sets one shot glass in front of me and another in front of himself. He's lounging against the bar, rubbing the side of his face. "They're on me," he says. I wave the shot glass under my nose.

"Rumpleminze?" I say. I'd recognize the minty aroma anywhere.

"That's one-hundred proof, isn't it?" Sarah says. "Guess I'll be driving home, tonight."

Joe and I clink our glasses on the counter before downing our shots. "Thanks," I tell him.

Joe gathers up the empty glasses with one hand and cocks his head towards the door. I swivel my barstool to see what's caught his attention.

She's talking to a bouncer. Her hair's different now—longer, or maybe a lighter shade, I don't really know. She takes her jacket off and drapes it over her arm. She was never the type of girl to let herself go. I knew she'd never put on any weight, but damn, I forgot about those low cut sweaters.

"Kayla." She's too far away to hear me say her name, but as if by cue, she looks in my direction.

"Who's that?" Sarah asks.

Joe claps me on the shoulder. "Welcome back."

People tell me that I screwed it up with Kayla because I don't know when to quit

drinking. But we're bar people. If anything, alcohol consumption was our common bond.

I prefer to blame everything on Kayla's rules and regulations. The girl was a walking minefield when it came to her expectations. I never knew that I'd screwed up until she tilted her head and flashed me that phony, *you're-a-complete-dumbass* smile.

I thought I was a stand up guy, offering to take her out for dinner and movie on Valentine's Day. She said I was pretentious. The first time she spent the night at my apartment and I made the move to switch from spooning to morning sex, she opened one eye and said, "Fine, if this is necessary, but make it quick."

Nothing about her was what it seemed. She wouldn't talk to people wearing band t-shirts because she claimed they were all glorified trekkies and computer nerds. She claimed fat girls exposed their cleavage because they knew they had nothing else worth showing off. She even wanted to call the cops on the neighbors when their kids were being too loud. If she could get a noise violation ticket for blasting her music at 2am, then why was it any different when the brats woke her up from her afternoon nap?

In retrospect, I never understood the girl. Maybe if I'd known her longer or knew more about her past relationships, I could've gauged her personality better. But Kayla said it's the losers that constantly bring up their past, and I had to agree. Anyone can bitch about their emotional baggage, but it takes real talent to let a bad conversation die.

I think it's one of those unspoken rules that if you see your ex in a bar, you either have to A) duck out the back door, B) give them an awkward hug, or C) start a screaming

match. I opt for the hug.

“I thought you moved to Arizona,” I say. She smells great. She feels great. I shouldn’t have given her a hug.

Kayla steps back. “I just flew back for Christmas.”

I haul Sarah in front of me. “This is Sarah,” I blurt out.

Sarah rubs her arm and cranes her neck to glare at me. I must have grabbed her too hard. “She’s my girlfriend.”

I watch them shake hands. Sarah shifts her weight. Kayla has that effect on everyone. There’s something slow and deliberate about the way she moves, even when she’s only extending her hand.

“So how do you two know each other?” Sarah pushes a loose strand of hair behind her ear. She suspects something, I can tell.

I suddenly wish the jukebox were so loud it would drown out all conversations.

Kayla doesn’t flinch. She’s completely focused on Sarah. “I used to work here.”

Sarah’s shoulders relax. I think she lets out a sigh. This must be the answer she’d been hoping for. “Oh. So are you going to after hours, too?”

“I’m thinking about it.” Kayla turns her head just as Slickman wanders over.

“I thought you’d never get here.” Slickman and Kayla reach across the bar to embrace. Slickman flashes me a wide, toothy grin over her friend’s shoulder. “Kayla is staying with me. Isn’t it great?”

Wench. Now I understand her “reunions” toast from earlier. “Yeah,” I say. “Didn’t see that one coming.” Kayla turns. We’re all facing each other.

“So how do you like your job?” I ask. She’d been a Nutrition major in college.

Beats me how she landed a human resources job, half way across the country.

“It’s ok.” There’s a funny, tight lipped smile on Kayla’s face. “The money’s good, but it’s not what I expected. Sorta a let down, if you know what I mean.”

Sarah excuses herself to go to the bathroom.

“She wears political pins,” Slickman says.

“So she’s different,” I say. A crowd starts to gather at the bar. Joe yells at Slickman to do her goddamn job. I wait for Kayla to say something. I’d give my left nut to know what she’s thinking.

She perches on Sarah’s empty barstool and reaches for the drink Slickman leaves behind. “Girlfriend, huh?”

“Are you seeing anyone?” I ask. She crosses her legs. Sarah would never wear tight jeans like that. Come to think of it, some of Sarah’s clothes are from the men’s department.

