

6-1-2015

## String Lights

Amanda Jennifer Pleau MFA  
*University of Southern Maine*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/etd>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Pleau, Amanda Jennifer MFA, "String Lights" (2015). *All Theses & Dissertations*. 102.  
<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/etd/102>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu](mailto:jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu).

# STRING LIGHTS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

**Amanda Jennifer Pleau**

JUNE 2015

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

June 1, 2015

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Amanda Jennifer Pleau entitled **String Lights** be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



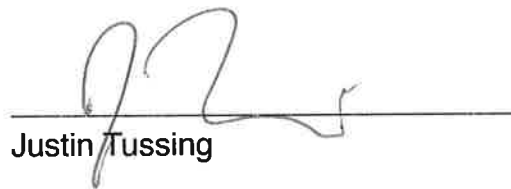
Suzanne Strempek Shea

Advisor



T Clutch Fleischmann

Reader



Justin Tussing

Interim Director

Accepted



Dean, College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences  
Manuel Avalos

## Abstract

String Lights is a nonfictional, creative exploration of relationships. Themes in this collection include digital communication, the cultural influence of music and music retailers, coming of age, sex, love, true crime, and travel. “Two Dates in Pittsburgh” and “Knitting Quilts” are from a memoir in progress and contain news headlines, text messages, and blog posts. The other pieces document my personal and creative journey throughout the program, taking the form of experimental and non-linear essays. The majority of the work is set in Lewiston and Portland, Maine.

## Acknowledgements

I'd like to acknowledge the faculty/staff at Stonecoast, for their support and dedication to the program but most specifically:

Jaed Coffin told me this program was about learning to write every day. I scoffed, but he was totally 100% right.

Susan Conley said, "Writing is hard and it takes a lot of time," which gave me permission to struggle.

Aaron Hamburger guided me through the most difficult time and didn't let me slack one single little bit.

T Clutch Fleischmann said "I want to text Anne Carson" and helped me identify what makes my writing unique and special.

Suzanne Strempek Shea slipped serious critical feedback in between compliment sandwiches of patience, kindness and encouragement. Stonecoast is lucky to have her.

My classmates and lifelong peers: Teal Gardella, Sarah Baldwin-Beneich, Robin Wood, Melanie Brooks, Katy Sargent, Kara Moran, Danara Wallace, Shannon Ratliff, Philip Osgood, Anya Mali and the Firsties from Summer 2013.

MWPA, Lorem Ipsum, the Glickman Library, LFK and Space Gallery for making Portland, Maine my writing home

My friends and family, for whom I'm so extremely grateful for the love, support, text messages and eye rolls: Kate Digby Skinner, Laura Grover, Bridget Burns, Tess Van Horn, Hillary Collins-Gilpatrick, Jason Read, Matt Dodge, Deirdre Fulton, Sarah and Peter Thorne, members of Bowlderdash past and present, and all the Pleaus. Everyone I saw on my cross country road trip, thank you for keeping me sane and on track, especially Rebecca, Emily, Jenn, Kahn, and Jess and Andy.

Mandy Wheeler, Tim LaVoie, Sean Moore and Corey Bryant: By examining our relationships, I've learned a lot about myself. Thank you for the memories and here's to many more.

Joey Esposito: you inspire me to be the best version of myself. I love you and I'm so glad I found you. #2B1C forever.

## Table of Contents

Preface, p. 1

Title page, p. 17

Why I Am Who I Am, p. 18

Two Dates in Pittsburgh, p. 25

Nick/Matt, p. 62

Knitting Quilts, p. 71

The Yelp.com Over Sharer Takes a Roadtrip, p. 98

Cash, Blanche and Me, p. 126

Works cited, p. 138





## Preface

I've always wanted to be featured in a "What's in Your Purse?" column, a popular feature in fashion magazines and blogs. But since that may never happen, I'd like to share the contents of my bag with you, here.

Bag: Navy blue leather tote with magnetic center closure, reversible; bright aqua on the inside. Purchased at the G.H. Bass outlet in Lee, Massachusetts for \$29.99 after seeing two stylish women at my winter residency with the *exact* same style bag in black/brown and navy/mustard.

### Contents:

- 1 evolution of smooth (eos) lip balm in Summer Fruit. Not tested on animals, no artificial dyes, no petroleum, and the sphere shape is harder to lose at the bottom of the bag.
- 1 Tom's of Maine travel toothbrush, a promotional item discontinued eons ago but left to rot in the office because it has the old logo.
- 1 Tom's of Maine Long Lasting Unscented Roll-On deodorant, made in Maine, not tested on animals. One woman at school is sensitive to fragrances.

- 4 loose bobby pins, brown.
- 1 cerulean hair tie.
- 1 rubber contacts case from MUJI USA at the airport in New York.  
Contact lenses were discarded either multiple days or multiple weeks ago.
- 1 Apple pair iPhone ear buds, loose.
- 1 Apple iPhone ear bud case, empty.
- 1 pair tan knitted mittens with flap to reveal fingers, entirely too dingy and dirty to wear.
- 1 pair sunglasses with rose-colored lenses.
- 1 black claw clip for pulling back hair, which is 10 inches shorter now thanks to an impromptu donation to Locks of Love.
- A postcard from Nick of an old timey map of Hawaii—he sent his best wishes and drew an arrow on the island of Maui: “My farm is here.”
- 1 half-full pack of Orbitz Wintermint, the flavor my boyfriend likes most.
- An errant coffee sleeve—when I forget my travel mug, I save my paper cups to put in my recycling at home. Often this leads to mostly-empty cups dripping on my stack of papers, but I still do it
- 2 halves of a broken screen door handle, which I took to the hardware store to purchase a replacement, a week and a half ago.

- 1 tube L'Occitane en Provence Shea Butter Hand Cream, a Christmas gift from my best friend's mother, who is also my landlord. The aluminum tube is cracked and I'm tempted to call to see if they'll send me a replacement, since this is the greatest hand cream I've ever tried. It's made in France so the ingredient list is in French. I don't know what they are but it doesn't matter.
- 4 Papermate Flair medium tip pens; 2 blue, 1 black, 1 orange. The orange came in useful two weeks ago for correcting my play-along-at-home Oscar ballot.
- Approx 50 pages of my manuscript printed out with my mentor's track change comments. I've been working in Apple Pages, and they have no view comment feature, so my boyfriend opened these in Word, saved them as .pdfs, then I printed them at home. I just wanted to be able to see all the comments at once.
- 1 red Moleskine unlined medium-sized notebook.
- 1 black-and-white marble, lined notebook.
- Stephen King's *On Writing*, hardcover, dogeared to my place on page 111.
- J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, the re-released paperback with the new art. It came in a boxed set. My boyfriend and I are re-reading the series together.
- *The New Yorker*, anniversary Feb 23 & March 2, 2015, edition, unopened thusfar.

- Program for the Berkshire Festival of Women Writers. Unopened thusfar.
- 1 handkerchief, more of a scarf. I picked this up at a thrift store in Paris, the one time I travelled abroad, in 2009. Blowing my nose into a scarf and stuffing it back in my bag surely grosses people out; I assure you it's worse when I'm sick. But I can't bring myself to use that many paper tissues. It's red and blue, with illustrations of Paris monuments. I can't believe I haven't lost it yet.
- Wallet: An L.L. Bean Signature fold over clutch. I call it a "Lady Costanza bundle." It's faded blue canvas and worn caramel leather. I've had it for five years and again, I can't believe I haven't lost it yet. Inside:
  - My passport
  - 1 Chapstick unflavored lip balm, which I'm pretty sure my boyfriend dropped in my driveway and then I picked up and kept
  - A blue marker cap
  - 3 loose bobby pins, black
  - 5 dimes
  - 1 quarter
  - 1 nickel
  - 24 pennies
  - 1 United Mileage Plus Explorer Visa card from Chase
  - 1 State of Maine driver's license

- 1 State of Maine identification card
- Red Cross New England blood donor card: Type O Negative
- Receipt from Roy's Shoe Shop
- A wallet-sized picture of my niece and nephew from five years ago
- The key card to my room at the Harraseeket Inn, Freeport, Maine, from three weeks ago
- 1 Bangor Savings Bank debit/Mastercard
- 1 C/W MARS library card, "Connecting libraries in Central and Western Massachusetts"
- University of Southern Maine student ID
- Another penny
- Business card holder with one last business card, which I mistakenly printed with my home address. I haven't lived there in almost three years
- An expired photo copy of my health insurance card
- \$1 chip from the Flamingo in Las Vegas
- 1 stila Stay All Day® Liquid Lipstick in vibrant coral. I hired someone to do my makeup for this wedding I was in and I told her, since she was the first professional I'd consulted on the matter, that I needed a bold lip.
- Two thumb tacks from when I packed up my apartment six months ago.

In April 2012, a few weeks before my undergraduate classes at the University of Southern Maine officially ended, I accepted a position at Tom's of Maine in Kennebunk, Maine. My official title: Citizens' Advocacy Representative. I'd be troubleshooting consumer's deodorant problems, answering their toothpaste questions.

A gigantic portion of the people who called Tom's simply wanted coupons. Another significant chunk wanted to know if the toothpaste was gluten-free. I would debate with strangers whether to trust the FDA, what health risks they may or may not encounter after using products with specific ingredients. A lot of people called or wrote in response to something they'd read somewhere online. What they didn't realize is that anyone can write anything and put it online, and it was my job to explain that without making them feel like idiots. Fluoride in toothpaste is as much a socio-political issue as it is a question of health. People are scared of GMOs, perhaps confusing the questionable ethics of Monsanto with the practical reasons genetically modified food exists. I've personally always loved navel oranges. Other times, conversations with consumers would launch me into a crisis spiral—Tom's of Maine dental floss isn't biodegradable. Should I forgo the free product to find a floss I can throw in the compost?

The job was mentally and emotionally taxing, but Tom's was and still is a company that takes care of its employees. Benefits included 401k matching, dental, fitness center on site, cash incentives to purchase environmentally friendly cars, and up to \$10,000 a year towards college. And if I reenrolled in a graduate program that my company would pay for, I could defer my undergraduate loans. I somehow convinced my manager that a degree in writing would be relevant to improving my job performance because writing is essentially communicating and communication was 100% what I did at Tom's. And if I stayed at USM, I wouldn't have to request my transcripts—which would not have been a hassle, but it helped expedite the process. In less than a month, with my corporate education fund on deck, I applied to Stonecoast. It was one of the best accidental decisions I've made.

Before Stonecoast, my writing consisted mostly of imperfect blog posts. The most popular entry was about this time I discovered I wore Spanx so often they left an indent in my thigh. But only one thigh. The blog had some followers, and garnered some local press, which led to opportunities reviewing performances for the *Portland Phoenix*, Maine's free alt-weekly and a column for *the Free Press*, the student newspaper at USM.

One night at Empire Dine and Dance in Portland, Maine, the subject of Edward Hopper's *Chop Suey* painting, I was drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon with the cast of a play I'd just seen. One of the actors had a new

girlfriend, someone I was tangentially aware of as my friend's college roommate who'd recently graduated from Stonecoast. I explained to her about the education benefit I was taking advantage of at Tom's of Maine and how a low-residency program would be perfect to fit into my life.

"So I figured, 'Why not?' And sent my application," I said.

"Because it's a lot of work. That's why not," she replied, completely dismissing me.

My acceptance call came a few weeks later.

In a lyric essay workshop with T Clutch Fleischmann entering my final semester, my classmates and I discussed how the experiences of your life influence the writer you become. The focus of the conversation was the non-traditional background of most lyric essayists, but it got me thinking about what makes my path to writing different. I thought a lot about how some of my classmates have more traditional literature backgrounds, while others have studied history, philosophy, worked at newspapers and lived abroad.

I grew up obsessed with a young adult series called *Girl Talk*—45 books written by published between 1990 and 1992 about four middle school best friends. In high school, I graduated to Harry Potter, *Cosmopolitan* and *Rolling Stone* magazines. Fifteen years ago, I couldn't get through *Beowulf*. So I decided to go to art school, in part because my drawings showed promise, in part because I knew I was ready to leave the



Pythagorean Theorem, *Beowulf* and tectonic plates in the blue-carpeted corridors of Lewiston High School in Lewiston, Maine.

In my foundation year at Montserrat College of Art, on the North Shore of Massachusetts, I enrolled in classes including drawing, painting, 2D design, and figure sculpting. My compositions, riddled with flawed proportions and insecurely drawn lines, were strongest when I drew squares of shadows and triangles of light. It clicked. A pineapple was no longer a complicated surface texture, it was a map of light and shadow. I spent hundreds of hours thinking about light. Once I understood how to draw the illuminated parts, I understood how to paint colors and compose depth and perspective.

This preoccupation with lighting has stayed with me ever since. Fluorescent lights suck the life from me approximately 60 percent faster than the average office worker. If I walk into a room with a single overhead light, I balk—nothing looks good lit directly overhead. In my essay “Why I am Who I Am,” my friend Laura asks me what I thought was beautiful that other people find ordinary, and I say the way streetlights reflect on wet pavement at night.

String lights appear multiple times in this thesis, tacked up in Laura’s dorm room; under the awning of Rouge Restaurant and Bistro in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts; above Tex’s Auto Sales in Lawrenceville, the Brooklyn of Pittsburgh; criss-crossing the rafters of the Barn Loft in Fayetteville, West Virginia; around the bedroom at my mother’s house I

reclaimed as a 20-year-old art school drop-out. Each of these pieces—some chunks from my book in progress, others I’m referring to as “weirdo essays,” (attempts with intention that might not make complete sense)—are themselves little lights. Points of inspiration put into words and together, they shine brighter. When I moved from Portland, Maine, to West Stockbridge, Massachusetts, midway through this program, one of the first things I did was festoon a string of round lights on the front porch. The title of my thesis is a reminder of my petulance to notice and prioritize lighting, but also the way these pieces are work alongside each other.

After leaving art school with thirty undergraduate credits to my name, I completed the final two-thirds of my bachelor’s degree majoring in communication and media studies at the University of Southern Maine. In CMS, I had the realization that media has changed faster in my lifetime than in any other generation since the beginning of time. I was a toddler in the mid 1980s, jamming to my parents’ vinyl collection, most notably Van Halen, Michael Jackson, the *Dirty Dancing* soundtrack, and John Cougar Mellencamp. In elementary school, I learned to record songs from the radio onto a cassette. By middle school, I had my first CDs and my first Discman, singing along to Billie Joe Armstrong’s faux British accent on “Dookie.” Before I graduated high school, downloading obscure covers on Napster was all the rage, and then the iPod came out, essentially marking the end of analog media. Meanwhile, I started my first blog, and spent my nights instant messaging friends. The Internet used to be this thing that

made earsplitting noises and disconnected when the phone rang. Now access to the Internet is the main purpose of our phones.

Intro to Communication taught me that something like 90 percent of what we communicate with another human is non-verbal and lies in tone of voice, eye contact and body language. Which is why so many of my teenage instant messages felt so empty and riddled with misunderstandings. But according to social information processing theory, “Based solely on the linguistic content of computer-mediated communication, parties who meet online can develop relationships just as close as those formed face-to-face—though it takes longer” (Griffin 138). This idea fascinates me.

Because social media and communication devices are such a big part of the way I manage my relationships, as well as a huge part of my undergraduate education, I wanted to make sure that was reflected in this thesis. In this collection you’ll read my text messages and my high school blog. I talk about Tinder, Instagram and one story is hypothetically told through Yelp reviews. In one scene from “Two Dates in Pittsburgh,” I receive an email ending a relationship with a man I loved for 10 years, while sitting on the toilet—this is the world we live in.

So there was art school, communication and media studies, and then my real-life education working at a record store in the early 2000s. It’s hard to quantify what being hired at Bull Moose Music in Lewiston, Maine, meant to me without sounding like an egocentric maniac, but I will try. Bull

Moose gave me a place in the social structure of my home town. Kids at my high school suddenly started calling out to me in the hall to ask the price of CDs. Overnight, I became cool. It was like *She's All That* but without the fucking bet. A significant portion of the stories in this collection are about the people I met and befriended at that store.

One person in particular, Chad Gurney, made a lasting impression in a different way. We worked together during the holiday season of 2000, labelling CDs and organizing the used section. The gift certificates Bull Moose sold back then, any maybe still sells, are barcodes stuck on old CDs with the store credit amount written in Sharpie. In the Christmas rush, Chad and I sold hundreds. Eight and a half years later, on Memorial Day, 2009, Chad took the life of a young woman he was sleeping with.

The other thing you need to know about Chad is that in 2005 he was in a near-fatal car accident with his college lacrosse team. He almost lost his leg, he almost died. The injuries he sustained when the van crashed left him in chronic and constant pain. He limped. But he wasn't just different physically. A seven-figure settlement from the school meant he never had to work again. He lived around the corner from me in downtown Portland and when I'd run into him, I felt a mix of guilt and discomfort. He was uncomfortable to be around after, so bitter. But I made excuses for his behavior and asked those who were closer to him how he was doing. And then he brutally murdered an innocent 19-year-old.

In Nick Hornby's novel *High Fidelity*, protagonist Rob Gordon suffers a break-up and decides to go back to all of his former lovers and ask why. "What does it all mean? Was it me?" I'm not sure if I realized at the time that's how this book in progress started—going back and asking, "What does it all mean?" I wanted to unpack how what he did impacted me. Do our friends think about it as much as I do? Did they ever find themselves in an argument about whether we could have been the one?

When I started writing about my past more seriously, I knew I needed to figure out what Chad's actions really meant to me. What happens when your friend kills someone? There doesn't seem to be much out there on the subject. Derf Backderf went to high school with Jeffrey Dahmer and wrote a chilling, successful graphic novel about their interactions, *My Friend Dahmer*. In *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, Lionel Shriver wrote a fictional account of a kid who killed nine people at his school, but he was exploring the idea of maternal ambivalence and, as far as I can tell, those parents weren't based on actual parents of school shooters. There aren't many examples of how to proceed after someone you know becomes a murderer.

These are the four people I called when I saw the news:

Mandy is not only my best friend, she is my emergency contact. We argued that it could've been one of us, and three years later she went off the deep end, almost starved herself to death. In actuality, it could have

been her. We wanted to be the same because there's safety in sameness, but after the accident I kept my distance from Chad. Mandy, however, would watch his dog for him, hang out at his apartment. It could not have been me, I was never with him. I don't know if all that is related to Mandy's downward spiral in 2013, but it sure as shit couldn't have helped. She's finding an incredible amount of success selling houses now.

