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FIRST
(TITLE)

BY
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Introduction

I want to ruin something perfect. Actually, I'd settle for something mediocre, so long as I get to break it. I want to fuck somebody up. I want someone who used to be just fine to go crazy, and I want it to be my fault.

I have no one reason, no particular instance, no source or origin to explain my behavior. I have all of them.

John Locke has this theory that primary sensations can compound into complex ideas—that how a person responds to something the first time it happens to her plays a part in determining how she associates herself to the world surrounding her. He believes people carry their firsts with them wherever they go.

Three is the Loneliest Number

The day my parents were married is the first memory I have of being unhappy. I can only recall hazy memories of the vows exchanged, the decorations in the church, and the way my mother looked at my father when she said the binding words, "I do." I only know these things really happened thanks to a collection of pictures stowed away in a dusty album in my mother's closet.

I remember the dress—not my mother's dress, but mine. The wretched little floral getup still hangs in our basement, where most of the things my mother treasures eventually end up. When I'm home, I dread going downstairs on an errand for fear that I'll have to walk past it. I have this recurring nightmare that its enormous sleeves will avalanche from the shoulders onto my head, rendering me unconscious.

There was nothing about this look that I didn't hate, from the scratchy material to the pink trim to the lace bobby socks and white pageant shoes that apparently made every 90's toddler outfit complete. My grandmother spent an outrageous amount of time pulling a comb through my hair only to make me look like the genie from Disney's *Aladdin*.

When I was brought out to the sanctuary for pictures, I first saw my mother, the woman who'd read me stories out of tiny picture books, helped me put puzzles together, and played word games with me while she drove me to my grandmother's house. She didn't look like the mom I knew; she was different. She was extravagantly beautiful, angelic even, in her ivory gown that cascaded to the floor where the fabric collected and rippled like water beneath her.

Next to her stood my father, shiny in his silver tuxedo jacket. My mother's arm rested in his. He was beaming through his crooked smile—the only smile he ever wears. He's never happy, just amused.

The photographer stopped to adjust the settings on his camera, and the scene at the altar fell apart. My father's arm dropped. My mother fidgeted with the skirt of her dress. She tossed her flowers to a nearby bridesmaid. Dad saw me and waved.

The photographer asked for the flower girl and ring bearer to join my parents for the next round of pictures, and Grandma tapped my shoulder.

"That's you, sis," she said.

"Where's Cody?"

Cody was the ring bearer, and he was also my best friend. In truth, he was the only friend I had, as most of the people I'd been exposed to as a three-year-old were either my mother's age or retired.

"Cody's not here yet," Grandma said. "Mommy wants a picture with you."

"I want Cody." I looked at my parents who were reassembling the scene at the altar. I knew where I was supposed to stand—front and center, the bridge connecting these two happy people.

In between my parents, I was the base of a scale, struggling to keep its parts in equilibrium. At the front of the altar, I felt awkward and exposed. When my parents turned their heads, they saw each other. When I looked at my side, where Cody should have been, I saw no one.

For the first few years of my life, I'd just had my mother. When I was born, Dad was stationed overseas. He isn't on my birth certificate. He had to adopt me in order to

claim his legal rights as my parent. The first time my father saw me, I was several months old. He wasn't around much because he couldn't be. He was relocated to South Carolina shortly after our first meeting.

Two birthdays went by before he came back. In those two years, I established a familiarity with my mother, my grandparents, my aunt, and my uncle. I'd come to recognize them as family—my family—and the induction of my father into this family was unsettling to me.

A few years after their wedding, we would greet another into the family. On September 17th, 1996, my mother gave birth to my only sibling—a brother named Tanner.

I wouldn't say I was a Daddy's girl, but for a while, I was his only option, and so we spent a lot of time together. Still in his toddler years, my brother was too young to go fishing, spend the night in a tent, or sit in a bush for three hours while mosquitoes clung to his cheek waiting for a turkey to walk by so he could shoot it. Mom was often forgotten while my father and I were off bonding.

When I outgrew the camouflage, my father outgrew me. We began to have less and less in common, and finally, he and I settled at opposite ends of our spectrum. As I hit my rebellious teenage years, I found myself on the outs with my parents, alone with my angsty Avril CDs and a sketchbook full of gloomy pictures. He wasn't one for emotional support, and I gave up on trying to pry it out of him. When I was cast into my first onstage role in a production of "The Music Man," my mother dragged my brother to six out of the seven performances. My father failed to make it to any, and I hadn't expected him to come. My mother didn't speak to him for several days.

My parents and I have coexisted like this for as long as I can remember: Two in, one out. Even now, I find it easier to love Mom and Dad when I can love them separately—when I don't feel like I'm shunning one by being close to the other.

My brother doesn't know it, but he's what keeps us all from falling apart. It's a lot of pressure for a sixteen-year-old to be the glue that holds a dysfunctional family together, but for him, it's effortless.

While my dad and I were off on our adventures, my mother was at home with my baby brother, and when Mom and I were off doing girly stuff, Tanner was perched on the workbench of the shop, handing wrenches and screwdrivers to Dad.

During the years when my parents "just didn't get me," my brother did. He sprawled out on the living room floor next to me and asked me to teach him to draw. He rode in the car with me on the way to school and sang along to my music. He doesn't give them out as often now, but he used to give the best hugs. I regret all the times I told him to leave me alone when we were younger, and I'm thankful he had the good sense to ignore me. I've seen how our family would work if Tanner weren't in the picture; it would look a lot like our photos in my parents' wedding album.

I'm bawling in all of them, but in the first, I'm laying face down on the ground, wrinkling the hell out of the front of my dress. My mother sits next to me, her face frozen in a face of consolation and her hand reaching out to pat my head.

In the second, I'm kneeling, arms crossed and cheeks flushed. I'm scowling as my father stands behind me, hands in his pockets and his shoulders locked in a shrug.

The third is of all three of us. I'm on my knees still, but hunched over in a fetal position and hiding my face. My parents are behind me, smiling, in their original pose.

Hateful Things

Taylor's arms are around me and I haven't yet realized that the first boy I've ever loved is teaching me how to hate.

I untangle myself from the hefty mess of arms and legs and down comforter that is Taylor's bed. It takes some effort, but he rests peacefully through all of it. When I break free just long enough to roll over, I feel his solid arms fold in on me again. No matter how much I want to let myself be perfectly blissful and hope I could go on like this forever, I can't, because John Lennon's profile looms over my head. The lyrics to "Imagine" are the first thing the light shines on when it cuts through Taylor's striped curtains, almost as if he's planned the placement of this poster so Lennon's is the face he wakes up to every morning, not mine.

