

STRANGER THAN FACT

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As a dyslexic child, I always had trouble finding my voice. It's hard to express yourself in words, when you struggle with them. For me words always come later when I write. But most people don't understand how I feel. If your synapses fire off at the right time how can you image what it would be like if they didn't? That's where fiction comes in. If you can override someone's lack of experience with the use of a metaphor, then by distancing the reader from reality with an allegory, you can get to truth that's hard to capture any other way. You can also simply tell the truth in your writing with plain nonfiction.

For me, fiction and nonfiction are a way for me to claim my voice and convey truth. Only a reader can decide what that truth looks like.

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PART I
STRANGER THAN FACT

As a dyslexic child, I always had trouble finding my voice. It's hard to express yourself in words, when you struggle with the very concept of little bits of cipher and verbalization supposedly representing what's in one's head. A word doesn't look like a thought. It doesn't sound like one either. Words had no business exasperating the way my mind already perceived things, I decided, in my own non-language. But, of course, this rebellion against all reading, writing, and speaking didn't last long. My adjustment was inevitable. I began to verbalize the things in my head, because I had no choice. I wanted to learn.

But it was really, really hard. When I was ten, I asked my mom why it was so hard for me and why other people weren't very understanding that I was a little slower.

"Well, honey, it's a doggy-dog world," my mom said. She said this for years.

"What the hell do dogs have to do with it? You're not even listening to me," I wanted to say. But instead I cringed and walk away—went into my room and played with my strawberry shortcake dolls. They never made me feel stupid. They couldn't talk at all.

Fifteen years later I sat with my friends Cary and Cynthia at a Starbucks with my nonfat tea in hand.

"Oh!" I gasped suddenly during a gap in the conversation. I was supposed to be furthering our discussion of existentialism but, as usual I was distracted by my mind, which is always secretly working things out while I put up the front of instant comprehension. In other words, I have a very convincing smile and nod.

"Dog *EAT* dog," I said with an air of real accomplishment.

Cary and Cynthia stared at me unblinkingly. Since they often described me as the smartest person they knew, had studied at Oxford with me, and were aware of my 4.0, they weren't really sure what to do with the fact that I had just deciphered the meaning of a very

common cliché. And if they had known exactly how long it had taken me, they would've felt even more uncomfortable.

“What?” Cary asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

Like usual, I didn't have the words to explain it on the spot. Words for me always come later, out on the page, where I can really think, at my own pace. Only then do I really have a voice.

So you can imagine what I'm saying, but just in case you're having trouble: if it takes me 15 years to understand the difference between doggy-dog and dog-eat-dog, then try to grasp how long it takes me to understand a paragraph, or a novel, or a speech. Sure, I've sped up over the years through practice, but nothing for me is a straight line. I never go from point A to B and when I'm supposed to be, I'm not even in the alphabet, I'm getting out a compass and wondering why it's not helping. I see no connections. I see no patterns. I only notice I'm in an ocean when I start swimming and see fish. I do everything on my toes. For me there is no natural common knowledge. All information is new information. And when I don't understand something, I label it, “To be determined” and put it on a shelf in my mind, not to be picked back up until sometimes years later. But I know you don't understand what I mean, because if the synapses in your brain fire off at all the right times then it's impossible for you to imagine what it's like if they didn't. There is no way for you to get where I am—struggling through life with lesions in my brain—no straight-line kind of way, anyway.

That's where fiction comes in. It helps you relay things to other people that are hard or even impossible for them to understand otherwise. You can override someone's lack of

experience with the use of a metaphor—take something most do understand to show them the shape and size of the concept they struggle with.

This is the kind of story I want to write: Fiction that has a purpose. Fiction that explores reality in the places where fact falls short. Distancing the reader from reality a little, so they can get closer to certain truths—very specific truths—truths that are hard to capture any other way. Using absurdity to get closer to reality than even reality can manage. I’ve never seen the point of fiction that serves no purpose other than to reflect reality. If your hope is to reflect reality as closely as possible, why not just write nonfiction? That’s the solution I’ve come to myself. Since I am also a journalist I tend to use life experience to write absolute nonfiction, or Terry Gilliam-esque fiction that could never happen. If you don’t have any limits, why stay within them? But, of course, there’s the danger of going too far the other way: writing fiction just to fantasize, which makes empty stories that have no purpose. Fiction should be both functional and fantastical. I agree with Raina Kelley in a recent book review of an allegorical tale: “[F]antasy can serve a nobler function. By replacing sordidness of the everyday with magic, writers can approach the philosophers’ stone with questions about history, identity, and (why not?) the meaning of life.”

Just Because You Can't See My Robotic Arm Doesn't Mean It's Not There:
The Use of Allegory to Explain Disabilities

An example of a fictional allegory with this kind of purpose is “Why the Sky Turns Red When the Sun Goes Down” by Ryan Harty. It’s about a robotic boy’s struggle to be normal and accepted. The science in this story is never explained because it’s peripheral. The robotic boy is merely the vehicle used to evoke the real and complicated emotions shared by people with disabled children.

The embarrassment the boy feels when his robotic arm falls off in front of his friends (100) is a way to explain the emotional side of this to people who don’t have the benefit of experience. Also, this list of symptoms could be for several types of disabilities. The shaking could be epilepsy, and the speech problems could be Down syndrome, autism, or any number of various developmental problems. I think this metaphor is meant to cover them all since they all have one basic thing in common—the feeling of raising or being a child who isn’t like other children.

It captures a specific tension between husband and wife about how to handle their son’s problem. The wife wants to do something that could possibly fix all their problems but would result in a change of the child’s personality—a new chip. That father’s against the procedure because it’s more important to him that his son stays who he is. This makes the intrinsic conflict within the marriage feels very real, though the surface problem in the story would be rendered silly without it.

Harty also captures what it’s like to comfort someone out of love, even when you have no comfort to give them, like when the boy asks what’s going to happen to him: “‘You’ll be fine,’ I say, because sometimes it’s a father’s job to lie. ‘Don’t worry, Cole. You’ll be great’” (115).

In my short story “Timelessness,” Keith is a time traveler. The people he meets envy him because they assume it means he can control time—but it is a disability. He can’t control it. He tends to get ripped from one time to another just when he’s learning to understand his surroundings. It’s an allegory for my struggles with dyslexia.

He has no fixed time or place. He doesn’t live or belong anywhere. He doesn’t go to any time period more than once. He never goes to times that are remotely close together in history. He just gets shifted from random time to random time, throughout the expanse of eternity. It’s lonely and frustrating. He always feels out of place and out of sync with the people he meets and they, in turn, can’t relate to him and he feels hopeless about this lonely condition: “Maybe time is just as confused as I am. It’ll throw me from one place to another for eternity because I don’t fit anywhere. Everyone else is a square in a square world, and I am one of very few circles” (10).

I use this story to explain my mounting frustration with my learning disability. I feel hopelessly behind, misunderstood, and believe there are very few who think like I do. I am a dyslexic writer, an almost impossible hurdle to jump, so in my allegory Keith is a time traveler with amnesia, making it impossible to learn anything, since he can’t build on previous knowledge or understand the things he does remember since they’re so out of order: “My memory has always been shitty, which doesn’t bode well for a time traveler, does it?” (9).

Keith also has a hard time expressing himself in ways that make sense to other people, which is a common feeling among dyslexics. As I said in my earlier anecdote, it’s hard for us to compare ourselves to ‘normal,’ if we don’t understand how normal works. We’re limited by our experience as well:

I can’t say if I’m in the past, present, or future because these conditions don’t exist for me. To me everything is the present because it’s *my* present. I only describe something as ‘past’ if it’s further back than the time I was just in and only future if it’s later than.
(10)

He also can't communicate answers to other people's questions in a way they'll understand. In his travels he meets a historian who wants to study him, but can't seem to piece his timeline together from the situation presented:

It's very hard for someone who thinks along a random timeline to explain things to someone who thinks in a linear way. For some reason he decided taking notes was the best way to deal with me. He even drew diagrams. I'd say something, he'd try and draw some kind of timeline of my life, and then flash it at me asking, 'Is this right?' (11)

Dyslexics also have a hard time learning once they reach a snag—no matter how small—because often no one can explain something to them in a way they can understand: "I never ask anyone what time it is, or what year it is because it's pointless for me to measure time in the conventional way" (10).

How could the question of "what time?" being answered with "6:30 on October 5th 2006" help him place himself in history? He doesn't understand history. He's not objective enough to see its patterns. What he knows of it is out of order and random. There's no point in asking questions that only lead him to more questions, inevitably, and never answers.

This leads him to be very isolated and at times, even superior. For instance, when he's overdosed at an oxygen bar in Las Vegas, the historian tries to warn him that he's not coherent. His response is stubborn and cold: "I'm sure his little linear mind was just limited by experience. I was making perfect sense" (12).

But dyslexia isn't the only disorder I try to let inside this allegory. Since I also have attention deficit disorder, Keith's always moving, getting bored and forgetting people's names. I drink to escape my frustrations so this story is also for alcoholics, who have struggled with waking up and not knowing where they are. To further my points against this behavior, I purposely have Keith wake-up in dangerous situations to convey how losing control of your consciousness is undesirable:

When I awoke, there was something heavy and cold bearing against my eyelids. I could move easily enough, in fact, I was suspended in something but my eyes wouldn't open. It was so cold. My mouth opened and filled...I tried to gasp, but instead choked...I hate it when I wake up under water. (15)

But there are even more ailments alluded to. When the first time jump occurs, Keith stutters, loses focus, motor skills, has a migraine, convulses, and then has a seizure right before he's sucked to another time. This covers all manners of disabilities. I want this story to reach anyone who feels lost, misunderstood, and alone, since these are the emotions that all these problems share. I want this story to both entertain and demonstrate through an allegorical tale what it feels like to be lost at all times, unprepared for every situation, and incapable of learning in the conventional cookie-cutter American way.

Four Legs Good, Two Legs Bad: The Use of Allegory in Politics

Another form of allegory that's useful is the hidden political commentary such as *1984* by George Orwell or Viktor Pelevin's short story, "A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia." This piece of fiction, though humorously titled, is actually bringing to light a very serious subject. This isn't really about Werewolves, but for political reasons it pretends to be, though everyone in Russia knows what it's actually about: the mob/gang problem in Central Russia. The "long crack in the road surface that looked like the letter 'W'" (Pelevin 6), stands for graffiti. The 'elixir' offered to him is a metaphor for hallucinogens. His initiation where he is expected to kill another wolf to take his place is much like how a new member is expected to kill an unwanted member of the gang before he can earn his place while simultaneously proving his allegiance. The leader's mentality of: "You must always remember that only werewolves are real people" (12), closely resembles a mob mentality where civilians are just cattle.

I believe this allegorical tale is more effective than a realistic mob story ever could be. It exposes the true emotions of the factual situation in a way that's more accessible for readers. Werewolves are common in fiction so most readers easily understand the implications of this image. It's not hard to jump from becoming a werewolf, to a pack mentality, and then to a violent use for this power. Not only does it fit as a metaphor, it's more fun to read about. It lays out the most essential issues of a mob problem faster and possibly more comprehensively than a straight mob story ever could. Plus, apathy could keep several readers from reading a political story about a mob problem, as well as prejudice against an overused mob 'bang bang' genre. This strange title, along with this passable werewolf surface story can get a message across despite whatever guards readers might have up against a straight political tale. I for one would

pick up “A Werewolf Problem in Central Russia” before I’d pick up “A Mob Problem in Central Russia.” In fact, I did.

I attempt a similar tactic in my short story “The Plague.”

I wrote this story in 2001 a couple of months after September 11th, when the dust was finally settling on the ground, and I was sick of being afraid. I was also sick of other people being so afraid of terrorists that they wouldn’t talk about anything else. And it was even worse that a certain number were posers: people who only talked about September 11th—not because it was important to them personally—but because it was ‘trendy,’ and mentioning it in a humanitarian way made them look ‘cool.’ And it struck me that ironically, the thing they used to elevate themselves also made them seem completely inhuman. Using the death of thousands of people—people they let remain nameless and faceless—merely as conversation filler over a cup of coffee with someone, struck me as incredibly shallow.

I started to think of these people as emotional vampires: people who only reflected emotion, borrowed emotion, sucked emotion from someone else, to stir emotions in you that they had no right to touch. It made me sick. But I didn’t know this right away. My feelings during this period were so confusing that I sidestepped them.

What came out was that I wrote about vampires as a metaphor for harmful trends. It helped that I had been taking a ‘The Vampire Metaphor in Slavic Culture’ class at UT with Dr. Garza at the time. I actually started the story in class, when all the lights went out. I used the idea of the blackouts, common in major cities back then, as a way of placing this story in a context that people might catch on to. If that wasn’t enough, I even had the narrator’s mother mention the idea of duct-taping her windows and doors to combat biological warfare. It was around that month that the *Texas Monthly* had a gas mask on its cover.

The first few scenes deal with a college campus and entire city blackout and the ensuing hysteria. With the highway flooded, the narrator actually ends up walking home, which takes several hours with the crowds, and is then informed by her mother over her cell phone of what's going on. Apparently there's a blackout in every major city. The narrator asks if they're under attack.

“I don't know, but don't go outside. There's a plague...It sounds like rabies. But I've heard that these people seem completely normal until they bite you and you get it. So you'll have no way of knowing who has it. I don't want you being around anyone. Not even your friends” (6).

I purposely made the vampire possibility very obvious, because this isn't a fictional story where you simply try and figure out what's going on. I prefer for the reader to struggle with the meaning of it, since that's the thing I'm trying to get across. The vampires are, again, vehicles for understanding, not the point. But I do take pleasure in defying conventions. These vampires do go outside in the sunlight, there's no clichéd mentions of stakes through the heart or holy water. They're lurking behind the eyes of normal people, which I think makes it more eerie. I wasn't safe getting coffee with anyone without them insincerely bringing up September 11th, even people that I never suspected of this behavior.

The entire middle of the story is the narrator dealing with paranoia and fear in an apartment with no electricity. She occasionally hears people walk by. She's comforted with both normal and ambiguous conversations that make her feel paranoid. Finally, her fears are confirmed when against her blinds she sees the silhouette of a fight between boyfriend/girlfriend that ends in a kiss where the boyfriend's lips are torn off (28). I always wondered what I would do if there was an attack and fear made me play out different scenarios. The narrator crawls into

her kitchen and shivers in the corner, which was the most likely from the list of my possible reactions. At the end the electricity comes back on, school reconvenes, and there wasn't any plague, according to the news.

But this false sense of security I employed is wrecked when the narrator goes back to her vampire class and something isn't right. She's not sure why, but everyone looks more attractive—dressed-up: “It's like 6th street throw-up in here” (29). But she chalks it up to everyone being vibrantly alive. However, she is startled when her professor appears with a “shiny blue shirt” and “leather pants” (29).

I did this to cash in on some of the more entertaining clichés about vampires—they all wear shiny clothes, spike their hair, and leather pants like on the popular TV show “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”—as well as slowly clue the reader into what's happened to build suspense. The suspense is further built by the narrator staring off into space and finding her eyes lingering on people's teeth without knowing why. It's at the climax of her professor's very strange lecture that she finally realizes why she's staring. I used the cliché of the ‘sharp teeth’ to make the metaphor easily accessible and, therefore, make the meaning more accessible.

“The news tells you that there was no plague, but the truth is there was...And we snuffed it out,” the professor says. “The plague of humanity has ended ”” (30).

I hoped this line to signal what was going on without actually literally spelling it out. It is also after this line that the narrator pretends to be calm as she exits the room. In the end she gets in her car and drives, thinking to herself: “maybe if I just avoided everyone, I could stay human a little while longer” (31).

Another story that inspired me is “Harrison Bergeron” by Kurt Vonnegut. It's about a world where everyone is regulated to the point of all being alike, an imagined utopia of a life that

would be fair. “Nobody was smarter than anybody else. Nobody was better looking than anybody else. Nobody was stronger or quicker than anybody else” (Vonnegut 7).

Harrison Bergeron is a once attractive gladiator-type forced to wear a red clown nose to hide the fact that he’s attractive, and carry weight handicaps to slow him down to make him average. He escapes from prison and releases a ballerina of smothered talent who dances with him, showing in a broadcast that everyone is not truly equal. They get shot dead during their dance, and the system remains intact. In a mere seven pages, Vonnegut manages to establish a fairly complex plot as well as pull off absurd details that manage to work for the story instead of against it.

This is what I attempt to do in “Draft the Supermodels.” I enter the plot with an absurd mission statement about drafting supermodels to balance out the ratio of attractive females to attractive male, but when the first scene picks up, it’s clear that the idea is being taken seriously. The story jumps about five years into the future where the drafting has gone terribly wrong and all the attractive women are dead. The main character is confronted by a woman with a disgusting scar over her eye who attempts to force herself on him. I try to make the details of the story absurd from the beginning—for instance, in this time we’re at the war with the Canadians which is unprecedented in history—so that as the details get more and more strange, it doesn’t throw the reader.

The main character is even criticized for the way he dresses by his male friend to show that gender roles have been completely reversed in this story: ““Women like men in long jackets. They think it’s sexy,’ he told me. ‘Just because you’re covered doesn’t mean you’re not getting their attention’” (38).

On the final page (40) the main character finds that the one person he cares most about dies in the draft and he doesn't see the point of living. At a loss of all hope, he doesn't stop the woman from forcing herself on him when she tries again.

The Importance of Nonfiction: If a Rose is a Rose Just Say So

Writing nonfiction helps me find my voice. It helps appease the natural delay between my thoughts and my expression of them. With enough time I can express myself with eloquence, wit, and charm. I can even be concise when there isn't a rigid time limit imposed on me. Like Italo Calvino in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* I prefer writing to speaking "because I can revise each sentence until I reach the point where—if not exactly satisfied with my words—I am able at least to eliminate those reasons for dissatisfaction that I can put my finger on" (56).

For me writing nonfiction is thinking directly onto the page. Only then do I understand what's in front of me. The pieces of my life make a pattern and I can finally see it. By organizing the happenings of my life to others in a way they can understand, I too can finally understand. It brings me out of the dark and into my life.

I didn't understand what went wrong in any of my romantic relationships until I wrote them down. I've written a short story for every relationship I've experienced. I started doing this after reading the nonfiction work of anthropology by Candace Bushnell *Sex and the City*. In this account is a blunt rendering of all relationships touching the author's life, including her own intimate love affairs. She and Mr. Big are not necessarily destined to be together—in fact, often things don't work at all. She sees this, acknowledges and writes it down to explore the problems in every relationship she observes, conceding that in relationships there are no perfect fits.

My best relationship story, of course, stems from my worst relationship. Before I wrote it, I was under the impression that I had been treated well, until I saw it on paper. In "The Other Girls" I saw Robert for what he was, finally. He was a cad who stared at other girl's chests and manipulated me into not complaining about it. The flirt who let promiscuous girls sit on his lap, and the inconsiderate creep who gave other girls massages right in front of me. It's not that I was

blind, but I couldn't separate the sugar from the salt until I saw it in writing. Since I was with him for a year, it just seemed like an overload of information. Most of our relationship was me refraining from speaking. I felt like I had no voice to argue. It wasn't until after I wrote it down, that I found the words to tell him exactly what I thought of him. I try to convey this feeling of speechlessness in a key beginning scene where he lets go of the wheel of his car and tells me that it's now my responsibility to drive. I don't take the wheel, we'll crash, and it'll be my fault (45). I tell the scene straight—exactly as it happened—offering little information about his motives. I try to have the reader piece together what he's doing, which is essentially testing whether or not he can manipulate me. This sets him up as a typical emotionally abusing blame-shifter, without actually coming out and using those terms. If this had been fiction I would've never thought of using a scene to say all these things. In this case, I'm lucky such a strange incident stuck in my mind, to represent the complicated power dynamic in our relationship.