Tim had already moved away when Chad killed Zoe, but now he stays away. Maybe that's his way of coping, having zero ties to Maine. His parents moved to New Hampshire after his brother graduated high school, even before Chad's accident, and now when Tim comes home to visit he barely makes it over the Piscataqua River border. He is a criminal defense attorney, so he thinks about criminals in a different way. Not many murder cases cross his desk, mostly drug stuff, but still. When he found out about Chad his first instinct was to ask how he could help. He seems 100 percent normal and well-adjusted, maybe because everything is out of sight, out of mind. I wanted us to be in love and I thought our shared past made us meant to be together.

Sean is on his way to becoming the man he's always wanted to be: an elementary school teacher climbing the ranks on his way to administration. He feels guilt for pulling away from his friendship with Chad, guilt that maybe if he was a better friend he could've helped Chad stay on the right path. The sullied moments that were supposed to be the best of times stay with him. We had fun, working together. Like Sean, I

wonder if I could've done something different. I wonder what could have been not just with Sean and I or Sean and Chad, but with everything. I've always tried to live without regret but if it was a theory I subscribed to, what would be above the fold?

Corey was the closest to Chad and is throwing himself at his studies and working hard, harder than all of us. Something to do with the ocean, microcosm biology or something. It's not that he won't talk about it—he talks to Mandy. He is obviously the most traumatized, the police knocking on his door that night looking for Chad. At some point our relationship changed, but I may never know why. Is it because we had sex that one time? Is it because I wasn't as supportive as I should have been when the news broke? Corey may remain one of those unknowns and the unknowns have always bothered me.

I don't know if it matters why Chad did what he did. He snapped, he lost control, he became a demon, he blacked out. Ambivalent parents, scorned lovers, traumatic brain injury, pre-existing sociopathism. But he's in prison forever now, and I'm more interested in life as it goes on. How long, if ever, should it take for this to not linger with us? Will it ever feel right to talk about him in the past tense even though he's still alive?

In some ways, this thesis is me writing myself out of the story in Portland, where I still lived around the corner from Chad's apartment. Where I saw Zoe's high school boyfriend all the time out at bars. Where I'd run into Sean at brunch every other weekend. Bringing my cat for a check-

up meant reliving the moment I heard through a door the technician and the pet parent talking about the news. On one walk home I found two teenagers filming a movie outside of Chad's building, apropos of nothing. But now I live in the village of a town of only a few thousand people, four hours away. The pace of life is slow and deliberate and the only people I know here are my neighbors and a few of the local business owners. I think some of my best writing has happened here, and that's where this part of the story ends. The situation is I was friends with a murderer. The story is my attempt to find love and meaning in a post-murder world.



# String Lights



## Why I Am Who I Am

Her new smile, the four front teeth at least, are straight and square thanks to a new partial the dentist made. Like an orthodontia retainer but flesh colored, with a few teeth stuck onto the front. She says she never smiled in pictures because she hated being photographed, but maybe it was her teeth. Oh but her laugh. More of a cackle, it reverberated from the recliner, off wood-paneled walls into Carew Street. A cackle, a whinny. Sometimes the laugh was so big it couldn't be vocalized. Instead she closed her eyes, and with her fist at her mouth, kicked her *pichous* like a kindergartener at swimming lessons: wildly and with gusto.

"Is there something you find beautiful that other people find ordinary?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, something that moves you that someone else might not notice."

"I guess single trees in the middle of fields. What's yours?"

"The way streetlights and headlights reflect on wet pavement at night."

Alicia's feet were just a size smaller than mine, but at an adult 6 they seemed somehow cartoonish. Her stubby little toes looked rubber. I told her she had pullable toes. Sometimes amidst the fits of neighborhood laughter and silliness, I'd actually try to pull one, as if like a Stretch Armstrong doll, one inch would become like three feet of toe and I'd rope it around to my house across the street.

The first sip clears my sinuses. It tastes like spoiled licorice or citrus zest dish soap. Campari, an apéritif. My companions want the best ice cream in all of Paris. Across from a bookstore I continue to dream about, left at the busking cellist, we find it. But instead of eating a whole ten-euro scoop I opt for a cocktail. I recognize one swirly scripted word and hone in: Campari. "Intern. Bring me a Campari," Bill Murray's delivery, the command, irreverence—one of my favorite lines in *Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. "On the rocks, I guess," and Kate translates. The second astringent sip coats my tongue to the very back of my tonsil and I ask Tess if I might try a bite of her *glacée au chocolat*.

“I know you didn’t know him but you should get used to going to funerals because I’m going to die someday. I wasn’t prepared when my mother died and I want you girls to be.”

For years, Crystal’s eyeballs hid behind thick ‘90s bangs and maroon-rimmed glasses. But once she started wearing contacts, she was like a whole new Crystal. Now her eyeballs were something she touched. Her irises, once an ambered hazel, could be blue, green, violet even. She filled the upturned contact with solution before flipping it under her lid and blinking out the remainder. One time her contact fell out during the drive between Lewiston and outlet shopping in Freeport. She held the lens in her palm out the window to collect rain to keep it moist. What if it’s acid rain, I thought.

In *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*, romance looks better, more Parisian, without the color blue. “*Failure teaches us that life is but a draft.*” The best way to ask out your crush is to Xerox black-and-white flyers on

colored paper, then post them in public places. If you travel, take with you a possession of someone you care about and send them photographs of that item alongside milestones. Between the jawbone and neck is a perfect second kiss. Are puddles accurate metaphors for emotions? Accordions can be sincere but pianos are heartbreaking. Is the searching because I'm French-Canadian-American, not Parisian? "*Without you, today's emotions would be the scurf of yesterday's.*"

"So you're moving to Germany. Will you be able to go off-base at all?"

"Well, I'm sure there will be like towns and stuff nearby."

"And the drinking age there is 18! Except... you don't speak German."

"What do you mean?"

"German? Ash, you don't speak German."

"What?"

"German?"

"..."

"German is a language just like French and Spanish."

"Oh. I thought they spoke English with an accent."

Days like today, heavy with August humidity, a ripened, familiar fragrance emanates from the carpet of the car and like an old friend looking to get in on your State parks pass—showing up only on the most desperate of hot days. Vegetable lo-mein, which I absentmindedly left on the floor until lunch, spoiled in the heat. Heat I could see, bouncing off the parking garage ceiling in waves.

“Mom. Is Aunt Connie gay? Last week at work we were talking about how statistically speaking there’s usually at least one gay person in every family and I was like we don’t... OH MY GOD AUNT CONNIE! Mom? Mom. Stop laughing. No seriously. Aunt Connie is gay. Her friend Pat was never just her friend. Mom. She’s been my favorite aunt for 23 years and I had no idea. Mom. Ok. I get it. But seriously.”

On the corner of Victor Street and Carew, smoke from his pipe coalesces with wood stove fumes for a sweet, foresty first breath of Pepère’s kitchen. In his grandfatherly embrace, there’s a whiff of Old Spice aftershave, the one in the white ceramic bottle. (That distinctive scent on numerous future men will hoodwink, comfort and soothe.) As the chair is pulled out, a cloud

of dust intermingles with ash from the stove. Boiled dinner or pork and Great Northern beans bubble on the burner, adding a saltiness to the aroma. Butter in the pan indicates *ployes* are on the way. With his little mustache, he's the French Canadian Marlon Brando.

"A minute on the lips is a lifetime on the hips."

It took me years to decipher my father's only tattoo, squinting through blonde arm hair and a carpet of freckles, bleeding into the hopeless farmer's tan of someone who never went to the beach but also never wore sunscreen. His skin taut over the muscled limbs of the blue collar worker he became, smelling mostly of cigarettes but also something he called "Daddy's stuff." It was a flower, no a leaf, and the stick-and-poke lines had blurred since he was stationed in Korea. But his tour wasn't long enough to get benefits from the VA, at least that's what he tells us. REEFER MADNESS, it read.



My crush said in an online interview that you always remember your first true love, but I want to text him and first confess I stalked him on Google, then ask how do you know if your first love is your first if with every go you love harder and deeper than before?



## Two Dates in Pittsburgh

2013

Fastening my lap belt, I reached with my toe to pull the oversized zig-zagged purse towards me. The binding of *In Cold Blood* peeked out from the open zipper. I planned to get some reading done on the flight.

The stagnant air and white noise of travel hung low around aisles and rows of families, the occasional flight attendant, and me. We passed over the empty middle part of Pennsylvania, as I rushed to meet Tim, my exboyfriend, to become new again.

“I was on the flight from Portland, too,” I said to Young Mom, seated next to me. As we’d disembarked from Portland International Jetport, her son, whom I placed in or around kindergarten, exclaimed to the passengers that they were going to Pittsburgh, too. During the height of tourist season, the population of Maine doubles. The tourists come to board boats, eat lobsters, revel in the beauty of our state. Summer, the reward for clenching your body against the wind and cold for six months, seems like a weird time to leave, but when a man tells you, “I think about going down on you every ten minutes. All day,” and you respond, “I can’t

wait to put your dick in my mouth,” sex > summer.

Young Mom taught high school English at a private school, and her husband, with their younger son two rows ahead, was a lawyer, just like Tim. They were going to visit some of his college friends.

The lights dimmed, the engines revved and we prepared.

I opened *In Cold Blood* to the 33rd page, dogeared to the spot.

Young Mom turned to me, “That is a scary book.” She spoke in her Mom voice, although I took us for peers. We seemed close in age, she taught English, I was pursuing a degree in creative writing. We were in love with lawyers. Saying this book was scary didn’t seem quite right for an English teacher. Didn’t she know Capote practically invented the non-fiction novel?

“It’s for graduate school,” I mumbled. It would be weird to say, “Actually, I know someone who killed someone, so this book isn’t that scary.” It’s hard to talk about homicide.

I walked deliberately down the corridors of the Pittsburgh International Airport, nary a wheely bag or clacking heel in earshot, noticing without noticing how so many American airports look the same. Same kiosks, same chain restaurants. Ducking into the bathroom on my left, I breathed deep to steady my nerves and took out my toiletries to freshen up. BB Cream (the latest all-purpose concealer-moisturizer),

mascara, a little lip gloss. The Tom's of Maine Long Lasting Soothing Calendula Deodorant roll-on, only available at the employee store, (where I got it), and in the UK, felt cold against my underarm with a *whhck whhck*, the roller-ball scraping the side of the container. Somewhere in my mid-twenties, I'd left coffee and compact discs for the wild world of personal care products. It was my job to talk to people who called Tom's of Maine, my employer in Kennebunk, Maine, with questions about their underarm perspiration and halitosis. But I didn't have to think about that for four more days. I ruffled, smoothed, ruffled, then tucked my hair behind my ears and pulled the length in front of my shoulder like a curtain. I sighed, a short staccatoed exhalation, and examined my reflection. Is this how I always look? Is this how I want to look? This moment had been building since I told him I'd booked a ticket. I even thought about how I hoped he would approach me so I wouldn't have to decide how fast to walk or hold eye contact. Maybe this mirror charade was just to kill time.

"This is the final boarding call..." A disembodied voice over the intercom, the rattle of a barricade rolling down over the Cinnabon entrance, and I made my way to Baggage Claim, stepping onto the descending escalator. A life-sized Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton stood between two escalators, courtesy of the Carnegie Museum, and for a moment that was all I could think about, how they got it here, what passersby thought when they saw a dinosaur.

Tim's shoes came into view first, a casual grey chukka. I knew they were his almost immediately, the way his pants bunched slightly at the ankles. Then his body, softer than before but his tee still hugging his biceps, his beard, a smirk, his black triangle eyebrows and the reflection of light off his bald-bald head. He waited just a few feet from the foot of the escalator, making no attempt to stifle a huge grin, his dark beard filling in, making his gap-toothed smile even whiter by contrast. I was one of the last people to deboard my plane, one of the last flights of the night. There were hardly any other people waiting around for their luggage. The air between Tim and I felt charged. It sounds cliché, but there's a reason for that. I put down my day pack, looked him in the eye, tilted my head ever slightly upward and kissed him. We made a pair of parentheses, just like in the song. The freckles in our eyes were perfectly aligned, just like in the song. It felt exactly the same as our very first kiss in the parking lot of Mr. Paperback, ten years earlier. A lot had changed, and changed us, but in that kiss we were young.

"You look great," he said.

I felt his breath on my neck as he squeezed my chest to his for an extra second. I smiled, looked at the floor then back to him. "I can't believe I'm here," I said, then glanced back at the floor then over my shoulder as he picked up my Bean bag and started walking. "I can't believe I'm here." I regained the rest of my vocabulary. "Thank you for picking me up."

He rolled his eyes. Of course he would pick me up.

On the upward escalator to the parking lot, a man's gigantic suitcase tumbled towards us. Tim, one step above me, caught this thing, one of those people-smuggling sized bags, with one arm and saved me.

\*\*\*

Being intimate never felt so comfortable. Not just because I knew his body from before, like there was that mole, due southeast of his belly button. I remembered that mole! Not just because we'd been texting promises like this for the last month. "I'm going to ride you so hard you're going to limp to work," I sent from my cubicle when I was supposed to be responding to consumers' coupon requests via email, explaining without explicitly saying that no, your child will not die because they swallowed more than the recommended amount of toothpaste for brushing. Our sexting escalated fast and I wasn't a virgin anymore.

"I'm going to make you shake," he replied from his cubicle, where he was supposed to be responding to inmate letters, drafting court documents. We talked so often I knew when he went on lunch break, how long it took him to get home, which nights he met coworkers for happy hour. I could picture how I'd fit in if I moved to Pittsburgh

2003

The scariest part of leaving for college was not missing my family, my friends, adjusting to a new place, or the curriculum. I thought without my job at the record store, I would be no one. None of the boys would like

me because there would be naturally beautiful girls. Or girls with cool tattoos, better at art, girls who drank beer and had sex. Girls who went to Europe and waxed their pubes.

Tim went off to college in Milwaukee, amidst the senior-year hoopla of who got into where, who was going into the military, the Americorps or Up With People. Anyone who didn't leave was expected to give a darn good reason for wanting to stay. Morale was low in Lewiston, AKA The Dirty Lew for its unshowered residents as much as the smelly, foamy Androscoggin River. (A few stinkers roamed the halls, but I thought that was how high school worked.) The river divided the downtrodden and faded glory of Lewiston, location of Muhammad Ali's infamous Phantom Punch, and the greener, sprawling sister City of Auburn. Auburn, with the golf courses and the pristine drinking water and good mall. The city where Tim grew up in a five-bedroom home with a perfectly manicured lawn. I remember thinking Milwaukee seemed like an odd choice for college, until I realized Marquette was a Catholic school, a natural transition for someone who completed 12 years of Catholic grade school. I'd stopped being Catholic before my Confirmation, when I started asking questions like, "How do you know God is real? Why does God kill innocent children?" and these questions were discouraged instead of engaged. My mom made my sister and I go through Confirmation despite my protests. As a teen, I pawed through the bill pile to find the newest Cosmo or



Rolling Stone and found instead the church bulletin still addressed to Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Pleau, three years after my father moved out.

“Mom. Why is Dad’s name still on this?” I’d asked.

“I don’t know,” she’d lied.

The church refused to recognize their divorce unless she paid them thousands of dollars. So the bulletin stayed addressed like it was.

I came home for Christmas after my first semester at art school. All the other seniors and I made such a big deal out of leaving, only to return for a month three-and-a-half-months later. Montserrat College of Art, exactly two hours door-to-door from my apartment on the North Shore of Massachusetts to my mom’s, was a tiny school, only 300 students. Neither of my parents had gone to college, so the experience was largely a mystery for me. The housing had kitchens instead of a cafeteria. Had I known I’d be responsible for feeding myself, perhaps I’d have logged off AIM for half a second while my mom prepared dinner every night and would have spared myself that sandwich of Pepperidge Farm cinnamon-raisin swirl bread, cucumbers and Fluff. While I was gone, my sister took my room, larger with sky blue walls. So I tacked string lights up on her red-walled little cubby.

Peter, an aged hippie who’d taken the job as Bull Moose manager, not realizing he’d be babysitting a bunch of hormone-crazed teenagers, agreed I could return as seasonal help during break. He even gave my key back. It was one sleepy morning at the store that Tim came in, the first

time I saw him since we'd left for college, the low sun highlighting the Scotch-taped posters and fingerprints on the glass doors. The management took a chance on me a month after I turned 16 and properly named all the top 40 radio hits. Bull Moose Music wasn't a status symbol, it wasn't a hangout. I didn't know about record stores because I didn't buy records. It was a place with bright orange walls, and tea tree gum stuck under the custom wooden bins, the finish barely visible through layers and layers of stickers. All I knew was they were looking for new part-time employees. I was so used to being the sidekick, the weird one, that it surprised me when boys there started actually flirting with me.

"What're you doing later," this one customer asked when I stopped in to grab my paycheck.

"Nothing," I responded, which actually meant lurking on AIM, hoping for *Pop Up Video* reruns on VH1.

"Do you want to hang out?"

It was sneaky, but it worked. Because I already said I wasn't doing anything, there was no way to make something up. This was my life now. Boys tricking me into hanging out.

It was only a few months since we'd left for college but Tim looked different that morning. Two years earlier, he'd been one of the boys, a skinny little noodle with a white-kid Afro, Levi's 501 and thrifted tees. Now, at 18, his band tees stretched taut across his chest and his close-crop

hinted at the slightest receding hairline. His purchase history was maturing, too. Saves the Day, Jimmy Eat World and Rise Against had given to Bruce Springsteen, Tom Waits and the Icelandic band Sigur Rós.

He knew the store almost as well as I did, so I gave him space as he beelined to the Springsteen section. When he made it over to the register a moment later, with something cool like Bruce Springsteen's "Nebraska," we nervously expressed surprise in seeing each other, asked about college.

"Milwaukee is the worst. All anyone ever does is get blasted," he said, and I agreed that sounded terrible; we were both non-drinkers at the time.

"Did you want to use any of your points today? You have 12.5." I'd looked up his account without waiting for him to retrieve the card from his wallet. Record store flirting 101. He shook his head.

"Art school is okay, it's nice to be close to Boston and I get home pretty regularly. Started working at Newbury Comics but I'll be here for the rest of break."

"Cool, maybe I'll see you around." He was always so confidently nonchalant.