Kayla trails her fingertip along the rim of her glass. It’s a madras, her favorite. Vodka, cranberry and orange juice. Kayla always said it wasn’t about making healthy choices; it was about looking the part. I’d forgotten she was strictly a hard liquor girl, unless of course it was after hours. It was something to do with her theory about beer turning girls into blimps. She does make Sarah look huge. Not to mention frumpy.

“She’s cute, Mike,” Kayla says. “In a hairy, doesn’t shave her legs sort of way.”

“You didn’t answer my question. Are you seeing anyone?” I glance at her hand. There’s no sign of an engagement ring. I should be relieved.

She shrugs. “Don’t worry about it. It’s not important.”

“I didn’t tell her about us,” I say. “I’m sorry. I should’ve.”

Kayla laughs. "You never say the right thing, anyway. It's kinda your trademark."

"Are you pissed?" I ask.

She sips her drink. "You look worried."

"You can't just come out and say something, can you?" I suck in a deep breath of air and slowly exhale. I keep my voice steady. "Just say it. I know you want to."

Kayla smiles. "She's different, huh? Let me guess, she doesn't wear makeup because she not superficial, right? And the mass produced logo on her purse is supposed to let people know she's an individual. Yeah, I know the type. Oh, she's definitely special."

"Not everyone can be as frigid as you," I retort. "She's a really nice girl."

Kayla tips her head back and laughs. I don't know what she finds amusing, but I'd forgotten how sexy she looks when she laughs. I look down her shirt. "You, with a nice girl. It'll never happen. You'll see."

"You're jealous," I say.

She shakes her head. "You never did understand the important stuff. I should've known we wouldn't last. But we had fun for a while, didn't we?" She doesn't wait for an answer. "I'm not jealous. But you could do better. You've had better." She takes another sip of her drink. "You know she's not your type."

Kayla scoops up her belongings and slides off the barstool. She walks away. Now I'm convinced she's jealous. "We should take bets," Kayla calls back to me, "on how long it takes you to screw this one up."

I have a bad feeling that I've just been cursed.

A few minutes later, Sarah appears, weaving her way through the crowd. Kayla stops and touches her shoulder. They talk for a second. Sarah comes back to the bar smiling.

“She likes my pin,” she says.

I keep Sarah away from Slickman and Kayla the rest of the night. I wish I'd never promised to go to after hours, but I know if I try backing out now, Sarah will never dismiss all the tension between me and Kayla as her imagination. I'm screwed any way I look at it, but I'm drunk, so I don't care.

Sarah and I sit in a booth while Joe cleans behind the bar. He sets the six pack of beer we've purchased on our table. Kayla disappears upstairs with Slickman to help count out the register. God knows what they're saying.

I have that familiar, swimmy sensation. Joe's been sliding me shots all night. I thought I'd done a pretty good job of not checking out Kayla's ass, but it seemed like every time I looked up, Joe would arch his eyebrows and bring over another round.

“You and Joe sure seem to get along,” Sarah comments.

There's a little wrinkle between her eyebrows. I think she must be mad. “I don't really know the guy. He probably just needed an excuse to drink and get away from Slickman.”

“Excuses.” Sarah grumbles something. I hear her say something about we “should've included her.” I don't answer. I'm not sure if she's mad at me or Joe, or maybe both, but I don't want to listen to her nag.

We wait until Slickman and Kayla say they're done counting the money before

grabbing the beer and joining them upstairs. There are a few bouncers with us, but none that I remember.

“What should we play?” Sarah asks. We drag folding chairs over to a square table.

Joe shuffles the cards. He fans them out, face down, in front of us. “Circle of death.”

“We’ll explain as we go along,” I say. Kayla and Slickman sit across from Sarah and me. The bouncers are facing Joe. I wonder if everyone but Sarah knows I’m deliberately being separated from my ex-fiancé.

We teach Sarah the game. Each card comes with a certain rule that determines who has to drink. Fours are socials, fives are guys, nines are rhyme time, etc. I’m half way through my second beer, but there are still cards on the table.

Slickman draws a seven. “Never have I ever.” She draws her words out long and slow, making sure everyone hears her. She looks at Sarah. “Now if I say something that I’ve never done, but you have, you have to drink.”

Sarah nods her head. “Yeah, I’ve played that game before.”

“Slickman, don’t be a bitch,” Joe says. He takes a puff from his cigarette and blows the smoke in her direction. We’re all chain smokers, so we’ve cracked a window for ventilation. Now the room is just hazy and cold. I get the chills.

Slickman glares at Joe. “I’ll do what I want, when I want.”

“Don’t,” Joe repeats.

Kayla clears her throat. Sarah looks at me. She puts her hand on my knee.

“What’s going on?” she whispers.

“How many times have I fired you?” Joe asks Slickman.

“Three,” Kayla replies. She holds up three fingers and wiggles them in front of Slickman’s face. “Come on. Please don’t make it four.”