I dig an elbow into Taylor's side and he releases me from his grasp, but pulls on my shoulder so that I'm forced to roll back over and face him. He plants a kiss on my forehead and his beard tickles my nose.

"Good morning," he sings. "Enjoy the morning breath while it lasts."

I don't even notice how disgusting it is that neither one of us has used a toothbrush in over twenty-four hours. I don't taste the beer we drank last night or the cigar he'd smoked; I only know that when this kissing stops, the hangover starts.

As if he can sense it, Taylor's on a mission to find me water and ibuprofen as soon as our lips part. He leaves me alone with John.

Maybe it's because he got shot by a lunatic, or maybe it's because he advocated world peace more than any Miss America pageant contestant who ever lived, but John Lennon has somehow wormed his way into the hearts of millions of Beatles fans. A

Beatles-lover myself, the sight of him shouldn't make me this acutely uncomfortable, but it does; I don't have the heart to tell Taylor why.

"Would you feel better if I let you hang up a picture of Paul next to him?" Taylor asks, handing me a glass of water and two tiny red pills.

"Not even Paul McCartney can change the fact that your role model was a raging hypocrite, an abusive husband, and a shit father."

"He was a great father."

"Not to Julian." I hand the water back to Taylor. After a pause, he sets the glass down on his nightstand and falls onto his pillow.

"He made some mistakes. Is that what we have to remember him for?" he asks as he pulls me toward him.

"I'm just mad that no one cares enough to remember."

"You just hate Yoko."

"Everybody hates Yoko."

In the time we spent together, Taylor and I never wasted a moment arguing unless it was about the Beatles. We didn't have the time to waste. I was leaving for England soon, and we knew that the dreaded long-distance hardships would take their toll on us the minute I boarded the plane. However, neither of us could resist a good-natured squabble over who the best Beatle was.

Taylor loved Lennon. To him, Lennon was God. He kept a copy of a Lennon bio on his bookshelf and used to stuff it in his bag right before he left his house for work (though I never actually saw him reading it). He quoted John and spat Lennon trivia at anyone who would listen.

His obsession with Lennon took over his entire lifestyle. Taylor grew out his hair and his beard and wore tinted hippie sunglasses at parties. He was a self-proclaimed musician, but he never produced any music on his beat up old acoustic because he only knew five chords. He picked up the banjo for a whole five hours after he found out John Lennon first played banjo chords when he learned to play guitar. He did whatever Lennon did and took interest in Lennon's interest.

Taylor liked protests and demonstrations. Just like Lennon, he never actually did anything whatsoever of note in the political realm, other than sign a few petitions and manage to worm his way into the photograph of a rally as he was passing by the crowd. The extent of his political activism was quoting various radicals of the 1960s and posting marriage equality campaign posters on his own Facebook wall. He was a part of the Occupy Wall Street movement that staged sit-ins on our university's campus, but couldn't articulate why he was doing so. To my knowledge though, Taylor never did anything completely counteractive to his image, like Lennon did when he made generous donations to groups like the Black Panthers and the Provisional Irish Republican Army, neither of which seemed to be particularly interested in peace, love, or understanding.

"I could be totally be John Lennon," he told me all too often.

"Would that make me Yoko?" I asked.

I didn't want to be Yoko Ono, because nobody wants to be Yoko. But I knew what was even more unsettling to me than being comparable to the woman who the world blames for ripping apart the world's greatest musical collaboration was being the woman John left for her.

Cynthia Powell: she was John's first wife. Of what I've read about her marriage to John, I gather that she suffered through countless nights of emotional and physical abuse.

John left permanent marks on the same body that nurtured and carried his first son, Julian. He rewarded her further with infidelity and eventual abandonment.

Imagine my concern, then, when my boyfriend told me he wanted to be John Lennon.

I suppose, on some level, he ended up getting what he wanted. I went to England and by the time I returned, he'd found someone else. Her name was Anna.

I call her Yoko Anna.

When Taylor and I broke up, no one but me was all that shocked to find out he'd been unfaithful. No one denied that, after he never responded to a single letter or postcard I sent him, constantly stood me up on Skype dates, and then forgot my twentieth birthday, he'd been a shithead and I had every right to be hurt. Yet, even though he was guilty of betrayal and deceit, no one seemed particularly interested in blaming him for our split.

I can't tell you the number of times I've been told that I should have seen it coming—that I was too good for him and we were headed down separate paths. I was told not to cry over the inevitable.

“Did you honestly think you'd last forever?” friends would ask me. I was chided for pining for him after he cut me so deeply. I was told not to give him a second thought.

I suppose they were trying to help, but after enough times hearing that ‘Taylor and I were never right for each other, I began to see a deficiency within myself—the inability to detect when someone wasn't good for me. My trust had already been broken in a huge way, but I took it a step further when I stopped trusting myself. Whatever faults I'd overlooked in Taylor, everyone else had seen so plainly.

It's been two years now since Taylor and I broke things off, and I still haven't heard the end of it from my friends and sometimes, even strangers. They say things like, "How could you stand to sleep next to *that?*" and, "What did you ever see in him?" A friend is still upset with me for I scrawling Taylor's name onto the wall of The Cavern Club in Liverpool (where The Beatles got their start) and not hers.

"I like The Beatles, too," she says. "Maybe you should have thought of me instead of your cheating ex-boyfriend when you decided to add some graffiti to that wall."

More than I wonder how I could have been so blind about Taylor, I wonder why my friends continue to berate me for how in love with Taylor I'd been, and maybe still am. Love is messy—especially a first love—and though I'm perfectly rational about my feelings for him when he's not around, my chest still stings a little every time I see his face.

I think of Cynthia Powell. I ache when I think what it must have been like for her, watching everyone adore the man who caused her years of physical and emotional pain, how she must have felt when John's adulterous relationship with Yoko was all anyone could talk about. I wonder how she made it through the day when Rolling Stone released that photo of a naked John Lennon embracing Ono, or for that matter, any day that John and Yoko were front-page news, spreading their love for all the world to see. I think about how many newsstands she had to walk by with her hands over her son's eyes, or if she made the decision to tell him that he and his father would never share the kind of love it took to get your picture featured on the cover of a magazine. I think about these things because I know how it feels to watch someone else receive the love you never got but thought you deserved. Cynthia Powell should hate us all for the kind of love and support we've shown her.

Most people forget Cynthia. Of those who remember her and what happened to her, many can forgive John for eventually realizing the error in his ways and dedicating the rest of his life to promoting peace, love, and understanding.

Some even place blame on Cynthia for being unfaithful herself, and others point out that John never wanted to marry her in the first place.

“He was a rock star; what was he supposed to do—stay monogamous?” they say. “She should have known better.”