"Hope so."

2004

After my freshman year, I took a year off from Montserrat because it wasn't as rigorous as I needed it to be. Everyone blew smoke up each other's asses and I didn't think I could improve without serious criticism. In the fall of 2004, I decided to try my hand at something different: coffee. Austin's Fine Wine and Foods in Auburn, Maine, was the only place in town to get a decent coffee, and also offered a full service deli and an expertly curated retail wine department, selected by Audie himself. It was also the job Tim went back to when he was home from school, but I didn't know that until I started.

"Amanda. Do you know Timmy?" Audie asked on my first day. "He'll be back with us over Christmas break."

"Tim... LaVoie?" I got that nervous feeling all over, surveying the tiny area between the deli case and the espresso machine. It was barely two-people wide.

After a few weeks, I fancied myself a gifted sandwich maker and a phenomenal barista. Our customers were the cultured, affluent, high-maintenance citizens of Androscoggin County, like Whole Foods Shoppers: The Prequel. I was glad to leave the scummy bathroom and the too-familiar frequent customers of Bull Moose behind for a taste of something new. Balsamic roasted veggies, Reubens, types of cheese that didn't come individually wrapped. It was my culinary awakening. And when

he showed up mid-December, Tim and I worked shoulder-to-shoulder. I'd grab the bread from the order, add the condiments, meat and cheese, then slide it down the cutting board for him to add veggies, slice and wrap.

Mike, one of my old customers and Tim's friend from school, prepped in the kitchen. He was a perfect liaison.

"Mike, I've been crushing on Tim for years," I told him, lurking on the threshold of the kitchen while he mixed things in bowls, assuming he knew this as a piece of gossip already spread to the far reaches of the county.

"Dude, she's pretty into you. You should ask her out," Mike told Tim, probably immediately.

"Hey, you wanna come to the movies tomorrow?" Tim asked me during our next shift together, the in-between down time when lunch was over but it was still too early to start closing.

"Oh, who else is going?" Was this a date? I wasn't sure.

It was.

We kissed for the first time in the parking lot of Mr. Paperback in Lewiston, grabbing a coffee after the movie, in that pre-snowstorm overcast. It wasn't a public display. It wasn't awkward, it was warm and firm, like a handshake to your mouth. I got into the Mustang that I never locked and smiled the whole drive back to the lopsided house on Carew Street.

You know what's great about dating someone you work with? Constant opportunities for eye contact, increased physical closeness. Involuntary physical closeness. If your boyfriend is picking up shifts while he's home for the summer and accidentally steps in a bucket of feta juice, soaking his sneaker to the sock in cheese brine, it's not just a hilarious co-worker moment, it goes in the relationship memory vault.

His family fascinated me. His dad worked in insurance and they loved talking sports. His mom stayed home and served on volunteer committees and amassed a collection from Cat's Meow Village, these handmade wooden trinket houses that lived on chair rails and on top of bookcases. And there were so many books. She was cool enough to go by "Syl," short for Sylvia/Mom. Tim's parents, his brother and sister, they didn't just love each other, they actually seemed to like each other.

When he was at Marquette, I called Tim on the phone almost every night. We talked about the papers he wrote, how much he hated the beer culture of Milwaukee, which bands came through town. I updated him on all things fine wines and foods, the classes I took at the Community College. Sometimes his roommate, Tal, grabbed the phone, and we'd talk about nothing for a few minutes. I sent Tim mixtapes and letters and for Valentine's Day, a huge batch of homemade pumpkin chocolate chip cookies. He flew home for every break while I still never set foot on a plane.

We didn't have sex, but he wanted to. If his parents were gone, we holed up in his attic bedroom and listened to music, wrapped in his maroon paisley sheets. When he wanted to fool around he did so by rubbing my tummy.

"Do you ever think about sex?" he asked.

Of course I did. I was so horny all the time and all I wanted to do was have sex. But my mother told me I should wait until I was in love to have sex and that seemed to make sense. Maybe he wondered why I was waiting, maybe that was his way of saying he wanted to.

"Do you ever think about love?" was all I could return, and he didn't say anything.

What I liked about our arrangement while he was at Marquette: I had plenty of time to hang out with my friends and all of my interactions with Tim were intentional and conversational. But mostly it was easier to avoid bringing him to my house. It wasn't just my twin bed or my messy room. When my room was clean, I was proud to show off some badass band posters, my own artwork, vintage lamps and my burgeoning record collection on display. But I hated my sister, who disrespected my mother, took money from her purse and raided my room regularly for everything from cash to clean underwear. My mom's shy and insecure mannerisms made me ashamed. We weren't keeping up with the yard work and the house looked like a half-abandoned Lego project.

Once or twice, after I started picking up shifts at Bull Moose again in tandem to my shifts at Austin's, I let us in the back door of the record store to fool around on the couch after hours. The one with the springs sticking out. The thrill of getting caught fueled our excitement, the cool warehousey air on our naked skin. Isn't that the kind of thing you're supposed to do when you're 19?

While we rounded more bases, my naiveté remained as intact as my hymen. That summer, we were always with his friends. Mike from Austin's; this girl, Jen, whose mom owned Kutter's Korner, the salon I went to; Scott, who also worked with us, the most vulgar, inappropriate mountain of a man; and a few other guys who came by the record store. The first nice day, we all went to Tabor's out by the lake, for mini-golf. Competitive though I was, my skill level did not compliment my ambition to win. Trailing behind, sinking this putt would save me from last place and I didn't want to be the loser. I already felt out of place, like from the other side of the tracks. My family was in the lowest income bracket of the group, I had dropped out of college and I assumed they all liked Jen, the only other girl in our group, more than me. I needed to win to show I belonged.

"This is the money shot!" I proclaimed, saddling up to the neon pink golfball.

Tim smiled and caught Mike's eye in a sidelong glance.

"No, that's later?" Tim said, tentatively but with a smirk.



“What?” I missed the hole.

I thought the money shot meant like, the most expensive and, therefore, important part of a film, and here on the golf course an important establishing shot for my place in the circle. Apparently there was a double meaning, Tim explained in a gentle aside, and again, not only I was on the outside but everyone was thinking about Tim cumming on my face. Like that one time Chad had told me, “Shut your man pleaser.”

The rest of the summer consisted of the boys coming by while I watched: hoops in Tim’s driveway, Red Sox games (which I couldn’t follow) in Tim’s living room, ping-pong in Tim’s basement, kickball in the high school parking lot. An errant ping pong ball became our primary interaction. “Hey can you grab that?” I was sidelined, benched. He went through an epic Danzig phase, which I hated but no one ever asked what I wanted to listen to. Our relationship went from mostly talking to mostly accompanying, and the more this went on the less confident I felt that he still liked me. Work was normal, but our shifts together less frequent. He was gearing up for a semester abroad, in Iceland. Iceland! Would he run into Bjork? Probably! *Dancer in the Dark* was the definitive heartbreaking film of the decade. I cried so hard I thought at least one lung might collapse. But who knows how often we’d be able to talk once he was there. What was the Internet like in a foreign country in 2004? Even so, there was no Skype, no Google Phone. I’d just have to save enough to get a passport and come visit.

When my parents got divorced when I was in Middle School, I vowed that I would never make the mistakes they made, which from my limited perspective seemed like a lack of communication. Communication is the key to love, I thought. Yet, easier said than done. I didn't tell Tim I was feeling left out and insecure, because I didn't know how. Maybe he read my confessional blog posts at [blurty.com/shadeofread](http://blurty.com/shadeofread). Or maybe he could tell by how mopey I was acting. Either way, his behavior didn't seem to change. I cried on the way to his house, parking my car across the street alongside a perfectly manicured lawn, acutely aware the beat-up 12-year-old Mustang was the shittiest car on the block. Taking a moment to wipe my eyes and catch my breath, I anticipated a miserable time being ignored by him and all his friends, knowing it was easier to pretend.

For his 20th birthday on May 12, exactly a month after mine, his parents bought him a plane ticket for a long weekend in Cleveland. His best friend from Marquette lived there, and his parents thought it'd be nice if they could see each other over summer vacation, since he'd be studying abroad in Iceland that fall. He flew out on a Friday. I called to make sure he landed safely. The evening passed, he didn't call me back. The following Saturday came and went, no call.

"Mom, did I get any messages?"

"No, no messages."

My new cell phone, silent. Sunday, no call. I called again, got the voicemail. By Monday night I decided I didn't deserve this radio silence. I should be with someone who wanted to hear my voice, who wanted me, who could take five minutes for "Yeah, hi! I made it okay, thanks for checking in. I'm having a blast! Can't talk long, but how are you? Awesome, see you when I get back." I only needed a minute.

He returned and we drove to the Dairy Joy in Lewiston. I ordered coffee/peanut butter swirl with a crunch coat in a small cone. Tim got some blizzard-type thing in a cup. We sat in the Mustang, in awkward silence.

"What's wrong?" he finally asked.

I spoke slowly: "Why didn't you call me back? Four days. It's like you don't even care if I'm around. Do you even want to be with me? And you're leaving soon. I don't get it. I don't get why you didn't think it would be a big deal."

"I don't know," he said.

I felt that lump forming in my throat. "I can't be in a relationship with someone who has no good reason to not return my phone call. Did you even remember that I existed while you were out there?" My voice started to break. "You're all I thought about the entire time you were gone. It's not fair."

"I know." Tim said.

"I guess we should break up then."

“I guess.”

As a friend, a frequent customer, on paper, even working together and in most conversations, Tim was amazing. Either our inexperience or my insecurity, whatever it was that we lacked, had intensified over the summer and I was miserable. I didn't want it to be over, but when you're 19, working at a relationship either doesn't occur to you or doesn't seem logical because you'll probably be married to someone else by the time you're 25, anyway. Thirty if you move around, travel, go to grad school. These are growing pains. And they hurt more than my heart. I lost 10 pounds over the next two weeks, unable to figure out if my stomach felt nauseated, hungry or crampy. I couldn't bring myself to ingest anything other than coffee and toast. Turns out my stomach was just sad.

So I blogged about it:

Monday, September 13th, 2004

i'm totally norahjonesing. getting sad when love songs come on, depressed at the sight of hands being held, yearning for someone to know how i take my coffee AND rub my arm if i've had a bad day and tell me it's alright. you know, we criticize those young people who get involved in serious relationships early. (like alicia who just got married and moved to guam.) but you know what? i want to be in love, i want to get married and start a family. i don't care about being young and making the most of my youth. the only reason i'm leaving is because my live

(sic) isn't exactly going like i want it to. it's not really running away if you have nothing to run from.

even when i'm like "i'll be here for you." really what i mean is i need to feel needed. i will stay here while you go far away, because i have faith in the idea of love, and that true love waits. have you ever had a station platform kiss? it's always worth the wait. just appreciate me and i swear to god i'll have and hold you as long as we both live.

Tim left for Iceland and we didn't talk for a few years.

2013

And I never had sex like this before. The stealth! One second I was laughing at my own poor attempt at humor like, "My jokes may be cheesy but I think they're pretty gouda." Laughing at myself for making the joke, laughing that he wasn't laughing as much as I was laughing, then the next second he knelt at the foot of the bed and lifted my legs by the ankles over his head, resting one on each shoulder. He leaned in, lifted the small of my back to his face and wait - I was still laughing about gouda. I barely noticed what was happening until it was happening.

Then the iPhone buzzed from the nightstand, a low *mrrrrp*. And buzzed. *mrrrrp, mrrrrp, mrrrrp*.

“I will not hold it against you if you pick it up,” I said and sat back up and pulled the flat tan sheet, warm from our bodies, over my chest.

He answered, immediately dressed and went downstairs to let his roommate’s girlfriend’s brother in. It’s the kind of favor you do for your roommate. You water their plants, check their mail, *interrupt sexual encounters to let a stranger in to rifle around your basement to look for a boat engine battery thing while your roommate is inexplicably on a solo camping trip three hours away.* I resumed *In Cold Blood*.

Four or five pages later I heard Tim’s muffled footsteps on the beige-carpeted stairs. Looking up to from my book at the sound of his arrival, I noticed the framed maps of our hometown and home state in the stairwell. I hated the placement, too high. He plopped on the bed, face down. I reached for my shirt and he grabbed an orange bottle from his nightstand.

“What did you take?” I asked, that guy still in the basement. “How are you feeling?”

“Like 10, can’t get out of bed? Two,” he said. Ever since being rear-ended by a pretzel truck a year before, Tim suffered from chronic headaches. I was glad to be there for him.

I pulled on my faded, cuffed jean shorts and a cream, silk pintuck shirt, billowy enough to hide my donut, beer and nacho problem areas but still revealing in the cleavage area. Carmel leather flats matched a weathered L.L. Bean clutch, which I carried on the off chance it lead to a

conversation about Maine with whomever, plus a senior citizen-sized gold Timex. In the mirror, shook out my hair and glanced at my fresh mascara, ready to leave for our 9 p.m. reservation.

In the high-backed leather settees of Meat & Potatoes' waiting area, Tim read out loud:

iMessage: Jean shorts and holding hands. Nice.

George, his coworker from the Public Defender's office, had seen us from the beer garden across the street. Tim's bald head shined in the street lights and that warm summer night he wore one of his gingham-plaid shirts notorious around the office. Tablecloth shirts, his coworkers called them. What could Tim be telling his friends about me, I wondered. He told me he liked the way I rubbed my eyes when I got sleepy, and showered me with compliments. He said he loved having me in Pittsburgh, thanked me a million times for coming. I wanted to capture these moments. I wanted to take a million pictures of him, a million pictures of us. But I held back.

I wanted to talk about Chad. My intellect and my journalistic integrity was telling me to find the story. I had twenty-five pages of writing due to my graduate school mentor in two weeks. Maybe after our watermelon gazpacho with whipped goat cheese. I almost found my words between mini chicken taco-waffles and pulled pork open-faced sandwiches. We did not have food like this growing up. But we were now adults who enjoyed fine dining beyond the *cretón*, *poutine* and red

hotdogs of home. Finally, after the rest of my house-infused Manhattan on the rocks, I was ready to broach the topic.

“Hey, listen, I want to talk to you about something tomorrow.”

Tim came around to sit next to me.

“Okay,” he said and I paused to find my words. Truthfully, there were so many things I needed to talk about, like are we in a relationship now? Should I move to Pittsburgh? My mind said interview, my mind said rehash the past. But my heart said find a way to keep him.

“I want to talk about Chad...” I trailed off to give him the opportunity to interrupt. He didn’t. “It’s something I want to explore in my writing. I think we have a unique perspective on all this. In so many circumstances it’s the family and friends of the victim that you sympathize for.” It came out canned but I had to keep going. “But it was hard knowing him, you know?”

Chad was our friend for like ten years, until four years ago, when he killed his girlfriend. We were left reeling. Could it have been one of us? Did we know he had it in him? I found out on Facebook, then saw the local headlines online and immediately called Tim and the others who’d known Chad. After the initial shock, we tried to forget. But I needed to unpack it, to understand how to cope, how it happened. What is the meaning of knowing a murderer? Was grieving our friend, the murderer, going to be part of my love story?



“And as a criminal defender, I have a much different perspective,” Tim said. Talking about his work, he lit up, started talking faster, with more enthusiasm.

“So,” I interrupted, “it’d be great if we can talk about this tomorrow, maybe?” I thought about a conversation over coffee, a breezy park bench. But late night at an upscale New American restaurant, three cocktails in — not quite what I had in mind.

“Sure, whatever you want...” He paused to let me interrupt but I didn’t. “It’s part of the reason I don’t go home as much,” he said, sounding nostalgic and disappointed, likely remembering all of the things he missed.

My heart sank. “Really?” I smoothed the napkin on my lap and there went my plan to persuade him to move back to Portland.

“Yeah. It’s hard to come home now.” He checked his phone.

iMessage: Same side sitting. Cute.

George and his date came over to grab a nightcap and, presumably, to spy on us further. Plans for Chad talk were tabled while we chatted with just-as-bald George and his rock ‘n roll girlfriend about our nights, meals, Pittsburgh and Maine. It’s hard to talk about homicide.

2009

Chad never seemed completely all there.

“Hey Panda, you wanna see my new tattoo?” He came in to the record store during my shift, and postured to show a Buddha, still red around the edges.

“Do you...” I frowned, trying to find the right question. Do you know what that means? Do you practice non-violence? “Do you follow Buddhism?” I asked, at the time deeply entrenched in my Eastern philosophy class. I heard that some kids stopped going to punk shows at the American Legion because Chad would show up with a baseball bat.

“He’s just a little happy guy.”

But, a little happy guy who represents a very specific set of beliefs that you just tattooed on your body. Buddhism teaches that happiness and contentment is attainable, and Chad seemed anything but content. Everyone knew Chad had problems with women. Always telling us, his coworkers, how he’ll never understand women. His girlfriend would call the store and we’d hear him yelling into the phone from the back room. He wrote “Chad Gurney Scorned Women Tour” in Sharpie under S-Z of the used Rock and Pop CDs.

I had trouble focusing on my work the Tuesday after Memorial Day of 2009. I’d had a man in my bed the night before and it’d really have helped my work day if we hadn’t done last-call slippery nipple shots. A

hollow, fuzzy feeling spread all over my body, rendering me unable to complete any of my administrative assistant duties. So I turned to Facebook, ignoring the ringing phone, the whirring of the copier and the dissonant hum of fluorescent bulbs.

Buried in a newsfeed of minutia, that's where I found out Chad had been arrested.

But the news already hit all the local outlets, *Portland Press Herald*, *Bangor Daily News*, WMTW.

#### PORTLAND MAN ACCUSED OF MURDER, ARSON

And I knew right away that he did it. It's hard to explain how that feels, the realization that your friend is a murderer. I called Tim. A couple of years after the Dairy Joy conversation, we'd fallen back into friendship. In 2009 he was home from law school in Pittsburgh to intern for the summer with a criminal defense attorney we knew from Austin's. Lenny stood 6'5" and drank 12 cans of Diet Coke a day, three over the course of the night, with the help of a little fridge next to his bed. Tim probably clocked in around 5'8" on a good day, which I imagined made them resemble Schwarzenegger and DeVito in "Twins," only *both* bald. Tim always sent me picture messages of his necktie/pocket square combinations, like we were real adults with jobs with dress codes. For someone I always thought of as more intellectually gifted than creatively, those were some excellent color combinations—magenta and navy, grey and gold—and I fell in love with him a little more with each one.