I use this same straight approach for the 'rape scene' of the story. I tell it exactly as it happened and then don't explain to the reader what he means when his response to my question of "Why did you do that?" is simply "Did what?" (55) I want them to again recognize that he won't take blame, without spoon-feeding that to them in a sentence.

Rape also has a way of taking your voice away, as is explored by the character Jack in *Anthropology of an American Girl* by H.T. Hamann:

'You were wrong to keep it to yourself. You let your shame silence you. It's exactly what they were counting on. You protected them.' / It was an interesting point, to think that shame can take your voice away. Maybe it was so. Maybe I thought that if I kept my humiliation to myself, it would go away faster. (117)

I've found that approach empty. By writing about that terrible experience where I couldn't speak, I've regained my lost voice and been empowered by sharing it.

The other subject I tackle in nonfiction is status. This is where I take cues from Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, and Lauren Weisberger of the *Devil Wears Prada*. These authors write about status and how to gain or keep it. Their heroines all suffer from most, if not all, of the same delusions of what society demands of their appearance and behavior and shows these struggles and tensions in a blunt and straightforward way.

Being from Dallas, TX where money and appearance are just as important as they would have been in any 19th century drawing room, I'm the ideal person to write about this topic, from my streaked hair to acrylic nails. Like the heroines of these books, I have certain loopholes to the spoils of high society, even though I'm actually relatively poor. I know what it's like to enter that world while simultaneously being shown the door (and realizing for myself that I don't—can't—belong there) even though I don't seem to belong anywhere else. I see the light and the darkness in both worlds, and try hard to explain one side to the other when I write.

My first nonfiction story on this subject is called "Shallow America." It has a variant range of topics that all deal with money, and status. In the first section I take a hunt for a fake Louis Vuitton bag to an extreme by buying one out of a trunk in an Albertson's parking lot from someone I expected to be some young thug. I show this to not be the case: "He was in his 70s, at least. Suddenly, this wasn't as exciting. He slowly rose from the car and circled to his trunk, hunched over to keep from disturbing his poor back" (62). I try to further stress the incongruity between expectation and fact created in this event by adding, "He has insisted we meet at noon so he and his wife could go to an outdoor concert."

The entire story sets expectations against actualities which I believe is the best way to write nonfiction, since it not only shows the reader the truth, but makes the reader feel it too.

Further in the first section I fear that when Mort asks me to come inside the grocery store to make change that he's actually trying to arrest me:

I was suddenly worried that he lured me into the store so that men in black uniforms could launch out from behind the counter, throw a net over me, and drag me to some black van with dark windows. But nothing so exciting happened. Instead, he accepted the wad of money in plain sight and told me me: 'Nice doin' business with you...And since I'm here, I'm gonna buy some fruit.' (64)

Having exaggerated anxieties before an anticlimactically outcome forces the reader to experience and decipher reality as I had to originally, in the moment and not without prejudice. I think this makes the story reach its audience in a more intimate way.

Besides setting up expectations, I also like to employ the use of total implication. I've always heard that the way to win the reader is to implicate yourself. This is what I do in my memoirs. I am completely honest about myself—rough edges and all. As this story continues I work at a major magazine and find the working world shallower than I expected. I consider sleeping with a celebrity to improve my mood as well as gain bragging rights. I am also so overjoyed with the proposition of borrowing a friend's Land Rover for a year and a half, that I dump him at the airport and drive off without even thanking him. I do however send him this dazzling text message: "I just realized that I forgot to hug you. So hug☺. Thanks so much" (77).

I let the bag I carry and the car I drive define who I am, and I insist it matters in this society. I really think whether I'm right or wrong about that is actually peripheral. The important thing is I admit it, on paper, for everyone to see. I'm very unabashed in my nonfiction. I don't care if the reader likes me. I'm just honest about myself, and I really think I come through because of that, especially since I often question my own behavior and the value of the things I accomplish.

At the end of “Shallow America” I believe that the Louis Vuitton bags I buy off the internet for cheap are the real deal and I feel like I’ve finally made it. Then I have a discussion with a friend of mine, a handbag guru and realize that those weren’t my salvation either:

‘[T]he only way you can really tell on designer bags are the zippers—cheap,’ she told me.

‘What?’ I asked, attempting to zip my bag and discontinue my nervous habit. It got caught in the middle and I had to force it. It wasn’t until that moment that I realized how tough it always was to zip that bag, and how much the zipper seemed more like painted plastic than metal, despite the convincing LVs. (79)

I use the discovery of the fake bag as a metaphor for discovering fakeness in myself. It is also a way to show that I imitate the rich instead of live like them, which I realize, at the end of the story, might always be the case.

In my final story, the “Year of the Rover,” I expand on the Land Rover situation presented in “Shallow America” and show that what seemed ideal to me a year ago is actually much harder than I expected.

Hoping that the two stories will be read in succession, I leave one story in a moment of starry eyes, and jump to a moment where everything has gone wrong. It’s a year later and the Land Rover has caught fire and is falling apart in every way. I also stress my embarrassment in these moments when dealing with the police, the firemen and bystanders, to show that it’s silly to be concerned with appearance during an emergency but expose my own character as someone who’s come to depend on her car for status. After the fireman puts the fire in the engine out, he asks me what’s it’s like to own a Land Rover. My answer shocked me when I gave it so I merely replicated it:

‘It’s great,’ I said. ‘When it’s not catching on fire.’

It was a Land Rover, and it was supposed to be my salvation, my miracle, my white knight that took me away from the cars of my past. But in the past three months I spent more money on parts and installation than I had ever spent the entire four years I drove

my previous car. And when it did work it was barely drivable: it leaked gas, it rocked from tire to tire because it needed a new front coupling, its steering wheel shook violently when I went over 50 (it needed a front end alignment), it tried to overheat when I boldly cranked the AC on it's lowest setting for more than 20 minutes *in Texas*, and now it caught on fire when I parked because it needed a hose that would cost me another \$330 when I had just given the dealer \$310 to replace the rear coupling, which is basically a joint that keeps both of the rear tires from flying off. *That* money was hard to get; *this* money was plain impossible. I actually started to miss my old crappy convertible, which lacked expected features and broke all the time, but was, at least, cheap to fix. (84-85)

I then jump between back to the past and tell a story where the Capri, my old convertible, broke down.

Strangely, it's only problem at the time was that the windshield wipers weren't working and it happened to be raining. This isn't anywhere near the engine catching on fire, but that's exactly why I picked it. The Capri sure had its share of horrible break downs, but sometimes the thing that went wrong was a small thing. I thought this contrasted nicely with an expensive car that caught on fire if you merely refused to replace one of its expensive custom parts. I also use this scene to express a tension between my friend Cynthia and I:

It was my turn to drive, *finally*, I could feel my friend Cynthia thinking. She had the newest car among our group of friends so she usually drove on our weekends to Austin and lately it was signaled by her gritted teeth and sighs whenever I politely asked if she could drive that she was not okay with it. (85)

The next scene is from a time when the Land Rover is running just fine, and there is another discussion of who will drive, but the feelings and tensions in this scene are completely opposite. I've been the one driving all the time at this point, and I want the break:

'I think it's someone *else's car's* turn,' I said, still looking at my feet. It sounded silly when it came out but it was true. Why did Marc's car always have to be *the car*? It didn't. It was easy for them to use it up because they weren't accountable for it, but I was...I had every right to refuse. They were just depending on my politeness to bully me into accepting. But Dawna and Cary avoid driving at all costs. With me right out refusing the responsibility fell on the next politest person.

'Well, I guess I'll be the one driving,' Cynthia snapped, staring at me...

Even when Cynthia sighed and gritted her teeth as she gathered her purse and keys, I continuously averted her eyes. She couldn't get to me anymore. I had made up for the past. In fact, if anything, she owed *me* now. (89-90)

I continue in this fashion in the story—only describing people's reactions and tone of voice when dealing with cars and car decisions. I do this because for the purposes of this story, I think that's the best way to characterize them. I avoid any physical description or other information about each person to show my own 'tunnel vision' and shallowness in my life by mostly concentrating on transportation. This reveals that I see them as merely an obstacle trying to keep me from riding in their cars, or a burden that expects a ride in my car. I also happen to think that how people deal with car trouble or drive-sharing reveals more about their character than a description could.

Some people blame you when your car breaks down, which means they have a problem directing their anger in the right place. Some people feel burdened when you expect help, which exposes a certain amount of selfishness. And in the relationship outlined in this story, a guy seems to be helpful about the car trouble before he becomes my boyfriend, but once he persuades me to date him he won't invest his time in that again.

I try to capture a more complicated level of emotions when I write nonfiction—one that's deeply superficial. It seems paradoxical, but I've found that if you admit things—things that this society might call shallow—out loud, you tend to get a response. This is because it's an untapped subject. If no one talks about the fact that a car really can change your life because people will treat you better and you'll feel better, then how can they explore the different facets of that truth, or even just argue against it?

For me, fiction and nonfiction are both a matter of voice. In one I stride to make someone understand a voice that lack of experience normally wouldn't allow, like the voice of a dyslexic

child, or the strange thoughts of someone no one could ever be: a time traveler. In nonfiction I say the things that no one wants to believe are true, and then I tell the reader all the details that support that truth. Only you can decide what the truth says back.

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PART II
SHORT STORIES

Timelessness

I've researched several things to help me understand my situation. There are plenty of movies on the subject, as well as some literature, but they always make the same mistakes. These stories always take a normal person and throw him into some kind of manmade contraption that's supposed to move through and compromise time. First of all, time is not a physical thing. It's not a path you can travel down, so a time machine built out of, let's say, a DeLorean would be useless. Cars are built to drive along roads; that's the only purpose they'll ever serve. Secondly, not just anyone can travel through time. You can't just wake-up one morning, sit down in a machine with a large circular calendar on the back, pull a lever, and watch the world build up or down around you. Time is not a VCR. It is a natural order, and unfortunately that order is completely random which actually can make a pattern in a large enough time frame, like let's say infinity. But it's impossible for a normal person to understand. I don't even get it, which is probably why I'd even consider being at a place like this. I knew it was a joke—insulting to my intelligence—but I had to grasp at any information on the subject since there wasn't much. But all I could think as I watched the speaker was:

“This man's never had sex. Why should I listen to him?”

He was confident, but you had to sit there and wonder why. He had his large glasses, his greasy hair, his little laser pointers, his slides, and his bored audience. But he had my complete attention, but only because I knew plenty he didn't.

I had seen him earlier at a diner. I had no idea he was the speaker for this little seminar with fliers in the West Mall that read: “See Real Life Time Travelers. Come to UTC Room 2.12 at 8:00 p.m.” But I had already noticed a familiar look in his eyes: the look of disinterest. His eyes darted from object to movement vainly grasping at impossibilities. He also knew his flaw—

wanting the impossible—but desired forbidden things just the same. It’s like a disease that most historians carry. They all wish they were born under a different phase of the sun. The present doesn’t hold any passion for them, because there’s little mystery in it. Well, I was there to enlighten him, but he already knew a couple of things beyond usual knowledge.

“I believe that time travel is possible,” he said, predictably.

You *think*?

He had no idea that I was there. I was sitting in the back row probably with my usual snide expression and nodding every time he said something remotely intelligent—or not. I just felt like nodding.

“This is a slide of the Titanic,” said his ironed out voice as the new slide appeared.

It looks different.

It was broken and covered in green algae. Crabs walked on the gray floor near small broken china dolls and little girl’s shoes. Everything was dark with a greenish tint.

Oh, it’s under the water. It must have sunk.

“Draw your attention to this shiny metal object on the very inside of the hull,” he clicked for another slide and it was a close-up of...

“It’s a 2001 Fossil watch. It’s a man’s watch, and it was found in 1985 as part of the wreckage...”

I pulled up my left sleeve and found nothing but flesh. I couldn’t believe he had found that! This guy deserved more credit than I expected.

And it looks broken. They told me that it could withstand up to 1500 feet of water. Damn swindlers.

“The government didn’t release this to the public because they were afraid the tabloids would have a field day...”

The audience actually laughed at this point. He wasn’t funny; they must’ve felt sorry for him.

“Plus, they weren’t sure that the numbers on it actually stood for the year. Then a year ago Fossil put out that exact model,” he said as his voice-pitch rose with annoying triumph.

The audience didn’t buy it. One student spoke up with, “Couldn’t *someone* have used a computer to cut and paste the image of a fossil watch to that picture? It wouldn’t be hard to do.”

The speaker looked down and sighed. “Yes, it’s possible, but the real question is, why would anyone want to do that?” he asked with sparkling eyes. He looked so sure that he had collapsed the student’s whole world with that one rebuttal. Poor guy.

“To sell more Fossil watches,” the student responded easily, like it was the most elementary question he had ever received.

This is where I felt sorry for the loser historian, and had to help. “But the watch is broken,” I yelled out into the crowd.

Damn swindlers. They had to be to sell *me* a watch.

The historian squeaked with enthusiasm. “Exactly!”

Dude, calm down.

Then the historian continued to grill the same know-it-all student. “So if Fossil wouldn’t benefit from this, who would?”

“Historians who want people to come to their seminars?” said the student. I didn’t butt in that time. Someone had to say it.

He colored, moved on, and made the mistake of showing some more slides.

Next he claimed that he had photographed currency that must have been from another time. They were coins that were flat and silver, like the shape of a penny when it gets run over by a train. He had seen them at a local restaurant being used by some shady looking homeless man.

You're drowning, dude. Move on.

There was a sort of hushed laughter stirring that seemed to distract him, but he pressed on anyway. Next he showed a picture of a monk burning himself in protest in the 60s. It struck me because I was in the picture. I sunk in my chair and tried to peer over all the spiked hair. There I was, next to the seated monk with the hot orange robe and the flames curdling his flesh, holding my mouth closed with my cheeks puffed.

I suddenly wondered if maybe he was sharp enough to know I was there. Was he about to point me out? Had he lured me there?

"Do you see this man?" he asked. He pointed at the monk and not me. I realized it was a false alarm. He had merely gotten lucky.

What did he expect the crowd to say in response? "*Geeee, the guy that's on fire? I hadn't even noticed him.*"

The next slide was of a completely different bald guy walking through an airport. The only things they had in common were the lack of hair and the generic orange monk robe.

"He's still alive," he said dramatically.

"Oh *come on!*" yelled a guy who was wearing a green shirt that said "Gettin' Lucky in Kentucky."

The historian's face flushed with shame, and he looked down at his feet for an uncomfortable amount of time. The slides discontinued, and he began his Q & A session early. He was terrible at fencing off people's doubts. He even got angry once and said, "Just *because.*"

He wasn't the best speaker, but he had me listening. It was too big a coincidence that I was in his audience, as well as one of his pictures, and he had even found my watch. It was just random enough to be a pattern. He had found traces of me without even knowing it. Sure he had an element of the pathetic—okay, scratch that, he was the personification of pathetic—but maybe he had some kind of hidden gift. Maybe he could help.

I approached him while he was gathering up his boxes. They were probably full of dates and wars and detailed accounts of who shagged who in Egypt. I told him I enjoyed his seminar, and flattered him about his grasp of history. I also asked if he'd like to grab a drink on 6th street and talk about Communist Russia.

He scratched a place behind his ear in thought. It was probably the only time in his life that anyone had asked him to get a drink. He smiled warmly to show his gratefulness but then said, "No...the bars on 6th are for the students."

"Come on," I pushed. "You're a hip guy," I insisted with clenched teeth. "There's no one in the world I'd rather talk to about Stalin."

At this his smile mixed with modesty and embarrassment.

"But there needs to be lots of beer," I added truthfully.

I stood there for a good 20 minutes convincing him. Eventually all it took was little finesse on my part: I seduced him with my extensive knowledge of the iron curtain, and he was mine.

Two-and-half hours of Russian leaders and Irish car bombs later, he started to get a little curious about my unusual historical insight. He was also getting a little sloppy. It was no accident that he thought an Irish Car Bomb was a shot inside a cup of Red Bull instead of a cup

of Guinness. I always have to get people really drunk or really messed-up before I even try telling the truth.

“This is what I don’t get about you Keith,” he began.

I go by Keith when people ask me my name. I don’t know why. I’ve just always liked that name.

He leaned forward to speak more intimately but almost fell forward. I softly nudged him back to a somewhat upright position.

“Well you know more about General Hideki Tojo than any historian I’ve ever met, but you say you’ve never heard of Bush?”

“Naaaa. I don’t watch much porn,” I said with a sip.

At this, small rumbles of laughter exploded into raspy hysterics and he began to annoyingly pound his fist into my back. “You’re a funny guy, Keith!”

“Yeah, yeah—great,” I said angrily with palms up, thinking about slugging him. Thankfully he stopped.

“But seriously. Why is it that you seem so...I don’t know...” he paused as some drool slipped out of the corner of his mouth and he dabbed it with a napkin. “Out of touch?”

“Well, to be real honest, David, I’m a time traveler,” I said nonchalantly before I threw back my tequila shot. “Awww, that’s the stuff.”

At first his eyes searched my face frantically for meaning, and then he nodded with understanding. “I know what you mean. As a historian, I often feel like a metaphorical time traveler myself.”

“I was being literal.”

“*Oh*,” he said with a nervous giggle, but instead of bolting, he smashed headfirst into the wooden bar. I should have cut him off sooner.

It was really hard to drag him to a cab, and really difficult to convey to the driver where we were headed since he was barely coherent, but somehow we got there. A couple of hours later, when he came around, he was really concerned that I was in his apartment.

“I don’t remember saying you could come here,” he insisted.

“I’ll bet you don’t remember paying the tab either,” I said as I handed him his wallet.

“I’ve had just about enough of this. I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“No.”

“I’ll kick your ass!” he said suddenly, in an unconvincingly squeaky voice. This made me laugh, which scared him.

“I’m calling the police,” he said seriously. This made me laugh harder, since I’m impossible to contain, which made him even more concerned for his safety.

“Do you want money?” he asked with desperation.

I dug in one of my pockets (my ankle length brown trench coat has the best storage). He backed himself into the furthest corner of the room with a petrified expression. He thought I was getting a gun.

But I don’t like guns; it was a knife. He looked like he was about to scream until I tossed it at his feet. His eyebrows creased together and his mouth gaped like it was waiting for an apple.

“Why don’t you take a look at that?” I said, then sat down on one of his chairs. He had a pretty nice pad. Lots of throw rugs, lots of black and white photos and the table near me had a

lava lamp on it. I watched the bubbles mingle together and separate. It reminded me of something.

He knelt down on the floor and picked up the knife like it was a snake. Then he began to turn it over and over in his hands curiously. He stopped and looked up at me with this ‘I’m a historian and I’m now in heaven’ look.

“*That’s right...good,*” I patronized. I picked up a letter opener and began using it to get gunk out from under my nails.

He bolted into a room and came back with a magnifying glass. He was, no doubt checking the engravings for flaws and the value of the different gems on the hilt.

“This looks like it’s from the Shang dynasty,” he said with excitement.