Where’s the peace in that?

Where’s the peace in telling a woman who’s been battered and bloodied by the hands of a man she loves that she should have seen it coming? If love is blind, how the hell would she have ever noticed? Where’s the peace in pardoning the behavior of such a man simply because he’s somehow convinced everyone he’s talented? Where’s the peace in forcing a woman to take on the guilt of her own heartache because as long as that man smiles for the right cameras and acts like a half-decent human being the rest of his life, no one will ever make him feel it?

I can’t forgive John Lennon, and I’m done letting everyone believe that what he did—what the world lets some men get away with every single day—is okay.

I’m not going to abandon Cynthia Powell.

The First Cut is the Deepest

The stylist holds a lock of my hair in her left hand, scissors poised in her right. I feel the cool steel press against the nape of my neck and I suck in air sharply.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" she asks me.

I'm not sure how to answer other than to tell her that it's recently come to my attention that I have serious commitment issues.

She doesn't retract the scissors. They've warmed from resting on my skin. I look into the mirror and am faced with the reality that I am incapable of making this decision.

"Maybe something less drastic," she suggests. "How about some more layers?"

More layers won't change anything. I need to feel exposed.

"Take it all," I tell her.

I sat on the floor of a stranger's living room while some drunk girl ran her fingers through my shoulder-length tresses.

"Girl, your hair is so cute. I want mine to look like this." She took a long swig of the Mountain Dew and vodka being passed around and handed it off to me. As I drew it to my lips, a hand reached down from behind me and covered the top of the cup. I turned to find the hand's owner and found Taylor, the guy I'd exchanged drunken confessions of attraction with just a few weeks prior to this party. We shared our first kiss outside during the first snowfall of the year and he'd told me he'd been waiting months to know what my lips tasted like.

Taylor pried the drink from my hands and replaced it with a cup filled with purplish liquid. I looked at him and laughed.

"You brought me grape Kool-Aid?" I asked him. "What kind of a girl do you think I am?"

He looked around to make sure no one saw him before he moved his mouth to my ear and whispered, "You're the kind of girl who'll come to a party with me. I'm willing to bet you're going to drink the Kool-Aid."

"I think the real question of my character isn't whether or not I'll attend a party with you, but whether or not I'll go home with you."

He smiled, and I knew I'd amused him because even his beard smiled. The muscles in his cheeks pulled the mass of curly amber hair higher on his face.

The next morning he pulled individual strands of my broken hair from that very beard and woke me by dropping them onto my nose. He told me that extracting my hair from his beard had become part of his daily routine.

"Actually, I keep finding your hair everywhere," he said. "It's only mildly disgusting."

"You want me to cut it all off?" I ask. To me, it was just as repulsive to break from a kiss so we could both spit out locks of my hair that had fallen onto Taylor's face.

"No," he said. "Don't ever do that."

I walk into the house through the back door. I can hear my housemates in the kitchen. Clare's telling Emily about something that happened in class; Kelsey's rummaging through the cabinets and fridge for lunch. I drop my bag in the doorway of my bedroom on my way down the hall to the kitchen.

Clare's the first to notice me. She hears the rhythm of my gait and identifies me before she even sees my face. It's a skill acquired from being one of six women living under the same roof.

“Hey Shelb—oh.” She thinks she’s made a mistake. She looks at me like I’m an interloper— like she’s about to ask me what the hell I’m doing in her home. She finally sighs. “I didn’t recognize you,” she says. “Your hair.”

“All gone,” I say. Clare, Emily, and Kelsey all continue to stare at my head like it’s a piece of modern art they don’t quite understand.

“Can I touch it?” Emily asks. She doesn’t wait for me to tell her yes before she runs her fingers through the inch and a half of hair I have left.

Clare and Kelsey continue to stare.

“It’s really different,” Emily tells me, as if I hadn’t noticed myself.

“Do you like it?” Kelsey asks.

“Yes,” I answer.

The three of them ask the same final question in unison. “Has Brenna seen it?”

I stood in Taylor’s doorway, eyes closed, hands out in front of me with my palms facing up, as I waited for him to drop my birthday present into them.

“I haven’t seen you in four months,” I say. “The minute I can set eyes on you again, you’re making me keep them closed.”

I heard him laugh as he opened a drawer. “You just spent a semester in England looking at all kinds of cool shit. I doubt I can really measure up to that.”

Something solid fell into my hands and Taylor told me to open my eyes. A large red book rested in my palms. The cover read Shakespearean Sonnets. He told me the book was published in 1907.

“It’s over a hundred years old,” he says, beaming. “You love Shakespeare; I love old stuff. It seemed fitting.” I set the book on the coffee table and threw my arms around his neck.

I'd missed his touch—his hands, his chest, his lips. I knew that whenever lovers were reunited in the movies, they kissed. They ran toward one another and plowed down anyone in their path to reach the other's embrace, where they both would breathlessly demand that they never be separated again—and then they would kiss.

I put my hands on his shoulders, looked into his eyes, and waited for a kiss that never came.

Every Thursday night, I go into Brenna's room and flop on the end of her bed. I find myself in her room quite a bit these days, mostly because I need to tell her something. Some nights I need to cry, but some nights I need to console her. We trust each other in ways we've learned not to trust anyone else.

I sit there until the episode of *Law & Order: SVU* she's engrossed in goes to a commercial break and she'll pay attention to me.

Tonight, she notices me entering the room. I don't even get to flop before she sits upright, wide-eyed, and asks me what the hell I did to my hair.

"I got it cut," I say.

"Couldn't we have talked about it first?" she asks.

"Talked about what? It's a haircut, Bren."

She's speechless. Her mouth is gaping. She wants to say something to me, but she's not going to because she knows I'm too fragile to bear hearing it.

I know it's not just a haircut.

She knows it's not just a haircut.

"Why didn't you tell me you were going to cut it like that?"

I scratch behind my ear, pulling what little hair is left. "I knew you were going to talk me out of it."

She laughs, but doesn't deny my accusation. "It's going to take some getting used to," she says and looks back to the television.

Brenna put a cup of coffee in front of me and asked me how my night went.

"I was grapes," I told her. By grapes, she knew I meant, too drunk to function and shouldn't have let that shady guy walk me home. It was our code word.

"Where is he this morning?" she asked.

"I don't know. He left."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"Nope," I answered. "I never do."

"Are you going to text him?"

"Probably not."

She watched me sip from my coffee and down a couple of ibuprofen before she spoke again.

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"You always act like you have the worst time ever with the guys you hang out with. If you don't like them, then why do you want to be around them?"

"Seriously? You're going to lecture me on the 'no strings attached' thing?"