“Did you hear the news?” I said when he answered. Normally when we talked, our smiles radiated through the phone, always laughing and flirting and joking. But not today.

“Yeah. What the fuck.”

“It’s so fucked up. I can’t believe this. Are you okay?” The last time he hung out with Chad to watch the Patriots, Chad pulled up an hour-long government conspiracy theory video from YouTube, and left while Tim watched, alone in the apartment. No football. Tim kept watching because Chad probably expected a conversation about it. After the accident, it was best to handle Chad with kid gloves.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Do you have any new information?” I asked, having no idea how criminal defense attorneys were picked in Maine. Tim said there was some kind of rotation for public defenders, but how would Chad be represented? Could Lenny, and therefore Tim, be the one?

“Not yet. I wish there was something I could do to help.”

It’s hard to know how much detail to go into about what happened that night, because it’s bad. Zoe was only 19, was so little, a wisp of a girl. He head butted her, strangled her, had sex with her dead body and then chopped her head off. Then Chad left his apartment, a block away from mine, and filled a canister of gasoline at the 7-11 around the corner. He poured gas in the bed, down the stairs, all over his apartment and lit it up.

When the emergency response team broke in to put out the fire, they found Zoe's charred, decapitated body and knew immediately the blaze was no accident.

2013

The following night, arm in arm, Tim and I walked towards lower Lawrenceville for dinner date number two, at Cure. Tex's Auto Sale's teal, silver and fuchsia streamers flapped in the breeze like a tiny foil stadium applauding our reunion. For a moment, it seemed like this could be our life together in Pittsburgh, walking up and down Butler Street. I hoped the string lights criss-crossing the used car lot would be lit up on our way back to his house. Auto Dealerships in Maine tend to prefer garish floodlights, and I liked the idea that Tex's cars might be more delicately lit, like date light. But as we digested on the walk home, they were off.

"Can I buy you a glass of wine?" he asked, motioning to Allegheny Wine Mixer, a new establishment embodying the hipsterish direction of the neighborhood. Tim said he'd been meaning to check it out but hadn't yet. (I also hadn't seen *Evil Dead 2 yet.*) Being in Pittsburgh for the first time made me acutely aware of the parts of his life I didn't know, like where to stop for coffee on one of those days you just needed one more, or how the bus system worked. AWM took its name from a scene in the 2008 film *Step Brothers* in which every time an event called the Catalina Wine Mixer

is mentioned, it's in this sentence: "It's the fuckin' Catalina Wine Mixer!" Tim and I found the last open table over by the exposed brick and the buttery couch. I ordered a Vinho Verde, my summer favorite. I didn't want to love this bar, because it would be another line to add to the Pittsburgh column. Tonight was our last night to talk. But Chad or Pittsburgh? Mind or heart? Past or future?

Tim and Liz met at 20, studying abroad in Iceland. At 26, they began a three-year long-distance relationship until she dumped him four months ago. She worked at the Natural History Museum in New York City, then moved back home to Delaware to start a new career as a medical illustrator. Meanwhile, he studied and started his career in Western Pennsylvania. If I did get the chance to meet her, I wasn't sure if I should hug her for opening the door for me, or punch her for breaking his heart. Tim and I met at 16 and he was it, he was d.) all of the above.

Since Liz left him, he was the first person I talked to in the morning and the last person I talked to before bed. Then I got on a plane and we went all the way for the first time.

"I mean, it's hard for me. The whole distance thing," he said, referring to arguments with Liz he chose not to mention. Tim and Liz were a six hour drive apart their entire relationship. "And with us, [Portland to Pittsburgh], it's twice as far. It's like distance spurned me..." He looked at

his glass, away from me. “I’m not interested in being in another long-distance relationship.”

I excused myself casually but barely beat my tears to the bathroom. I howled on the toilet, the black poly-blend romper I’d picture-messaged him from the dressing room a few weeks before, bunched around my ankles. Someone jiggled the doorknob. I blinked, rubbed my eyes, blinked a few more times. Blame my contacts. I pulled the side zipper, reached around my shoulder to grab the back half of the strap that secured the two tiny buttons at my collar bone, then pulled by arm back through, as though I got confused trying to do The Sprinkler and tangled my elbows.

“Oh! Sorry.” I flashed the largest, fakest smile this side of the Allegheny River to the slightly over-teased woman patiently waiting outside the door. I gestured to my outfit. “I had a romper situation” then threw my palms to the ceiling. ㄟ\_(ツ)\_ㄟ

She laughed, I laughed and I turned the corner to find Tim. He paid our bill and I pretended nothing was wrong, doing that closed-mouth pretend smile, which was easier than saying how I felt. Easier than asking him to reject me to my face. I was falling in love with him and he wanted to be friends who talked all day every day and got on planes to have sex sometimes. The whole walk home I lingered two paces behind. He grabbed my hand a few times but I pulled away.

He opened the door to his 12-by-12 patio, sidestepped two butterfly chairs and pulled me in close, our bellies touching, his arms around my shoulders. “How’s the lighting here?”

“It’s okay,” I had to laugh. I hadn’t realized I talked about lighting so much. “It’s dark but offset, inoffensive. But if you moved a few inches to your right,” I made the L with my left hand to confirm, “it would be like Circle K all up in my face.”

“Aww!” He spun me around so the Circle K faced my back and kissed me. It didn’t feel like I took those steps, I glided there like Nancy Kerrigan. “I don’t want the Circle K all up in your face.”

Inside, I poured myself a whiskey on the rocks, because why the fuck not, and followed him up two flights to the sloped-ceiling bedroom. Four prescription bottles stood out, scattered on his bedside table, some haphazardly knocked over. They were intended to treat his headaches, some for immediate relief, one for the morning, one for the afternoon, and another time-release alternative. I secretly sipped the whiskey while we got ready for bed.

In bed, we stripped down to a striped fitted brief (him) and an indigo bikini bottom and red-orange tank top (me). We talked about *In Cold Blood*. He’d read it and most of the books I’d read, plus many more I hadn’t, books on history, politics, Ted Williams’ biography. Just all of the books.



“It’s great, but one thing that I can’t get over are the liberties he must’ve taken,” I said. “There’s a passage where he talks about her favorite items in the bedroom. She was dead! How would he possibly know?” I focused on the line between truth and fiction than the horrible nature of the story. Talking about the nature of the story meant talking about Chad’s story, which was part of our story. I’d heard enough for today. Memories of Chad were why he hardly went back to Maine, and there seemed to be a direct correlation between my living there and the future of our relationship.

“Wasn’t she pretty young?”

“Sixteen, but still. Your bedroom is such a private place... I have no idea what the most important items in your room are.”

He surveyed the space. “I think my Lincoln bookends and my framed map of Maine.” There wasn’t much else: desk, books, his framed law degree.

I went downstairs for one more whiskey but lied and said it was water. The smoky highball glass I chose would never betray me. We were too full from the whipped pig lard on a crostini, goat meat salami, pork shoulder with 30-year-old balsamic, roasted tomato or smoked butter mashed potatoes to be intimate. I didn’t cry again that night, I just wanted it to be over.

My unpacked bags from Pittsburgh spilled out into my entryway like a half-split rotten tomato, so packing for Deirdre's bachelorette weekend in the Berkshires was a cinch (follow the hashtag #totescozanto). The event was billed as bottomless champagne, vodka, poolside lounging and hot tub gossip. I swapped the semen-and-tear-stained outfit from my last 24 hours in Pittsburgh with new underwear and a second bathing suit, stuffed in my L.L. Bean buoy towel and was off. I didn't know what to say to Tim's email. He said he felt like he'd given me the wrong impression, that he didn't want to leave one long-distance relationship just to jump right back into one. And I understood, sort of, but didn't want to talk about this over email. Should I try to hard sell a move to Pittsburgh now? Could I not respond? Would I flat-out lie and tell him that I don't want to be in a relationship, either? How would I decide what to say and know it was the right thing? Bachelorette weekend promised a respite in the form of copious amounts of booze and girl talk so, before getting in the car to New York, I dropped my phone off at a friend's house. Phone-free and unplugged was the only way I'd be able to make it through the weekend.

Since I'd returned from our five-day love fest two weeks earlier, it was different. He—well, we—still talked all the time. Or, he texted me all the time and sometimes I responded. I'd hear from him again in a couple of hours, undeterred. I always thought if a guy was into you, you'd hear

from him. And I was. But different. He stopped flirting and yet there he was, not letting me let go.

“Mac store to see what’s wrong with my disc drive D’:”

“Gross morning here”

“Good day?”

So I gave him an ultimatum, in an email. It went something like, “Do you have feelings for me? If you do, then we need to figure out how to be together because it’s worth it. If you do not, then please give me some space to get over it.”

You should never look at your phone while you’re on the toilet. There are so many reasons not to check Instagram or refresh your Gmail while you’re pooping: you could inadvertently drop your phone in the toilet; you could end up sitting for longer than necessary, which I think leads to hemorrhoids; you could be tempted to take a toilet selfie. But the worst possible thing to happen when you’re on the toilet and you’re looking at your phone is to get bad news. “Tim LaVoie, Re: ” It came up with a little blue unread dot. He’d responded. My stomach burned and my legs went numb. My breath waited, ah-ten-hut. The prickles of perspiration tingled my forehead and underarms. As a professional working in the personal care industry, I learned there are different kinds of sweat: heat, exercise and anxiety. This was the last one.

During the summer, my office took advantage of half-day Fridays, and this was our last one, kicking off Labor Day Weekend. Most Tom's of Maine consumers don't call to register their complaints on a beautiful Friday morning preceding a holiday weekend. Makes you really wonder how important their complaints really are if beautiful day > ineffective deodorant. So up until now, it was an okay day. Then, there it was. 3:51 p.m., Friday, August 30, 2013, with the little blue unread dot.

He was home, at his parents', two weeks after our tryst. When he'd dropped me off at the airport at 5 a.m., my quiet tears fell to the concrete. He consoled me, "I'll be home in two weeks." Home. We should be there together. The smell of rubber and exhaust filled my last sniffle as I dragged my bag behind me, through the glass doors to the terminal, back to my life.

Now here I was, on the toilet, reading this stupid e-mail. He said no. I forwarded it to Mandy, who knew waiting to hear from him was killing me and who asked almost every hour on the hour. Almost every hour except for when she was working. Right then, she was working.

That's it. It's over. *"Having you back in my life is fantastic, and now that you're back I can't imagine any extended period where you aren't...I apologize that I didn't let you know earlier that I just can't do a long-distance relationship. I wasn't leading you on, I loved every minute of flirting and every minute you were here. I just can't begin to explain how*

*complicated the bullshit I've been rung (sic) through over the last 13 months has been. Everything is fluid - most of all my physical health - you caught me (or maybe caused) a nice upswing, but just the week before I really didn't feel like I could get out of bed. I wouldn't change a single thing we did or a single thing I said, but I don't have an interest in anything beyond friendship now. Take all the space and time you need, be disappointed in me if you want, but I'll never hurt you. When you get in touch I'll be excited and ready to keep you close like always."*

But. He did say, "Keep you close like always." He did not say he didn't have feelings for me. He evaded the question. Stupid dirty lawyer trick.

At least he knew how I felt.

Within a few desperate hours of receiving the toilet email, I found myself with two semi-strangers, my young barista friend and her new lover, at a taco joint, reveling in the final days of summer. I felt like a third wheel, an onlooker. But I needed something, someone to stay with me, a babysitter. I named all these things I saw on Netflix, using the streaming site as a conversational homing device, looking to land wherever. After eight years on *That 70s Show*, whatever happened to Laura Prepon?

"I was watching this movie the other night called *The Kitchen*. It was all about this one woman's 30th birthday and..." I paused to let anyone interrupt me to say they'd seen it. "It was good!" *Anything other than Tim. Talk about anything other than Tim. Don't text Tim.*

“Laura Prepon, oh yeah! What has she been in?” My barista’s lover indulged me.

“Oh, well have you seen *Orange is the New Black*?” I was two beers in and having no qualms and I know everything about television and film. *Tim-who?*

“No! Was it good? I’ve been meaning to watch it.”

“I saw all the episodes. I liked it... “ I trailed off to sip a 12-ounce Tecate. “Actually it’s based on a memoir of this woman I heard on *The Moth* podcast a few times.”

“Oh cool! Do you remember who it was by?” Jamie, my barista piped in. She’s a pretty big reader, and at 23 still has this enthusiastic upswing in her voice that makes me smile.

“Ummm. Piper Kerman?” I wasn’t entirely sure.

“Yeah, it’s Piper Kerman! She lives in my neighborhood in DC,” the solo dude on the patio inserted himself. Ugh. C’mon. Seriously?

And that’s how I met Rob with the dreamy eyeballs, in from DC for work. In the summer, everyone looks happy, healthy and just the right amount of disheveled and so did he. I learned he’d spent some time in Mongolia with the Peace Corps. I knew one person who went to Mongolia, and it turns out Rob also knows that guy, a former frequent customer of mine at Bull Moose in Lewiston, also a friend of Tim. As a double film/anthropology major, Rob found himself working at some non-profit public

policy social justice think tank kinda thing. A job that somehow brought him to random taco bars in Portland, Maine. He bought us a round of shots.

We left together for a dive bar down the street, and compared and contrasted the episodes on *Fresh Air's* Late Night week. Interviews with David Letterman, with whom I share a birthday; Jimmy Fallon, my new favorite; and Conan. Oh Conan. I drunkenly laughed about QuestLove not wanting to write a theme song for the new *Tonight Show*. Perched on two bar stools, we turned to face each other and my knee touched the inside of his thigh. He waxed poetic about pizza and the caloric intake of beer. I loved all of it.

Then I woke up in his room at the Howard Johnson's. The sex was so much better than it should have been, considering he was a complete stranger and I'd had a bouquet of beers. He'd obviously done this before but it was great so who cares. Should I be drinking less? Was this going to be a funny story or a sad story? I looked at my phone. Only one drunken text to Tim.

"I wish we could go back to the way things were before."

"We can and we will," he wrote back. Giving me hope was the cruelest thing he could have said.

I almost drove my car into oncoming traffic so many times over the next few weeks, sobbing, singing along to Miley Cyrus, hating myself for

relating to Miley Cyrus. “Don’t you ever say I just walked away/I will always want you.”

By Halloween, two months after our tryst, Tim showed up on my Instagram feed dressed as Walter White from Breaking Bad, his arm around a short-haired woman dressed as Snow White—The Whites. It was clever and awesome and we haven’t talked in almost a year.



## Nick/Matt

This summer, my friend Kate and I each found ourselves involved with multiple Nicks and Matts, four or five in total. I started to lose track of who was who.

Nick/Matt is tall, 6'4". Once, a man at the strip club said, "You stole my jacket." Nick/Matt slowly rose from his brother's bachelor party table. The moment he stood eye level with the creep, he paused, and continued to rise for eight more inches. "Oh yeah?" Nick/Matt said, "Do you wear an L.L. Bean Medium Tall?" This Nick/Matt has short unkempt dirty blonde waves but a tidy full beard. Sometimes he wears his grandfather's watch with the red face, sometimes his eyes shift nervously.

Nick/Matt drives a pedicab and stores his cash in a wooden box. When the stash gets low, he goes back out to the Old Port, where tipsy Vera Bradley ladies drunkenly objectify him from the back of the rickshaw. He thinks is this an appropriate way to make a living, covered in sweat and Tiger Balm.

Sometimes when Nick/Matt gets excited, his voice extends to an upper Muppet register. For years, in part because of this, I negated him to the friend zone.

Kate visits me in Maine for a Jenny Lewis concert and Nick/Matt appears at every bar we tell him to. This, I tell Kate, is highly unusual, as Nick/Matt is typically more discerning in his hangout spots. She brushes it off, but I tell her he must be interested in her. Then he handles the rest and totally seduces her.

Conversations with Nick/Matt can be broken down as such: 60 percent stories he's already told me about people I don't know, 30 percent making fun of me, 10 percent mumbles. He's such a good kisser but kind of a little twerp.

Nick/Matt isn't looking for anything serious because that's what you say in the beginning. I wonder what Kate really thinks about him, whether she believes he isn't looking for anything serious, whether that's what she wants.

Nick/Matt asks to take Kate's picture in her house with the crackled yellow paint. She says why not because why not? She knows that she can curtain her hair over half her face and do this steamy aloof thing that always seems to work in photographs. I ask it if was too intimate for them to be doing this on account of his girlfriend and she says, "No of course not, we've known each other for years."

Nick/Matt downloaded this new app Yo and wants me to download it, too. It's only purpose is to send a Yo, which makes your phone say, "Yo." I don't download it but periodically he texts me "Yo," and I write back "I don't think that's how it works."

I'm delighted to run into Nick/Matt at the neighborhood bar. Together, we drink whiskey and, pushing the boundaries of our platonic friendship, I say "I still haven't seen your apartment!" He handles the rest and totally seduces me.

A pool of sweat collects in that space between Nick/Matt's collar bone. When he sits up, it dribbles through chest hair that matches his tidy beard, not his unkempt waves. I pretend not to notice he is dripping with sweat, and ask about the painting at the foot of his bed. He saw it in a calendar once and mentioned to the artist he liked it. "UGH. You want it?" the artist said.

Nick/Matt wants Kate to move with us here, to Maine, but Kate and I want to move to California and forget all these noncommittal losers. Instead, I decide to go on a roadtrip, she decides to move to Portland, but not because of him.

Nick/Matt's eyeball vision is twice as bad as mine but somehow I think I've been wearing his contact in my left eye since last week.

Kate tells me if I want to make it happen with Nick/Matt then I should do one of three things based on his prior relationship experience: 1) Pledge my undying love to Jesus, 2) Eventually reveal I'm batshit crazy, 3) Leave town. Number three is already in progress, but I can't rule out number two.

Nick/Matt isn't Kate's boyfriend yet, although he pees with the door open and makes a key for her when she's in town, to use when she visits. I Cyrano de Bergerac her when she doesn't know what to say to him because new relationships are like Jenga.

Nick/Matt's voice waivers when he tells me it's okay. He texts me half an hour later, "Oh man, it's hard for me to see you so sad."

It's my second to last night in town and Nick/Matt offers to bring takeout and help me pack. He makes fun of me for ordering Pad See Ew but he gets Pad Thai, which isn't exactly original. After he rips all the nails out of the wall like I ask, he pulls me into the bedroom. "I've been trying to get you this naked for four years," he says and I'm flattered. He handles the rest.