“Because it is,” I told him.

“This isn’t the kind of thing you can fake. Even if you found someone who could recreate this...they’d be mistakes...and...and these gems...they’re worth millions...and—”

I cut him off with “*I know,*” because the rambling was starting to get to me.

His shoulders dropped and his face became inevitably puzzled. He surrendered. My spiel began.

I admit I don’t know all the details, but whatever reason behind the chaos of my life, it has to do with me exclusively. I must be a unique type of person. I can’t remember ever belonging to a time of my own—just being thrown from one time to the other. I have two theories as to why this is possible:

I did once belong to a signature time, and I was practically a normal person. But I was changed; a mistake was made. An unnatural shift occurred that sent me somewhere else entirely

because, suddenly, I was an unnatural being. I have no idea how this might've happened. My memory has always been shitty (which doesn't bode well for a time traveler does it?).

Continuing on, I was put in the wrong place, so immediately time began to correct itself. However, instead of dealing out all the cards in order and putting me back in the deck, time just started shuffling me around chaotically hoping to put me back by chance. Maybe one day the traveling will stop, because I will reach my home.

My other less-childish theory is that I have no time, and that I was never normal. I have no memory of being allowed to live a full month anywhere, so maybe I've always been this way. Maybe time is just as confused as I am. It'll throw me from one place to another for eternity because I don't fit anywhere. Everyone else is a square in a square world, and I am one of very few circles.

I also don't age. As far as I know I've always resembled a twenty-something male with blonde hair and blue eyes and, except for that one memory, I've never been older or younger than that. Yet I'm certain time passes because things happen. But I have no measure of that passing.

I can't say if I'm in the past, present, or future because these conditions don't exist for me. To me everything is the present because it's my present. I only describe something as 'past' if it's further back than the time I was just in and only future if it's later than. But often I have no idea where I am, so I don't refer to it as anything. I also never ask anyone what time it is, or what year it is because it's pointless for me to measure time in the conventional way. I have no special place to get back to; I have no special place to go. I can't have a schedule. In theory, I can't be early or late anywhere. I usually just can't be somewhere because I'm already gone. It's a very

unstable life. But there is one good thing about it: I'm the only person I've ever met who has a good enough reason to be a flake.

I know, how exciting. You'd think I'd condone suicide by now.

So as a time traveler you aren't given the luxuries of a normal person. You have no fixed place, no age, and no real goals that can be obtained. You also have no place to return when your journey is over because it never ends. You're nameless, timeless, ageless, and directionless.

If everyone knew this, he/she wouldn't be so anxious to jump in their time traveling sports cars or press the rewind button. People complain that the only thing they have control over is the present, which controls the future. Well so what? There's no point in traveling to another time to spruce up your time if you don't have one, especially if you can't control when and where you land. I'd gladly take the present with some control over all times with no control what-so-ever. There's the rub. Being able to progress naturally with the world is the best deal. I wish I had the ability to live in time, instead of just travel through it. I'm so envious.

"So you're a time traveler, with amnesia?" he asked.

People always fixate on this.

"Yeah, I think I've been time traveling so long that it's fried my brain or something," I said quickly. I didn't want to get caught up in further explanation since it was *I* who needed his *help*, even though I wasn't sure what he could do for me. But he begged me to convey all my experiences to him, and he was so annoying about it that I tried.

It's very hard for someone who thinks along a random timeline to explain things to someone who thinks in a linear way. For some reason he decided taking notes was the best way

to deal with me. He even drew diagrams. I'd say something, he'd try to draw some kind of timeline of my life, and then flash it at me asking, "Is this right?"

"No, don't be a simpleton," I'd say flatly. Then he'd erase and start over. I was mostly just having fun with him.

It was all fine until he asked me how far into the future I had been. This is where I froze up and tried to answer without thinking about it. It wasn't his fault; he didn't know. In the middle of a swallow I almost choked. I think some beer got into my lungs. And my stomach felt squirmy. I wanted to forget, but I could see them: the eyes, the legs, the blackness—the shrilly screams.

I was there again. The ten foot creatures with pinchers and eight legs were at first unaware of me, probably because I was in a fetal position whimpering. In that vast wasteland of desert, humans had probably been extinct for millions of years. Then the sun—which was now white—imploded. A flash of blinding light and then it dimmed to orange as a blue ring shot out into the horizon...then...the sun went out...darkness... stinging cold...the glowing blue eyes were everywhere...it was so dark...my pupils would never adjust ...the rumbling of the legs...like thunder...coming for me. I'm lucky I left when I did.

I never want to go back there. But part of me knows I will. I'm going to die there one day. If I return after the sun is gone the earth will be frozen, but at least I'll die quickly. Because if I return before that, the Spidercrabs will probably tear me to pieces and eat...slowly.

His tense jaw and fixed eyes lured me back to reality. I was covered in sweat. "Pretty far," I finally answered short of breath.

"What year was it?" he asked.

You bastard.

I saw the horrible image in my mind for a second time. But I was slowly able to find composure.

“Depends. How long will it take for the sun to go supernova?”

I took another gulp of my beer. I was annoyed. I hated talking about myself.

“About 9 million years. That’s incredible! I’ve gotta say, I wish I could switch places with you.”

“Then you haven’t been listening,” I snapped. You fucking moron.

“How long will you be here?” David asked.

“I don’t know. It’s totally random.”

Then I started to feel it. Something jabbed into my gut and made me collapse.

“Are you okay?” David asked.

Sure why?

I looked down at my hand and it was shaking, and my shirt was now soaked in sweat. My head fell in my hands—it was hurting. I started breathing heavily.

David looked a little confused. I guess this seemed pretty weird to a normal person. He helped me climb off the wall, and I crashed against him.

“I’m n-not done,” I stuttered. Something hit me like a shovel to the skull, because head trauma makes everything feel unstable and surreal. Or was the ground actually shaking?

I tried to stand but ended up falling backwards and painfully meeting the ground. I rolled over and mashed my face against the carpet.

“Keith, what’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m n-not finished,” I repeated.

David stooped and tried to pull me up.

I shoved him—whimsy frame and all—into a nearby chair and probably hurt him pretty badly.

“Stay away from me!” I yelled. I struggled to kneel and found salty glass embedded in my palms. I didn’t even get to finish my margarita.

He slowly rose to his feet. “How can I help you?” he asked. He stood slanted back with no intention of getting close again.

I forced a laugh that came out so loud, it was creepy.

“You can’t.”

When his face clenched and his eyes widened, I could tell he was desperately trying to identify the incredible object rolling in behind me. I didn’t even turn around to marvel in its awkward beauty. I’ve seen it too many times.

I guess—unless you’re me—it looks pretty strange. It always springs out of some form of water—his small fish bowl—but then it becomes part of the air and races toward you. It’s not solid, but it’s not liquid. It’s like a sphere that forms and reflects everything around it like a mirror. Then it opens.

It felt like someone punched me in the gut as I was thrown backwards and swallowed into its cold goopy interior. The room whirled by painfully and I watched the historian’s face as it engulfed me.

And then...nothing. It’s like passing out. While inside you feel nothing, and see nothing, until suddenly you’re somewhere else. In a moment I was gone. I hope he was quick enough to get a picture; then he’d really had something to share in his seminars.

When I awoke, there was something heavy and cold bearing against my eyelids. I could move easily enough, in fact, I was suspended in something but my eyes wouldn’t open. I was so

cold. My mouth opened and filled with some substance. I finally forced my eyes open, tried to gasp, but instead choked. It was hazy where I was. There was murkiness and I couldn't see three feet before my face.

I hate it when I wake-up underwater.

I found myself at low tide being pushed toward and drawn away from a shore of golf ball sized rocks at a copasetic pace. I waded towards land, while the large rocks shifted and rolled beneath my feet—cutting me. By the time I got away from the rocky beach and to the cobblestones of the street I was limping and leaving bloody toe prints.

Where the hell are my shoes?

I passed out again, in the center of Brighton, England (I was tipped off by the eccentricity of the Indian Architecture of the Royal Pavilion).

When I woke again the beach had moved and was a different beach. It was hundreds of feet below me and trailing off to my right. From my diagonal view, the distant cliffs resembled Easter eggs speckled with electric purple and mossy green. They were nestled into the sand of cinnamon and sugar that made the half-moon curve of the shoreline. The emerald green water swirled crystal blue and deep purple.

Two rambunctious children (bent like two peanuts from my viewpoint) slipped from between two far away cliffs and surged out to the water. They wore hot pink and hot orange bathing suits and had tangled hair.

How the hell do I get down there?

Before me was a sharp drop-off of shingled rocks too vertical to grasp. I finally became frustrated and sat with my feet dangling over my view of the dreamlike place.

I saw a gray bird speckled white. The wind was so strong he flew in place above me. His wings, full of pulsating muscles, stretched out and pulled in skillfully, but the opposed forces canceled each other out, despite all his effort.

Frustrated, I listened to the children laugh and splash below me. The area was so undisturbed that the waves and their voices were the only sounds bouncing off the cliffs into my ears. I was envious.

The ground shook again. Instead of fighting it, I just lay down on my stomach with my chin hanging off the cliff and pretended I could almost touch the shaving cream-like foam riding the waves to shore. I closed my eyes and imagined stripping off my sweaty socks and sinking my feet into sand soft as flour. I imagined rolling up my jeans and stomping out into the icy sting of the ocean and feeling it soak into the loose cuffs but not caring.

The convulsions were painful, but I closed my eyes and pretended they weren't. I felt the splash of stinging salt water once inside the warp, and it was so peaceful when my eyes inevitably feel closed.

Not Just Another Bar

I was sitting on a barstool with no recollection of actually arriving there, but they called me “Mr. Keith” in an English-like language and apparently I had a tab there. The barmaid informed me that I had enough alcohol in my system to kill a Drascon.

“Good. I don't know what that is, but it sounds big.”

I go by Keith when people ask my name. Sometimes, I forget I'm a time traveler and I actually think I'm this 'Keith' person. Or I just think I'm so drunk that I *think* I'm a time traveler. It's comforting and happens when I'm really out of it—hence the carousing.

I looked around. Everyone was wearing tight-fitting jump suits, sitting in booths, and drinking glowing shots. I could be anywhere.

“Where the hell am I?”

“You ask that a lot don’t you, honey?” said the barmaid with a wink before she strutted to another table. It was cute, but she didn’t answer my question.

Soon I felt the usual flame thrower scorching the inside of my throat, and knew those last few shots were coming back. I fumbled to the closest slab of metal that resembled a door. A pressed *some* button that said *something* and the door slide open slowly. There was this annoying sound—like a siren.

I was probably some sight to behold, a drunken idiot standing and blinking before a blue force field that led to something he didn’t understand.

There was no ground, and the night sky seemed unusually expansive. The stars were brighter and closer than usual. The colors were brilliant. I looked left and right, up and down, and all I saw were stars, distant planets, blue mists.... “Oh, I’m in space,” I thought. “It’s been forever. Well shit, where’s the bathroom?”

The nice creature (brown with tentacles) ranting in another language grabbed me and nudged me toward the correct door, before he angrily closed the one that wasn’t meant to be opened. While hurling, I wondered why there was even a door there. I’m sure it confused more than just *me*.

I reemerged feeling much worse, but at least the gross stuff was over. I climbed back onto the barstool and tried to focus on anything. I wanted to survey my surroundings but I was just too drunk. Everything looked dark and foreign—so the usual.

Then I felt that familiar feeling bearing down on me—the one that always got its way. I tried to stand but fell backwards and painfully caught the seat of the stool between my back and the floor. I rolled over the hard metal and mashed my face against the ground’s refreshing coldness. It felt like concrete, but it had this glass-like clearness. Looking through the clear floor gave me the feeling of swimming through space, and earth was looming beneath me. It was shades of blue with flakes of brown. The swirls of white and gray reminded me of whipped cream. It looked so blissful from up here.

“So that’s where it is,” I mumbled into the ground with a jaw that didn’t have the freedom of movement.

On my belly I convulsed. My mouth filled with foam. My head ached.

But then my body stopped shaking and the moment seemed to freeze, and for the first time in a while, I saw beauty in the situation instead of horror. In the water I was in I could see the reflection of my face transposed over the lucid vision of the time warp tumbling in behind me and the view of earth.

The time warp reflected the colors in the water; it reflected my eyes; it reflected parts of the great wall—spinning and rolling the beautiful images in the water before me like a kaleidoscope—spinning and rolling through the air—before it swallowed me.

Some darkness you can feel before you open your eyes, and once I did, I was sorry. It must have come for me while I slept. Usually I like it when that happens—I pass out, stone drunk, don’t have to feel the pain—but this time I knew I was somewhere bad. I could smell it. Rotted meat.

Those fiery blue wide eyes surrounded me. They spiraled around in all directions like I was in some deep cave. They had been waiting for me. And once they saw me, the shrilly screams began, and their legs rumbled as they surged for my tasty body all at once.

I closed my eyes like I could shut that world out. It was the only thing I could do, since I was partially ready to feel peace. The ability to re-grow my right arm really wasn't going to help me there.

They ripped into me before I took my third breath of their world. They greedily bit off bloody chunks. They sliced their sharp legs into my arms and knees. And at one point a pincher even cut me clean in half. Then one bit into my stomach and ran into a corner to feast on its contents unfolding my lengthy intestines, which snapped at the end with a painful jerk.

I thanked God that it was so dark. I didn't want to see my body in pieces. I didn't want to see one of them swallow my hand, or my legs, or my pelvis. And I couldn't scream during all of this, not because I wasn't moved too, but because one of them had ripped out my throat.

The squishing, the smell, the organs bursting out and slipping past my ears, the blood soaking my hair...I threw-up a lot, but it didn't deter them. They were hungry.

But I sound pretty calm don't I? It's hard not too, now that I have knowledge of how this little nightmare ended.

I felt all these horrible things happen to me, and it was real, but suddenly, for no reason at all, I felt *perfectly* fine. I felt whole; I felt unscathed even though they had just eaten me. These enormous creatures with pinchers, razor legs, and layers of teeth had made a pretty good meal out of me, and I was still lying there.

They were still taking bites at me, but now it wasn't working. Something was happening. I felt my throat and felt that it wasn't ripped. Then I realized that I had reached, and that I had an

arm again—in fact two. I reached for one leg and then another and found them both, my torso was certainly there, and my lower intestines were still on the inside. I guess whatever protected my arm extended to my whole body.

The creatures seemed pretty frustrated. They kept trying for seconds, but now they were screaming at my taste. Then there was this pure light coming from me, and they were screaming because I tasted like fire. They all scattered and stood around the cave and watched me with pinchers high, as their eight legs guided them from side to side. They were ready to defend themselves *from me*.

Needless to say, this was all very strange, or not. Did being immortal come with the time traveling package? It just didn't make sense.

I stood up and thought for several minutes, while barely noticing the presence of the creatures whose image used to make me sweat cold.

Then it happened, and I fell to my knees and puked. I remembered. I remembered *everything*. But the truth was so horrible, and so overwhelmingly long that I didn't want it. I remember the feeling of it, but that's all. I felt like I was drowning in a sea of fire for millions of years and I couldn't crawl out. It was like a train always moving backwards to gain more memories to grasp more memories. It was a truth I would have never wanted if I knew what it was, so I don't know it. I remembered it because every time my whole body is completely destroyed and rebuilt (which takes a lot for some reason and begs the question of whether or not I'm even human), I'm faced with a choice: I can either remember my entire life, which I think spans backwards into eternity, or I can let it all go—wipe the slate clean, hit the reset button.

I tried to remember everything after meeting the historian—Elizabeth—because I believed I needed it, and I wanted to remember the strange decision, but even that was slipping

away. Soon I won't remember anything. I still have no idea who I am, but somehow I made the choice that it was better not to know. Ironically, now that I can't remember I doubt the truth could possibly be that bad, but if not would I really give it up? It must be unspeakably terrible. For the most part I believe it, but I wanted to quickly feed myself to something else so I could have the choice again, and maybe choose differently. But I fear I've been in this cycle forever: every time I notice that I'm completely immortal I also remember everything and then chose not to remember. It's like an all or nothing deal. Maybe it's the only way to survive my life sanely, since I obviously can't die.

Sometime later I wake with my face warm, and the light behind my eyes oddly dim. There's this calming sound of waves rushing in and out. After a while I feel the cold refreshing water whoosh around my feet. I just lay there for a while, with my eyes still heavy. Eventually the water surrounds my head, wetting my hot scalp, and I sit up and open my eyes.

I am on the most beautiful beach. Surrounding me in this large cove, are the cliffs like Easter eggs—speckled with electric purple and algae green, but they have these orange and red flowers on them, shaped like fire, and the size of a head of lettuce. The flour-like sand isn't just the colors of cinnamon and sugar, but also blue, yellow, and black. The emerald green water swirling around my body is crystal blue a little further out and deep purple where it was deeper. The sky is cloudless, and the rivaling blues of the sky and ocean clash wonderfully where they meet at the horizon, and the sun is huge and red, like a pomegranate, split open and bleeding. The red light spilling on every color makes them richer.

To my left and right the cliffs curve in like a boomerang trapping me in this location. It's a perfect abandoned beach that is impossible to leave, or to get to, except for someone like me.

I lay back down happy from delirium and let the water rush around me continuously as I stare up at that indigo and purple sky.

So I don't know who I am.

So I don't know where I came from.

So I don't know why I travel.

So at best I'm a crazy alcoholic who just thinks he's time traveling.

But even still, at this moment, lying on this glorious beach as the red sun sinks, I can't help thinking: "This isn't so bad."

The Plague

Everywhere in the Slavic lands the fatal activity of the plague is explained by the evil of vampires.

-Jan L. Perkowski

I was in my evening class studying the Slavic culture when it happened. The young professor with the wire glasses and jet-black hair was telling us that if vampires really did exist, as opposed to disease and catatonia, we would all be infected by now. The people of Slav were very superstitious. The reading made me feel narcoleptic because it was so repetitive. Over and over it had stressed that if a black animal jumped over your grave you'd become a vampire, if you sinned as a human you'd die and become a vampire, and if you had red hair naturally, apparently you were already a vampire. I tossed my hair around a little and thought.

So I guess I'm a vampire. And here I thought I was just Irish.

It was around then that the lights flickered and went out.

At first students gasped, but then there was a little scattered laughter and applause. "Just wait a few minutes, I'm sure the power will come back on," the professor said with a groan.

We waited a few minutes and nothing changed.

"Alright, start moving toward the exits," he said gravely.

We went outside and realized it wasn't just our building. There was a mass of dark faces and bodies flooding out of every nearby building and swirling together in the proportionally smaller outdoor space. The streetlights weren't even working. Every step slammed me into some invisible person, and my feet kept getting caught on the changing levels of concrete.

I thought the blackouts were over.

It was deafening how loud this mass of people began to be. There was no organization. There was no voice that could be understood or heard above the others. I caught pieces of strange conversation and had no idea what to think. Some people thought there had been an attack on the city. Some hysterical people thought there had been an atomic bomb. I kept moving through the crowd wondering if I was even making progress in the right direction—not that there was one. But I was faced with nothing but a tapestry of blackness and frantic ramblings.

This went on for quite sometime. Every now and then someone flickered a Zippo illuminating their face warm orange. But I doubt they gained much more perspective of the situation. I wondered if people were just going to stand around trying to see until dawn. Then came a voice on a distant megaphone, trying to hush the crowd so he could be heard. It was the Dean. He was planted at the top of a pedestrian bridge with a small flashlight.