"Yeah, because that only applies when you're fucking somebody, and you just told me you're not getting any."

The room fell silent. I heard the clock ticking in the living room.

"I just don't want anyone to blindside me like Taylor did." It had been nine months since I'd learned of his indiscretion, his betrayal—nine lonely months of trying to find self-worth and failing at every turn.

I stared at my breakfast and tried not to sob. Brenna went to the freezer and pulled out the tube of cookie dough I bought her two nights before, when she and her boyfriend had split. She cut off an end and peeled away the wrapper.

“The thing about getting blindsided,” she told me as she handed me a slice of Nestle Chocolate Chip, “is you’re never going to see it coming.”

Brenna and I head over to Heather’s office to pick her up for dinner. It’s a Buffalo Wild Wings night, and we’re all starving for 60-cent boneless wings. When we arrive, Heather’s marching up to the office door, just back from a few errands, and appears to be ignoring us.

She stares at us out the corner of her eye until recognition settles onto her face. A hand flies to her mouth to stifle a squeal of delight.

“Your hair!” She circles me and ruffles my bangs with her fingers. “I thought you two were customers coming in as I was trying to close up and I was pissed; I didn’t even recognize you— holy shit!”

“You like it?” I ask.

“I love it!” she squeals again. “It really suits you.”

I feel light for the first time in months. I’d never taken notice of the weight in my hair, but now that it’s gone, I’m amazed at how much easier it is to hold up my head. I want to mourn the tresses I’d exiled to the floor of the salon, but it occurs to me that the trash may have well been a welcome haven for them after hanging off of me for so long.

We’re all talking as we approach the door to the restaurant, and when I open it, Taylor walks out. A short girl with brown shoulder-length hair follows behind him.

Faking It

I'm struggling to feel sexually empowered while making small-talk with my best friend's new beau at the personal lubricant display case. We're both acting like this situation is perfectly normal, like all friends carpool to the adult store on a Thursday night, assist each other with purchases, and go out for dinner at Chili's afterward.

"You think you'll go with silicon or water-based?" he asks me, picking up a bottle labeled "Liquid Sex."

I remind myself that I have needs and desires, there's nothing wrong with having them, and he should respect that. This is fine. I'm not uncomfortable.

"Probably water-based," I tell him. "Easier clean-up."

I instantly regret my words, sure that I've led him to believe I'm the Jackson Pollack of masturbating. I watch his face, waiting for the look of disgust to twist his features, anticipating at least a raised eyebrow.

Nothing happens. It's cool.

"Where's Heather?" I ask him, hoping he'll leave me alone long to go look for his girlfriend. He shrugs.

I tell him I'm going to go check out the vibrators and don't stick around for his reaction.

I've been around penises before, but the wall of dildos is daunting. There are any number of lengths, girths, shapes, materials, and colors available. The categories they'd been separated into, intended to be helpful, make me even more wary of letting my gaze wander. I spend too much time in the "Couples" section before I realize I'm sifting through a selection of double-sided dildos and strap-on woodies. I back away from the

wall, scanning the room to ensure that no one's seen me standing here. I make eye contact with a young guy standing in line for the viewing booth. We exchange words via our panicked expressions.

Me: I'm not gay; I'm just lost.

Him: I'm not a pervert. I don't have an Internet connection at home.

I make a lap around the store trying not to look at anything, but there's so much to see. I wind up back at the wall of vibrators, no less bewildered than I was just a few minutes earlier. I don't know what I'm in the market for—I'm new to this game. Does wanting a seahorse tickler to stimulate your clitoris mean something different than having a butterfly do the job? I don't have an answer, but I'm sure that the people around me will judge my libido based on my purchase. I need to get this right.

I'm tempted to grab the first average-looking thing I can find and make a dash to the check-out counter, but I am faced with two obstacles. First, there is nothing that appears average to me. Every disembodied "penis" hanging before me looks alien, unlike anything I'd learned about in health class (and thanks to that textbook, I could now confidently diagnose gonorrhea). Next, my friend Liz has joined me—Liz, the epitome of experimentation and sexual freedom. She asks me what purchases I'm considering.

"None of them," I want to tell her.

"All of them," I also want to tell her.

Instead, I shrug and she asks me what I like. She's trying to be helpful, but she's asked me such a loaded question. Again, I shrug.

She starts talking about clitoral versus G-spot stimulation, throwing out statistics about how seventy-five percent of women don't orgasm from vaginal penetration alone.

She pulls a box down off the rack and tells me how the object she's holding is going to make my toes curl.

"This one's got a couple different speeds, which is nice when one's just not doing it for you," she tells me. "The jelly coating is as close to the real thing as you're going to get. These beads here in the center will rotate and massage the walls of your vagina, so you'll be getting stimulation from all angles. Best of all, this little guy right here will tease the clitoral hood every time the device is thrust inward." She points to a miniature rabbit figure mounted to the side of the dildo.

After hearing this, I'm convinced my ears are bleeding, but I feign composure. I have no reason to doubt her, but I take the box from Liz and following my natural consumer sensibilities, look for more product information on the back. The package reiterates everything Liz has just told me in six different languages.

"You should work here," I tell her.

She takes my words as a cue to show me some more options and as she's doing so, my best friend, Heather, and her boyfriend stroll up alongside us. I'm suddenly ashamed of the bright purple jumper in my hands. I want to throw it at Heather for bringing him along, or maybe at him for agreeing to come along.

Mostly I'm mortified because in this instant, I realize that my companions are all here for the promise of good story, and I'm just pretending that's why I'm here.

I can count the number of times I've had sex on both hands. I only need two fingers to represent the number of partners I've had, and I have to ball up my fist whenever I'm asked how many of those times I experienced any semblance of an orgasm.

I wasn't having bad sex; I just wasn't being honest.

In the beginning, it was a matter of inexperience, learning how to navigate a body other than my own. I had so many distractions. Focusing on my own pleasure didn't seem like an option. I was happy to be kissed tenderly and held tightly. When he asked if I'd enjoyed it, I told him the truth when I told him, "Yes."

I got closer and closer with every try. Even in failure, I was pleased with my progress. I took my small victories and encouraged him with a white lie so I could still fall asleep in his arms.

I was almost there once. Just once.

It was the last time we were together. Our breathing was in sync, our chests rising and falling in unison. My nerves were electrified; every touch was intensified, though I'd begun to feel numb. I put my mouth to his ear and whispered, "I'm coming," just as *Cosmo* had told me to.

And then it was over. Two hands pushed my hips out and away from his body, damming the current flowing between us. I kneeled on the bed as I watched him sink his face into a pillow as every muscle in his body tensed. When he finally relaxed, he rolled over and put a hand to his brow, exhaling. He sat up and moved to kiss me.