Kate packs up her house in Massachusetts and FedExes him the most thoughtful presents for his birthday. The following weekend she's here, and I say she's lucky to have found someone to treat her with the care and respect she deserves. She says she wants the same thing for me, and I bawl into my mojito.

After midnight, Nick/Matt grabs his cutoffs from the floor to get dressed. "Thanks for offering but I have to go home and give Ellie dinner." It's my second-to-last night in town and in my naked vulnerability I don't tell him I want him to stay. I don't tell him feeding your cat at midnight is a total bullshit excuse not to stay.

Once I'm on the road, Kate and Nick/Matt send me selfies. I miss their little faces but this will have to do.

Nick/Matt, on the other hand, signs up for Instagram to follow my roadtrip hashtag but otherwise I haven't heard from him in weeks.

Nick/Matt's moms are so happy to see her! They ask about her job interview, their plans for the weekend, implying approval and excitement of their budding romance.

At certain times of the day, the pool at the Luxor gets two suns, the actual Las Vegas desert sun and the reflection off the side of the pyramid. I opt for my pinup one-piece with the hibiscus flowers, very *Mad Men*, and some ginger tells me I'm gorgeous. I take in a different kind of vitamin D and revel in the physical distance I've put between myself and the Nicks and Matts, who can no longer seduce me with their text messages. But I miss Kate terribly.



## Knitting Quilts

2014

Sean and I decided to meet for a beer at LFK, named for Lawrence Fucking Kansas, as in “If this bar doesn’t work we’re going to Lawrence Fucking Kansas.” The bar’s floor-to-ceiling picture window peeks onto Longfellow Square, which is actually a triangle, named for the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Because of the bar’s location, in Portland, Maine, the birth city of Longfellow, most patrons think the acronym is LongFellow Knights or Kitchen or something. Their burgers are decent, but the place has no fryolator which, hello, who wants a burger with no fries?

Before LFK, the space housed a used book store, Cunningham Books. As tribute, between royal blue walls and black window sills sat typewriters, and shelves and shelves of books. At the bar I saw professors, designers, people from my bowling league, long-time record store employees. “Bull Moose Lifers,” we called them, those who never moved on, just up to the corporate office or out to manage one of the farther-flung branches. Ten or eleven, I think, from Bangor, Maine all the way to Salem, New Hampshire. That’s where Sean and I first met 14 years ago, working at the Lewiston, Maine, location. I was 16, he was 18. He now lived in Portland, one block up from LFK, on State. My apartment was

two blocks in the opposite direction. Around the corner from my place, Chad's brownstone held memories for those who remembered when. I was hoping Sean's girlfriend would meet us out, but it'd have to wait for another time. While the two of us, Sean and I, reviewed the beverage list, I couldn't help but notice how much easier his smiles came these days. This new tidy haircut of a 33 year-old-old, and shirts that finally fit—these seemed to work for him.

Eventually, the conversation turned away from work, graduate school, writing. Deep down, Sean wanted to be a writer, but I thought he was missing two things essential to the writing life: he didn't love to read and he could never accept edits. In a story he showed me once, he had his protagonist's wife knitting a quilt. Though I tried to explain that one knits sweaters or afghans, a quilt is sewn, he refused to change it. I love edits. Critiques were one of my favorite parts of a short-lived art school experience. Criticism is what you make of it, right? What would I do without mechanical-pencil wielding grammar freaks? The Word Doc squiggly underlines? He was curious about this writing life I was attempting to live, and after vague descriptions of my works in progress, inevitably, we returned to Chad.

"I think learning what he did was like 'Whoa, we're adults.' This isn't something a kid does," Sean said. And there wasn't much to say after that which hadn't already been said. We looked at the table, dim, dark wood

with white tea lights in shot glasses, white menus on clipboards, my beer, his beer, my empty whiskey and water glasses, his water glass.

It's not that I was glad Chad had done what he had done, but it would always link us, Sean and me. We would always remember when we were shooting the shit at the record store, sitting on the counter, zero cares. Sean was a vegan back when kale was considered gerbil food or garnish. I drank skim-milk caramel iced lattes from Dunkin' Donuts. His oversized Nirvana t-shirts hung from his shoulders to mid-thigh. He was the first guy I met who knew me not as the lousy, sarcastic clarinet player, the girl who hung around chess club meetings but never played—I was his peer. The record store people, they chose me.

2000

Chad came in for weeks, asking “Do you have a job for me yet?”

“Get outta here, nerd!” Sean taunted. We exhibited expert customer service to strangers, but the regulars we treated with mock-contempt.

Maybe it was his charm, his persistence, or his Black Flag tattoo. But he joined the team for Christmas, and dropped out of college to stay. At Maine Maritime Academy, he was training to be a sailor and making a name for himself as goalie of the lacrosse team. He dropped out to come back to a town where high school seniors clamored to get out any way

they could.

Chad took it upon himself to coin a nickname for me, behind the register, between scans of barcodes.

“So Amanda, do you have any nicknames?”

“Uh, no. My sister calls me Mander, but because she couldn’t say Amanda when she was a kid.”

“Mind if I call you Panda?”

Amanda Panda, get it? So dumb. Even though Chad isn’t around anymore, thanks to him, for the last 15 years, everyone we worked with, and their friends, have called me “Panda.”

2009

At or around 3:00 every day, I not only lost the will to continue my data entry/envelope stuffing for the day, I lost the will to live. Or, at least stay awake. Due in part to the activities of the previous evening, the 3:00 slump crept in early, at like 11. I completely lost focus and wished for nothing short of a door, so that I might close it and nap. Part of my duties as Administrative Assistant for the Muscular Dystrophy Association in Westbrook, Maine, included acting as the first line of defense for wandering strangers. My desk floated in the middle of the entrance area, for everyone to see and approach.

Between ticks of the clock, my mind drifted to events of the previous evening. Matt's 29th birthday fell on Memorial Day of 2009 and we did last-call shots of slippery nipples then stumbled home to my apartment, within two blocks of Chad's brownstone in the notoriously unsafe Parkside neighborhood of Portland—Maine's most densely populated square mile. My friends were chased by a naked man once, but that was the worst I'd heard of until now. I woke up to his former plus-size child model snores and his soft, warm skin stuck to mine. In an effort to move the clock forward with my mind, I took a moment to check Facebook. Okay. More like half an hour to check Facebook. Most of it was innocuous and forgettable like "Goin' to work!" "Ate a sandwich it was awesome!" until I mindlessly scrolled into this status update, from one of our old managers, Chris, who moved to Denver: Chad Gurney was arrested? What the fuck is happening in Maine right now?!

I felt just as confused as Chris. But wait, what? Chad was arrested? Like, for what? He'd been known to mess people up pretty badly in the mosh pit, but those days were behind us. There had to be some mistake. I Googled "Chad Gurney." Posts came up from all the local outlets: *Portland Press Herald*, *Bangor Daily News*, WGME News-13:

#### CITY MAN ACCUSED OF MURDER, ARSON

My skin burned, as though there was no way to absorb or comprehend the information so it came out as heat. This news, it didn't make sense. I grabbed my cell phone to call the ones from home who knew him best. The type of friends whose numbers I still had memorized.

"Hey, what's up?" Sean answered the phone the same way he had the nine years I'd known him, the "Hey" extending to two syllables: H-hAY. When I rose from my desk, I caught a whiff of lingering booze and perspiration from last night's tryst.

"Did you see the news?" I paced the hallway outside the office entrance. The other administrative assistant could definitely hear me through the walls but it mattered more to not feel her stare.

"No, I'm at school. What's going on?" Sean had left Bull Moose less than a year after I was hired, and eight years later snagged his own classroom at an elementary school nearby. He didn't know. I was going to tell him. I didn't consider I could be the bearer when I dialed. This seemed too big to hold in, too big to not talk about immediately.

"Chad's been arrested. They're saying he killed his girlfriend," I said quietly, upset at the way the words felt. It felt wrong.

And waited.

"What the fuck," he mumbled.

"It's all over the news. It's so fucked up."

We lingered on the phone for a second longer, wondering if the other had anything else to say, and hung up.

2014

In a conversational lull, I looked at him, with his full sleeve tattoo, his terrible posture, his surprisingly red beard and the smile that used to destroy me. He used to bleach his hair, dye it black. He was a secret ginger.

You know how in *High Fidelity*, Rob set out to understand his romantic history by contacting all of his former lovers and rehashing the past? That's not exactly what I was doing. But it wasn't not what I was doing. I wanted to understand what Chad meant to us, and I wanted to understand how exactly Sean fit into my life.

"I had the hugest crush on you," I said.

"What?" he asked, as though he hadn't heard me. But I knew him well enough to see he was making me repeat myself, either because he wanted to hear it again or he needed time to format his response. Around 11 p.m., rounding our third drink and hour together, I could barely hear Neutral Milk Hotel playing above the dozens of conversations happening around us. Just another Thirsty Thursday crowd.

"I had the hugest crush on you."

"No," he feigned disbelief.

"When we were teenagers," I said.

"Until when?" he asked.

“The whole time.” I pretended to not get what he meant because I couldn’t say the truth. I had a crush on him until I read his chapter from National Novel Writing Month, and his fiction included an antagonist who wore a black suit and a red tie because he was evil. I had a crush on him again a little bit later because our banter is as old as time and there’s this chemistry I can’t shake, until I went to his new apartment and saw inspirational quotes in Comic Sans, printed on 8x11 copy paper and taped to the wall. Sayings like “We must be willing to let go of the life we’ve planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us,” and “Be in love with your life. Every minute of it.” Instead, I continued, “Is that news? That cannot be news to you.”

“It’s not,” he conceded, smiling, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

“You little shit!” If we were back at the store, I would’ve thrown a marker or a divider card at his head. In his Converse low-tops, he would have run around the store, But we were adults now, in an adult bar, so I said, “No... I just like, you were one of the first guys that I met that wasn’t from my high school and we were together all the time. But you were like, not into it.” It’s hard to let go of the feeling of wanting someone to want you.

“Yeah. Chad, Chad was like, ‘How can you not see that, you need to get on it right now.’” I knew Chad had my back, but after once sassing him at the store, while we were scanning and labelling a shipment of



Eminem CDs, he said, “Shut your man-pleaser.” It’s not hard to imagine what kind of misogynist things he then said behind my back.

“No! Well, you know if Chad was telling you to do it, it was the right thing to do. Clearly,” I added with a hint of sarcasm.

“And now I see that he was right. Ha!” He paused and searched my face for clues about how to continue. “I... I mean, it’s going to sound bad but...”

We kissed only once, back in 2005, and it was a disaster.

#### 2005/2006

In July of 2006, a misguided 33-year-old Lewiston resident rolled a frozen pig head into a storefront mosque, garnering national attention and seriously upsetting the city’s 3,000 Somali/Bantu immigrant population. Brent Matthews, charged with desecrating a place of worship, said it was a prank, that he didn’t know what it meant. I don’t know how it must’ve felt, to bring shame to an entire town, but less than a year later, in the parking lot of the Lewiston location of the local surplus and salvage chain Marden’s, he shot himself in the head with a semiautomatic weapon. Rumor has it that in the parking lot standoff with police, while considering whether to take his own life or listen to police trying to talk him down, patrons of the store, immobilized on police orders, became impatient and

heckled Brent to just do it. This, for some reason, seems like one of the best ways to describe why I didn't want to be there.

At 20, I dropped out of art school, leaving my major undeclared at Montserrat College of Art, drove from Maine to California and back in 40 days, and moved back in with my mother in the defunct mill town we all clamored to leave. Between Lewiston, Maine, and its twin city of Auburn, the other restless youths and I had our choice of two malls, two movie theaters, a bowling alley, multiple mini golf courses, a college, a lake, a river and skiing, all within a 15-minute drive. But when boredom got the best of us, we scraped together some extra gas money and drove an hour down to the Portland International Jetport to watch planes take off.

Lewiston High School teetered around 1,500 students, the second most populous in the state. It afforded us more than you'd think, given the reputation the school had: The Dirty Lew. We had all the cliques of the most hyperbolic teen comedy. So many vocational programs and extra curriculars—early childcare, ceramics, CAD, tennis, auto body repair, marching band, to name a few. The professors' and lawyers' kids excelled at Civil Rights Coalition and Odyssey of the Mind, the downtown welfare kids acted out *Dangerous Minds*, and the ones from the outskirts drove their snowmobiles to campus, parking near the entrance to the automotive department. There was a mini Elvira, and dudes from *Half Baked* with their hackie sacks and devil sticks.

Despite the ease with which I found a niche somewhere between the skater boys and the band nerd-os, I hated living there. I hated that my mom worked in the food service area of the hospital her whole life, a job that ruined her body where her coworkers treated her poorly. I hated that my father couldn't hold down a job. We lived in a mobile home park until I was in the third grade, which wasn't that bad until I was old enough to understand the social stigma. Although I'd barely spent any time in Maine's biggest city or travelled farther than Providence, R.I., and therefore had little to compare it to, I watched Lewiston deteriorate before my eyes. A general malaise permeated the community; morale was low and stuck in the crevices like the lingering smell of cigarette smoke.

Before the suburban sprawl, Lewiston simply had mills. After almost a century, in the 1950s many of Lewiston's textile mills started to become boarded up. This gradually led to a run-down and abandoned downtown area. The city's flagship department store, B. Peck & Co., closed in 1982 after a hundred years in business. I just missed it. As businesses and jobs began to leave the city, people followed. The population decreased steadily from the 1970s until the immigrant influx of the early 2000s. Today, the biggest export from the Twin Cities are tampons, which of course are not milled or powered by canals connected to brick buildings on the waterfront, but instead come out of a nondescript building in an industrial park affiliated with Proctor and Gamble.

Like a significant portion of the population of Lewiston, I come from a long line of French-Canadian immigrants. My parents' parents were French Canadian - Pleaus, Pelletiers, Martels and Chasses. My last surviving *mémère*, Yvette Martel Pleau, passed about a year and a half ago. *Mémère* and *Pépère* retired to Minot, Maine, about 30 minutes into the woods from my childhood home. She was my favorite, always hugging, knitting, baking and smiling. Every Christmas, our tree was covered in delicately crocheted little angels, stitches so small they were barely visible. She put Mailhot's ground sausage in her turkey stuffing, and my whole family raved. Mailhot (pronounced "MAY-ott") Sausage Company is still based in Lewiston, providing quality pork products like *cretón*, a pork spread, and *tourtiere*, known in my family as simply "meat pie," the same way it has for 100 years. The facility is still located at the bottom of Bartlett Hill, not too far from the Androscoggin Bank Colisée, formerly known as the Central Maine Civic Center. It's the kind of company that operates without a website. No one is going to check-in there. No one is going to add a Yelp review stream to their sidebar. All pork, no filler or surprise meat, it's a pocket of Lewiston that may never change.

At 20, I took a job making coffee and assembling sandwiches at Austin's Fine Wines and Foods. After the freedom of college, coming down from the high of the open road, I felt lost and lonely. I tried to keep the lights low so I wouldn't have to see the linoleum coming up in the corners

of the little bathroom, the accumulated fingerprints on the kitchen cabinets and the ugly white lace curtains my mom picked out. Frustrated with the volume at which my mom kept the television, my lack of privacy and my sister's hoodlum friends, I turned to the Internet for refuge. So I obsessed over every bit of minutiae on the Internet, clicking the night away.

Sean posted this on his LiveJournal on February 20, 2005, at 5:53 p.m. I discovered it later that night in the uninsulated basement, using dial-up internet, wrapped in fleece blankets, with only my typing hands exposed, like scallions poking from a spring roll.

*I have seen and read so (sic) disconcerting (sic) things about me the past couple of days from an "untitled" source, yet I know who it is, but it just hasn't bothered me like I think it was designed to, because I just feel we have been going to two opposite directions throughout the years. I don't like burning bridges, but I'm also stubborn in that I don't like trying to rebuild ones where the material seems to expansive (sic) and these bridges that don't seem to want to take the time to heal. "These wounds will heal, on their own time. I won't live in my regrets."*

I felt like the "untitled" source was me. Thinking he was making a decision about our relationship without my consent, single-handedly deciding to end our "will they-won't they" storyline, I threw off my blanket

shawl, like James Brown preparing to encore—with gusto. How dare he put an end to the idea of our relationship, coded in a blog he knew I'd read.

I had to see him. I got dressed and drove to his apartment, didn't think about my clothes, just picked up whatever and put it on. No boots, no jacket. Didn't bother to warm up the Mustang. You can't be angry unless you really care. Left onto Sabattus Street, by the Tipton's, through a couple of stop lights, then passed the vacant buildings that used to be Reel Action and Shop N' Save. My sister peed in the ball pit at that video rental store (I'm sure she would not want you to know that). I flew by the Hannaford Supermarket with the cute bagger, then past Holy Family Catholic Church and the Maine Family Federal Credit Union next door. I think there was a meth bust at the house across the street. Elizabeth Ann's, the gas station with the blue shark gummies and the laundromat where we filled water balloons that one time, then Friendly's (Mom's favorite), the ever-expanding campus of St. Mary's Regional Medical Center, the Middle School field where marching band rehearsed, that place I got my tragus pierced, Aunt Connie's apartment—didn't realize she was in the closet until I turned 23 and someone said, "Statistically there's at least one gay person in every family." Right before the Blue Goose, a dive bar where I heard one of our most frequent customers hung out, I banked right at the light on Wood Street, towards Bates College.

Sean had me over once or twice to his apartment to watch movies or whatever, probably in an upswing of the will-we-won't-we pendulum. He'd trained me at the store. The amount of eye contact, listening, physical closeness required for him to explain how to sign someone up for a frequent buyer card or restock the best seller wall, training with him was more than I'd even been near a boy before. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up, where I wanted to go to college, what to have for dinner, but I knew I wanted him. The *New York Times* recently quoted a study by Dr. Arthur Aaron, a notable psychologist, that essentially said you can fall in love with anyone after four minutes of silent, uninterrupted eye contact. In the experiment, a heterosexual man and woman entered the lab through separate doors, meeting for the first time. They sat face to face and answered 36 increasingly intimate and personal questions. Then they stared silently into each other's eyes for four minutes. Six months later, the man and woman were married. I wondered what variables to consider if a young man and woman share one-minute intervals of teenaged eye contact over the course of hundreds of hours. Is that why it felt like it might have been love?