“It appears that there has been a citywide blackout,” he began predictably.

Well, yes, we all kinda noticed that.

Faculty members began to veer out into the crowd with flashlights and calming words.

“If you drove we suggest you take the highway despite the traffic because the City has installed some emergency lighting. Back roads are very dangerous right now, but if you have to use them, use your brights. The busses will be running but it will be several cycles before all the usual riders are rotated through. We’ll be putting up some lighting around the campus if you feel more comfortable staying in one place, and there will also be some policemen leading groups of people who are close enough to walk. So everyone just stay calm and we’ll find away to get you all home.”

Trying to walk on those crowded streets was like jumping into an endless mosh pit. The lack of light especially helped that image in my brain, but the lack of wailing guitars and

screaming Manor-wannabies was missed. It took me forever to get to the highway, where I decided to follow the constant stream of people walking toward my end of town. It wasn't as dark as I thought it would be. All the headlights and policemen with glow sticks and other frightened people made it very bearable.

It wasn't so horrible walking that far, since I wasn't by myself, but it took me six hours to get home. Yet the time seemed to slip easily by. However, I stumbled in feeling very aware of my exhaustion. I barely managed to dig out my flashlight before I fell easily asleep.

My sleep was undisturbed, until I awoke suddenly. Usually when that happens it's because you've heard some loud sound, but once you wake you don't remember it. I woke up in a cold sweat, like I had heard something unpleasant. Nonetheless, I didn't hear it again, so I went back to sleep.

That morning I got up earlier than usual, glad that my apartment was well lit and started trying to use my cell since the other plugged into the wall. For hours the network was busy so when my mother answered sounding very distressed, I had almost forgotten I was expected to exchange words with someone.

“Sweetie? Is that you?” she shouted in a voice that broke and twitched.

“Yes. It's me. What's going on?” I shouted back.

“The News said that there was a blackout in every major city, and that they're spreading,” she said nervously.

“What does that mean? Are we being attacked?” I asked.

“I don't know, but I don't want you outside. There's a plague. It's been spreading in the cities that have blacked out. I want you to stay in your apartment. Do you have food?”

“Yeah,” I said a little disillusioned. “What kind of plague?”

“It sounds like rabies. But I’ve heard that these people seem completely normal until they bite you and then you get it. So you’ll have no way or knowing who has it. I don’t want you being around anyone. Not even your friends.”

“Okay...you’ve thoroughly freaked me out,” I said nervously. “Should I come home?” I asked that last question with hope, wanting her to command me to dash to my car and drive somewhere safer.

“I wish you could. But the highway’s a mess,” she said grimly.

It was then that I lost the signal and the network got busy again. There were probably thousands of students having the same conversation with their parents.

I spent all day in my apartment. I put the blinds down and tried to be as quiet as I could. What my mom said shook me. Others must have been scared as well. Usually there were people going by my window every 30 seconds (it was a very popular apartment complex), but today there was only someone going by every hour or so—I assumed not everyone knew about the plague, being cut off as we all were. The people were casting shadows on my blinds as they walked, but they were having normal conversations, as if nothing terrible was going on. I was comforted by the fact that my mother usually exaggerated. Earlier that year she tried to get me to duct tape my door shut to avoid biological warfare. That never turned out to be necessary, so I decided not to be too worried about it.

I listened to several passing conversations that day lying on the couch by my window. It was the only form of entertainment that I had. One couple I knew passed by playfully shoving each other.

“Hey, don’t shove so hard,” the girl said with a laugh.

“Sorry,” her boyfriend answered. Then he picked her up and flung her over his shoulder. I could see their silhouette in my blinds.

“Hey, put me down,” she said only half seriously.

Instead he started spinning her around forcing her to scream and cling to his neck.

“Put me down, I’m serious!”

“What are you gonna do, huh?” he said continuing to be playful.

“Put me down!” she screamed and then I heard him scream “Ow!” and from the silhouette I could tell he almost dropped her.

“You should’ve listened,” she said in an airy voice.

The situation sounded very light and I was smiling, until he said the words that made my smile fall.

“You *bit* me,” he said with disbelief.

“You didn’t listen,” she said again lightly. I was telling myself that I was just being paranoid, but I couldn’t help shaking. They were just playing around. It was a coincidence. The disease had probably already been contained and barely anyone had gotten it.

“It’s bleeding! I think you busted an artery!” he yelled. In the silhouette I could see him holding out his hand like a wounded paw.

“It’s not a big deal,” she said. Then she leaned in to give him, what in the shadow looked like a kiss, but he screamed.

I slowly rolled off the couch onto the floor and crawled away from the window on my elbows, shaking the whole time. He kept screaming. I looked back once and realized she was tearing into his lips violently.

I crawled into the kitchen where there were no windows and I hugged my knees.

I shook as he began to yell. “What the hell are you doing, you crazy bitch! Get away from me!”

She just laughed as if he was being irrational and I heard his footsteps retreating away. Her laughter sounded almost scary now. “You’ll get over it,” she shouted after him.

That night I just sat in the kitchen, far away from all windows and listened. Every few minutes a shrill scream rent the air. In closer apartments I could hear people ranting on and on about how they had been bitten. But after my neighbor screamed at her husband a while, her voice became a calm hum again, like nothing was wrong. I tried to call the police several times, but the line was always tied up. I even heard police sirens several times, but the strange sounds continued all night, until the sun rose.

That morning I woke to a flashing alarm clock. I instantly ran to the TV and turned on the news. It came on sounding so loud that I had to turn it down instantly.

“It turns out the plague is a myth,” said the newscaster. “No one has died as a result of infection and scientists have not been able to find an actual infection of any kind. The mysterious biting incidents have been a result of a strange unexplained mass hysteria, but now that the electricity has been restored, that has been predicted to taper off...”

I called my mom overjoyed and she confirmed everything the newscaster said. Most people just couldn’t handle the trauma of a possible country meltdown. They reacted in an irrational way and all being human they reacted in the same irrational way.

I was glad to return to the school the next day. Everyone seemed so happy to be around people again. I sat down in class smiling and my teacher began his lesson, but I noticed he looked different—more attractive. He was wearing this shiny blue shirt—like he thought he was in a dance club—and leather pants. In fact, everyone in the room was overdressed.

It’s like 6th street threw-up in here.

I chalked it up to everyone being happy to be alive, and looked down at my usual T-shirt and comfy shorts with shame.

“Today, instead of focusing on the past, I want to talk about current events,” the teacher began his lecture. I noted the animation in his features as he spoke. I didn’t remember him seeming so passionate before. I looked around see if the students seemed as affected.

They were. They were smiling and nodding along to every word he said. The student next to me had a huge smile that almost dared to engulf his entire face. But that’s not why it struck me as odd. A word sounded in my head before I even noticed it.

Sharp.

That was it. His canines were really pointy. I decided it must have been a trendy ‘goth’ thing and looked to someone else. I felt very paranoid when I realized their teeth were the same. I laughed at myself and looked to someone else, and then someone else and someone else.

“The news tells you that there was no plague, but the truth is there was,” the professor continued, “And we snuffed it out.”

I looked at the exit sign and tried to think of a way to get out without seeming too terrified.

The students in the room began to clap unexpectedly and this made me lurch forward in my chair. But I didn’t sit back. I stood and slowly began to walk toward the exit...shaking the whole time.

I tried not to make eye contact with any student when I left, but I couldn’t avoid it. They were all looking at me. They were smiling with their pointy teeth, until they saw my tight expression, then they were just peering with curiosity.

Oh god. Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.

“The plague of humanity has ended,” I heard him say right before I let the door fall closed.

Vampires...they're all vampires...

I thought all this frantically as I ran through the empty hall to the elevator. When the door closed, I was alone so I felt free to hyperventilate.

It wasn't until I was outside moving toward the bus stop that I played at being calm again. They were everywhere. I tried to stand by myself, but one very attractive guy in a muscle shirt and tight pants moved toward me with confidence.

“You've got that whole innocent thing going on,” he said boldly as he looked me over. “You wanna catch some dinner?”

“No, I'm cool,” I said weakly as I looked past him for the bus. It hadn't even rounded the corner yet.

“Are you sure? Because you're all flushed. You look like you could use a good meal,” he insisted.

He was gorgeous. For .45 seconds I actually considered converting just for the dating options. Guys this hot had never hit on me before.

“Uh...no thanks,” I said with a nervous giggle and tried to smile in away that didn't expose my teeth.

When I got back to my apartment I got in the car and drove. I only stopped for gas and drove in any direction I felt like. It didn't matter where I went. The world was truly theirs. And maybe if I just avoided everyone, I could stay human a little while longer.

Draft The Supermodels

Draft the Supermodels

A Mission Statement

By: Kevin Sandoz

I think all would agree that it is disconcerting how many beautiful and intelligent women are forced to meander through this world alone. According to the 2024 US Census, 48.40 percent of women over 15 are single while only 43.40 men over 15 endure the same fate. According to the same source, the country is 48.9 percent male and 51.1 percent female, which makes the standard for a woman's appearance higher than ever, since there is so many of us. Unless a woman is blonde or dyed blonde, anorexic or surgically enhanced, and a Victoria's Secret model or a neurosurgeon, she has slim pickings when it comes to men.

I think all women would agree that there aren't as many attractive men in the world as there are women. In fact, I think many would say that for every 1,000 attractive women there's only one attractive man, and that man, unless he's the rare but possible Brad Pitt is not really all that attractive.

This misfortune creates an unbalance that causes women to compete in ways they wouldn't have to, if the balance didn't exist. These so-so attractive men have become spoiled by this competition from women who are far too attractive and intelligent for them. They in turn become full of themselves creating toxic personalities. This renders them not even worthwhile human beings while the attractive women of the world maintain their wonderful personalities because they must stay pleasant to compete.

But how did this imbalance occur? Well, many of the bravest, most attractive, and most worthy of women's potential mates died and their lines never continued. Several times in history, men in good physical condition who weren't afraid of commitment were drafted, fought in the war, and died. In fact, over the last century, according to the New Day Encyclopedia, 16,073,428 men served who were drafted for American conflicts and according to the American Battle Monument Commission, the fatalities of World War I, and II, and the Korean and Vietnam Wars where the draft was in place was 630,387. This eliminates a great number of non-commitment-fearing-potentially-attractive males, while, draft-dodgers, deserters, and men so unattractively unfit they couldn't be drafted stayed behind to breed and create smaller unattractive men. The supermen have mostly died. The superwomen remain and they have few equals, so they are easily obtaining the equals of others. Therefore, these less perfect but no less beautiful women, are having to settle for the garbage. So what can be done? The supermodels certainly won't unseat themselves.

I have one humble proposal. It seems that the beautiful yet imperfect women of the world would not have to compete with impossible standards if they embodied the new standard. Therefore, the supermodels would simply need to be eliminated. But how could that be done in a way that's best for society? Simple, we draft them. Any woman with less than a 24 inch waist, under 110 pounds, and taller than 5'8" would report for military services instantly. Consequently, anyone who tried to evade these responsibilities would be lawfully decapitated by any willing citizen (decapitation, of course, should be the first response to err on the side of safety). The physically fit men of the world would finally be safe while having to for the first time deal with their real choices of a mate—an equal instead of a superior. Finally the normal yet beautiful women could have equals as opposed to those beneath them.

Now some might claim that this is unfair to the unsuspecting supermodels, but it could truly benefit everyone. Being on the front line would be the perfect way to model the next camouflage line by Gucci. Not to mention the abundance of free artillery and explosions the models could pose with while shooting commercials. Also more army movies could be created with built-in special effects and death scenes. Think of the real tears a movie could create when Paris Hilton the 2nd explodes into cannon fodder in a moment of intense drama. She could even win her only possible academy award yet we wouldn't even have to sit through her award speech. Everybody wins.

The models would be happy: they would be free, they would be the center of attention, and they would possibly inspire unsuspecting opposing armies to drop their guns and gawk. This could even lead to peace on earth.

And if not, wouldn't they look cute holding their guns?

I finished reading this aloud in a room where smoked curled through the beam of a projector. My presentation had consisted of note cards and pictures of different models posing in camouflage bikinis, and stilettos while pointing rifles. I told them it was for a government presentation, so they didn't even ask for payment. Three men in white lab coats faced me, with cigars lifted and elbows pressed on the long white table. They just stared for a while when finally the oldest of them, the balding one with the glasses and odd sideburns said to me, "You want to draft, the supermodels?"

I nodded and stared at my feet.

"Why?" he asked, flabbergasted.

"I'm sorry. I heard you were taking suggestions for who should be drafted today," I told him, studying the slow decay of my dock martins.

“Well we were...” said the brown-headed man with the, “But only serious suggestions.”

“I assure you I’m serious,” I said. “I have a sister and she has no chance against these fem bots. She deserves to be happy.”

Then men nodded in a postured acceptance to my explanation, but continued their stare of wonder.

The one with the sideburns spoke first.

“Well...” A horrid sound of throat purging mucus from throat followed before: “We are still a little confused as to why you, an attractive man, would want to eliminate all our pretty women. Wouldn’t you rather draft all the ugly women?”

“That wouldn’t be a very sizable draft,” I told him.

“True, but what if we just drafted all the ugly men? Wouldn’t that create some kind of balance?”

“That would be too big of a draft,” I thought better of my next sentence but had to say it anyway. “And who among the government would be left?” I asked, as tactfully as I could.

“I see your point,” Sideburns said with a grimace.

“It would be the right amount of people,” Lazy-eye said after some thought. “And we can’t expect to keep this country procreating if we release the draft on men again. Plus this will be a great way to shut-up the feminists. They want equal treatment—fine—we’ll draft them. They’ve never been that equal before.”

“The feminists would probably be left behind,” I reminded him in a small voice.

There was a lull of disappointment before Lazy-eye regained his enthusiasm.

“Even still. It would be quite a political turn. And I’m tired of being so ‘PC’ all the time,” he said with single air quotes.

He locked at least one eye with each of his companions and then they all stood.

“Very well,” Sideburns said happily. “We accept your proposal. Good job.”

I gave a nervous sputter as they each walked down to my level and shook my hand.

“And we can even make the whole thing into a reality TV show,” I offered on a whim, “to cover-up the dehumanization of the whole ordeal.”

“Brilliant,” said Lazy-eye. “That would certainly lessen dissent, if the models got some kind of airtime.”

“It might even keep it from seeming like a draft,” Sideburns said with a hard pat between my shoulder blades.

That was the biggest mistake of my life.

Five years later I sat at a bar, alone, and drank whiskey. The only light was the blue emissions of television glow from a high corner. I waited like an anxious child, for the opening of the new “Cannon Fodder,” the supermodel/ battle ground/ reality TV show that I had unfortunately thought-up.

I wasn’t waiting with excitement, but with strained hope, like a woman awaiting a letter in World War II that one of her sons had survived battle.

The ridiculously commercial Intro began, with its wailing guitars and natural-looking women popping their weight from hip to hip as they held heavy artillery across their proportional chests. Their smiles were shaking on their faces, like a nervous actor waiting to flee the stage forever. They each wore an American flag bikini top and camouflage mini-skirt with red spiked high heels—not too practical for the battle field—but I couldn’t help reveling in the pure sexuality of it. It had been too long since I’d seen a truly pretty woman in person, let alone dated

one. Even the mediocre ones were fickle and spoiled, like the only kid left in the world shopping at a candy store, where all the candy desperately sold itself to legitimize their existence. Why would anyone only pick one flavor when faced with that kind of attention? It was hard to envision that I knew that feeling once, and took it so for granted that I threw that life away, for all men.

It was during my hardened stare that a wide-set woman with greasy hair in the Annie-style and a scar cutting through her missing eye approached and offered to buy me a drink.

“No thanks,” I muttered without turning my head.

“Excuse me?” she asked huskily. She wasn’t used to being turned down.

“I said no,” I clarified without making eye contact. They took eye contact as encouragement.

“Leave him alone, Angela,” said Bob the bartender and my only friend. He had finally emerged from his hiding spot behind the bar. He had kind of a naturally red face that women found attractive since it seemed like he was always blushing, so he constantly had to watch his ass.

“Why should I?” Angela asked.

“I’ll tell your husband you cheated again,” Bob said.

She moved away as Bob gathered up empty glasses then leaned in toward me.

“I told you not to dress like that,” Bob said.

“How much less skin could I possibly show?” I asked, presenting the tails of my trench coat.

“Women like men in long jackets. They think it’s sexy,” he told me. “Just because you’re covered doesn’t mean you’re not getting their attention.”

Angela smiled at the part of his statement that excited her.

“Now just hold out for fifteen minutes. I’ll be right back,” Bob said.

When Bob moved outside loaded with trash bags, my eyes returned to the TV and Angela approached me again.

“Don’t you see what’s in front of you?” she asked.

What was in front of me was my sister smiling and waving on the screen. I forgot about the ugly Amazon as I sucked in air thick as mud.

The Draft the Supermodels Campaign seemed perfection at one point. It sustained the first year we had to fight the Canadians, but they grew more aggressive. Apparently, in our war commentary we had made one too many maple syrup, flannel skirt, and hockey stick jokes. They snapped supermodel spine like cocktail swords, and soon the draft expanded. The standards for what actually constituted as ‘supermodel quality’ slipped lower and lower until all our attractive women were dead—my sister was so pretty she had been taken in the second wave. She had just gotten married to an attractive wealthy man who graduated from Yale with honors. It was everything I had always wanted for her, made possible by the very draft that swept her away.

She held on for four years. I nervously noted her in backgrounds diving just in time to miss a bullet, but now she was on camera—a bad sign. They only allowed one of the girls a voice or personality if she was about to die in the next scene.

“I just can’t wait for the war to be over, so I can see my brother again,” she said. Her green eyes were worn and her smile tired. “Some people hate him, but I know he’s always wanted what’s best for me.”

It was hard for her to say that—to make that amount of peace with me and herself. The forced gloss-over in her words came to me like a cold shutter. Then Angela, not distracted by the

same source, grabbed the back of my neck and mashed one of my cheeks against the chilled marble bar. She whispered garlic breath into my ear, but my eyes didn't leave the screen.

“You get off on watching pretty girls when you have a real one right in front of you? You need some respect, boy,” she said. “I'm gonna rock your world.”

Her hands were like pliers that wouldn't unclamp. But even if they weren't, I couldn't have kept her from licking my ear, or anything else she did to me. Though already broken, I kept my eyes on the screen, fighting the inevitability of undertow by waving my hands around wildly and finding nothing but more water.

I saw my sister catch an air-raid in her gut. I knew it was coming, but it surprised me like a dart popping a balloon, yet was nowhere near as small. It was my heart, my lung, my soul, my life—mirrored by her intestines, her silly strings of brain matter and her mustard chunks of fat. Only an indiscernible mess surrounded where her boots still stood, upright and empty. I felt a heavy pinch on my sternum and the beginning of a scream that got lost in my throat. There was no point in screaming anymore. Everything that gave my life matter was just obliterated. There were nothing left but dead trees in a land where beauty used to flourish.

The Other Girls

I remember seeing Clayton arguing with his girlfriend. I've only ever seen her twice, and if you collect the images I have of her, there's only the back of a head and the side of a face. The time I studied the back of her head was after the Mock Trial tournament where our team had received second place. I followed him from the court room in the hopes that he'd come celebrate with us at *Players*, our law fraternity's hang-out, but he was standing with her in a dimly-lit hallway. I could see his face and not hers. The smile he wore was more intimidating than the beauty of any woman's features, though not by much.