“Never have I ever slept with Mike,” Slickman says. The room goes silent. Sarah looks down at her beer.

“Baby,” I say, trying to inject a note of humor into my voice. “They know we’ve had sex.” One of the bouncers coughs. Sarah’s gaze darts from Slickman, then to Kayla. She turns to me, her eyes starting to narrow with accusations.

“You can’t fire me for this,” Slickman says to Joe. “It’s un-work related.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Joe says. “You always have to get off on other people’s misery.”

Slickman laughs. She really must be wasted. “Come on. There’s still one more seven left.” She throws her arm out in a grand, sweeping gesture. There’s a beer can in her hand, and I watch as some of the liquid spills onto the floor. “If I get that card, I’m going to say never have I ever—” She pauses. “Never have I ever been engaged to Mike.”

Sarah jerks her hand off my leg.

Kayla sighs. She picks up her beer and chugs the whole thing.

I asked Kayla not to leave. It was strange like that. We were friends and drinking buddies, and in a sense, it was inevitable that we wound up in bed together. Somewhere along the line, it stopped being casual sex and we formed an actual relationship. Neither of us knows exactly how it all happened. That’s why we didn’t celebrate anniversaries. (Did we base it off when we first slept together, or when she started expecting me to buy

her dinner?) In any event, we fell out of a relationship as fast as we'd tumbled into one.

I knew she'd transferred college credits and that she'd be graduating before me, but it didn't really sink in until I saw her planning to leave.

"Stay with me," I said. "I'll be done in a few years. We'll move anywhere you want."

"No." She wouldn't spell it out for me.

"We're engaged," I said. Still no answer.

We didn't even get the proposal right. We'd been together for about a year, I know at least that much. We didn't have one of those sappy, movie moments where I got down on one knee and asked her to marry me. One day I'd been joking with her that she should keep me around; she'd never find anyone else like me. She laughed and walked away. Then she turned around, and I'll never forget that look on her face.

She cocked her head to the side, pursed her lips and said, "Actually, yeah. You'll do."

I passed it off as a joke, not wanting to scare her away with some idiotic declarations of my undying devotion. Later, though, when she was in my bed, she brought up the subject again. Kayla laid on her back, staring up as my ceiling fan rotated in lazy circles.

"I could be with you," she said. "We're good together."

Kayla usually didn't like to talk after sex, so I didn't say anything.

"You know all about me." Kayla trailed her fingers down my stomach. I must have squirmed a little. She smiled, letting her hand go still. "You know what I'm like. I don't have to worry about all the small stuff with you."

“What do you mean?” I asked, when she rolled over to face me.

“So many expectations,” she murmured. “Like how people think I want to be a nutritionist because I care about their health. I’m just skinny.”

“Just a pretty girl in a room full of fat people,” I teased.

She bit her lower lip, but then a more serious expression crept over her face. She kissed me. I lifted a hand to brush a strand hair off the side of her neck, hoping she didn’t notice the way my hand shook.

“I’ll buy you a ring,” I whispered. “An engagement ring.”

She paused, reaching up to twine our fingers together. Her usual smile returned, the one that seemed to gleam with just a hint of amusement. “I get to pick it out.” She started to kiss me again, and I pulled her towards me. “I love you,” she said, and I repeated it back.

I wish I could pretend that I’d been tricked, that Kayla was secretly a money grubbing bitch who took off once she slipped a ring around her finger, but that’d be too easy. We’d said “I love you” countless times before, but never like that. There’d always been something prompting us to immediately follow up the phrase with some sort of a joke or a goofy comment. But that night, something changed. It was the first time we ever just let our words hang in the air.

When Kayla brought me home to meet her parents at Easter, I knew our engagement was real. I should’ve been looking forward to planning our wedding; Kayla wanted a yellow cake with chocolate frosting, and both of us agreed on an open bar reception. Still, I couldn’t stop thinking about her looming graduation date, the day she’d

leave me behind. Kayla wanted to postpone our wedding, waiting until I graduated too. In the back of my mind, I think I knew that our engagement would never last that long. Kayla would go on her own, and one day she'd wake up, wondering why she ever agreed to marry me in the first place. That's when I started to screw everything up.

We were boozing-cruising on the ride up to her parents,' which wasn't a big deal, considering we were in the middle of nowhere. She lived a few towns away from my own parents, so I just poured some rum in my coke and enjoyed the drive. Then I got nervous. Poured in some more rum. I tried to pull into their driveway. I missed. I took out their neighbor's mailbox. It wouldn't have been so bad, but the mailbox catapulted through the air and landed on the neighbor's lawn statue. It was a ceramic Jesus one. I dented his forehead.

Kayla's parents hated me after that. I ended up staying at my own parents' house instead. I tried to make up for my mistake by taking Kayla and her parents to the most expensive restaurant I could find. I probably shouldn't have picked a seafood restaurant; Kayla's father is allergic to fish.