The Jordan School apartments, located in an imposing three-story 1902 Italian Renaissance-style building downtown, were hard to miss. It first served as a second high school until 1931, then an elementary school until it was converted into apartments in 1983. It seemed fitting somehow

that Sean lived in a school and would go on to be a teacher, even if he claimed it was only to date single moms.

The parking lot spaces contained numbers corresponding to apartment units. I picked an empty one at random and hoped the rightful occupant of the parking space stayed out for the duration of my visit. I took the six graphite-colored stone stairs two at a time, remembering how ornate and beautiful the stonework on the landing seemed, blue, brick and white weaving from tile to tile. Sean was lucky to live there—this building had history, it belonged to a rich, bustling Lewiston, not the downtrodden hooting and hollering defunct place it had become.

Of 45 buzzers, none were clearly labelled with names or numbers. Some had Sharpied-in numbers on the wall next to the empty name field, others had only apartment numbers, only the first two digits out of three. Some had embossed labels from those old spin-and-punch label-makers, others had numbers with arrows pointing to the correct ivory rectangle button. A few blank spaces implored, “Leave me alone.” I remembered which corridor to walk down to get to his door, but not which number. Even if I had, this unkempt, chaotic panel didn’t seem reliable. I turned to the mailboxes on the opposite wall, which we no help in identifying Sean’s unit number. One read, “Apt 205” with a handwritten note stuck to it: “Some packages have been going missing. If a package can’t fit in the box, please leave a note and I will collect at the post office. - Joe.” The whole system seemed flawed. I panicked for a minute, went back down the stairs



to stare up at which windows were lit. Under the cantaloupe-colored streetlight, shorter than most lights of its kind, the pavement was whitewashed by a paper-thin layer of snow carried over by a strong gust of wind. I saw my breath but didn't feel cold.

Then someone came home and held the door open for me. No questions asked. I was meant to be there. I ran up the absurdly wide stairwell meant to accommodate entire classrooms of children. At the second floor, slightly out of breath, I reached his door and listened. The muffled TV sounded like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, this must be the place. I rapped on the door four solid swift knocks and heard him get up and walk by the blackboard which had never been removed, simply painted over.

I didn't know what to say and realized too late I should've found a boombox to blast Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes," or at least should have considered what to say. He opened the door, justifiably surprised to see me.

"Hey... what's up?"

I can't remember if I said anything beforehand, whether I approached fast or slow or if we were over the threshold of his doorway or not. But I kissed him, pressed my lips against his, my thumbs found his collarbone through his t-shirt. He stiffened, an anxious, uncomfortable tightening, not the happy, sexy way. His mouth didn't move in response to mine. His jaw clenched. Maybe I'd seen one too many rom-coms to think

this would work. The grand gesture. He didn't kiss me back. *Say it ain't so/  
My love is a life taker.*

The next logical step was to post about it on my blog:

*Sunday, February 20th, 2005 10:11 p.m.*

*subject: only in dreams*

*mood: crushed*

*i just lost my appetite for something insatiable.*

The song we held hands to that one time at a Weezer concert was "Only in Dreams." Our hand holding was the only physical, concrete connection we made since we met, five years earlier. I knew he'd know.

The next day he posted this, and we didn't talk for a long time.

**Rapid Hope Loss - 10:28 p.m.**

**February 21st, 2005**

*Sometimes it's the ones you least expect to come around, but I don't think I'll ever come around, so it's best to just find our best wishes on these parting ways when we've both gone too far in the opposite directions to ever really find our ways back to each other. It's best to just face the truth, that I was truly surprised to ever hear your voice again, when honestly I was expecting someone else. I must face the brutal truth, we*

*could never have worked out, even if we worked hard at it. Maybe I am too insecure or maybe you just never took the time to hear me out. Maybe I would never speak the truth, seeing that lies fit me better anyway.*

**Current Mood:** spent

**Current Music:** At the Drive-In

2014

After three hours at LFK, I felt my energy wane. “But it’s water under the bridge,” I said about my crush on him. My voice got all nasally and loud after a few beers. All of a sudden I was scared he’d express regrets again, like that time he texted me and said he had a revelation, his words, and it was that he thought we’d be really great together. At the time I had a boyfriend. Those were the stable, happy but boring years, and all I could muster was “Ah. Remember when we were young.”

“I knew,” he repeated.

“I would feel weird... we’re like adults now, moving on with our lives and for me... It’s something I’ve been wanting to rehash and air out,” I said. His girlfriend, whom I had not yet met, seemed great, too pretty and stable for him to not take seriously. Their relationship provided the safety and security for us to have this conversation. It kept us in the past tense.

“I think we both tried really hard to distance ourselves from it, and not deal with it or confront it,” he said.

“Were there, like, other girls?” I asked.

“Uh, I think... for the time period I’m thinking, there was Demarie. Which really upset you.” Demaire, Chad’s sister had the same dimples, same taught athletic body as her brother.

“It did! Because you were constantly objectifying her!” And because I *liked* you.

“Totally!”

“That’s not okay!” I said.

“I think I’ve always done that, up until a certain point where, I think I was like... well I mean, I didn’t have my first girlfriend until I was 25,” he said.

“Yeah, but it’s not like you were a 25-year-old virgin.” I assumed most of the guys from the store had enjoyed a little something-something in high school. Sean and I met when he was 18 and I was 16, so I assumed there were girls from before that I didn’t know about. He wore ties to school and played ice hockey.

“I was!”

We’d been virgins that whole time.

He laughed.

“Shut up! Sean!”

“I was! So my first girlfriend, it was like I was under the fog of first love, and that was the first person I had sex with. So when you talk about you and I, at that point in my life I was totally not ready for anything

remotely related to a relationship because I knew I couldn't really handle everything that came with it. It took me until I was 25 until I thought I understood what a relationship means.

“My friendship with Chad, he was very focused on devirginizing me in any way possible and his sister became one of those avenues. I just wasn't ready for it. So I felt kind of used by him, because I'm like this nice guy that he wants to deverginize and he was like, 'You'd totally be good for my sister because you're a nice guy and all she's dated are douche bags.’”

“That's weird because—” I stopped while Sean checked his phone.  
“You okay?”

Nearly every day I walked by Chad's building. The weekend before Sean and I sat down at LFK to shoot the shit, five years after Chad killed Zoe, I'd taken my canvas tote of pizza supplies and Vihno Verde for one and walked right by the scene of the crime on the way back to my apartment. Two kids were filming at Chad's building. One kid of average height/build in jeans and a vest and an androgynous kid in skinny jeans, with a combover, boom mic and tripod. I stopped watched from across the street. Vest Kid ran up the driveway the around the side of the building and Combover followed him with the camera. I politely waited until they were viewing the playback to approach.

“Hi. I’m so sorry to interrupt, but do you mind if I ask if there is a particular reason you chose this spot?” Chad’s building was one of the more unique and picturesque in the neighborhood. Built in 1924 as a single-family home, it was renovated into apartments. But with the ivy and ornate brick inlays shaped like little plus signs, it was a memorable house even if you didn’t know what had gone on inside.

“Uh, no.” Vest Kid replied in the monotone of disaffected youth.

They didn’t know. Should I have told them? Should I have told them that in that very building, my friend strangled his 19-year-old girlfriend, chopped her head off with a sword then set fire to her body? He’s in solitary confinement now, I hear, because he put a guard in the hospital. If I walked away it would be a brief enough encounter to forget. Filmmakers run into this all the time, curious bystanders interrupting. Then I imagined them screening the footage at school and someone’s younger sibling or a first responder’s kid piping in, “Is that the house where Zoe was killed? What is wrong with you, man?” But maybe the history of the location will contribute to the significance of their film.

“Oh okay.... well thank you!” I kept walking.

“Yeah, my girlfriend is watching *Breaking Bad* and telling me she can’t handle it. She’s like, ‘I need to watch more more more!’ I know, you can’t stop!” Sean said, explaining his momentary phone distraction.

Our server dropped off one last pint for me and Sean looked up from his phone. I sipped and let him continue, leaning in to hear over the din.

“I always got social anxiety. For a long time, I would never come here alone for brunch because I was so worried what everyone else would think. If anything, it makes you more available by being alone, because if people are curious, they’ll come and talk to you. I’ll bring a book and that’s a way to open communication,” Sean started to rant. “For the first 30 years of my life, I was so concerned with what everyone else thought then I realized, who cares? So, to connect it to you and I, I think I was very worried what other people would think, and not just my own feelings.”

Whoever was working the playlist that night was really killing it. Arcade Fire, Neutral Milk Hotel, and in this silent space, Wilco’s “Heavy Metal Drummer,” from an album I’d listened to a gazillion times in the store.

“I definitely don’t want you to walk away from this thinking like, oh he didn’t feel anything for me. That’s pretty shitty,” he said. He said my feelings for him were reciprocated at the time. And then we made out.

Just kidding, we didn’t actually make out.

I didn’t know quite what to make of all this. It was validating, in a way, to know that what I felt between us then, as teenagers, it wasn’t all in my head. But knowing that didn’t change anything. It didn’t erase how

heartbroken I was then, it didn't change the way I felt about him in that moment. I shifted in my seat, my foot falling asleep.

"Does that explain?" he asked.

Was I courageous enough or drunk enough or curious enough to bring up the LiveJournal exchanges, how I'd gone to his apartment that time, almost ten years ago?

"We have the luxury of time and the ability to look back and reflect. I'm so happy to have you in my life and to have someone right down the street who I can say, 'Remember when?'" So I was not brave enough to ask him about that moment. Instead, I monologued. "A lot of what's happening to us as we're growing up and having romances, it's so internal, it's so much the story that we're telling ourselves, maybe even more than engaging with that other person. Everything that you just explained was happening only in your mind, it didn't really have much to do with me. I think that's something a lot of people can relate to... I can. I feel like I've done more of that later in life, internalizing, whereas I feel like when I was young I was more open about how I was feeling. At least I thought I was."

The moment I went home and cryptically blogged about Sean not kissing me ten years ago was the moment I realized vocalizing what you want wasn't enough to get what you want. Maybe that's why I write so much, because it's easier to type things than to say things. The important words get caught in my throat or mentally rewritten to oblivion and nothing



is said. Which is how I came to be here tonight, intentionally, maybe awkwardly, trying to say things before I left town.

“No... you were.”

“Yeah, that didn’t really work either,” I said and rolled my eyes.

“Why are you saying it didn’t work? It didn’t work because you didn’t get what you wanted at the time?”

“No... It took me a long time to fall in love. A balanced, mutual love. I think that’s always the goal, someone to love you as much as you love them.” I said, my voice softening.

“You can’t make someone feel how you want them to feel,” Sean said.

One of my failed OKCupid dates walked by and I looked away to avoid eye contact.

“That’s part of my motivation for wanting to go away for a little while. Shake the Etch-A-Sketch, erase that chalkboard. Not that my romantic frustrations are the catalyst for wanting to leave, but I think I need to get out of here.” When did everything get so complicated? When did life get so hard?

“It’s a big piece of it,” he said.

I started rummaging in my bag for my wallet. “Yeah, I mean, if I had a boyfriend and was in love, I would think twice about wanting to leave.”

Then Sean went on a tangent about how he refuses to pay for his girlfriend’s concert tickets: if she can’t afford to go he’d rather go alone. As

if to remind us both that we weren't talking about each other in a present or future context.

"I think you could be a little bit nicer to your girlfriend."

"I know."

"You're kind of an asshole. What does your dad have to say?"

"I don't tell him."

"Because he'd be on her side."

2015

Nearly a year later, after driving across the country again, I settled in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts and fell in love with a man who likes Nirvana almost as much as Sean does. Joey and I met, in part, because I liked the Weezer t-shirt he wore in his profile picture. Except now I'm not sure if it was a Wonder Woman shirt. The last time I saw Sean was back at LFK, a couple month after I left the three-block radius Chad, Sean and I lived, where I'd always be known as the girl from Bull Moose. He was there alone for brunch. It was so much brighter in there in the morning. I sipped an Irish coffee and we talked about his girlfriend's expectations for an engagement ring. While he talked about prices of rings and what he was willing to spend and how that related to his salary, I thought about how glad I was that nothing ever happened between us,

how happy it made me to run into him on a random visit home and pick up  
where we left off.



## The Yelp.com Over Sharer Takes a Roadtrip

### **Novare Res, Portland, ME**

July 30, 2014

★★★★☆

My last night in town, I couldn't say no to one final beer with Bridget and her boyfriend. We met at Novare, aka the "beer garden." It's always helpful for me to be there with beer aficionados, otherwise I spend 30 minutes looking at the expansive menu, unable to decide, too shy to bother the server with my idiot questions. "But how bitter is it? Do you have any domestic saisons? What do you have in bottles from Maine Beer Company?" Instead, I try whatever Bridget is having, or ask Kevin what he was most excited about. I think I had a Rising Tide featured brew. But I'll tell you what I did not have trouble deciding on: the crab rangoon grilled cheese. It was everything I wanted and more, almost made me change my mind and stay.

And then I received a text from someone I know in real life but is mostly an Instagram friend. He was texting me from across the bar, and wanted to catch up. In some ways, it was these meaningless but familiar interactions

that I wanted to be relieved of. When I left Portland, everything would be more intentional.

### **Rouge French Bistro, West Stockbridge, MA**

August 1, 2014

★★★★☆

My friend Kate and I walked in under the red string lights, admittedly somewhat tipsy. We bellied up to the bar and ordered all kinds of tapas. The best by far? Duck egg rolls, which we washed down with pineapple-infused vodka and soda. Jeremy, the bartender, happily obliged our refill requests.

Their bread is amazing, btw, if you're someone who still indulges in the mouthgasm that is focaccia. I ate the whole basket while Kate polished off the butter with one of our six superfluous utensils.

Kate had been following the Bulletproof diet and ordered the grass fed beef burger. A man next to us at the bar requested olive oil for his bread, and she broke in that butter is better, grass-fed, specifically, "Because of the higher omega 6 and 3," proselytizing the Bulletproof bible.

Jeremy and I joked about the importance of the cow's well being. I thought we were riffing on the *Portlandia* sketch, "Can we meet the farmer?" until Kate instead turned it around on me: "Why do you think it's more important to recycle than eat grass-fed beef." She didn't say it like a question, making it hard to answer. I do prioritize my environmental impact over my personal nutrition. Recycling is basically free. But also completely different. I tried saying grass-fed beef isn't always available in the grocery store where I shop, and if I went to the one where it was, I'd spend 30 percent more. An exaggeration, perhaps, but an attempt to get myself out of this hole she dug for us.

Listen, the point is, I think the Bulletproof diet, the Paleo, and all the whatever diets going around now are fads. Here's a diet tip for you: eat more vegetables. Also recycle. Even your toilet paper roll. And go to Rouge. They can accommodate all kinds of dietary needs.

### **The Avery, Providence, RI**

August 4, 2014

★★★★☆

My companion, a Providence resident, was shocked to find the Avery totally, completely empty the Tuesday night we walked in. She ordered a

Negroni and, to ingratiate myself with my host, I said, “Me, too,” forgetting Negronis are made with Campari.

The first time I had Campari was in Paris, after remembering it from a line in *Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. I ordered a Campari on the rocks, because I’m what the French call *les incompetents* and could barely choke down two sips before asking for a bite of my friend’s *la crème glacée au chocolat*. It was like tongue kissing someone who just brushed with the Fennel Tom’s of Maine toothpaste and rinsed with Robitussin.

But the polenta fries, oh goodness! They were amazing. And it wasn’t because I was in the car all day and hadn’t eaten since the Berkshires, only to arrive at Sarah’s and talk and talk and talk before we decided where to go.

I loved the decor, although initially it read more Elvish from *Lord of the Rings* than Art Deco.

Definitely worth a trip!



## **The Grange, Providence, RI**

August 5, 2014

★★☆☆☆

The Grange is a restaurant for omnivores who love vegetarians. It helped that they carry my favorite beer from back home, Maine Beer Company's Spring Peeper. There was live music, a man in overalls with a floppy hat and acoustic guitar, with full tables on all sides. I sipped and waited for my Tinder date, who happened to be both a vegetarian and passing through Providence.

Ankur opened with insensitive remarks about a man transitioning to live as a woman, apropos of nothing. Strike one. Then we had a great discussion about GMOs. I weighed the pros and cons of relocating to Santa Fe, New Mexico or the Berkshires of Western Mass. Oddly enough, the bartender was from Santa Fe, and the random man to my right from the Berkshires. Decisions personified. The menu kept me totally satiated, I didn't even notice the lack of protein in the rainbow beet salad.

When Ankur said his all-time-best live music experience was Eminem, he lost me. But I let him kiss me in the car because I knew this would be the first and last time I'd see him. His mouth felt too small against mine.

## **The Barn Loft, Fayetteville, WV**

August 7, 2014

★★★★★

I knew the moment I saw pictures of the Barn Loft on Air BnB, a website on which people rent their homes, I had to go there. Holly's Southern sensibility and design school education made me feel like I was in an episode of Hart of Dixie. But make sure you take directions from her page because, against all odds, Google Maps will not take you there!

By 9:30, I turned towards downtown Fayetteville to find everything closed for the evening. Holly, the homeowner, mentioned she'd likely be in bed when I arrived from Providence. Google guided me to High Street, definitely the road. It stopped after number 21. I was looking for 49. I checked and rechecked, asking myself, "Is that a driveway? Did I miss a turn? Could that house behind 21 be 49?"

A friend from school said, "You're going to West Virginia? Careful the raccoons and the hillbillies!" Her words caught the needle of my mind and I got scared for the first time since packing up my Portland apartment. Technology had failed and I was lost. Nobody knew where I was, save for my friend in Providence and maybe the girls back in the Berkshires. But all

I said to them was “Barn” and “West Virginia.” My headlights cut through sleepy darkness of the dead end, confusing and alarming neighbors, their silhouettes poking through blinds at the hum of my Ford Fiesta. But turning off my headlights and creeping around to squint through the porch lights to read numbers would alarm them even more. Careful the hillbillies. Finally my fear of being lost overcame my fear of waking up Holly and she graciously directed me to her place over the phone. The road was cut in half by a property change thing fence thing. I apologized profusely for ignoring the warning on her page about GPS issues.

Take the directions from her page.