She had long dark hair, the glossy kind that looks coated in clear wax. It was done-up in a bun of spilling tendrils, meant to look messy but actually resembling something in *Hollywood Hairstyles Magazine*.

I fingered my split ends with envy.

Her backless brown shirt made her look slender, unassuming, and even classy somehow, despite its risqué cut. If I wore that I'd be raped on the way to the parking garage and the cop, though glad I called, would give me a speech about appropriate dress.

She balanced perfectly on black spiked heels with only the help of dental-floss-thin straps.

I eyed my worn plastic flip-flops with embarrassment.

Her skin was evenly tanned; white lines traced the path of my non-existent bra straps within the V-neck I wore under my suit-jacket.

She stood with a flat back; I always slouched.

I rambled about unrelated things; she spoke eloquently. I could hear her relaying an anecdote about her biochemistry class. She described with ease the way she expressed herself to the other top-student in the class after they completed their tests.

“I asked him, ‘Was that a joke?’ I thought he was kidding. It was so easy! I was afraid it was a joke and once I left he was gonna hand out the *real* test—like those false-endings at Smashing Pumpkins concerts.”

The Smashing Pumpkins always played through a show, said they were done, waited until half the crowd left and then Billy Corgan would say, “I just wanted the posers to leave.”

I wished I could come up with such telling allusions related to such an intellectual band. And as I watched him describe the tournament to her with great animation, I even wished I was good at biochemistry.

Then she did the one thing I would never wish to do, yet the fact that she was comfortable enough to do it made me envy her even more, she yelled at Clayton.

She yelled at this perfect, brainy, blonde, 6’2” actor who competed in Mock Trial to get practice for court-room dramas—my perfect, beautiful, sweet, good-hearted Clayton. But he wasn’t mine; he was hers. And she was so confident of his affection that she felt privileged enough to even treat him like shit. I was always afraid to say one wrong thing around him, like if I misspoke and said something boring he’d shake loose from reality.

“I don’t want to hear another story about Mock Trial, Clayton! Why don’t you tell it to someone who cares?”

I cared, but I knew he wouldn’t revel with me in our shared experience. I wasn’t the one he showed his real smiles.

This reminded me of *another* Clayton who reserved his real emotions for someone else. He also had a well-spoken girlfriend with dark shiny hair. I also met her twice, and the first time was in a hot-tub where he tried to feel us both up simultaneously.

He was actually with me at that point, though the only thing we shared was sticky groping in the back of his 4-runner in the church parking lot. Insulted by his assumption that I couldn't see through bubbles, I took him outside in January and sat immodestly in my red string bikini while he wrapped up in his towel.

"Why aren't we together, Clayton?" I asked, sitting in a lawn chair and looking at the stars instead of him, attempting to supplant his coldness with their warmth.

He sat, looked down, and shuffled his feet on the icy concrete. His golden hair pointed in all directions combined with his inability to raise his green eyes to mine, reminded me of a guilty wet dog that had been swimming in a previously clean pool.

"I just don't think you're the girlfriend type," he finally answered. This was the first time I heard this.

"Yes, I am," I insisted.

"Well, what do we have in common?" he asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. I wanted to say, "Because you never even try to talk to me." Not that he was the only one implicated. I didn't try talking to him either. I had no idea what boys wanted to hear.

"Well, I don't want a relationship," he told me. I accepted this as true, but it was suspiciously the same night he asked Lexie to be his girlfriend.

The second time I met Lexie, I merely just saw her—mostly just the back of her head, in fact—while I watched Clayton talk to her with such child-like excitement, my vision blurred a little.

It was at an airport after a youth trip to Winter Park, a ski resort in Colorado. She came to pick him up and together they collected his luggage and guitar case. She was wearing a lime green skirt—identical to one I wore often, and the way it fit her wasn't flattering. Big hips [you said you didn't want to spoon feed your readers, I'd rather you said something like this...]. I was 18 and on the swim team that year, so the skirt looked much better on me.

Her dark hair was in a messy bun that indeed looked spontaneous and was more reminiscent of a dirty spider web than anything silky.

My hair was layered-short, golden blonde, and shiny at the time.

When she turned toward me for a second while they exchanged a laugh, her chin was infested with zits.

Mine was immaculate that year. It was all the chlorine.

I eyed her flabby arms and was disgusted by how pasty they were. My tan was deep, since I had spent the previous summer lifeguarding.

Nonetheless, he did a silly march around her, slinging his luggage side to side as he circled, to express how happy he was to see her (he was a little goofy), and they left together merrily. I watched the whole thing silently and the airport seemed to shrink around me as they exited through the sliding glass doors.

This is the way it went in high school. I was never the 'girlfriend.' Instead, I was always the understudy whose over study never mysteriously died from a stage light falling on her head.

It was depressing and I thought something was wrong with me. I was broken somehow and only guys could see it, so they didn't want me, at least not in a girlfriend capacity.

And then there was Robert.

I fell in love with Robert because he took me to expensive restaurants, he provided me with weekend trips to the coast, he bought me roses on Valentine's Day as well as expensive perfumes from Paris, he gave me his jacket when I was cold, and he speculated about our future. I thought he was treating me the way girlfriends got treated. There were a couple of things in his behavior that made me cringe, but my inexperience didn't help me identify what bothered me about it.

Yet in retrospect it's easy to see when the *testing* began.

He had the position that all girls were dramatic. He told me I was special, though, because I wasn't like that. That instantly made me want to be that way, even though I wasn't sure I was. This slightly reminded me of Clayton telling me in the beginning of our fling that he wanted a laid back girl who wasn't looking for anything serious. How quickly I'd mold myself to their wants is shameful now, but at the time, well, do I dare say it? I didn't know better?

Well, that was the only warning sign that went off, because soon I was in completely new territory.

I wanted a boyfriend so desperately to prove I was just as good as all those other girls I always lost my guys to, so I didn't mind sacrificing my comfort a little, if it would keep him around. But, understandably, I got nervous when he suddenly let go of his 4-runner's steering wheel and said: "You'd better drive or we'll wreck."

We had been driving on Mopac, a crowded highway in Austin, so when I grabbed the wheel, I avoided veering into the cherry mustang next to us.

“Why the hell did you do that?” I asked, breathless.

“Oh, don’t get upset,” he said. “I was just playing. Women are so dramatic,” he added, eying me carefully.

I didn’t know what to say, so I didn’t speak.

“But you passed,” he added. “You’re flexible. That’s good.”

Now I’m ashamed that this statement made me flush with pride, but at the time all I could think was, “I passed. He likes me.”

Next he tried to convince me that jealousy was really insecurity.

At the time we had been walking on Guadalupe next to the University of Texas at Austin, where we both attended school. I noticed him openly staring at another girl’s chest as she walked by in a green skirt with Hindu designs on it. He even grinned at me with a childish intensity in his eyes, flaunting this action to me as he looked between her breasts and my face. I tried to pretend I hadn’t noticed, because I didn’t know how to handle that situation, but he wouldn’t let me.

“Did you see what I just did?” He asked like a little kid showing off something stupid to his parent.

“Uh, yeah, it was kind of hard to miss,” I said with uncloaked anger.

“Are you mad?” He asked with a gaping mouth and wide eyes.

“Uh—”

“Because you can’t get all huffy every time I check-out another girl. It’s gonna happen, sweetie,” he informed me. “And I can’t date a girl who’s insecure.”

I thought for a minute and decided I had to be okay with it, or he might not want to be with me.

“I’m a very secure person,” I told him, still showing my anger. “But you don’t have to be so obvious when you do it.”

“Oh, I won’t,” he assured me, suddenly relieved by that answer. “You’ll have no idea when I do it. I just wanted to make sure we were on the same page.”

I was relieved too, but my smile weakened when I wasn’t sure not knowing when he was checking out another girl, was a good thing.

Then the pushing started.

I had previously refused to do anything besides groping with every guy who refused to be my boyfriend, which was all of them so far, so the only aspect of my virginity that was tainted could be counted on one finger. This impressed Robert. He’d give long speeches about how proud of me he was for being so “new” and “undamaged.”

We were sitting on the bed in his room when we discussed this. I was excited because this was only the second time I had been on his bed or any guy’s bed for that matter. The sheets were satin and clean and his comforter was a goose-down that I had always wanted but never been able to afford. He started kissing me and we layed down. At first I was completely comfortable then he pulled my shirt up, pulled down my bra and helped himself.

Only one guy had done that before (Clayton right before I broke it off and though gentleman he was not, he did at least ask first).

Plus Clayton was very gentle; Robert was hurting me.

I didn't say stop, I just pushed his head away with both hands, but he was greedily latched to my breast like the tip of a vacuum, and for a moment I was terrified.

Then he pulled away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're just so beautiful."

I had never had a guy call me beautiful in my life. With my cursed C-cups most guys don't see my face, which I have to admit I think is at least worthy of 'pretty' but I felt like the only person who saw that. Finally, someone didn't just describe me as hot, or sexy; they called me what I thought I deserved. This made me forget.

He moved on to kissing my stomach anyway.

Then he ripped my pants off. I had never allowed a guy to do that before but since he just assumed it was okay, I decided I must've done something to make him think it was, so I decided that I had allowed it. He wasn't forcing me. I must've given a signal.

He started kissing the intimate creases of my thighs. Then he pulled down my underwear and helped himself again. I grabbed him and pulled him on top of me so our eyes were level.

I didn't say no, because it was like admitting I was really in trouble. I was in control of this situation. I wanted this.

I just said, "I can't handle that," in a voice smeared with tears.

He nodded but then repositioned himself and began again. What I said must've been too vague. He didn't understand what I meant. Obviously, he thought I wanted him to keep going. Thankfully he was interrupted by a knock at his door. It was his brother, also a friend of mine, who was always over.

“Robert, what the hell are you doing?” Beau asked through the door in a voice both suspicious and informed.

Robert sat up quickly.

“Give me my fucking pants,” I snapped.

Shocked he handed them to me, they were applied, and we met Beau at the door.

Robert stood slanted away from his brother, so he wouldn't smell his breath. Beau seemed to know.

“Robert?” he asked.

“What?”

“What were you just doing?” he repeated

Beau looked to me and my eyes were forced down. He must've seen how wet they were.

He stood closer to his brother, angry. Robert chose the mask of ignorance.

“What? We weren't doing anything. What?”

Beau's jaw was boxed, his lip mashed together.

“Kelly, do you want me to take you home?” Beau asked.

I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to show anyone's guilt, especially Robert's because then it would make me feel guiltier, since I let it happen. I didn't say anything.

“I'll take her home—don't worry about it,” Robert insisted.

On any other day that offer would've seemed appealing to me.

Beau adopted a new attitude. He was suddenly causal and laid back. He flipped the switch. The tension went out of the room.

“No, dude, I’m going home anyway. You don’t wanna drive all the way out there,” Beau insisted knowing his brother’s distaste for commutes.

He thought for a minute while his eyes rolled over me.

“Yeah you’re right,” Robert said, not realizing that he had actually been manipulated for once. “Go with him,” he ordered me.

I tried to push past the two of them to the door. I was very ready to leave but Robert caught me and pulled me into an embrace. Beau watched while restraining himself, but Robert didn’t notice. I was the one looking at Beau over his shoulder.

I didn’t know how to handle this situation. I had pretty much done nothing with a boy. I didn’t know what was okay. I didn’t know if I had freaked out simply because we were moving forward or because he had done something wrong. I wanted to deny the latter, because I knew I loved him. So somehow in my head I worked it out that this situation was my fault. I wasn’t clear that I didn’t want it. I wasn’t assertive enough.

Crying, I whispered into his ear, “I just don’t want you to think I’m a slut,” as if that was what I was really concerned about at that moment. On some levels it was. Because of my large breasts and curves I had fought for my reputation my entire life. People accused me of dressing slutty simply because of the way clothes fit me. I was outgoing so people assumed I slept around. But I always had an iron-clad defensive every time some girl called me a name: “You think I’m a slut? Really? Because I’m the only virgin you know.”

I had more trouble keeping my reputation as virgin than most sluts. They weren't shaped like porno stars, so even if they behaved like them no one cared. I was suddenly very afraid my life was going to get much harder because of what he and my friends would think of me. True, they were all shaped like praying mantises but they also had solid boyfriends. I knew the only way to make this situation okay was to make sure he was my boyfriend.

Beau and I left together and for a while neither said a word. We were in his black Cherokee driving far down highway 183 when he finally spoke.

“So what happened, Kelly?”

I was silent for a minute. I considered crying to him about how fast we were moving, but I was afraid that if he knew what we had done, he would judge me—not his brother like he seemed so willing to do—but me.

“Nothing I didn't want to happen,” I lied while telling myself that it was the truth.

Months went by and Robert never formally asked me to be his girlfriend. He even managed to somehow manipulate me into asking him to put on the condom so we could have sex. I wanted him on a basic animal level so I felt just as responsible for the decision but I absolutely wasn't ready for that. I kept thinking if we did it, he would choose to be my boyfriend, because I was giving him so much of myself.

So I gave in. He got everything he wanted and I got nothing I wanted. It took me months to even get up the courage to ask him what was going on. If I questioned him about anything emotional, he'd accuse me of being dramatic so I didn't like creating a stir. But once while spooning in bed, I let “Are you my boyfriend?” slip out.

This day happened to be Valentine's Day.

“*What?* Why do you have to label everything?” he asked heatedly.

“Because we’ve been dating for five months,” I replied in a mousy voice.

With him I had a voice I had never had before: a submissive quiet one. It was a change from my sheer outgoing volume.

“I don’t like titles. I like what we have. We’re exclusive, but I’m not ready to call you my girlfriend yet. Let’s just say that we belong to each other.” he said in a patronizing tone.

“So how is ‘being exclusive’ different from being boyfriend/girlfriend?” I asked. This didn’t make any sense at all, which was odd because He always prided himself on being so logical. And according to him, all women were irrational, so he was also embodying his own gender specifications of woman. But it was always okay for him to break the rules.

“The lack of titles,” he clarified with irritation.

Despite the weirdness, I accepted the compromise. Besides, he was uncomfortable with the title—not me. I would refer to him the way I wanted. This half-truth only sustained me until I talked to my friends.

“Did you talk to him?” they asked; I nodded. “Get the label?”

“Yeah,” I lied. “He’s my boyfriend.”

I couldn’t tell them I was a failure. They already didn’t approve that I was sleeping with someone who wouldn’t make anything official. They were convinced that he was just using me to fulfill his sick pleasures. I insisted this wasn’t true because we were in love.

They asked what the sex was like. They wanted to know if it was respectful. I didn’t know what respectful sex was. I said yes because he didn’t slap or whip me. But it turns out that most guys don’t force you to swallow by insisting that it’s immature not to. Most guys don’t make an argument for anal sex that claims everyone does it; no one talks about it. Most guys

don't pull your hair out after they've convinced you doggy style is just as romantic as missionary. Most guys don't make you watch dirty pornos with them and insist you act it out because all couples do that. Most guys don't tell you its okay if your period is late sometime, because if you ever get pregnant they'll just hit you in the stomach with a baseball bat, since it's cheaper than an abortion.

But I didn't know anything about most guys at this point, not that this excuse is going to sustain you. I know you're asking yourself, "How dumb are you?" I don't blame you. I am truly appalled by my passiveness during this time in my life. I wanted a boyfriend so badly that I was willing to put up with anything. So what reason did he have to treat me decently? What reason did he have to even be my boyfriend? True his very existence does naturally raise the question, how could there be any evil in the world when there was no one to delegate the work-load in hell, but he knew he had me because I knew he had me. I was afraid if I stood up for myself he would leave me, and I'd just be the dumb girl whose first time was with a prick.

I didn't want to admit I had made a mistake. I had proudly held onto my virginity so long, I couldn't lose it to someone who wouldn't commit, and I couldn't admit this to myself or anyone else. So I glossed over my entire life for 9 ½ months while the life I knew was actually more like 9 ½ weeks.

But no matter how you rationalize it, no matter how many times I still blame myself for letting it happen to me, I still can't excuse him.

He has no excuse.

I remember thinking that over and over after our last shower together.

He had been kissing my back gently, but then he bent me over and inserted somewhere nontraditional. I told him to stop and pushed him away. It hurt so much I bled. I could also barely

stand. I turned toward him, swaying, and begged him not to do it again. Despite this, he tried, again, to put himself where I didn't want him.

For a few moments I was in a vacuum. It didn't even occur to me to wonder where I was, I didn't know *who* I was, and for a few seconds I didn't know that I had been alive. I felt warm and safe. I awoke and didn't recognize the person in front of me. I couldn't hear; his lips were moving but no sound came out. There was this machine-like vibration, the floor was hard, and I was so warm. The man before me was naked and so was I.

I remember thinking, "I loved him...*once*," without even realizing who either of us were. His face and his foot were both in my eye line, his appearance contorted to my view. I finally realized that I was lying down. I had passed out. I asked him how long I was out, and he claimed I had been awake the whole time. I asked him why he had done that after I said no.

He looked at me with false bewilderment and said, "Did what?"

I followed suit and pushed that from my mind like it didn't happen. I wanted to stay in love. I wanted to believe that he would never do something to violate me. I had chosen this. I was in control.

Summer came, and things with Robert improved. He seemed to want me around constantly, and we had grown closer. Then came an out-of-town visitor. She was blonde, skinny, enjoyed talking about sex, and she was staying with Robert. Sharona—how I loathe that name. I watched them flirt for two hours before she wanted a massage. Robert pulled her into his lap, laid her against his chest, and ordered her to relax. She couldn't—I was giving her the *bitch* look. This made her so nervous she offered to sit on the floor. Robert wouldn't let her. He insisted this way was better for her back, but *meant* better for his hard-on.

I got up, mumbled something about bed, and left knowing he'd follow me. I stripped down and got into bed. At this point I was under the delusion that I controlled him because I could get him to have sex with me anytime I wanted him to. He let me think this because, honestly, where the hell was the bad for him? I was the one being hurt by it. I'm the one who sacrificed all my morals overnight and pretended it was deliberate. So, of course, he joined me in the bedroom and also stripped down.

I laid with my back to him. I wasn't under the covers. I wanted him to see what he was risking, while knowing deep down that it wasn't really at risk. I believe he knew it too. He pulled behind me and laid comfortably in the curve of my body.

"I sent Sharona to bed. I decided we were making you too jealous," he said while kissing my neck.

"*You think?*" I said sitting up quickly. It was the first time I had ever allowed myself to get angry with him, so my voice came out much louder than I planned.

"Well, I told her about our arrangement and—" he began. My shoulder was parallel to his nose, so he continued to kiss on me like this was a perfectly pleasant conversation.

"What arrangement?" I snapped, pulling my shoulder away.

"How we date other people," he said with a forced laugh of surprise. He made it sound like we had discussed this thoroughly. There had only been one vague conversation 10 months ago.

"You told me we were exclusive," I said with shock and fear.

"I said exclusively screwing," he insisted with an annoyed tone.