Then, when Kayla's graduation date did finally roll around, I stayed at the bar drinking. I couldn't tell you why. Kayla had entrusted me with the tickets to the ceremony, and for some reason, while I chugged beer after beer, I'd reach into my pocket, to make sure the tickets were still there. Her parents missed the event, too.

I'm sure I did a million other things wrong, but the point is, on the day she packed up to leave town, she said don't bother calling.

I unlock the car and flop into the passenger seat. I might be drunk, but I'm not

about to watch my girlfriend drive off in my car while she leaves me stranded. She snatches the keys from my hand. She won't look at me. We spend a good portion of the ride home in silence.

"Just talk to me," I say.

"I'm so pissed, I don't even know what to say to you." Sarah's staring straight ahead. She has a death grip on the steering wheel. I give it a minute or so. They always say that before they start yelling.

"I knew it, I just knew it," she says.

"It's nothing," I say. "It's over and done with."

"It's not nothing," Sarah yells. "Engaged? Engaged? When were you going to bring that up?"

"Umm," I say.

She tells me I made a fool of myself. I'd been checking Kayla out all night. She rants about how everyone else knew what was going on, and I just made her the butt of everyone's joke. I lose track of what she accuses me of next.

"I asked you a question." Sarah glares at me. She's crying. I hate when girls do that. It's cheating. Now I'm automatically the designated asshole.

"Baby," I say. I try to sound soothing because I haven't a clue what she's asked me.

"Don't Baby me," she says. "Answer me. Why'd you break up?"

"I don't know," I tell her.

"Bull shit. Tell me. Who dumped who?"

I sigh. I close my eyes. "She graduated college before me. She moved away.

She dumped me. Happy?"

"Oh, I'm thrilled." Sarah snuffles. "You don't just throw engagements away. What did you do?"

My eyes are still closed. I listen as the questions come rapid fire: *How did I meet her? How long were Kayla and I together? Did I still love her? Why would I go back to Winston's? Was I a complete fucking moron?*

"Do you still love her?" Sarah repeats.

I open my eyes again. Sarah's angry, crazy angry--I've never seen her like this before. I lock the passenger door, in the case she's entertaining any ideas of strangling me and ditching my body by the side of the road.

"Do you still love her?" Sarah screams.

"In a way," I tell her. "I guess I never let her go." I look down at the glove box. I've never told anyone, but I saved one of Kayla's graduation tickets. It's somewhere next to my insurance card. Most of the time I forget it's there, but I just couldn't bring myself to throw it away. I suppose it's a strange storage spot, but I liked the idea, knowing it followed everywhere I went.

The car grows silent. Sarah must not have liked my answer.

"It's all in the textbooks," I say. I try to peer out the windshield, but everything is blurred and speeding past us.

"What?" Sarah demands. She snuffles again. She sounds all nasally and congested, like snot is about to drip from her nose.

"History repeats itself." My words sound slurred, even to my own ears.

Sarah starts to shout again. She asks if that means if I want to get back together

with Kayla. Did I think she kept her engagement ring?

“No.” I say. “I don’t know. I doubt it. She probably pawned it and drank the money away in Cancun. She’s not a nice person.” I pause. “She’s not like you.”

“I better not be like her,” Sarah says. For the first time this evening, I’m thankful she’s everything Kayla’s not. I could care less that she’ll never be the most attractive girl in the room, and I don’t even mind that she’s always on my case to eat organic produce. There’s something simple and uncomplicated about her nature.

I start to say her name, wondering if I play my cards right if she’ll forgive me.

“Kayl—”

“What did you call me?” Sarah stares at me.

“Oh, God. I’m sorry.” My mouth feels dry. “Really, really sorry.”

“You’re sorry for what?” Sarah’s voice is different now. Low. Dangerous.

“I’m sorry for everything,” I tell her. She lets me apologize over and over again.

I squint at her, trying to focus on the expression on her face. Her eyes are harsh and cold, and there’s something grim, almost determined, about the way she’s pursed her lips. She’ll probably key my car.

“You hate me,” I say. “You do, I can tell.”

She doesn’t respond. It could be my imagination, or maybe I’m drunk. I tell myself it’s passing headlights playing tricks on my mind. Sarah’s not like the other women know. She’d never be like the ex who’d advised me to not to speak. And Sarah doesn’t have it in her to be mean and spiteful, not the way Slickman does. But mostly, Sarah’s not like Kayla. She’s never given me that expectant stare, like I should just be able to look at her face and know what she’s thinking. Sarah’s sweet and plain, and she

just wouldn't leave without an explanation. I look at her hard face and remind myself, it's only the funny shadows playing tricks on my mind. She's not vindictive at all. Sarah just wouldn't smile.