

# *Is This What It Feels Like?*

*A Collection of Short Stories*

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## Preface

“The absurd...is that divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints...”  
– Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

There is a certain shape that I've been obsessed with recently. That probably sounds weird but I can't help it, I've just been seeing it everywhere. The shape looks something like a mountain, but it's longer on the left side than it is on the right. I love this shape so much because it represents a pattern that describes the momentum of pretty much any significant event that can take place in human experience. Take the narrative arc of a story, for instance. First you have exposition, where everything gets set up. Then you have the rising action, the uphill struggle. Followed by this intensely intriguing moment where, for an instant, everything culminates in the climax. Then the denouement, the conclusion. It feels like I've been familiar with this shape for forever but for some reason I've only recently realized how prominent it is in the world. For instance, songs have this shape, too. An introduction to ease you in. A verse and a chorus or two to make you feel comfortable. And then it peaks – the bridge, the breakdown, the crazy guitar solo where everyone loses their minds for that one instant. Then another chorus and an outro. And what about sex, too? The foreplay, the real play, the orgasm, the cuddling and cigarette-smoking to cool down afterward. And drugs. You eat them, you wait. An hour of nothing, an hour of coming up, the peak experience, the come-down. And finally, what about life itself? Can it be said to follow this trend too? And if it can, then what exactly should we expect to find at the top?

This project endeavors to explore what happens at the peak of that mountain. The summit, the zenith, the climax. It seems to me that there is always this one instant, this perfect moment that we're all working towards. And it's completely ineffable, and totally intangible, and

that's exactly why we're driven towards it. I don't know what that moment is. All I know is that it's a product of human nature, and that when it occurs, it feels like something is really, truly *happening* to you. It is a moment of transcendence, of understanding. Dare I say that in a world with no inherent meaning, these moments can actually give our lives *purpose*?

I cannot make the bold claim that the world has no inherent meaning without mentioning that this work has been greatly influenced by the philosophy of Albert Camus. In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," he references the Greek myth in which Sisyphus is condemned to roll a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll down again, and to repeat this task for all of eternity. Camus uses this parable to talk about something he calls "the absurd." Basically, the absurd occurs because the mind wants order, but the world offers none. Or to put it another way, it is absurd to try to find meaning in a world that is devoid of it. Sisyphus is absurd because he knows that the boulder will roll back down the hill every time it reaches the top, yet he rolls the boulder up the hill anyway. There is no point, no greater end to be reached. What is he to think when he reaches the top? That is to say, if the absurd man knows that his life has no meaning, then how is he to cope with living a life at all? Camus' brilliant response is simply that man must make his own meaning.

So, the stories in this collection are meant to reflect that mountainous shape as well, the one that Sisyphus is trying to surmount, the one whose peak offers that inexpressible thing that is seemingly worth reaching toward. The particular arc that the stories make attempts to exemplify my own version of Camus' reasoning about the absurd. The first two stories are stories of rejection. In each, the narrator finds herself in an absurd world whose values are worthy of repudiation. In the first story, she rejects the laws arbitrarily set upon her by society. In the second, she rejects the idea that other people are significant. In the third, she nearly rejects

herself completely, but at the point of climax, she changes her mind when she realizes that anything is possible. In the fourth piece, we see her accept the fact that other people and their actions have consequences that matter. And in the fifth and final piece, she can again accept society's values and indeed, life itself. So, from an analysis of this journey to the top of the mountain and back, perhaps we can conclude that whatever it is that's waiting for us at the top, it can give our lives meaning, even if we never reach it. We find beauty in the struggle, and hope in the unknown.

This work often explores the themes of sex, drugs, and death, because I think these things are really, truly interesting in a way that ordinary things like school or sports are not. They push the limits of human experience and potential, they happen on the brink of human knowledge, meaning that something new and exciting can occur as a result. Moments like these can offer great things in the way of self-discovery, and knowing yourself is one of the most important things you can do. I want to reach the pinnacle of experience so that I can stay there and revel in it. There is no way of knowing what this would be like, but it would be crazy to think that it would not be worthwhile.

### **I. Weird Morality**

“A law is a law...Driving too fast was the same as setting a fire was the same as planting a bomb was the same as shooting a man. A criminal is a criminal is a criminal.” – Chuck Palahniuk,  
*Fight Club*

Driving down Interstate 70 through the tree-spotted fields of West Virginia, I hardly feel very Fear-and-Loathing at all as Diana tells me how I remind her of Johnny Depp while placing that LSD-infused sugar cube on my tongue. The fire-colored fall foliage that we’re driving by is just about the farthest thing from the barren sandiness of the Nevada desert, and I’ve been careful *not* to speed this whole time since I know that there’s a colorful array of other drugs in the car – not quite a suitcase full, but certainly enough to kill someone if they somehow accidentally managed to eat them all. I was once given an invaluable piece of advice: only ever break one law at a time. If you have drugs in your car, don’t speed. If you have drugs in your bag, don’t shoplift. If you have drugs on your person, don’t vandalize anything. If you are on drugs, don’t shout obscenities at the police. Sometimes this is harder than it sounds.