For a moment I didn't know what the truth was. Could I possibly fool myself that much? Every time I thought I knew what was going on with us, he told me my memory had deceived

me. He didn't really say what I thought he said. He didn't really tell me that story about his ex-girlfriend cheating on him with Beau. He didn't really hate women. He never told me that jealousy means you're insecure. I believed the Alzheimer's that ran in my family had struck me early and since he was careful to ask me about my family's medical history he used that against me as well. But it finally dawned on me how simple it all was. He's the only one who seemed to notice faults in my memory, so he was the one who was wrong. It was all a lie. All I had to do was disagree with everything he tried to convince me of because it was all false. I had to tell myself this to navigate. He actually had me so confused and twisted up that I couldn't even find the truth.

"You did not!" I insisted eyes filled.

He kept shaking his head at me like I was being childish. "Yes I did. But you just heard what you wanted to hear, like you always do."

"No I didn't!"

"I told you about this," he insisted while he simulated sex by poking one finger through a hole he made with the other. "I was a little worried about you. You kinda seemed to be in a dream world—"

"You didn't tell me you were dating other girls!"

"—But I thought you were smarter than that."

"You never told me about the other girls!"

"I did, but you didn't want to hear it."

"You did not!"

"You deluded yourself. I was upfront with you."

“You don’t just forget something like ‘exclusively screwing!’ That kind of phrase tends to stand out in your mind!” I screamed.

“Obviously not in yours,” he said, his mouth poised like he was about to bite my shoulder. Sickened, I stood.

I got dressed and left. He was so annoyed with me he didn’t even try to stop me. He laughed and huffed the whole time I gathered my things.

When I came back it was to get a necklace I left, or rather he hid to make me come back, and to officially break-up with him, so that there was no confusion. I never held anyone else to my standard of clarity but I was always clear.

I told him I couldn’t sleep with someone who wouldn’t commit to me. That was my only argument at the time. I was still trying to get myself a boyfriend. I wouldn’t even examine the way my chosen partner was treating me.

He pulled me onto the floor and tried to show me all the things I’d be missing. I stiffened and wouldn’t react to anything he attempted. He asked me to come into his bedroom so he could kiss me properly. He only considered a kneeling kiss a real kiss. Everything else was just an imitation.

Sex was still the only thing he seemed to want from me, and that made me cry. This experience had been no different than the others, except in this one, I gave in.

“No Robert, that won’t work,” I told him, my face buried in his neck.

“Why?” he asked.

The sobbing was so violent I barely got out, “Because...I loved you.”

It's strange that when I finally found the courage to say that to him, it was no longer true. I was just using it as an excuse to freak him out, so he'd let me leave. I really believed that I couldn't leave without his letting me. He'd find some way to stop me. He had the power.

I could feel his face pull tight against my cheek in horror. Then he laughed.

"Oh shit," he said, chuckling. "Oh...*well*..."

"I've gotta go," I said pushing to my feet.

"What?" he asked over his shoulder as he walked into his bedroom.

"I've gotta leave!" I screamed after him.

"What? I can't hear you. I'm in here," He said, obviously attempting to manipulate me into following him.

I rolled my eyes and followed him into his room. He was fully clothed but lying on the bed like he wasn't.

"I have to go," I repeated, irritated.

"Well you can't leave without giving me a hug," he insisted, his arms outstretched.

"Well, then get up," I snapped.

"Nope, if you want to hug me you're going to have to do it over here," he said, his arms outstretched like a spoiled child. I don't know why I obeyed him. I didn't even want to hug him. But he had a way of making you believe that you only had one option, so that when you acted, you took your one choice.

I sighed in annoyance and hugged him. His arms were heavy on me as he tried to guide me down, but he wasn't pulling hard enough for it to be force. He wanted me to choose to get in bed with him. He was trying to make me believe it was the only option. His arms were so heavy.

The easiest thing to do would be to lie on top of him. That's how he worked, manipulating you one baby-step at a time. I finally realized it.

I pulled away and lugged his arms off of me.

"Bye," I said.

"Bye," he said in his baby-voice. Oh yeah, he talked baby-talk all the time, but apparently I have a way of glossing over unpleasant things, so I left that out of the story.

But unfortunately that wasn't the last time I saw him.

The last time I saw him he convinced me he wanted to be friends. I hadn't learned yet to consult my feelings on such issues. If someone wanted to be my friend I always gave them a chance. I never reevaluated whether or not I wanted *them*, so we met at Chilli's for one last supper.

I was eating fried chicken which I hate and knew I hated but he insisted that I liked it the last time we ate there. But I was positive that I absolutely hated it.

"It sucks," I told him poking at it like it was dog shit. "I've never liked this," I told him as I forked it off my plate and passed it to his.

"Well, don't put it on my plate," he said, irritated.

"It's your problem now," I said with a devilish smile. Probably doesn't seem like a severe enough punishment but, hey, small victories and all that.

It was at that moment that I was sucked into a feeling nostalgia. He looked so good. His hair was gelled and shaped, he was wearing one of the plaid shirts I had bought him, he was wearing the tight beaded necklace I bought him (back when they were trendy) and he was wearing the silver Fossil watch I had bought him. He was like a walking bulletin of memories. I affected every part of his life for almost a year. He really was mine; he had been all along.

And the fight we were having—it was a cutesy fight like normal couples had. He confessed he wanted to commit to me after all, and I couldn't help picturing what we must've looked like sitting there, me with my dark brown hair (at the time this was the color), tanned skin, thin size-three body (Robert gave me mono and it turns out it's a great diet), my mini-skirt and backless black shirt that I was able to pull off after losing all that weight.

We must've looked like the perfect couple. If I had seen the two of us sitting together, even fighting, I would've envied us, just like I envied the Claytons' girlfriends. But there I was only seeing a bit of beauty out of context. Maybe when you look closely at any relationship, they aren't what you thought you were looking at, at all.

Robert treated me like trash. It didn't matter that we created a pretty picture. I'd rather watch the pretty picture and believe it's beautiful then live it and know it's not. I certainly didn't want a relationship if Robert was my only choice, and, of course, he was doing everything he could to make me think he was since he knew he was my first choice.

“I want something else,” I said, pretending to still be talking chicken.

“This is what I bought you, so this is what you're eating,” he said coldly.

I stood up.

“Then, I'm not hungry,” I said.

As I walked out Robert angrily yelled something about how friends split the check but I closed the door before I heard all of it.

You should've seen his face as I left—his eyes wrinkled and his mouth all twisted. It created an ugly picture after all.

Shallow America

LV

I sat in my 1991 Mercury Capri eyeing the knife slits in the roof (from a break-in where they took nothing and left my CD case flipped open to Jewel) and faded leopard skin seat covers, waiting for my deliverance in the form of a white Honda. The problem was that there were an abundance of white Hondas in this crowded Albertson's parking lot, and I hadn't bothered asking him how many doors his car had, OR what he looked like, and I had completely forgotten to tell him what my car or I looked like. I was also starting to wonder if, "Park on the left side of the Albertson's parking lot," meant park in front of Albertson's or over by Luby's on the technical left side of the lot. I sat in the sweltering heat for a while before I mumbled, "Oh fuck it," and got out and leaned against the back bumper. I had tried to be discrete earlier because my mother cautioned me that I was probably walking into a sting operation. I told her that buyers don't go to jail—just the people who import them, because that's what he had told me. Just then, a very new, shiny Honda Civic with silver rims pulled up beside my car. He rolled down the window and asked: "Are you 'Louis Vuitton-Seeker?'" And I said, "Yeah." Then with disbelief, "Are you Mort?" He nodded, then coughed.

He was in his 70s, at least. Suddenly, this wasn't as exciting. He slowly rose from the car and circled to his trunk, hunched over to keep from disturbing his poor back. He wore a button up shirt, a leather belt, leather shoes, and nice slacks. He looked like he had once been very important—like a CEO or something, but now he did *this*. I laughed to myself when I remembered what he had said on the phone. He had insisted we meet at noon so he and his wife could go to an outdoor concert.

After a sharp click and a pop, there they were. Some shone tortoiseshell brown—some glistened velvet pink—some were the traditional cream and chocolate. My eyes swam through the speckled patterns, somewhat resembling leopard print, but was actually endowed with little LVs, a hollowed circle, a diamond with a four-sided asterisk cut-out, and then the asterisk beside it, like the remaining dough of a cookie cutter. I drank in the noisome imitation leather. They were beautiful.

Because of an article published in *Time Magazine*, selling these anywhere would be completely illegal come October. That's why Mort said he was selling off the rest of his inventory. That and so he could retire somewhere on the Pacific coast. I could see why Louis Vuitton would be angry. They were flawless replicas. But instead of dishing out \$1,100 for a real one, I could get the same status and respect for spending a measly \$26 dollars in an Albertson's parking lot on a Sunday afternoon. The one I picked was a large shoulder bag that I planned to use as a backpack, just so I could rub it in people's faces everyday. When I had interned at *D Magazine*, all the SMU girls in front of Rolly Polly, the sandwich place where I loitered, had these. Now I could be one of these girls.

I only had two twenties, so we had to go inside the store to make change. On the way in I asked how he had chosen this particular business.

“My brother got me into it,” he said. “There's a lot of money in it.”

“Yeah, I'll bet,” I said.

“So are you a student?”

“Yeah, I'm a grad student at North Texas.”

“Oh right—that's a great school. So are you from Dallas?”

“Yeah, but I spent the last few years in Austin for my undergrad.”

“Oh UT? That’s a good school too.”

He opened the door for me and I went up to the counter. My hands shook as I accepted my change. I was suddenly worried that he had lured me into the store so that men in black uniforms could launch out from behind the counter, throw a net over me, and drag me to some black van with dark windows. But nothing so exciting happened. Instead, he accepted the wad of money in plain sight, and told me: “Nice doin’ business with you,” in a southern-gentleman drawl with his wrinkled eyelids squinting against the florescent lights. “And since I’m here, I’m gonna buy some fruit. Have a nice day.”

I smirked as I walked out, thinking of that beautiful fake bag nestled safely in my trunk. It was more than worth meeting some old businessman who liked fruit. But I was lucky. It could have been dangerous. Suddenly, I wondered why I was willing to take this kind of risk for a status symbol. When did that start? I wasn’t sure, but I knew it had something to do with *D Magazine*.

D Magazine

I was intimidated when I first entered that long black white and red hallway lined with blown up covers of *D Magazine* ranging from the 70s to present day. But despite my not-so-steady hand, I took a deep breath, straightened my black overcoat from Buffalo Exchange, a thrift store with nice but cheap clothes, and told the receptionist I had an appointment to meet the managing editor.

The receptionist looked like a runway model. She had wild red hair, caked on mascara, and a Gucci scarf tied like a belt around her size zero body.

“Awww. So you have an interview?” she asked.

“Yes, I do,” I said confidently.

“Oh, how exciting!” she said as she launched off her chair onto her stilettos. “Right this way.”

Suddenly, I was chasing her through a maze of tall gray cubicles. For someone wearing heels half the length of my calf, she was pretty scrappy. At the end of the marathon, I was guided into a tartus-like corner cubicle, where a large woman was bent over her keyboard typing furiously. The tartus is a small police box that a British man named Dr. Who uses to time travel, according to the BBC. The outside is about the size of a phone booth, while the inside’s a mansion.

“Oh, you’re just gonna love her! She’s the best,” cooed the receptionist before she must have instantaneously materialized back at her desk.

The editor wasn’t what I expected from the magazine that dictated the spoils of Dallas Society. This woman looked completely...*ordinary*. She had short brown hair, a plump form, and she wore all black.

I meekly called her attention to my presence and the interview began on the spot. I believe her opening line was: “Great! You’re here! So what are your credentials?” I was expected to instantly spout off all the relevant writing I had done in high school and college, as well as my level of involvement in the layout and editing process. I think I did rather well, considering she only gave me 50 seconds.

I started right away because of a looming deadline. Immediately, I was fact checking controversial stories with people who really didn’t want to talk to me. Sneakiness here was key. I had to think three dimensionally. To get an address, I often called and pretended to be some lost customer. To get a name, I’d pretend to have a common acquaintance. And to get

someone to confirm their own inappropriate behavior, I had to ask leading questions until they were caught in an answer.

I also hunted for recipes from famous restaurants to print in our home cooking section, picked-up and returned expensive kitchenware for photo shoots in our home style section (knowing that if I broke something I'd be sued) and gave secondary interviews with famous Dallas socialites like Sis Carr, a very rich woman who decorated her whole estate in varying shades of yellow.

Grunt-work was my life for the next nine months, and it eventually became tedious, so at the close of my internship, I was relieved when offered a temporary position in the annual *D Magazine* "Medical Directory." This publication lists all major Dallas hospitals as well as every medical practice. There's also a doctors' profile section that medical professionals pay thousands of dollars to be included in. I was asked to head this section because the previous organizer had been fired for some unexplained reason. Of course, I accepted graciously, but was terrified.

I was fresh out of college. I had only done shopping errands, fact-checking and phone interviews, and they wanted me to be in charge of my very own section? I flattered myself for days thinking that I was actually that good, but then noticed many of the Medical Directory employees shut-up in the ladies room crying. They picked me because there was simply no one else. I had only ended up on top because the person before me had failed, and she had much more experience. With as little as I knew, how could I possibly succeed?

I received no training, no explanation, and every time I asked a question, I got no straight answer, so I nervously pinned down my role and hoped I guessed right. Apparently it was my job to assign the profiles to the freelance writer and photographer (which felt odd since they were both twice my age), have the graphics department put the profile together, and then beg the

doctor to sign off on the profile. I only had two months until the magazine went to print, and only 5 out of 100 profiles were completed. The rest needed photo shoots scheduled and copy written.

Doctors are, of course, very busy, so when you explain you need to take their picture in the next month they have a tendency to say, “No. Impossible. Surely, this magazine isn’t coming out until August so we’ll have to schedule it then.” Apparently to them, magazines just materialize on the shelf without going through any sort of printing process. It also became problematic when a doctor didn’t like any of the pictures from a previous shoot and demanded another. “The photographer made me look ugly. Isn’t he a professional?” The photographer was impeccable, but there are some things that light and make-up can’t improve.

It was also my job to take the screaming phone calls from dissatisfied customers. Usually they were from doctors who felt I was cheapening the whole profile experience for them by rushing them to adhere to my deadline, which, of course, they felt shouldn’t affect them. I was rushing them, and coincidentally whether or not they were happy I felt shouldn’t affect me, though I pretended it did. Once a doctor even called and yelled at me for 30 minutes for something my predecessor did. When I recounted this story to my editor I said, “I just apologized and buttered him up, but I’m well aware it wasn’t my fault.”

“Oh, well...good for you,” my boss said in a flat voice. I didn’t understand if she was disinterested or disappointed with my response.

But the directory was finished on time, the profiles looked wonderful, and all the egotistical cardiologists were happy. However, my editor acted strange the day I came to clean out my desk.

I smoothed down my jacket, heaved my bag over my shoulder and walked into her cubicle. She sat with her back to me, typing.

“Well, everything’s done,” I said awkwardly to her back. I don’t know why I was so jittery, except that I was afraid she would possibly point out some mistake and I’d spend the whole day there, making me late for the wedding rehearsal where I was a bridesmaid.

“Huh?” she asked. She glanced at me and her eyes fell. “What are you still doing here?” she snapped.

“I just came to get the final approval on the last ad,” I said in a weak voice.

“What?” she said, her eyes wide. “That wasn’t done yesterday? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I did,” I reminded her, confused. She didn’t look convinced. “You told me this morning was okay.”

“Oh, well, fine, I guess,” she said turning back to her computer to type. “Just leave it on the desk.”

I did what she asked and left. To this day I don’t know why she chose to say, “You’re still here?” like I was some unwelcome one-night-stand, instead of, “Thank you so much for sweating blood to help me out.”

She certainly didn’t offer me a job at *D Magazine*, which I have to admit, I naïvely expected. She didn’t send me the pathetic sum of money we had agreed on either, until I politely pressed her about it months later. On the phone she acted put upon and annoyed that I wanted my money. This felt especially wrong to me since I wasn’t getting paid hourly for my several 50-hour weeks. She didn’t even mail me a copy of the magazine I had worked so hard on—I had to call the receptionist. That’s the moment I grew up. That’s when I realized that the world really is everything people say it is: shallow, hard, wrong, and unfair. It was very upsetting.

But I got over it. I started to embrace it even. So August 8, 2004, the summer before graduate school, I decided to use the *D Magazine* money to see the bright and shiny side of shallow and caught a plane to California.

“That ‘70s Show”

It was 70 degrees outside in the CBS studio lot when the staff moved the line into some shade so we wouldn’t pass out from the heat. Being from Texas, I found this hilarious. Try moshing at an outdoor concert in notoriously humid Austin, Texas where Audioslave is playing on an afternoon of 104 degree heat before you try and tell me what *hot* is. But until then, I’ll certainly tell you what hot *isn’t*: 70 degrees. I was actually wishing that I had worn something besides a mini skirt and a baby T, because I was shivering. The only warmth I had was the heat coming from the end of my friend Cynthia’s cigarette.

“You know, it’s kinda sad to see all these people, gathered here, waiting for a glimpse of a life they’ll never have,” said Cynthia, mellow. With her journalism background, she had a tendency to analyze absolutely everything, then shake it out of her hair like postmodern dandruff.

“Hey, we’re some of those people,” I said defensively. I was a pretty devout fan. I had to be. My working career had been sucked under the escalator strip, so easily chewable sitcoms were the only answer.

The line finally advanced inside and we actually got to sit on something besides concrete. The room was pretty cramped. I looked up at a sign above the audience cage: Maxim Occupancy 241. I was glad we weren’t turned away our first time seeing a show since tapings were free and worked on a first come first serve basis. Cynthia told me it was a pretty horrific gamble to fly all the way to Cali for something that wasn’t even a sure thing. But I was glad my life finally

allowed impulsiveness and spontaneity again. Besides, we had every intention of hitting Santa Monica beach, photographing Hollywood Blvd., and getting drunk on Sunset; we had plenty of ambition.

But sitting in this room was astounding, even before the beautiful people came out. The basement, where all the characters gather in every episode, was across from us. I could see all the random things I had always wondered about: the lawn chair hanging on a hook on the ceiling, all the different boxes of laundry detergent above the washer and dryer, and the beat-up chair wrapped in duct tape. These things looked almost too real, too textured—too 3 dimensional. On TV these details barely made it through the countless camera filters, but sitting before it was almost too much. Everything was shiny and rough at the same time. I always thought Hollywood was supposed to be fake but this was almost too clear. It was like I suddenly had 40/20 vision.

I also had the power to focus on any part of the set I wanted, instead of submitting to the images framed by the camera. Strangely sharing a wall with the basement and just to the right, was the driveway—I never expected that, but I was made more comfortable by the fact that the driveway, kitchen, dining room, and living room were all attached like they seemed to be on television. In the mist of all these dashed illusions, I found some continuity comforting.

Soon a comedian, whose job was to keep us entertained in between takes, came out and went through the preliminary studio audience drill: “Don’t talk during the scene, only laugh—make no other sounds.” Then he announced the actors. When Topher Grace, the skinny main character Eric, jogged out from the back door in the garage, I froze while everyone else applauded and screamed. I remember being strangely disturbed by his face. He had more muscles and more expression there than I ever expected. Like the sets, he looked too real. Plus his leg was no wider than my arm, which was a little gross.

When Aston Kutcher (Kelso), the dark-haired American *It-boy*, came out the comedian made a joke about how every girl was probably claiming he looked right at them. Then Danny Masterson (Hyde), the curly-haired rustic male, came out. He got the loudest reaction from the females, to my surprise, and I didn't sit there and claim he looked at me, because *he did*.