The tepid August night cooled my anxious pits as I climbed a ladder up to the loft, a modern fairy tale come to life. String lights criss-crossed the rafters. Mosquito netting for effect, with a cream bureau and table and chairs, lit softly against the dark wooden walls. Holly had put fresh wildflowers here and there. I took pictures of every nook from every angle, then sent one to a boy I wished I was cuddling with. The same little twerp who only pretended to care that I was leaving so he could stay and kiss for an extra hour.

I didn’t want to go to sleep because I didn’t want to stop looking around—something I hadn’t felt in a long time. Isn’t it funny that as children, the last

thing we want to do is sleep but, as adults, we can't wait to sleep So I popped a pineapple beer from my cooler, sat at the refurbished shabby-chic table and wrote for a bit. The room absolutely twinkled. My heart swelled. A dissonance of frogs, bugs and cicadas stood in for my white noise machine app. I grabbed an extra comforter out of the bureau. It smelled strongly of Downy.

In the morning, I read in bed for a few hours while blue sunbeams broke through the floorboards and the walls. I made my way back to the main house to use the bathroom, brush my teeth. Embarrassed at my inability to find the place, I slipped in and out as quickly as I could to avoid Holly, and went into town to find coffee.

### **Secret Sandwich Society, Fayetteville, WV**

August 8, 2014

★★★★★

The sign outside caught my eye: "Hot coffee, Sexy sandwiches, Free wi-fi at the Society."

Settled at a table on the deck, patrons around me gabbed in Southern accents and drank sweet tea or pop. I took a black coffee and wondered what your coffee says about your personality. My cute little waitress, all

blonde and clear eyed, said to her coworker, “At Sephora, they said drinking from straws gives you wrinkles.”

From the menu: The Polk: roasted chicken cutlet, chipotle-bacon jam (that is not a typo), garlic mayo, lettuce, tomato, onion & day pickles.

THIS COULD BE THE MOST PERFECT CHICKEN SANDWICH EVER?!

Maybe Fayetteville, with the perfect sandwich and the enchanting barn loft, will join my short list of places to possibly relocate to:

- West Stockbridge, Massachusetts
- Santa Fe, New Mexico
- Louisville, Kentucky
- Fayetteville, West Virginia
- Not Maine

#sexysandwich #wanttogotothere #fayettevillewv

**Hammerheads, Louisville, KY**

August 8, 2014

★★★☆☆

Hammerheads is tucked into the basement of an average house in an average neighborhood, except for the life-sized fiberglass shark affixed to the siding. They said there was an hour wait, but they provided red Solo cups to take our drinks outside. Rebecca, a Louisville native I befriended during her 15 years in Portland, Maine, and I clutched beers on the sidewalk, in the shadow of the shark. It was quite the mix—people dressed up, down, young, old, families, couples, a plainclothes local television anchor. Even one guy hangin', party of one. We asked some dudes next to us for a picture, they asked for us to reciprocate. Summer! Louisville! Hammerheads!

Three hours later, we finally had a table, and our order in at the kitchen. Was it worth the wait? Maybe.

This is what I learned:

1. You can put your name on the list, leave and come back. There's another bar around the corner, or Rebecca's boyfriend is right there in Germantown.
2. Grippo's is a type of potato chip out of Ohio that we don't have in Maine.
3. Somehow, at Hammerhead's, they put the BBQ dusting flavor blend of the chip on their French fries. I still don't understand how this is possible but my life will never be the same.

4. Rebecca's boyfriend Chris arrived with his gentlemanly Southern manners. He was surprised when I called the last man I slept with a little twerp, and admitted to me he's never said anything like that about a partner. There I've been having sex with people I don't respect, and that needs to change. I shouldn't let someone put their P in my V if I roll my eyes every time they text. Even though they make me laugh, even though it's just for fun.

The next morning at Rebecca's, where I was staying, she prepared veggie hash with MorningStar sausage, bellinis and coffee—Matt's Bird Dog, her favorite from Maine. Chris said, in all honesty, "Rebecca makes the best breakfast out of anyone." We had a Bon Iver record on, and I started to tear up, but I swallowed it on dry bite of toast.

I want to be in that kind of love.

### **Whole Foods (Capitol Hill), Denver, CO**

August 12, 2014

★★★★☆

While Whole Foods Markets are pretty consistent across the country, but some standout items here include:

- the bulk cookie bin
- six types of Mochi
- coconut-flavored seltzer
- the size of the cafe

It was the perfect place to park for a few hours and avoid the strange situation I put myself in: staying on the couch of a man with no friends except the fruit flies in the bathroom (Why??), in an apartment reeking of weed. I hadn't seen him in probably six years. Sometimes it's nice to spend time with friends from home. Other times you're reminded why you neglected to keep in touch.

Grab something from the salad bar and walk over to Cheesman Park!

## **T I aco, Boulder, CO**

August 15, 2014

★★★★☆

It was just my luck that when Jess gave her two-week notice the day before I arrived in Boulder, they told her not to come back. To celebrate not working, she decided we should grab tacos at this place, pronounced "tee-ah-koh." While I was skeptical of the gimmicky name, Jess had been in Boulder long enough to know what was up. She's a friend I was just



starting to get to know when she and her newlywed husband Andrew moved out west. The bartender came out to the patio to serve us, and though his body gently grazed my back when he placed our menus on the table, he spoke only to Jess, who is tall, beautiful, smart and cool.

I got three tacos: beef tongue, duck, and spaghetti squash, ones I knew were hard to come by, and noticed the restaurant had some sort of Pandora or satellite radio station on that only played only cover songs.

While we sipped our happy hour margaritas, cheap and strong just as they should be, Jess and I talked about how she made a list of five items she was looking for in a partner, and then she met Andrew, four out of five. It's funny, a friend from graduate school also said I should make a list. Because I was entitled to get whatever I wanted. I chuckled. Aren't there a million ways to be compatible with someone? But seeing Jess and Andy, how amazing they seem, I started to wonder what would be on my list.

### **Boulder Bookstore, Boulder, CO**

August 15, 2014

★★★★★

The dream of the independent bookstore is alive and well in Boulder. Boulder Bookstore is everything it should be: expansive selection, good

lighting, a tiny bit confusing, Moleskine book lights and those philosopher finger puppets. Buzzed from margaritas at a taco place down the street, I started pulling books off the shelf willy-nilly. Instead of hearts, my irises turned into little novels. With the help of a bookstore employee I whittled my pile down.

“Annie Proulx?” she asked.

“This Attractive Guy from school really likes her.”

“Will you read it?”

I eyed the rest of my pile and handed it back to her. “Nope.” Gotta love an honest and helpful bookstore employee.

I walked away with:

- ✓ Mary McCarthy *The Group*
- ✓ Chuck Klosterman *I Wear the Black Hat*
- ✓ *The Roommates: True Tales of Friendship, Rivalry, Romance, and Disturbingly Close Quarters*
- ✓ Roxane Gay *Bad Feminist*
- ✓ Zadie Smith's *NW*

I persuaded my friend to take home Jennifer Egan.

## **Holiday Lanes, Park City, UT**

August 18, 2014

★★★★★

I knew Jim and his mountain biking ski-bum buddies would be worthy opponents, as they play hard for a living, but I didn't know this would be the best bowling alley. It's like the land that time forgot. My chicken fingers were served with "fry sauce," toast and jam —this is a Utah thing? We owned the juke box with Talking Heads, Concrete Blonde, Michael Jackson and Van Halen. The staff was courteous and welcoming, even though I said the F word in front of a family of Mormons. Don't miss the mac and cheese balls and the cheap domestic bottles. Also: I won.

The only bummer was navigating Jim and his girlfriend. He's so cold to her. I was shocked to find they'd been dating for three years, since he barely mentioned it. My visit lasted four days, and on my way out of town he posted a picture of me on his Instagram. He's never once posted a pic of her - I checked.

I want to be with someone who can't shut up about me.

## **Luxor Hotel, Las Vegas, NV**

August 20, 2014

★★★★☆☆

The windows don't open so don't plan on airing out the weed stank. There is only WiFi at the pool and what good is that? The bathtub has a glass door which means you can see yourself in the mirror while you shower. If you're into that.

Some attractions at the Luxor that day:

- JABBAWOCKEEZ: The World Famous Jabbawockeez have danced into the brightest light on the Strip with an all new Headlining Resident Show, PRiSM
- Titanic: The Artifact Exhibition
- CARROT TOP
- T&T (Tacos & Tequila), where they provide complimentary smoky salsa and homemade chips

After losing \$30 in blackjack at the Flamingo, I grabbed a boozy mango smoothie and walked back down the strip. A street performer dressed as Thor asked me to stop and take a picture, and after chatting for a few minutes he hugged me goodbye and pointed to his cheek for a kiss. As I leaned in, he turned his head and we made out a little.

I was back at the Luxor by 11, a perfectly memorable, PG, solo-Vegas outing.

**“Restorative Retreat,” Santa Barbara, CA**

August 27, 2014

★☆☆☆☆

Rebecca and I were in town for a friend’s wedding, and received a great deal on this room using her Air BnB credits. The homeowner gave us the briefest tour. So brief it seemed unnecessary. I noticed she’d had some work done. Back home if I saw someone with plastic surgery I’d think, “they’re clearly not from around here.” Which means, this is where those people are from.

The room had nice light and a comfortable bed, but a disturbing amount of self-help books with *Midlife Crisis at 30* shelved right at eye level. Things got weirder as the days progressed. Dishes festered in the sink, and the laundry wasn’t free the whole time, despite facilities listed as available. There was a Pabst Bull Ribbon Tall Boy nestled in the shrub next to the mailbox. We came home from dinner one night to find a shirtless teen male snuggled on the couch, watching television at a higher than average volume. Clearly the son of the homeowner, but he didn’t introduce himself,

offer to put on a shirt, turn the television down. Rebecca and I retreated to our room, our faith in the unreliability of the Internet restored.

Our host did recommend a great beach, but as I type this I realize all the beaches in SB were amazing.

The wedding was so much fun, and helped me think about how I want my next partner to inspire me to work harder, be better. “You’re the best person I’ve ever met,” her vows said, “and if that isn’t a reason to marry you well shit, I don’t know what is.”

**Elk Prairie Campground, Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, Orick,  
CA**

August 30, 2014

★★★★★

The couple camping next to me with a pickup, a Harley and a mutt saw on my second night that I had but one measly piece of wood left for my fire. Assuming a sense of helplessness from my license plates (Maine) and my age (older than I look), they brought over a few logs, which I accepted and thanked them for twice. Then the wife came back and doused my fire circle with lighter fluid. It burned high and bright and fast, but all I could think was *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and how she

imposed it on me. Three of the half dozen logs looked like they might've been redwood. Wasn't sure how I felt about these old trees I'd been hangin' around, loving and sometimes fearing, but always in awe of, reduced to kindling. But I figured they'd burn them if I didn't and I should revel in the kindness of strangers. I was traveling alone, after all.

I hiked 11-ish miles including a dip at a nearly perfect, nearly empty Pacific beach. I wore my Tom's shoes because, I'm not sure why, and my feet became floppy peanut butter sandwiches. The term-dog tired comes to mind.

### **Harbor Lanes, Eureka, CA**

August 31, 2014

★☆☆☆☆

Back home, the bowling alley was my Cheers and across the country they're supposed feel the same. Pins crashing, high fives smacking, goofy sliding shoes, smiles for strikes, eye rolls for 7-10 splits. A dank whiff of toe sweat and antiseptic, the wax on the lanes, the old timers with their rollie bags of gear. The guy from the pro shop dressed like a casual Johnny Cash, black on black.

I've been on the road for one month today. Driving up the 101, taking a break from a solo Redwoods camping excursion, I was looking for a lunch, a few groceries, maybe a new cooler. I wasn't planning on bowling, but when your days are totally unstructured, with zero obligations, I noticed the parking lot: sparse, which meant they were open, but not full, so I thought to myself “\\_(^▽^)\_” and pulled in. Maybe they'd have a little CCR on the jukebox.

Holding my shoes, a little scuffed around the toes, but slick like when you just put on lotion and try to open a bottle, I walked in. The woman behind the counter, long frizzy grey hair, somewhat stout, did not seem pleased to see me, some young Yankee outsider or something. “You pay at the end,” she grunted.

I stretched, grabbed a 10-pound medium from the rack and rolled a few to get a feel for the lanes, the ball. I was stiff from sleeping on the ground the last few nights, and it showed in my game. Taking a step back to shake off my last gutter ball, I spotted an empty power outlet and grabbed my laptop to plug it in. There was no power at the campsite and I had some writing to do.

Stout Lady went to set up bumpers for a young family five lanes over, and I watched her across the room see my Macbook, the most expensive thing



I ever purchased without a payment plan, unplug it, and take it away. I flashed back to Middle School and my repeated Discman confiscations.

“Oh-“ I ran up to her to attempt to explain, “I’m far from home, camping, there’s no outlet, there was no sign saying no plugging things in, I’m terribly sorry...” Even though I didn’t have anything to be sorry about. It’s 2014! She grunted and unloaded my most valuable possession into my outstretched arms with an eye roll. “This yours, too?” she asked of the prong adapter.

I tucked my tail between my legs back to lane 17. As I rolled, waited for the reset, rolled, waited for the reset. Anger bubbled inside like a broken lava lamp. I never felt so unwelcome at a bowling alley. Three thousand miles from home, at least 400 miles from my nearest friend, I just wanted to feel like I belonged. Bowling people, these were my people. Somewhat indignant, I thought, “Does she know who I am?” *I’m on a league.* I decided then and there to pitch a feature magazine piece, “Bowling Across America,” in which I’d review and compare different bowling alleys, so I could tell her about the piece I was working on. I wanted to roll a perfect game to show her I’m no amateur, but the angrier I got, there farther my score spiraled.

I thought about the league commissioner back home, who tracks our progress with a smirk and a nod. The laneside waitress who inquires after my love life and knows I tip 30 percent. The technician who curses those who don't replace their balls after use.

"That outlet surges, you should ask next time," she said on my way out.

"That's okay. I'm never coming back here."

### **The Sweet Hereafter, Portland, OR**

September 2, 2014

★★★★☆

I'm the first to admit, I'm from the Original Portland and have always been resentful when people mix up my Portland with that Portland.

At home, we differentiate with airport codes. I felt reluctant about this PDX place. As though as they anticipated my sour arrival, after crossing the state line I was issued a \$175 ticket for driving while talking on the cell phone (which I had been, plus while holding a book). The next morning, my car was broken into, my sleeping bag and toolbox gone.

Luckily, one of my favorite Maine (PWM) expats, Jen, lives in the SE quadrant, just like everyone else I know who up and left for this corner of

Oregon. She wanted to meet at this place, and said they had “bowl food,” which is kind of the best if you think about it. Food in bowls. There were copious amounts of young attractive people, so many almost-familiar faces until I saw Jen and her wacky leggings. She hugged me big. After settling in with a bowl, two tequilas and pineapple chasers, we got to work making our “perfect man list” on stationery I’d snagged from the Luxor Las Vegas.

- shows respect
- confident
- intelligent (bookish?)
- actively makes jokes
- likes the things i like
- social; likes my friends
- clearly expresses wanting to be in the relationship, with me
- in touch with own wants/needs
- kindness/manners

Then Jen said something that kind of stuck with me: she hadn’t been having sex. She dated really hot guys, but never let it go farther than making out because of the inherent emotional link. Then and there I decided that the emotional intimacy was going to match the physical intimacy of my next relationship.

## 9 Million in Unmarked Bills, Seattle, WA

September 7, 2014

★★★★☆

This Attractive Guy from school suggested we meet up at this place. Then asked if I could pick him up. Then threw a package in my backseat, saying he didn't want to leave it outside. Was this a way to secure his ride home? The bar reminded me a lot of home. Eclectic, vintage decor, soft lights.

He hogged the drink menu and I didn't want to turn our waitress away, so when he ordered the Corpse Reviver, I assumed it was a Seattle beer, and got the same. It was more like a prohibition-era Long Island Iced Tea. Good thing I drove. Not!

Attractive Guy complained about:

- Seattle
- our server's attitude (his perception)
- the strength of his drink
- his job
- people in Seattle who use umbrellas

But between complaints and mixed signals, we had a great talk about school. In a Facebook chat last winter, he told me he liked me. "You are my Stonecoast crush," he said, name-dropping our program. We weren't

supposed to see each other for a year. Except now I was in his town, three thousand miles from home. It's like he couldn't decide if he should be eager to see me or standoffish.

I cut things short, bought his drink, and met the friend I was staying with. None of her friends hung out in the neighborhood Attractive Guy took me to, which must have been a sign that he wasn't really my people.

### **Momiji, Seattle, WA**

September 7, 2014

★★★★☆

My friend Emily from undergrad, well, my best friend's friend from undergrad, lives in Seattle. Over the years, we lost touch but never affection. I arrived at her sweet little place in Wallingford and we had the best time. Her boyfriend woke me my couch slumber by blasting "Saturday in the Park" by Chicago, which I was almost annoyed with until I realized it was hilarious. Yes, it was Saturday.

After a reading at Elliott Bay Books, we stopped by Momiji and drank sweet potato *shōchū*, munched on *inari* and edamame like the hobos we are. Next to the enclosed garden, we tried to make each other guess movies by summarizing their plots without details. They were the best,

most fun hosts. Momiji had a great vibe, offset lighting, compelling art, satisfactory food and remarkable service.

### **Broadway Inn and Conference Center, Missoula, MT**

September 11, 2014

★★☆☆☆

I left Seattle confused about a guy, sad to end my hangout with Emily, and unsure if I would make it to my next stop, Glacier National Park. I took a phone call from a friend from home to stave the monotony of the road.

In a conversational lull she said, “Do you know Tim [Redacted]?”

“Yeah. Ugh. Deirdre and Keegan tried to set me up with him. Blech.”

“He killed himself yesterday.”

I was shocked both by the news and the flippant way she delivered it. How dare she allow me to say something like that, knowing the news she was about to break. Robin Williams had taken his own life less than a week before, and there was no way their suicides were unrelated. I hung up, pulled over and cried, unsure what to do next. Since I went on the road, not making plans had been working but I always had a clear head. I needed a bed and hot shower while I sorted things out.

Through the Hotel.com app, I found the Broadway Inn and Conference Center. There was nothing remarkable about the room. Downstairs, I found syrupy whisky and slot machines.

I wrote a homesick postcard to a handsome man back home, a longtime friend and camping companion with whom I'd recently had sex. I wrote about being homesick, about acoustic songs that make you sad, hitting you in the chest like pinballs. A gang of hotel employees yucked it up at the end of the empty bar.