"Why did you do that?" I asked before his lips could reach mine.

"Do what?"

"You cut me off."

He looked at me quizzically. "I was scared to finish inside you."

"You're wearing a condom."

"I've never stayed in before; why does it matter this time?"

He asked the question in earnest. That boy sat on the edge of the bed and stared at me with his face all scrunched up trying so hard—so very hard—to understand why I

was slipping my underwear back on and groping around in the piles of his dirty laundry on the floor to find my shirt instead of nestling into the crook of his arm. He stared and he stared, saying nothing, just blinking. I wanted to flick his furrowed brow until his eyes grew wide with understanding, shame, or anything—*anything*—but the perplexity they already held.

“It just matters now,” I told him, climbing back into the bed. He covered me in his comforter and held me until he thought I was asleep.

The next morning I kissed him goodbye and by the end of that week I boarded a plane to London. I was studying abroad for a semester and wouldn’t be back for four months. I knew that four months away from the person I loved meant four months of abstinence. The person I loved, however, either didn’t know that or didn’t love me.

For fifteen weeks I roamed the grounds of an English manor house, making mental notes of everywhere I wished I were having sex —hidden passageways, remote gardens, library stacks, the conservatory, in front of the fireplace in the dining room. For 104 days I fantasized about the second I’d be reunited with my lover. I slept with an arm and leg slung over an oversized pillow as if it were his body, and was disappointed every morning when it hadn’t miraculously morphed into his head, chest, arms, and legs overnight. I craved his touch and needed his warmth. The anticipation of sex was more awful than its absence.

When he told me he’d been with someone else while I’d been away, I didn’t break down. I don’t think I said anything. From looking at me, no one would have ever suspected how battered and bruised my insides were. I only knew because I couldn’t finish my Taco Bell. I gave up on the burrito halfway through, partly for fear that I couldn’t keep it down, but I think that, mostly, I just wanted to abandon something too.

“You want this?” I asked him, gesturing to the remainder of my meal. He raised an eyebrow but accepted my offer.

After swallowing a mouthful of beans, rice, and cheese, he asked me, “Why are you ripping up the lid on your cup?”

The plastic from the lid, shredded into tiny triangles, littered my lap and the floor of his car. “It’s just something I do,” I said.

What I should have said is, *“Because we’re together for the first time in months and our clothes are still on; because I drove two hours to see you and you probably had your hands on another girl as I was en route; because I’m stuck in your car and have to look at you not looking at me; because I love you but I hate you, I hate you, I hate you.”*

At the very least, I should have cried.

Instead, I went for a walk with him around our university’s campus. I didn’t want to go, but he asked me to walk with him, and so I did. I so wanted to credit him for his decency, but I knew our civility was a lie. Neither of us was the person we appeared to be: he was a prick and I was a basket case.

We held our composure even when it was put to the ultimate test. We met a blonde making her way across campus as our walk was coming to an end. I recognized her face from the profile picture of a girl who’d been posting to his Facebook wall more and more frequently in the past few weeks. He smiled shyly at her as she brushed past me. She waved; I waved back.

“Was that her?” I asked him before she’d made it out of earshot.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “That’s her.”

We walked in silence back to my car. Before I left, he opened his arms and asked for a hug. I obliged because I knew that's what people were supposed to do when they parted on good terms.

It made sense to me to bear the hurt, to hide it away—to lie about it. My weakness was best kept a secret. It thought it best to mask the pain and suffer in silence then, just as it seems fitting that I conceal my shame and discomfort in a room full of sex toys and people who know how to feel pleasure.

When I'm fine, I'm only pretending.

I'm at the register with a bottle of lube, a vibrator, and a four-pack of AA batteries because I don't want to fake it anymore.

Grief

“The great art of etiquette was invented to translate the incoherent jumble of human feelings to which we are all subject into something more presentable. When we cast it aside and let our emotions run around naked and exposed to public comment, as we have done by abandoning the formal customs of mourning, everybody suffers.”

---Judith Martin, *Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior*

My father gifted my brother, my mother, and me with our very own burial plots the Christmas after I turned twenty. I thought he was joking until he pointed out my future grave as we were pulling into the cemetery— almost a year later—to lay my grandmother to rest, or whatever people's bodies do when they're dead.

My grandma's funeral was the first funeral I can remember attending. That's not to say I never knew anyone who died until I was twenty-one years old; no, I just never went to anyone's funeral. If you're looking for me to give you a valid excuse as to why I never went, I don't have one. I just didn't go.

After about thirty seconds of being in a funeral home, it occurs to me that my absence at all those previous funerals has left me totally dumb to death etiquette. I'm told it's not polite to laugh at corpses, but Grandma's body is wrapped in a terry cloth bathrobe that my parents gave her for Christmas ten years ago. When she'd opened the present, she'd said that she'd like to be buried in it, which we'd all assumed to be a joke at the time.

I also wonder how appropriate it is to be annoyed with the members of my extended family right now. My grandma's dead, but my aunt's voice hasn't changed and it still hurts my ears to hear her speak. She's still married to a registered sex offender, and her son, a year older than me, hasn't gotten any better at not insulting me every time he

opens his mouth; he greets me by telling that Grandma wouldn't like my haircut very much.

“I guess it's a good thing she's dead, then.”

My uncle still speaks with a mumbling slur; his mother's death hasn't been the catalyst he needs to get himself sober. A forty-something year-old man I've never seen before in my life but insists he's my father's cousin mistakes me for my mother and pulls me into an unwarranted embrace. He spends the rest of the day patting my hand and my shoulder, consoling me when I don't need it and discussing the possibility that our family may be descendants of Jewish High Priests.

To me, this funeral is just another uncomfortable family reunion; my grandma's death hasn't changed a thing.

All around me, people are telling me how peaceful my grandmother looks now, like she's sleeping. I suppose in some ways she is but I have half a mind to remind all these people that sleeping people still breathe. Someone says, “she looks just like herself,” and I agree, thinking all the while that plastic fruit looks like fruit even though you can't eat it. Everyone keeps talking about my grandmother like she's still here with us, like she's about to sit up and yell at all of us for being loud while she's trying to nap. People are laughing, some are crying, but no one but me appears uncomfortable standing five feet away from a corpse.

I wonder what the point of showing up to a funeral is when everyone wants to pretend like nobody died.

* * *

My father follows the hearse to the cemetery and for most of the ride, my family sits in silence until my sixteen year-old brother starts giggling to himself. I look at him and raise an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I know we’re supposed to be sad, but look.” He points to the rear end of the hearse, bouncing as the tires roll over the uneven pavement on the highway.