In fact, once the show started, he began to stare at me in between takes. It is the most uncomfortable feeling in the world when someone you're used to staring at on the screen stares back at you. It makes you feel exposed and guilty, for all those times you watched them in the dark while physically undressing them with your eyes. I wondered if he was just staring at me to see if I'd look away first, and I did. Then he poked Mila Kunis, the humorous 95-pound girl who plays Jackie, and pointed at me. She stared at me too. But I felt so inferior to her exquisite beauty (the camera doesn't even begin to do her justice) that I ducked behind another audience member and waited until another scene started.

I had planned this seduction very well: I had tanned for a month, I had streaked my brown hair with blonde, I had lost 10 pounds, and I was wearing a shirt so tight that it perfectly framed my C-cups. But I thought I was kidding myself. I had never expected to catch his eye when he had such a higher chance of catching mine, considering that he was on television. But ever since Cynthia and I set flip-flop in California, I noticed a strange phenomenon: the women there weren't pretty.

In fact, the only pretty woman we had seen since we entered the city was Mila Kunis, who just happened to be an actress that was displayed before us like some rare zoo animal. Then it occurred to me that in California they put all the attractive people on TV because there are so few of them. In Texas, everyone is attractive. I've always heard that the most beautiful women in the world are from Dallas, Texas, but it's always biased Dallas natives who say this. Yet

everywhere Cynthia and I went in California, we had hot businessmen giving us cards, rich guys buying us bottles of wine from across the room, and men—about 15 per street—yelling about how we should share a cab. I have never been so fawned over in my life, because in Dallas I'm considered *average*. But in California, Danny Masterson was staring at me, and I had no idea what to do.

I got more and more nervous as the scenes progressed and when it was time to sign autographs, I pushed up against the little railing and waited my turn. I didn't have to wait long. He came to me first. I handed him the picture of *just* him and he looked at it with a devilish smile that seemed to say, "Oh *really*?" Everyone else economically brought one picture of the entire cast to have everyone sign, but at that moment he knew I was there just to see him, and I found that even more embarrassing than looking away during our little staring contest. So instead of dazzling him the way I planned (I was going to say I loved the way he layered his character—just so he'd be confused enough to strike up a conversation with me), I meekly squeaked, "You did really well tonight." To my surprise, he looked up at me while squiggling across my picture with a sharpie, and smiled the hottest smile I had ever seen in person.

"Thanks baby," he said in a voice heavy with sexual undertones. I was already on the verge of blacking-out just because of that, when he proceeded to stand before me, and slowly look me up and down while smiling huge. Then, probably because I was rendered unable to speak and he got bored, he moved on to the next person whom he just gave a quick, "Yeah, thanks" and moved on.

Cynthia, who had caught all of this, turned to me and said, "Oh my god. Did you see the way he looked at you?"

"Yes," I said, stunned.

We had a short conversation with Aston Kutcher, about his budding career. He was much more gracious and much less goofy than I expected. Wilmer Valderrama, the Venezuelan who plays Fez, asked our advice on whether he should talk with his normal voice when signing or his character-voice which was an over exaggerated display of his heritage, whatever that is. He demonstrated both to us; the ramifications of this were obviously very important to him. I complimented Laura Prepon (Donna) about being brave enough to dye her hair blonde instead of red and she ate it up. But Danny was so busy with the VIP section behind the camera, including people like Seth Green (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Austin Powers*) and Hayden Christensen (Darth Vader in the new *Star Wars* Movies) that I became intimidated and no longer wanted to wait around—plus Cynthia and I had traveled all day and were pretty wiped.

Part of me wishes I waited around and asked if he was interested in embarking with me on the only one-night-stand I'd ever consider, but most of me is glad I didn't. I admit he would have been a very impressive addition to my very short list. In fact, I would have laminated such a list and put it in my wallet. People would read it and say "Average Joe, Average Joe...*Danny Masterson*? Why the hell do you keep this in your wallet?" and shove it back at me.

But was it worth it to whore myself just so I could have bragging rights? When I entered that studio, I would have said, "Hell yeah," but once the tables turned, and he actually started checking me out, the collusion between the imaginary and the real was just too much. I could never watch *That '70s Show* again without throwing my Campbell's potato soup at the screen and yelling, "You bastard! You didn't call me!" And I couldn't give up my favorite show for a fling. Also, this was a hot Hollywood man who probably slept with tons of groupies. To him they were probably as available and disposable as condoms. Did I really want to be on that nameless

uncountable list? Plus if I bragged to my friends that I slept with Danny Masterson (since it's only real value was bragging rights) they'd look at me funny and say "Who?"

"The guy from *That '70s Show*."

"The show with Aston Kutcher?"

"Yeah. He plays Hyde—who know—the guy with the fro?"

"Oh *that* guy," they'd say—not really impressed. "Huh."

I wondered how I'd ever been rewarded for all my hard work when my wants kept changing.

LR

A year later, after I completed a year of grad school, my sister and I were playing with my Titania cards. They're just like Tarot cards except techno-colored with different symbols and easier to read. I had just laid out the cards for my reading and chastised my sister for shuffling them without my permission—she wasn't an experienced Titania reader. I was convinced she messed-up my reading because I actually got a good one, which almost never happened. Specifically, the man on horseback was next to the star, and the star was beside the letters. This meant that I would get good, unexpected news, very soon, from a knight-in-shinning-armor-type, and it would be the answer to a wish I had for a long *long* time. I couldn't think of anything I wanted that was obtainable.

There were only two things that I ever wished for on a regular basis. The first was to have a healthy relationship with a boy who wasn't a complete fuck-up. So far the level of fuck-up-ness by my sociopathic cheating boyfriends had been unrivaled by anyone else's beaus that I had ever heard of or known. I now knew that it was something wrong with me and therapy wasn't

fixing it, so that wasn't going to happen. The second was to finally, after years of knowing exactly how much my 1991 Mercury Capri weighs after countless times of rolling it off the highway, have a car that wouldn't put me in scary life-threatening situations. But I didn't have any money or a job. The third was to have the power to turn every object I touched into a stack of money that matched the original price of the item as it was first sold. This would help me combat impulse buying as well as make it possible to move without renting a U Haul. I'd call this my super rebate power.

Anyway, I strongly doubted that any of those things could be possible so soon— this was a 7 card reading which only extended over a week—but then the phone rang.

It was Cynthia, and she said someone had a proposition for me. Soon, she put me in touch with Marc Boles, her sister's rich 35-year-old boyfriend, who often had us girls over for wine and a movie.

He asked if I could do him a favor. I rolled my eyes. I knew his dog Alex needed a place to stay for a year and a half while he was in London earning a Masters in Architecture. I was instantly pissed because Cynthia, my best friend, had failed to mention how I absolutely hated being around dogs, since I'm so OCD that I can't pet their coarse, breakaway, filthy fur without washing my hands raw.

So I waited for it. I already rehearsed how I'd explain that dogs just weren't in my taste. I considered telling him a traumatic story of how I was once attacked by a decrepit Dalmatian with a spinal problem, just so it was so specific he couldn't possibly force Alex on me. I knew I'd tell him that dogs weren't allowed at my apartment, which did happen to be true. I'd tell him I had a cat and only one door that separated my two big rooms. I was rubbing noses with my cat at that very moment. He had just finished licking himself.

I took a deep breath and he finally spoke.

He said, “I was hoping you could drive my Land Rover while I was in England.”

I snorted, very unattractively, because I was so surprised. I cleared my throat to pretend that was the problem. I composed myself by taking a breath and pushing hair out of my eyes.

“I’m sorry *what?*”

A month later I dropped Marc off at the airport and took his car home. In fact, he hadn’t even closed the door. It swung closed as I sped away and he stood broiling in shock. He had just told me that the pillow in the back had to be stored in a very special place because it was a special pillow designed by NASA from material used on space ships that shaped to your head.

“So do you have everything you need?” I gasped as I struggled to stay composed.

“Well, I guess...” he said uncertainly looking around.

“Great! Have a nice trip!” I said with a forced smile before I drove off, then took the North Gate exit out of DFW airport.

It took 10 minutes to feel guilty. First I thought, “What do I care what he thinks? I have his car.” Not to mention the fact that he was boarding a plane to England that wouldn’t return for a year and a half.

Then I felt bad about rushing away too excited to even say goodbye or thank you so I text messaged him, “I just remembered that I forgot to hug you. So hug☺. Thanks so much.”

He said *something*.

Anyway, that was enough. Even if he was mad, he’d forget. He’d be there for a while. And even if by some small chance he’d hold onto a grudge, he’s come back to see his car in pristine condition and just be happy I didn’t manage to wreck it. Hopefully.

I've been driving the car now for 3 months sans incident. I had this silly projection of how the car would change my life. Suddenly all ex-boyfriends who couldn't really commit would look me up, and fall in love with me. There would be a steady stream of flowers and chocolate, lots of perfect sex, an engagement, and a wedding on a mossy cliff in Tintagel, England, to *someone*. But, of course, that didn't happen. Nothing has really changed at all, except I have the freedom to drive wherever I want without keeping my eye on all escape routes I could take on foot. But I've begun to take that for granted, and I can't help eyeing those new mustangs that are a mix of the vintage 70s mustang and the bubbly 90s model. It's so hard to be happy when your wants keep changing.

But I did, however, get one thing I've always wanted that made me completely happy. On eBay I saw two Louis Vuittons that looked completely genuine for very little. I got in touch with the seller and he admitted that he didn't know if they were real or not. They were so inexpensive I took the risk. I bought one classic brown and tan one for only \$50, and a more outlandish white one with rainbow-colored designs on it for \$30. When they arrived I tore open the box to see that they were each stored in a felt draw string bag with the LV emblem on the outside, they each came with their original price tags (\$995.95 and \$365.95) they each smelled like leather, had the proper zippers, and a genuine label on the inside. They were real—no question in my mind...until a year later when I was asking for advice on my New York Trip from my friend Kari.

“You want to find the guy's with the trash bags,” she said. “They're the ones who have the Prada bags that look like they fell off the truck.”

“So are they real?” I asked, fiddling with the zipper of my brown and cream Louis Vuitton bag.

“No, but the only way you can really tell on designer bags are the zippers—cheap,” she told me.

“What?” I asked, attempting to zip my bag and discontinue my strange nervous habit. It got caught in the middle and I had to force it. It wasn’t until that moment that I realized how tough it always was to zip that bag and how much the zipper seemed more like painted plastic than metal, despite the convincing LVs.

The Year of the Rover

12:13 p.m. Wednesday, September 20, 2006

While parking at a meter behind the Recreational center at the University of North Texas, the car I drive caught fire.

I didn't realize it at first. The smoking during parallel parking had been rendered 'normal' by my non-mechanic father who was actually a post office maintenance man. He knew the basics and fixed our cars in his spare time, because he had no choice.

But he's very limited to what he can actually do, and we couldn't afford the \$330 to buy a new power steering cable plus esoteric dealership installation. So I just put in new steering fluid every time I parked knowing that it slowly leaked out for months. But recently the cable must've ruptured because every time I wrestled into a parking space, the fluid would splash on to something hot and make smoke. But I had been assured it was nothing to worry about.

"Uh, your car's on fire," said a guy with overgrown brown hair who had previously been walking by and was now standing, dumbfounded, and pointing to the area above my left tire.

People have said this to me everyday for two weeks because of the smoke, so I decided to be annoyed instead of cautious.

"Thanks, but it actually isn't on fire," I said wanting to both smile sincerely for his concern and scowl at him for his out-of-context assumption. "It's under control." I know I didn't manage sincerity.

"Oh. Huh," he said, slanting his head to view the left wheel. "Because I can see flames."

Then he moved in a way that was a walk at first and then turned into a scared run.

He thought the car was going to explode, and since I also had knowledge of a rear gas leak, I decided not to dismiss his reaction.

I quickly grabbed my brief case, swim bag, and Louis Vuitton, or at least what's believably passing for LV these days, and threw them on the sidewalk next to the car. Then I ran to the opposite side of the street to crouch down, at a safe distance and look for the 'alleged' fire.

There were flames, just above the left tire, revealing a fire up inside the engine which wasn't small.

I decided I'd call my dad, but realized the phone was still in the car. I sit with it in my lap so I don't have to hunt for it when it rings. I acknowledged the proof that there are more important situations that call for your phone to be on you. I swallowed hard running back to the car to retrieve the phone, and ran back to the same spot after I got it.

I dialed the first digits of dad's pager number, but then realized it would probably be better to actually put the fire out before I had someone come fix the car.

Part of me was excited simply because I had never gotten to call the police before—except that one time someone sliced into my convertible, left my crappy stereo face on the floor, and left my CD case full and open to Jewel—but the rest of me was waiting for the explosion.

"My car is on fire," I said when the other end clicked.

"What part of the car is on fire?" she asked, her voice sounded just like the stock voice you hear and always imagine from a 911 operator—(Are they called operators?)—I wondered who trained them to sound so calm and so, 'speaker on today's *The View*.'

"I don't know." I said. "I got away from it."

"Probably a good idea," she said. "I'm sending the police and the fire department."

I gave her my location and hung up.

A campus security guard appeared next to me and started asking questions, seeming more interested in the novelty of the event than its victim.

“Is that your car, Miss,” he asked?

“Yes.”

“Well, I’d hate to be you,” he said comfortlessly with a chuckle.

“Well, the police are coming,” I said with a tight smile.

“I’ll call the campus police too.”

“Thank you.”

It was then that I noticed two useless seeming guys standing shoulder to shoulder having a grossly inconsiderate conversation.

“Oh, man, do you see the flames?” one said, pointing.

“Yeah, that thing’s on fire!” said the other, with no restraint of his joy.

“I’m so glad that’s not my car.”

One swatted at me but being furious I couldn’t look him in the eye.

“Is that your car?” he asked, expecting me to return his enthusiasm.

I kept my eyes in their corners as I confirmed that it was.

“That sucks,” he said with a laugh.

“I know, right?” the other asked.

“Whoa what about the other cars? Do you think they’ll explode too?”

Yes, he said *too*.

When a policeman arrived he reacted about the same as everyone else. He asked

if it was my car, and then stood stupidly, not knowing what to do. But he did enjoy crouching to look at the fire and making remarks. It was too bad it blew out before the firemen arrived, because I suspect they may have done the same thing.

When the fire truck arrived, I, the policeman, and one fireman approached the car. The policeman had me pop the hood then asked me in an authoritative voice to “Step Back, Miss.”

The firemen carefully sprayed the charred area while I explained the power steering situation to him.

“You need to get that cable replaced,” they took turns telling me like one statement was contingent on the other, though they were identical. It was like ‘the repeater’ in *Super Troopers*.

“I can’t afford it,” I told the police officer.

“Well, it’ll be cheaper than paying to have the car towed every time,” he told me.

“You’re right,” I pladdicated him because I was stressed and ready to ditch the car and worry about it when I had to drive home from work five hours later. It was hot outside and I was ready for my daily swim.

My dad would never let me pay to tow a car. He would come here, fix it, even if temporarily, and drive it home. And I hate it when people tell you that you can afford something by pointing out that you can’t afford something more expensive, like it’s an either or deal. Sometimes you really just can’t afford either option. But I knew he wasn’t interested in the fact that I only had \$0.67 in my bank account, nor would explaining that change that fact, so I pretended to concede with his advice so they’d go away and I could call the ‘real’ help and go for a nice cool swim while I waited for it.

“So that’s it?” I asked, anxious for them to leave and signal rude loiterers to stop gawking.

“Yeah,” the police said.

“Well, I have one question,” the fireman said. “How do you like driving that car?”

“What?”

“Well, I’ve always wondered what it’s like to drive one of those,” he said. “That’s a Land Rover, right?”

“It’s great,” I said. “When it’s not catching on fire.” It was a lie.

It was a Land Rover, and it was supposed to be my salvation, my miracle, my white knight that took me away from the cars of my past. But in the past three months I spent more money on parts and installation than I had ever spent the entire four years I drove my previous car. And when it did work it was barely drivable: it leaked gas, it rocked from tire to tire because it needed a new front joint coupling. Its steering wheel shook violently when I went over 50 (it needed a front end alignment), it tried to overheat when I boldly used the AC on its lowest setting for more than 20 minutes *in Texas*, and now it caught on fire when I parked because it needed a hose that would cost me another \$330 when I had just given the dealer \$310 to replace the rear coupling, which is basically a joint that keeps both of the rear tires from flying off. *That* money was hard to get; *this* money was plain impossible. I actually started to miss my old crappy convertible, which lacked expected features and broke all the time, but was, at least, cheap to fix.

6:15 p.m. Friday, 2004

It was my turn to drive, *finally*, I could feel my friend Cynthia thinking. She had the newest car among our group of friends so she usually drove on our weekends to Austin and

lately it was signaled by her gritted teeth and sighs whenever I politely asked if she could drive that she was not okay with it.

I knew that driving 3 ½ hours in my 1991 Mercury Capri convertible had long past become a terrible idea. It had always had a problem with fuel injection. It could have a full tank of gas, and a charge and yet you'd press on the pedal and it wouldn't move. The battery also had a tendency to need a jump about once a month, and need replacement about every four months, which is excessive. It was also so low to the ground that if you drove through a puddle deeper than 2 inches, it would whoosh a dying breath and expire. Also, if you wanted to go over 60 mph, the engine would come lose and rock around, only attached by some eroded wire. It was like driving with a loose bowling ball in your trunk.

Yet because Cynthia had been lying on the guilt trips for months, and because I really did feel guilty that I never offered to drive, justified in this decision or not, I pretended away all logic for the sake of pride.

“Thanks for driving,” Cynthia said. “I really appreciate it.”

“No problem,” I said, changing lanes carefully. It was raining and the car, only weighing a ton, tended to skit in the rain. It also didn't help that the tires were bald and I hadn't been able to afford new ones for months. “I figured it was my turn.”

“Yeah,” Cynthia couldn't keep herself from saying.

I was actually glad it was raining. That would take the edge off the fact that the passenger window couldn't roll down and the air conditioner didn't work. I said something along those lines and she nodded with a tight smile then put her recently drawn cigarette away.

Soon after that, there was a hiss and a pop and both windshield wipers stopped their copasetic bowing. With the rain splotching the windshield, it wasn't long before I couldn't see.

“Oh,” I said. “Um, I'm going to have to exit.”

Cynthia sighed in a way that signaled she knew she'd be driving after all. We had just left, and were pressed for time. Cary expected us by 10 p.m. “Yeah, just go back towards my apartment, I guess,” she said.

Even though her apartment was only two exits back after my U-turn, the window became so flooded I had to slow down. Then that wasn't enough.

“I'm going to have to pull over,” I said pulling off to the side.

“I'll hop out and—”

But Cynthia was already out the door, pushing the broken limbs left then right to clear all the excess water from the windshield. She did this at every stop light on the way back to her place, without being asked but not without the sighs. A 5 minute drive took about 15.

When we were headed comfortably to Austin in her car, I admit, I felt relieved. If something didn't happen early on, it would've occurred later and been worse, even if it were merely too much sun—making a 4 hour drive without air conditioning is gruesome.

The whole thing had made me tense because I hated putting people in tedious situations. They wouldn't want to be around me if they knew how often something like this happened. That's why I almost always met people places instead of offering them a seat in my car. Yet paradoxically, it created a situation where my friends always heard about my car trouble yet never witnessed it. So some, like Cynthia, probably thought I was exaggerating so I never had

the responsibility of driving. Well, now she knew better. I said my car broke down all the time, because *it did*.