### **Sage Creek Campground, Badlands National Park, South Dakota**

September 13, 2014

☆☆☆☆☆

Things you hear at one o'clock in the morning, camping in the Badlands.

- A plane. No, a Bison.
- A bison. They sound like bears or CGI monsters. But you think it's gas from grass because they have two stomachs.
- Something sniffing the flap of the tent or just the breeze.
- Frosted grass crunching under footsteps. Of a bison? It could be close because of the hoofprints next to the picnic table. Beware the Bison, the sign read. Not be aware of the bison or don't get close to the bison or the bison will be pissed if you take its picture. Simply: Beware.

- Stars, dotted or dusted, break off like a glacier, or someone's cooler contents shifted.
- Opening lines from "Thriller." No, an actual coyote. A couple of coyotes.
- Giggles from the next tent over either because they are fooling around, good for them, or because they can hear you tossing and turning in this replacement sleeping bag.
- Crickets.
- Your dried split ends rustling against your sleeping bag, like a broom on a ceramic tile floor.
- Water, gurgling water, but this may not be possible because the mountain biker in the pop up van said to the other guy, we gotta find water in the morning.
- The zipper of my sleeping bag then the tent with one swift *fffft*. It's a surprise Northface or REI or the Army hasn't tried to make a silent zipper.
- Is that a bison? Or my Patronous, willing you to sleep.
- A footstep or nothing.
- You mummy yourself and try to only breathe, not move. Your breath whistles slightly.
- Or is that a bison?
- A chest collapses carbon dioxide into a rubber balloon, and it expands with each breath. Actually that's not CO<sub>2</sub> it's hope and your heart.



- An owl, unmistakably an owl. You didn't know there were owls here which is worse than a bison because the owls are not what they seem. A horned sheep bleats three times and the owl stops to listen. It keeps hooting because it's all, "Fuck it, I'm magic."



## Cash, Blanche and Me

I.

*“There was a girl in Portland before the winter chill”*

II.

When I first moved to Portland, Maine, in 2004, I couldn't find work and decided the best thing to do was play Bonnie “Prince” Billy's “I See a Darkness,” on repeat and sob until I couldn't breathe. The song felt like the story of my leaving Burlington, Vermont, where I had crushes, jobs, and an active social life for nothing but promises back home in Maine. In 2000, hardcore-kid-turned-hip-hop-producer turned straight up genius had Johnny Cash record “I See a Darkness” on Cash's *American III: Solitary Man*. Critics called it Cash's swan song. He passed two and a half years later from a diabetes complication.

Josh, the one who took my virginity, we met six months after I moved to Portland. His best friend happened to be Will Oldham's tour manager and accompanied Oldham to the recording session with Johnny Cash. Oldham has recorded under multiple monikers over the years, including Palace Brothers, Palace Music and Bonnie “Prince” Billy. I tried to tell the one who

took my virginity, Josh, what Bonnie “Prince” Billy’s “I See a Darkness” and Johnny Cash meant to me, and how mind blowing it is when one of your all-time most devastating songs is covered by one of your personal idols. He responded, “Please. Call him by his real name.”

Josh struggled. His doctors said it was bipolar, but none of his medications seemed to work quite right. He felt bloated or groggy or anxious. So he went cold turkey and fell into a bottomless pit of despair. I’d come home to our apartment and the lights would be off because he went to sleep while it was still light out. Once he asked me to punch him in the chest, just so he could feel something.

III.

*“She could laugh away the dark clouds, cry away the snow.”*

IV.

If June Carter could look beyond Johnny Cash’s addiction and wild rebel streak and see a man burdened by sadness but buoyed with love, I could love Josh into the man I knew he was supposed to be. The man who got excited about trips to strange roadside attractions, of which Maine has many, who danced with gusto. When he played me his demo songs, I cried. He inspired me to start writing with a modicum of seriousness.

V.

I worked at a record store from ages 16 to 22. All my coworkers emulated Rob from the film *High Fidelity*. He was a donkey who treated his girlfriend like garbage but made the most amazing mixtapes. He was a professional appreciator of culture. My coworkers and I knew the hard truth of his words directly to the camera, “My gut has shit for brains,” and “Did I listen to pop music because I was miserable? Or was I miserable because I listened to pop music?” Perhaps most importantly, “I agreed that what really matters is what you like, not what you are like... Books, records, films — these things matter. Call me shallow but it’s the fuckin’ truth.”

Rob’s favorite book of all time was *Cash* by Johnny Cash. After seeing the movie, as soon as I could get my hands on it, I read it in two days.

VI.

For my 23rd birthday, Josh bought me a Johnny Cash figurine. Despite my unabashed love for both Josh and the Man in Black, it wasn’t an item I coveted. I didn’t want tochties or clutter in my young life, in our young love. In the weeks leading up to my big day, I saw over his shoulder an email confirmation for the gift, I felt I should be honest with him. “That is not a thing I want,” I said. Understandably, he did not take it well but gave it to me anyway. In the seven years since then, the Man in Black has

listened to me answer the phone at a non-profit, hid in boxes while I moved, then supervised me troubleshoot personal care product issues as a Citizens' Advocacy Representative at a natural toothpaste manufacturer. He now stands on my windowsill, about ten inches tall, mid-gait, next to the tiny terrarium and a cobweb or two, while I wash dinner plates and highball glasses. That one who took my virginity, he left town, but I hear he's happy-ish.

VII.

*"Can't help but wonder where I'm bound."*

VIII.

My boss at the nonprofit advised against coming clean about the gift I didn't want. After Josh and I broke up, she gave me a recreated, laminated show poster from a Sun Records gig Cash did with Elvis in 1956. I put it in the bathroom of my last apartment. Cash says of Elvis in his memoir, "The first time I saw Elvis, singing from a flatbed truck at a Katz drugstore opening on Lamar Avenue, two or three hundred people, mostly teenage girls, had come out to see him. With just one single to his credit, he sang those two songs over and over. That's the first time I met him. [He] was so good. Every show I did with him, I never missed the chance to stand in the wings and watch. We all did. He was that charismatic." Elvis died of a drug overdose in 1977. Meanwhile Cash wrote, worked and toured with his wife

June Carter until she passed away in 2003.

IX.

“Did you know my mother loved Johnny Cash, too?” my mother asked one afternoon when I returned home from my high school job at the record store with a shrink-wrapped copy of Cash’s 1968 *Live at Folsom Prison*. My mother said she and her brothers listened to the radio upstairs and, when Cash came on, Blanche would yell from the kitchen, “Turn it up!”

“Of course she loved that beat—she didn’t like the slow mushy stuff,” my mother continued. “She just loved the tone of his voice, and the meaning of his words. ‘I Walk the Line.’”

I didn’t know Blanche and I had that in common. She died a month before I was born. My mother always said I had a little bit of her in me. My strong will, like when, in high school, I refused to be my mother’s designated driver because I didn’t understand why drinking was necessary to have a good time.

Blanche and I both loved to read. Between her shifts at the mill, she’d fall asleep reading in a hammock under the weeping willows in the back yard

of the house in which my mother grew up. The breeze between the hanging branches must've been like a white noise machine.

When I was in elementary school, the crossing guard chastised me for reading and walking on my way home to the house two doors down from the weeping willows Blanche read near.

My eyes are just like hers.

X.

The love and sadness which clawed at Cash's vocals over all these years enriched the songs he recorded in the six-part American Recordings series. It was Reuben's idea to have the 70-year-old Cash put a spin on Nine Inch Nails' "Hurt." Cash's storied past, this struggle with amphetamines, the philandering and his biggest heartache, the death of his brother Jack and his father's lament that "God took the wrong son" — you believe him when he sings, "I hurt myself today." As a musician, Cash's struggles had been in the public eye for half a century. He knew his past decisions hurt the people he cared about most and thinking about those moments, I think that's what he thought of when he sang "Hurt."



They said he died of complications of diabetes, but I think he simply couldn't live without her.

XI.

June Carter cradled her autoharp like a baby and wrote "Ring of Fire." I always thought the song was about the uncontrollability of with whom you fall in love.

XII.

Jason was supposed to be the one with whom I would be the best version of myself. He was good; kind and patient. A teacher by day, an animal shelter volunteer by night. He didn't really drink, didn't eat meat. Portland offered him tenure, and at 26, that's where I planned to be for the long haul. When he came into the bowling alley where I was a waitress, I always gave him an extra smile. I think that's how we met, flirting for tips.

It wasn't until later that I considered him a person I wanted. It wasn't a great time for me. My roommate and I would have a cocktail occasionally before our respective waitressing shifts. I saw the entire front-of-house staff do a shot behind the bar at a fine dining establishment nearby and I regularly read blogs about the debauchery of the restaurant industry. Then I'd go to work and see our bartenders throwing one back behind our bar. Eventually, my one occasional cocktail turned into two mandatory pre-work

cocktails, which became sometimes going across the street for a shot on my break. Then one night I was sent home and subsequently fired for showing up under the influence. That night I drank and drank and drank and tried to forget.

On an amphetamine-fueled haze, three years before he married June Carter, Johnny Cash set a fire that destroyed hundreds of acres of Las Casitas National Forest and killed 49 of the area's 53 endangered California condors. He said at the trial, "I don't care about your damn yellow buzzards."

XIII.

*"I admitted to myself I needed you."*

XIV.

Blanche's drink of choice was a Sombrero made with Allen's Coffee Brandy and either milk or half and half.

XV.

I prefer boozy iced coffees.

XVI.

I ran into Jason at a dance party a week later, too ashamed that I was fired to flirt. I noticed he noticed I wasn't flirting. So I pursued him and sank into my studies. My life, our life, got better after that. We prepared healthy meals together and took long walks; made each other laugh and held hands.

Two months into our relationship, we celebrated New Year's Eve, December 31, 2010, together at my neighbor's house. It was one of those Solo-cup, sticky floor, shoulder-to-shoulder dancing kind of parties. When Jason and I got back to my apartment, I was drunker than I'd been since that night at the bowling alley. I'd been taking Tylenol PM to sleep through an excruciating toothache and I felt the pain despite multiple shotgunned PBRs and swigs of whiskey. So I made a bad decision and took a Tylenol PM, blacked out, and had the wildest sex of my life.

When I told him I didn't remember, he was so hurt he didn't speak to me for the rest of the day.

XVII.

My mother says of her parents, "There was no yelling or screaming in the house. As I started getting older, I realized my parents were having sex.

She didn't like sex." My mother says she would hear them, "In French, he'd say, 'C'mon.' Then Blanche would say, 'Stop it.' She thought it was dirty but after a while she'd let him do it. Then she'd get up and wash her hands and go back to bed." My mother says she always thought it was sad because he wanted to be affectionate.

I wonder if Blanche ever had an orgasm.

XVIII.

Mandy says I need to stop wearing that necklace, that I should create my own reality and let it go. I was tentacling. "I KEEP A CLOSE WATCH ON THIS HEART OF MINE," the oval pendant read, hand stamped on copper, like a flattened penny. My last love, Jason, bought it for me and for the second time in a row I lost one of his gifts and replaced it, unbeknownst to him.

We were together for almost three years, and then I broke up with him because he wasn't the one. Maybe it was bad juju keeping me single again, maybe I was, in fact, keeping a close watch on this heart of mine.

Johnny Cash died of a broken heart and I wanted to love someone so much I couldn't live without them.

XXX.

Blanche did not die of a broken heart, but of lung cancer. I'm told she smoked all the time, every day, and passed in the company of her husband, my *pépère*, who looked like a French-Canadian Marlon Brando, and with the love of her five children.

My mother has some regret regarding making amends with Blanche, she blames herself for not being a great daughter, although I suspect she is just being hard on herself. I regret never getting the chance to meet this woman; I think she could have been my best friend.

XVIII.

Joey and I had been dating for about a month when he showed me his childhood bedroom. Assuming what I saw was intact from high school, with the addition a few piles of things to be stored here and there, accumulated during trips home over the last ten years. You can learn a lot from someone's bedroom. Framed posters of Spiderman and Superman hung above the bed, a few crime novels, some craft books on writing. The top shelf of his desk had action figures ranging from a few inches to a few feet and to the right next to that were three framed 45s from Sun Records, including Johnny Cash's "Big River." I saw it and touched my penny pendant, "I KEEP A CLOSE WATCH ON THIS HEART OF MINE."

Early on, I asked him, honestly, how it could feel so different and so amazing when I didn't think my words or actions, sexually, had changed drastically since my last partners. He said it was chemistry but I think that is because we weren't calling it love yet.

XLV.

*"We got married in a fever, hotter than a pepper sprout."*

## Works Cited

"AP Stylebook Finally Changes "e-mail" to "email."” *Mashable*. Ostrow, Adam. Web. 18 Feb. 2011.

Bertsche, Rachel. *MWF Seeking BFF: My Yearlong Search for a New Best Friend*. New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2011. Kindle Edition.

Branch, John. "Snowfall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek." *New York Times*. *New York Times*, 20 Dec. 2012. Web. 23 July 2014.

Brosh, Allie. *Hyperbole and a Half: Unfortunate Situations, Flawed Coping Mechanisms, Mayhem, and Other Things That Happened*. New York: Touchstone, 2013. Print.

Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and Its Consequences*. New York: Random House, 1966. Print.

Carrère, Emmanuel.. *Lives Other than My Own*. New York: Metropolitan / Henry Holt, 2011. Print.

Carrère, Emmanuel. *The Adversary: A True Story of Monstrous Deception*. New York: Metropolitan, 2000. Print.

Cash, Johnny, and Patrick Carr. *Cash: The Autobiography*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997. Print.

Conley, Susan. *The Foremost Good Fortune*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011. Print.

Crosley, Sloane. *How Did You Get This Number: Essays*. New York: Riverhead, 2010. Print.

Derf. *My Friend Dahmer: A Graphic Novel*. New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2012. Print.

Doll, Jen. *Save the Date: The Occasional Mortifications of a Serial Wedding Guest*. New York: Penguin Group US, 2014. Kindle Edition.

Dunham, Lena. *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's "Learned"*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014. Print.

East, Elyssa. *Dogtown: Death and Enchantment in a New England Ghost Town*. New York: Free, 2009. Print.

Eggers, Dave. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. London: Picador, 2000. Print.

Fischer, Molly. "Elena Ferrante and the Force of Female Friendships." *The New Yorker* 14 Sept. 2014. Online.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Bantam, 1974. Print.

Friedman, Ann. "Shine Theory: Why Powerful Women Make the Greatest Friends." *New York Magazine: The Cut* 31 May 2013. Online.

Gay, Roxane. *Bad Feminist: Essays*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2014. Print.

Goleman, Daniel. "E-Mail is Easy to Write (and to Misread)." *New York Times* 7 Oct. 2007. Online.

Gornick, Vivian. *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. Print.

Gould, Emily. *Friendship: A Novel*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. Kindle Edition.

Griffin, Em. *A First Look at Communication Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009. Print.

Hersh, Kristin. *Rat Girl*. New York: Penguin, 2010. Print.

Heti, Sheila. *How Should a Person Be?: A Novel from Life*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2012. Kindle Edition.

Heti, Sheila, Heidi Julavits, Leanne Shapton, and Mary Mann. *Women in Clothes*. New York: Blue Rider, 2014. Print.

Hitt, Jack. *Bunch of Amateurs: A Search for the American Character*. New York: Crown, 2012. Print.

Holmes, Anna. "Age of Girlfriends." *The New Yorker* 6 July 2012. Online.

Hornby, Nick. *High Fidelity*. New York: Riverhead, 1995. Print.



Jones, Daniel. *Love Illuminated: Exploring Life's Most Mystifying Subject (with the Help of 50,000 Strangers)*. New York: Harper Collins, 2014. Print.

Jones, Daniel. *Modern Love: 50 True and Extraordinary Tales of Desire, Deceit and Devotion*. New York: Three Rivers, 2007. Print.

King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Scribner, 2000. Print.

Krakauer, Jon. *Into the Wild*. New York: Anchor, 1997. Print.

Lawson, Jenny. *Let's Pretend This Never Happened: (a Mostly True Memoir)*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2012. Print.

Marquart, Debra K. *The Hunger Bone: Rock & Roll Stories*. Minneapolis, MN: New Rivers, 2001. Print.

McCracken, Elizabeth. *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination: A Memoir*. New York: Little, Brown, 2008. Print.

O'Connor, Maureen. "The Great Digital BFF Renaissance." *New York Magazine: The Cut*, 21 March 2014.

Orlean, Susan. *The Orchid Thief*. New York: Random House, 1998. Print.

Owens, Iris. *After Claude*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973. Print.

Paterniti, Michael. *The Telling Room: A Tale of Love, Betrayal, Revenge, and the World's Greatest Piece of Cheese*. New York: DialPress, 2013. Print.

Powers, William. *Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building A Good Life in the Digital Age*. New York: Harper, 2010. Paperback.

Purves, Miranda. "Emily Gould, Gawker's Original Oversharer, Hits Refresh." *Elle* 14 June 2014. Online.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2014. Print.

Ruefle, Mary. *Selected Poems*. Seattle: Wave, 2010. Print.

Rowell, Rainbow. *Attachments: A Novel*. New York: Penguin Group US, 2011. Kindle Edition.

Sedaris, David. *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls*. New York: Little, Brown, 2013. Print.

Sheffield, Rob. *Turn around Bright Eyes: A Karaoke Journey of Starting Over, Falling in Love, and Finding Your Voice*. New York: It Books, 2013. Print.

Shields, David, and Matthew Vollmer. *Fakes: An Anthology of Pseudo-interviews, Faux-lectures, Quasi-letters, "Found" Texts, and Other Fraudulent Artifacts*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2012. Print.

Slater, Lauren. *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. New York: Random House, 2000. Print.

Sullivan, J. Courtney. *Commencement*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2009. Kindle Edition.

Souza, Tony D. "The Boomtown, the Gringo, the Girl, and Her Murder." *Outside Magazine*, 1 May 2007. Web. 12 Nov. 2013.

Strayed, Cheryl. *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. Print.

Thomas, Abigail. *A Three Dog Life*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2006. Print.

Thorpe, Rufi. *The Girls from Corona del Mar: A novel*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014. Kindle Edition.

Wilson, Carl. *Let's Talk about Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Print.

Wood, James. "True Lives." *The New Yorker* 25 June 2012. Online.