“I just pictured Grandma bouncing,” he continues, chuckling through his nose in an attempt to suppress his laughter. He motions up and down with his arm like he’s limply dribbling a basketball.

My mother, father, and I immediately burst into tear-inducing laughter. My mother, who’s been crying all morning on my father’s behalf, makes a *Weekend at Bernie’s* joke that sends us all into another round of hysterics. I’m glad to see my dad laughing, not because I’m reassured in this instant that he’s gotten over his mother’s death, but because I wouldn’t know how to comfort him if he were crying. He’s a stern ex-military man, and while I know he can experience a range of emotions, they usually manifest themselves in some display of anger or frustration.

“Do you think they’ve ever wrecked the hearse on the way to the funeral?” I ask. My mother looks back at me and shakes her head.

Tanner gasps. “What if the casket came open?”

“Oh my god!” My mom and I shout in unison, reducing to tears from laughter.

Tanner and I wonder aloud if anyone opens up the casket to make sure the body hasn’t become disheveled before they lower it into the ground. I wonder what we must look like to all the cars we’re passing by—a cackling foursome in a funeral procession. The world must be judging us.

By the time we arrive at the cemetery, it's raining. I step out and my mother hands me an umbrella. There's a row of chairs set out for my family right in front of the casket. People crowd inside the tent pitched over my grandmother's burial plot, shielding themselves from the rain. Just before the pastor begins to speak, I look out to see the people who've gathered here.

I'm surprised to see as many people as I do. Friends and neighbors are gathering around the small tent, huddling close to one another to keep warm. My family tried to keep the funeral as private as possible, but no death goes unnoticed in a town as small as the one I grew up in. I see my brother's girlfriend, Bailey—who never met my grandmother—shivering under an umbrella with her mother and it's the first time I've ever felt so humbled by the actions of a fifteen year-old. The smiles and laughter from the funeral home are gone now. There are only somber faces and sympathetic looks, and every one of them is turned on my family. Now that the casket is closed, everyone remembers why we're all actually gathered here today.

I pull out the tissue I've been saving in my pocket and dab at the tears forming in the corners of my eyes. When the pastor finishes his anecdote about his last conversation with my grandmother, I see my father bow forward in his chair cradling his forehead between his thumb and forefinger. Mom puts an arm over him.

When we stand, Bailey makes a beeline for Tanner and squeezes him around the waist. My aunt places a hand on my uncle's shoulder and my mother holds my father.

I'm alone with my crumpled up Kleenex.

I feel a hand on my shoulder and I turn around to see a woman I've called Aunt Jude all my life, but is of no blood relation to me. She offers me a consolatory smile and I sink into her chest, tears and snot and slobber leaking out of me and onto her

windbreaker. I'm ashamed I'm making such a mess when I'm not even crying about my grandma being dead.

I never grieve so much as when I see my father cry.

Gifted & Talented

I'm standing at my mother's side as she's staring at the big red "C" on the history test I've just handed to her, contemplating whether I should walk away or wait for her to say something to me. She sighs heavily and furrows her brow. When she speaks, the only thing she says to me is "Have you shown your dad?"

That's how it is with them— no decisions made alone, no secrets between them. When I go to my mother, it's, "Ask your father." When I turn to Dad: "What did your mom say?"

I haven't shown my father the test yet, and I hadn't planned on it. I'm twelve years old and have it in my head that my father only exists to force me to change my outfit every morning before I walk out the door and make me feel guilty about being interested in girly things. I don't want to give him another reason to be disappointed in me.

Mom makes me trudge out to Dad's workshop to deliver the news. I push the door open and find my father prying a wrench from the guts of a tractor engine. He's dropped it and can't fish it back out, which means his speech is caught in a back-and-forth between coaxing sweet talk and cursing.

"Hey, Dad, can you come inside?" I ask him. "I need you to sign something."

He groans as he gropes for the wrench just beyond his grasp. "I'm a little busy right now, Shelb."

"Okay, well, Mom told me to come get you. I did bad on my history test."

His fingers wrap around the handle of the wrench and he pulls his arm from the tractor. Black sticky grease coats his arm all the way to his elbow.

“You failed your test?” he asks, wiping the grease from his arm with one of my old T-shirts he uses as a rag.

“No, I didn’t fail. I got a C. You’ve got to come sign it.”

He whips the wrench into his toolbox and throws the T-shirt on top of the tractor.

“How the hell did you get a C?” he says as he stomps out of the shop toward the house.

I wait until he’s out of earshot before I mumble, “Probably the same way you always did.”

When we’re both back inside, Mom gives him the paper and he looks over it. He’s frowning. I wonder if he can answer the questions any better than I did.

“So how’d this happen?” he says when he looks up.

I’m unsure how to answer that so I just tell him that I got a bunch of the questions wrong. I tell him to look at the essay. I did really well on the essay.

Mom asks me if I studied. I tell her I did the study guide just like everybody else.

“Nobody got a good grade on this test,” I tell my parents.

“I don’t think that’s an excuse,” Dad says. “You’re a straight-A student.”

“Do you have a chance to retake the test?” Mom asks.

I look at them both like they’ve gone nuts. “No. I didn’t fail.”

“So this is permanent?” Dad asks. He’s obsessed with permanent records, resumes, report cards, and other things like that. It’s strange that he’s like that, because according to him, all of his records suck. He didn’t make good grades in school, and from what I can tell, he really resents the track he was put on. He joined the Air Force straight out of high school because his guidance counselor had convinced him that he wasn’t college material.

“Yeah,” I say. I’m ready to scream. Nobody’s parents but mine care so much about this. It’s the first time I didn’t get an A on a test. Mikey, the boy who sits next to me in class gets Cs on everything. No one thinks anything of that. “Can you just sign it, please?”

“I don’t want this to happen again, Shelb.” Dad’s about to ground me. I can tell by his tone. “Your grades are important and you need to keep them up. No Walkman for a week.”

“For a C? That’s not even bad.”

“Then why do I have to sign this?”

“I don’t know, but a C is average. I still passed. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Dad shook his head. “I think by your standards, you did.”

That’s how it started—this notion that I would forever be held to different set of standards than everyone else. People would always expect more from me. Teachers told me they expected A’s from me because they knew I was capable of earning them. My parents led me to believe my future was at stake: impressive resumes didn’t come from C students. Each fed me this false notion that I was somehow better than most of my peers. I heard it a million different ways, but the message was always the same: normal is failure. It would make no one happy to see me progress at an average rate. I had to exceed. I wasn’t just like everyone else; I was *gifted*. I was talented.