Summer 2006

“So who’s driving?” Cary asked as we readied ourselves for Eoyer’s Birthday, an outdoor party in Lamar Park, always on the last weekend in April.

When no one answers it becomes an endurance contest. Everyone wants to go, but no one wants to drive. But no one wants to seem like they don’t want to drive, but one can only remain silent comfortably for a few seconds before she’s deemed impolite. So someone has to speak first, and once someone does everyone else will cut in, like they were just about to offer too, but since you started first, they’ll stop talking to ‘listen’ to your offer, because it would be impolite to interrupt.

This time I remained silent for the first time in months and kept my eyes downcast to avoid their expectant stares. We all passed the rude barrier so someone had to speak. We all felt taken advantage of in the past by each other at some point, so everyone was less concerned with politeness, but I felt my reasons for not driving were more pertinent since I had been the one taken advantage of most recently.

Since gaining the Rover I had more than made up for my freeloading days—in fact, I had probably made up for it ten times over. I took us to parties on Lake Travis at midnight, even though the invitation was last minute and the party was, even for 20-somethings, pretty late. For my ex-roommate’s wedding, I drove Nicole and I to Houston after driving to Austin from Dallas to pick her up, and then drove her back to Austin and then myself back to Dallas. That same weekend, I also drove us an hour south of Austin to go tubing on the Kamal River. Needless to

say, with years of piled on guilt from road trips and little rides here and there, I overdid it a little, and they had gotten spoiled by it. None of them had driven any of the weekends that I had visited for at least 8 months. I didn't see why they felt I was obligated to offer.

"Well, we probably want to take a big car so that everyone can fit," Dawna extended the politeness threshold, and also hinted that the Land Rover was the best choice. But it was ineffective. There was another gap of silence. I finally didn't feel guilty for not wanting to drive.

"Well, I can drive, Kelly," Dawna said, "If you let me drive Marc's car."

Dawna was the only other person who was allowed to drive Marc's car since she was his girlfriend. That had made things especially complicated since she always seemed to drive it when I visited, instead of her own car. It was a power struggle that I tried not to participate in. If she wanted to drive Marc's car, I simply let her. I didn't want to fight about it, but she abused the privilege. She'd use up all the gas and never offered gas money even though I had only budgeted enough money for how much *I* planned to drive it. She wasn't concerned that two people driving it would wear it out faster and I'd be the one stuck with the price of maintenance. She also never acknowledged that I was paying the insurance so maybe she should temporarily relinquish her hold on the car, since Marc wasn't paying any of its expenses at the moment. I could've just said that she had no right to feel entitled to the car, but that would be rude, so I was forced to pick my words carefully.

"I think it's someone *else's car's* turn," I said, still looking at my feet. It sounded silly when it came out but it was true. Why did Marc's car always have to be *the car*? It didn't. It was easy for them to use it up because they weren't accountable for it, but I was. I needed it to get back to Dallas, and once there I needed it to get to school in Denton. If I kept driving at this rate it would break down. Plus, they wouldn't offer me gas money and it would seem petty to ask for

it for something that was less than a mile away. I had every right to refuse. They were just depending on my politeness to bully me into accepting. But Dawna and Cary avoid driving at all costs. With me right out refusing the responsibility fell on the next politest person.

“Well, I guess I’ll be the one driving,” Cynthia snapped, staring at me.

I knew she was only taking her anger at on me because Cary and Dawna are impermeable to guilt about this subject. They hardly drive and they hardly feel bad about it. They think they’re entitled to always ride even though their cars were in perfect condition, and the lack of actually driving is probably part of the reason why. The few times Cary does drive—after months of riding in your car without any guilt—she’ll sigh and say, “Well, I guess it *is* my turn,” like she’s the biggest person in the world for acknowledging that when she’s only doing the bare minimum to appease you. Then she’ll act put-upon all night, refusing to drink anything with grandiose gestures, like she’s doing you an enormous favor for driving you to a bar three blocks away, despite all the time she’s ridden in your car for 250 mile road trips.

Even when Cynthia sighed and gritted her teeth as she gathered her purse and keys, I continuously averted her eyes. She couldn’t get to me anymore. I had made up for the past. In fact, if anything, she owed *me* now.

2002

My convertible had broken down in Lulling, Texas while driving back from a camping trip with my co-ed law fraternity Phi Alpha Delta. When I told Kelly, the guy who wanted me that I had no interested in, he said “Well let’s go get it.”

I had been forced to ditch it in a nursing home parking lot with a note on the window that said, “Car Broken. Getting help. Please don’t tow” and caught a ride with a friend who was driving home from the same camping trip.

When Kelly drove me back to the car we tried to jump it without success and it wasn’t long before he was driving my car sans power steering while I drove his red '98 Ford Ranger with nothing between us but a royal blue tow rope. We had yellow walky-talkys my friend lent us and occasionally he would instruct me on how to drive in difficult situations. Overall, he told me not to drive too fast or the rope would snap. This made an hour drive into three which was fine on an empty dirt road, but soon I was expected to enter a highway.

“Now keep going slow and don’t panic,” came his voice through the raspy medium.

Seeing the speed of traffic in my periphery, I felt I had no choice but to punch it or we’d get slammed from behind. I followed this impulse and soon the rope snapped and Kelly swerved either way frantically before he was sling-shotted into the very traffic I had tried to avoid.

But the cars bent around him easily, barely pressing their horns, like a motionless car blocking the right lane was merely a little irritation.

“You panicked,” he expelled like a sigh.

With no complaint he stooped under my car and retied the rope and we didn’t say another thing about it.

Another time while driving on the highway, I noticed my car’s engine grumbling to a critical hush. I exited and managed to slide into a parking space, right as the engine died.

I called Kelly and he picked me up. I wanted to tow the car right away, but it was 10 p.m.

“Come get some sleep now, and I’ll bring you back in the morning to tow it.”

I had work at 8 a.m. so this put us towing the car around 7 a.m. before I had to take the bus to work. It all sounded very stressful, but Kelly had dealt with my car trouble so much since we started dating that it made me feel guilty.

“Alright,” I said, “But you’d better get up and come get me tomorrow.”

“Of course,” he said.

When I called him at 7:30 a.m. he didn’t have the same taste for his idea.

“What?” He whined like a sleepy child.

“You said you’d help me tow my car.”

“Call a towing company.”

“You said *you’d* help me, and I wouldn’t have left the car there last night like you told me to, if I knew I’d be calling a tow truck. I could’ve done that last night!”

“But it’s so early,” he said.

“It was your idea to do it this early.”

“But I didn’t know how tired I’d be,” he said, applying a pitiful intonation to his voice, hoping to sway me that way. But I couldn’t leave my car at the gas station all day. They said they had few spaces to offer customers and I had to have it moved by noon that day or *they’d* tow it, and then I’d have to pay to get it out of the impound, *and* to tow it to my apartment, and I couldn’t even afford to just tow it. My revised plan was to write a hot check. But Kelly didn’t care about any of that. He was tired.

“Fine,” I said, and hung up.

But I instantly called him back when I realized a hitch.

“What now?” he groaned.

“I still need a ride to my car to meet the tow truck,” I reminded him.

He groaned like me disturbing his sleep was more inconvenient than him ditching me entirely. “Have the towing guy come pick you up.”

When I lived in Austin my dad drove from Dallas on average about once every three months to fix the car, insuring that I’d come home to visit, which I only did about every 6 months. This time when he came down, he announced after two days of tinkering that it couldn’t be fixed quickly and he needed to go back to work. It had something to do with the timing belt.

Kelly announced he could fix it, and if they’d pay him \$200 for parts and maintenance, he would.

My parents begrudgingly accepted since Kelly was currently out of work and had been kicked out of school for a ridiculously low GPA—he fried too many brain cells to do well in physics—so they felt sorry for him. I didn’t really think it was fair for him to charge his girlfriend’s parents to fix her car—the things I did for him never came with a price tag—especially since he only worked on it for about two hours a day for the next four weeks, then he’d sit inside, play video games and talk about how hard he worked.

September 2005

The first month I had the Rover, I drove up to my friend’s apartment and encountered one of my exes in the stairwell. He was a common friend so it wasn’t strange for him to be there, but it was odd he wanted to speak in private. I had broken up with Gabe because he was obviously in love with my friend Nicole, also he didn’t want anything serious, also he used too much hair gel and I couldn’t run my fingers through his hair without touching something that felt either cold and gooey or like dead grass.

“So that’s the car you’re driving now, huh?” he asked, sounding impressed.

“Yep,” I said.

We ended up watching the *Family Guy* movie together after Nicole passed-out early, and Gabe made it very clear that he wanted to kiss me. He made several drunken attempts and I gently pushed his face away and allowed him to play it off.

“Do you even remember why we broke up?” he asked. “I sure don’t.”

“You didn’t want anything serious,” I remembered easily.

He sighed and looked me over, lingering longer in some places than others.

“I’m a different person now,” he told me. “Do you wanna, maybe, try again?”

He pressed his forehead to mine and tried to close the space between our lips, but I pushed away. Having the Land Rover made me realize I was too good for him. Usually I felt unworthy of the guys I dated since they always seemed to have money and nice cars and I always didn’t. I felt like a burden—always calling them when I needed help with my car—and I tended to subconsciously take on boyfriends who had a certain amount of car know-how. I also seemed to always have a boyfriend. Maybe it was just incase I was car-less for a period of time. Now I had options. I wasn’t perpetually stranded anymore.

“No thanks.” I said, “I’m good.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I realized. “I am.”

2001

When I visited for Christmas that year, my car broke down before I could drive back for the spring semester. My parents had to drive me to Austin, drop me off, and then drive back

Dallas. When they helped me back into my dorm and turned to leave, I asked how I was supposed to get around.

“Robert has a nice car.” My mom said. “Make him drive you around.”

Robert was my boyfriend at the time, and I spent so much time with him that it did make sense for him to drive—he always insisted on driving anyway—but it didn’t seem fair that because I had a boyfriend my parents were suddenly off the hook. I had this terrible feeling that they wouldn’t bother to fix the car. My dad has a tendency to put things off if he can. It took him 10 years to fix up our first house so we could sell it, even though the actual painting and roofing only took about 6 months.

My parents didn’t even like Robert. My dad was at least polite, but my mom was outright rude to him. It disgusted me that because of a car situation they were suddenly condoning my relationship, when they should’ve been saying, “We’ll find a way to fix the car soon, and you should dump that asshole you’re with.”

True at the time I was misguidedly in love and wouldn’t have listened, but their training had sunk into my values. The fact that he ‘drove a nice car’ outweighed things that it shouldn’t have—like the fact that he was emotionally abusive. But my parents have never been able to meet my needs, so I’ve always had to find ways to manipulate other people into providing for me. So when I looked for a boyfriend he absolutely had to have a nice car, or he had to know a lot about cars, in case my car broke down or I needed a ride for a couple of months. And when I didn’t have a boyfriend, I relied on my friends too heavily. Whenever I needed to take a trip somewhere, I had become a master at tricking someone into thinking I was inviting them somewhere fun and wanted to spend time with them, when really I was using them for a ride. This is how I got my friend Darrell to help me move from Austin to Dallas. This is how I got

Tina to take me to visit my sister in Austin even though when she got there she did nothing but sit on the couch and have no one to talk to. This is how I got my friend Cynthia to drive me and three other bachelorettes to Austin by flattering her with an invitation directly from the bride who thought she was ‘cool’ and then a week later telling her that the person who was driving had decided not to go—I knew that when I asked her. But that didn’t keep me from saying, “This is horrible. I guess we can’t go. The bride refuses to drive, and she refuses to ride in my car since it’s so small and doesn’t have air conditioning. If only I knew someone who wouldn’t mind driving us.”

Behaving that way made me sick, but I had been trained. My parents decided it was completely moral because I was pretty and charming for a reason, right? I might as well use it to save them money and take the burden off of them. But I have to say, at the rate I’ve depended on friends and boyfriends in my life, I never understood why they felt I owed them a break. A break from what exactly?

“I need to go to Austin this weekend,” I told my dad several times in 2004 when I missed my friends so much I couldn’t stand it, and was fed up with how boring Denton is. Denton, TX is where my grad school resides. He always had the same answer.

“The Capri won’t make it that far.”

“Can’t you fix it?”

“I don’t have time.”

“Can I borrow mom’s car?”

“*No*. Are you kidding me? That’s the only car we have that runs. We need it to get to work.”

If before there was an incentive to fix the Capri so that I could visit Dallas when I lived in Austin, now there was an opposite one to not fix it so I couldn't leave Dallas. It was either because my dad thought car trips were too expensive, or because he thought I was automatically safer if I was in the same city—despite the Dallas crime rate—or because he had no problem stranding his favorite daughter so she could've leave his side—could've been all three.

“Well, I need to go.” I told him. “It's Cary's birthday.”

If I missed one of my best friend's birthdays because of car trouble she'd never forgive me. People who don't have car trouble don't think it's a legitimate excuse to miss anything, even if they know your car simply doesn't work 95% of the time. You're expected to work it out when something they deem an occasion comes up. This goes for all birthdays and several holidays.

“Well, you'll have to get a ride with someone,” my dad shrugged.

Never mind that no one who lived in Dallas was invited to this party, but I guess they were about to be.

“I guess I'll offer to pay them gas money,” I said to myself.

“I don't know,” my dad said. “Sounds expensive.”

October 2006

“Kelly's driving a car now that's more expensive than our house,” my mom bragged to my grandmother when she insisted I drive us all to Red Lobster for a family outing. It seemed like a complement to most but there was a discordant jealous pang in her tone that only I seemed to detect. I never understand why people are jealous instead of happy for the people closest to them.

My mother didn't like this Land Rover idea in the beginning. She said Marc was obviously 22, stupid, and his parents wouldn't approve of his decision.

I told her Marc was 35, the car was completely his, and though it was a strange situation I doubted anything like it would come along again.

Within a month my mom began to call the car a miracle. She requires that I drive it on all family outings because it's the largest and only reliable car we have. This makes me feel like the family's provider. Neither of my parents have ever been much of one, but I'm the youngest of three daughters. It seems impossible that everyone above me was so incompetent that they couldn't introduce a reliable car into the family until one of my rich friends did me a favor, but that is the case.

My mom insists that I've matured a lot in the last year but she's merely been forced to see me for the capable person I've always been. My one speeding ticket and one fender bender were convenient excuses for why they felt they couldn't invest their money in a nicer and safer car for me to drive—"You can't handle the responsibility"—but now it was clear this simply wasn't true. It had nothing to do with my behavior or maturity level; they couldn't afford it. They told me that with shame if I really pressed them, but I had never believed them before. I had always thought that if they really loved me, they'd find a way to afford it. Lack of money really can be a limitation. I always thought that was an excuse.

"That car is just a miracle," my mom has told me about once a week for the past year. "We are so blessed."

10:01 a.m. Friday, October 6, 2006

I had just gotten finished interviewing some Dallas Texas Exes at a “UT Teed-off at OU” golf tournament, when I got in the Rover, started it, and couldn’t get it out of park. The engine was running and everything seemed to be in order, but it wouldn’t leave park. I tried kicking it into reverse, rocking it, and pushing it, but the Prima Dona wanted to stay right where she was, even though there appeared to be nothing wrong with her, outside of that.

“You need to come get me. I’m at the Firewheel golf course.”

“Why. What’s wrong with the car?” Gretchen asked.

“I can’t get it out of park.”

“Is the parking break on?”

“*No*,” I said.

“Did you try turning the wheel back and forth?”

“I’ve been trying different things for 30 minutes. The car’s not moving.”

“Well, go back and try turning the wheel.”

“I forgot my cell phone and it’s a long walk from the pro shop. Could you just come get me?”

After I said this, I eyed the Pro shop employees who halted their conversation to listen to my raised voice.

Sigh. “I’m never going to get to finish this movie with all these interruptions.”

“Well, at least your car didn’t break down,” I snapped.

Here the pro shop guys exchanged looks and unintentional laughs.

“I’ll be right there...I guess,” she said like pulling her away from her movie was horribly inconvenient.

When I hung up they each gave me careful looks of pity.

“That was my sister,” I felt the need to explain, even though they were merely overhearing, and weren’t necessarily entitled, but they did allow me to use their phone.

“Kind of difficult isn’t she?” one asked.

I didn’t say anything. I just nodded. With less on my mind I would’ve said, “Difficult doesn’t even cover it.”

It would be impossible to sum up my sister in a couple of sentences so all I’ll say is she’s so severely dyslexic that my mom felt the need to spoil her and let her get away with being greedy, selfish, and overweight. She didn’t care about anyone else’s needs; she only cared about her wants, so having to depend on her for a ride when she was only a couple of miles away at home where she’s still living at 29 unemployed, was hugely inconvenient for *her*, apparently.

I had permission from the pro shop to leave the car there as long as I needed. My dad and I spent a day there and couldn’t figure out what was wrong with it. We couldn’t afford to tow it back to the house, and even if we could, you can’t tow a car that won’t come out of park.

Finally with the back break lights completely out, it signaled to us that the car didn’t even know the breaks were on. My dad realized on our second trip to mess with it that merely the switch that triggered the break lights was disengaged. The car wasn’t leaving park because it thought the breaks weren’t working. Good safety feature in theory, but it’s completely immobilizing if the breaks *are* working. On that second trip, all he had to do was adjust the break peddles higher so the switch would catch. Took five minutes, and it infuriated me that something so small could sabotage the car completely.

In a less expensive car, a safety feature alone could never be the reason a car wouldn’t work.

The Land Rover is currently working and by that I mean, so far *today*, but in the last two weeks, I haven't been able to get through an entire day without something breaking. I've spend over 1,000 dollars in the last month, and I absolutely can't afford to do anymore if something else happens. I have a feeling that even though I'm supposed to give the car back to Marc in December when he moves back from London, that I'll hand him keys to a car that won't move.

I begin to wonder if it's merely my personality that makes cars not work. Or if it's my parents fault—always forcing me to overlook important maintenance so they can save money— or if it's just my karma. The car worked for almost a solid year so maybe that's why I've somehow managed to turn even a Land Rover into a lemon.

These extra three months—the ones not credited in my title—have been worse than the days of the Capri breaking down, because at least my dad could work on that car. This one has custom parts for everything and they're all too expensive and tricky to install.

So that's it. Technically the year of the Rover was over in September, but I really have three more months to go. What have I learned? I've learned that most people will automatically treat you with more respect as well as take advantage of you if the car you drive is expensive. I've also learned that some people—richer people—will treat you like crap because suddenly you've moved into their rung and they're forced to notice you. Once after parking in front of a Starbucks and giving off that horrible gas smell that is currently lingering around the Land Rover, I heard one guy in a Cashmere sweater say to the other, "Well, *that* certainly isn't new." But *today* I saw a different guy standing on the highway with the hazards of his Porsche flashing.

Maybe everyone has car trouble. Maybe it's something I will always have to deal with on a weekly basis. Maybe I'll grow and change as a person and realize that what car you drive doesn't matter because all cars suck. Maybe I'll go back to being car-less completely and be

happy not to pay gas and insurance, and be happy to not date for free towing and to not use my friends to get places. I'll just go where other people offer to take me. And if that's nowhere, maybe I'll finally make peace with that.

But I do dream of the day that I won't have to leave this note on my dashboard: "Car broken. Getting help. Please don't tow☺"