For years, schools have put children into classes and programs based on their estimate of children’s abilities. This practice, commonly known as tracking, emerged out of an early twentieth-century American culture that was obsessed with the philosophy of “scientific management”—an economic practice meant to increase efficiency and eliminate waste. As methods of production became standardized, so did higher education,

and as a result, the kinds of people given access to that education also had to meet the “gifted” standard.

Early studies of giftedness evolved from research on mental inheritance and subnormal children. This research came from men like Francis Galton, who published a book in 1869 called *Hereditary Genius*, in which he concluded that intelligence was derived from the process of natural selection. According to Galton, you couldn’t be smart if your parents weren’t smart, or if their parents weren’t smart. He even argued that “greatness” was an inherited trait. According to his social study, aptitude depended entirely upon the collective familial gene pool. (Considering his own family tree, it makes sense that he would equate genetics with genius: Charles Darwin was his cousin.)

Here’s an excerpt from the introduction to *Hereditary Genetics*:

“I propose to show in this book that a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world. Consequently, as it is easy, notwithstanding those limitations, to obtain by careful selection a permanent breed of dogs or horses gifted with peculiar powers of running, or of doing anything else, so it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations. I shall show that social agencies of an ordinary character, whose influences are little suspected, are at this moment working towards the degradation of human nature, and that others are working towards its improvement.”

Galton’s work was incredibly influential in developing scientific management and in later establishing programs and even schools for gifted children, even though his research took place some thirty years before the first gifted school opened and the subjects in his study were not sampled from his own society but rather prominent British men throughout history who were of classes which were socially and culturally elite. Though there were a few exceptions, his work propelled the myth that higher education could be equated to higher social class. In fact, in his introduction to *Hereditary Genetics*, he states, “the general

plan of [his] argument is to show that high reputation is a pretty accurate test of high ability.” I suppose that now is as good of a time as any to mention that Galton was the dude who coined eugenics—a concept which sparked a social movement that peaked in the early decades of the twentieth centuries and provided the justification for numerous unconsented sterilizations of people in America who were deemed socially undesirable. The socially undesirable were the poor, mentally ill, blind, deaf, developmentally disabled, promiscuous women, homosexuals, and entire racial groups. The most well-known active eugenics movement happened in the 1930s and is most commonly referred to as the Holocaust.

Remnants of these early views of scientific measures of potential have carried into our modern perceptions of success—especially when you look at the preparatory curriculum of most American public high schools. By the time students reach ninth grade, most students have been sorted into either vocational or academic tracks and enroll in elective courses for the next four years based on their former academic performance. Typically, those who’ve exceeded standards are eligible to take advanced or college prep courses while the rest take courses geared more toward post-graduation practical training.

Gifted programs were implemented in public schools throughout the first half of the twentieth century. The first special school for gifted children opened in 1901 in Worcester, Massachusetts. The field of gifted education continued to evolve as the needs of the country changed. After the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957, the nation poured exorbitant amounts of money into identifying the brightest and most talented students who could expand America’s human capital with specialized knowledge in the fields of math, science, and technology programming.

The goal of scientific schooling was to track the few “gifted and talented” students toward high status learning and careers while instilling good citizenship and a work ethic in the rest. Just like today, determining who was destined to come out on top boils down to a percentile of an aptitude test score. Kids who were smart according to the test ended up in universities and became valued members of society. The kids who weren’t so smart went to lines in the factories, in the wars overseas, or the unemployment offices. Not unexpectedly, tracking caused tension between members of opposite tracks, and the only way to facilitate this higher education to high-track students was to separate them from the low-track ones.

Gifted people aren’t evaluated by how well we performed in relation to a normal standard; our success is always measured by how well we outperform everyone else. Though some have tried to establish criteria for what makes a person gifted, there’s no real measure of a person’s giftedness other than, “above average.” When a gifted person isn’t the smartest person in any given room, it causes him or her mental and physical distress. The day I learned I wasn’t even the salutatorian of my graduating class remains one of the most traumatic events of my life. I was inconsolable for thirty hours straight and refused to eat anything or speak to anyone during that time.

It’s about more than good grades, though. People can be gifted in many ways— one only has to be unlucky enough to possess a predisposition for something that not everyone else can possess. When you’re a gifted person, you take on roles and extra responsibilities that you assume non-gifted people can’t be trusted with. I was that girl who would take over an entire group project because the risk of not receiving an A was too great for me to allow anyone else to have a part in it. We become control freaks

because we've essentially fallen into this pattern of thinking no one else can produce the high-quality product that we can.

Gifted people need to have answers when no one else does. I'll still never understand why the kids in my high school would immediately turn to the gifted students in the class and ask them to explain an assignment the teacher just gave before they would ask the teacher to clarify anything. In high school and college alike, gifted students are the kids who get the stares pressuring them to speak first after a question is posed to the entire classroom.

The gifted don't ask for help because they're taught to think they never need it. They're the people who appear to have their lives sorted out when everyone else is struggling. They'll struggle too, but they'll do whatever it takes to make sure no one sees them distressed. For years, I was depressed, but I hid it for a long time, making myself too busy to deal with anything I was going through emotionally. I took on projects and course loads and leadership positions and organized events so that when people saw me, they saw me happy. Only under the influence of a lot of booze or behind the solace of a locked bedroom door could I cry over a first love who'd hurt me deeply, grieve the loss of my grandmother, worry about my family issues, freak out about my future, or care about anything other than what everyone else needed me to do and wanted me to be. I couldn't allow anyone to see me failing, ever. Gifted people put themselves on pedestals so far up in the air they can't even see the ground. In their minds, they have much, much farther to fall than most people.

I find it remarkable that people are still so surprised when they see so many headlines of young men and women with bright futures ahead of them who've taken actions to end their futures entirely. As a society, the pressure we put on success has

turned talents into obligations, forcing people to stop loving the things they're good at, and therefore, themselves.

* * *

I'm standing at my mother's side as she's reading the paper I've just handed to her, contemplating whether I should walk away or wait for her to say something to me. This time, I'm not handing her a fifth-grade history test. She's staring at a bill I received after I was admitted to the hospital for trying to drink bleach. I'm glad Dad's not around; I don't want her to make me go show him. No matter what his reaction is, it won't be the right one.

Have you ever opened the hospital bill for a stay after your attempted suicide? I have, and it's fucking awkward.

It's awkward because I have to explain things people never bothered to ask before. The first thing everyone wants to know is what made me want to do it. No one wants to know the answer though, because no one wants to know they're part of the reason I couldn't stand being alive. They get all defensive and stop listening when they hear that. It's important that they understand it's not them personally; it's everyone—everyone who's ever had the audacity to think they really know me. Who or how I am is so much more complicated than anything they're willing to believe.

I'm gifted—which, in my particular case, only means that I have a general aptitude for test-taking and a willingness to complete tasks assigned to me. It does not mean I'm only as good as the letter I bring home on a report card or that I am any more destined for success than someone who had better things to do than stress out over a B average. I may be gifted, but it doesn't mean I can't fail. It doesn't mean I won't leap from my pedestal just to see how long it takes me to hit the ground.

The week before my senior year of college, I found out just how far I could fall. Classes hadn't even begun, but I still found myself stressed out over the anticipation of all the things I knew I would have to do. I'd taken on two leadership positions in organizations on campus simply because I couldn't say no to the offers. I knew I wouldn't have time for them on top of a full course load and a part-time job, but I took them on anyway. School wasn't just something I was good at anymore; it was now something I was obligated to excel at. It was tiring, and it was unfulfilling.

To get my mind off the next few months I wasn't looking forward to, I'd gone out with my friend, Amy, to a house party, which seemed a little juvenile at first since she and I had become accustomed to the bar scene ever since we turned twenty-one. The host of the party was our mutual friend who'd promised us there would be lots of attractive men to ogle while we were there, so we went despite our initial hesitation. The party was in full swing when we arrived. People were mingling, the music was at top volume, and a large group was crowded around a table set up for drinking games. I could tell that a few attendees were underage, but for the most part everything around me was great. On a trip to find the bathroom, I crossed a threshold into what appeared to be a laundry room and nearly stepped on a boy who was lying face up on the hardwood floor. Amy dropped to her knees and shook him.

"Are you okay?" she shouted over the deafening bass of the music playing. The boy groaned and flitted his eyelids. She rolled him onto his side while I ran back to the kitchen to find someone to help.

"There's a kid passed out in the laundry room," I repeated over and over as I wormed through a group of people dancing. "He needs help."

I managed to wrangle a couple of guys to come back to the room where Amy was now sitting in a pool of vomit trying to revive the boy who'd looked near-death just a few minutes before. Someone ordered me to fetch a glass of water and so I did, and on my way back several people stopped to ask me if I was okay. I'd been crying and hadn't realized it.

More people had crowded around the laundry room, but no one seemed to know who the boy was. Amy continued to pelt him with questions—"What's your name?" "Who did you come here with?" "Where do you live?"—but only received broken, garbled answers. One of the guys looked for a wallet to try to figure out who the kid was.

That's when we heard the sirens.

"Cops!" someone shouted to us on his way out the door. We all exchanged panicked looks.

"There are minors here," a girl said.

"I think *he's* a minor," someone else said.

"Let's get him up," said Jacob, the friend I'd retrieved to come help. He and another guy hoisted the kid up and draped each of his arms over their shoulders, carrying him outside. When we saw flashing red and blue lights, the guy helping Jacob carry the kid ducked his head down and dropped the boy onto Jacob. He took off in a dead sprint away from the house.

Jacob swore at the deserter and then told Amy to leave.

"Get Shelby home," he said. "I'll take care of this." He tapped the boy's chest. Amy grabbed my arm and dragged me away from the house, where people were spilling out of every entrance, saving themselves from drinking tickets and ignoring. Tears were

streaming down my cheeks as I let her lead me down the back alley toward her house. I was in hysterics by the time we made it back, and Amy couldn't calm me down.

"Why are you crying?" she asked.

"That boy," I sputtered. "We shouldn't have left him."

"He's going to be fine," she told me. "He just had too much to drink."

"That's how I feel all the time," I told her.

"What are even you talking about?" she asked.

I didn't answer her. Instead, I let her give me a ride home and promised her I'd go straight to bed once I was back in my apartment. I didn't, though. I locked the door behind me and went straight to my own laundry room and sprawled out on the floor. I pressed my cheek against the wooden floor and thought about the boy. I wondered if Jacob would take care of him, and I how he'd feel in the morning when he woke up and realized his friends had left him behind when he'd needed them most. I wondered why he'd gotten so drunk. It could have been an accident, but maybe it wasn't. Maybe he was trying to escape something, feel something different. Maybe lying unconscious on the floor of a stranger's home was better than living his life.

I opened my eyes and the first thing I saw was a jug of bleach.

A 911 call from my roommate and an ambulance ride later, I received a visit from a psychologist sporting a ponytail and Jesus sandals whose first question was, "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't," I told him.

"You were obviously thinking something, or else you wouldn't have wanted to hurt yourself."

“I wasn’t trying to hurt myself. I was trying to kill myself. If you had to live inside my head for a day, you’d probably want to do it, too.”

“You don’t seem like you’re very happy,” he said.

I sat up. “You don’t seem like a real psychologist.”

He scribbled on his notepad and looked up at me. “If you want to leave, you’re going to have to tell me what’s going on.”

I’d been stripped down and held in a solitary room for four hours. They’d taken my clothes and my privacy. A nurse was stationed outside my room all night and the door was kept open so that someone could watch every move I made. I hated being under this weird fluorescent lighting. I wanted out of here, so I talked.

“I’m sad all the time, and I’m exhausted from trying to hide it. I’m scared of failing. I’m scared of ending up like my father—hating my life and taking it out on the people I love. I’m scared of ending up alone.” I practically screamed it at him. “All I wanted was a break. I didn’t know how else to take one.”

The psychologist pulled out a form from behind his notepad and handed it to me.

“Sign this,” he said. “It’s a behavioral contract. By signing this, you’re promising not to harm yourself or anyone else for the next seventy-two hours.”

Signing the contract felt like punishment, like being grounded for not being some superhuman who never got Cs and could cope with her issues without any outside help.

Before that night, the people around me never realized how much they were hurting me by expecting nothing less than greatness from me, nor did I ever see how much I was hurting myself for striving for perfection in everything I did. I constantly took on more than I could handle and didn’t ever want anyone’s help, nor did I ever ask for it because I’d convinced myself I didn’t need it.

I know what it feels like to have people expect certain behaviors from me based on an identity I didn't really even choose for myself. So does my dad. We've acted in accordance with those expectations, too—for a time, we adopted them as our own. Dad never went to university because somebody told him his brain wasn't big enough to handle it. Most childhood memories I have of him consist of listening to his dinner table talks about how much he detested his job and how much he resented the lot he'd been given in life. Schooling had taught him if you weren't good at something, you might as well not even try because society would only value you if you were the best. Even as much as he resented that mentality, he pushed it on my brother and I when we were growing up. Because of that mentality, I suppressed my self—the self I wanted to be—down so far I forgot she even existed just to satisfy everyone else's perception of who I should be.

I know how it feels when you have to let yourself down over and over to avoid disappointing everyone else.

It feels like dying.