I smile as the sugar cube melts on my tongue and ask, “How long do I have?” If we did this right, we should arrive at the concert around the same time that the acid starts to kick in. “About thirty minutes,” Diana responds. My thoughts about how excited I am to see the show are momentarily interrupted by thoughts of tooth-decay as I crunch down on the individual grains of sugar that have made their way into the crevices of my teeth. So sweet, bitter-sweet. That something so delicious can also cause parts of your body to rot. That something that’s so savory one minute can erode a part of your life in the next.

There's nothing out here on these West-Virginian roads. Nothing of substance, that is. Grass, trees, farms. A house. A horse. A cow. The windows of the car are closed, but as we pass by all this nothing, I find the silence deafening.

I glance down at the GPS to see just how much longer we have to be on this road. We have been on it forever, it seems, and I am getting sick of it. Whether my restlessness was a result of just having taken acid, or perhaps a warning sign of things to come, I couldn't be sure.

"Dude," I say, doing a double-take in disbelief at the GPS. I am praying for the "estimated time of arrival" to change; perhaps it's not up to speed with where we are. Perhaps I've forgotten how to count. "Why the fuck did you just give me acid?! The GPS says we still have *one hour and thirty minutes* till we get there, not thirty minutes you asshole! What the fuck?! What the hell are we gonna do?! We'll never make it before I start tripping!" This is the sort of thing I should have triple-checked before letting her dose me. But I didn't.

I think about pulling over, about finding some gas station or 24-hour convenience store parking lot to spend the night in. Waiting out our whole acid trip in my car. Missing the show entirely. All that driving for nothing. Wasted gas, wasted money, wasted time. Wasted hope. And Diana, she thinks it's funny. She thinks it's funny because she knows that failure is not an option. Maybe she did this on purpose, just to make me drive faster. More likely she ate her own acid too soon, and forgot about the way time works. She thinks it's funny because she's already tripping, and she doesn't realize the severity of the situation.

And now, what's worse is that I'll be freaking out the whole time I'm still behind the wheel of the car, waiting to start feeling the first effects of the drug creep up on me, the way

smoke creeps into a room through the cracks between the door and the floor. A recipe for a bad trip.

What choice have I got now? I'm technically already breaking the golden rule – violating more than one law at a time by driving on drugs and having more drugs in the car. Might as well put the pedal to the metal and speed the rest of the way there. Might as well. She asked for it.

As I accelerate, the inviting colors of the trees all around us seem to blur into one solid presence. I don't bother to look at the speedometer. I am speeding; this I know. The specifics of it don't really matter.

And as luck (is there really such a thing?) would have it, through all that emptiness, the grass, the trees, the farms, the occasional houses that suggest the existence of other living things, there is but one lone police officer sitting in his car on the side of the road. As if he was waiting for me. By the time I see him it is too late to slow down. I think about fate. I think about Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. Was this scripted? Maybe if I waited long enough, the director would shout, "Cut!" and we could get out of the car and drink some water or something. Take five. Eat a snack. I think about the scene where Johnny Depp gets pulled over by the cop, but the poor cop is just lonely and wants a blowjob. A small price that I am willing to pay, I decide, to make it out of this unscathed.

But this cop, he's not just any cop. He's a K-9 unit. He's got a giant drug-sniffing German Shepard sitting in the back of his car. Maybe having a dog with him means that this cop isn't as lonely as the one in the movie. Maybe he doesn't need a blowjob. Maybe I'm about to be thrown in jail while coming up on acid. I have had nightmares about this exact situation. But I always wake up after being thrown in the holding cell.

My state of mind changes so quickly the instant I see the red-and-blue flashing lights in my review mirror that I feel as if I've been injected with a syringe full of adrenaline and fear. I consider our options and do not ask for Diana's opinion. When I look over at her, her eyes are the size of saucers. I can't be sure whether this is because she has understood the situation we are in, or if it is just an effect of the acid. Either way, I turn to her and hiss through my teeth, "*Say nothing. Do not open your mouth unless you are spoken to.*" She nods in terrified understanding.

I think about the rest of the drugs that are in the car. I tell myself we'll be fine, but only half-heartedly believe it. There is weed in the glove compartment, but it is locked. There is ecstasy stowed away in my underwear. We both wore the Victoria's Secret kind that comes with a convenient little pocket on the inside of the bottom. Most of the panties they make have this. Its purpose is to allow airflow, but it is also extremely useful for the storage of contraband. I don't know if Diana's got other drugs besides ecstasy hidden away in hers, but I can only imagine that she does. The cop has no reason to search this car. He'll just give me a ticket for speeding and be on his way. He does not know that we are on acid. He cannot search this car. It would be illegal.

It wasn't until much later that I realized, by my own logic, that the illegality of something is most oftentimes not enough of a reason to keep someone from doing it.

My heart is threatening to beat out of my chest as I slow the car down and pull over onto the shoulder. I quickly fix my boobs to make them look perkier and tell Diana to do the same, as I am willing to use any trick in the book to get out of this. I will demean myself to any level necessary to escape the clutches of law-enforcement. This is because I have never found anything in life to be more worthy of valuing than my freedom.

When getting pulled over, there is that moment of truth that occurs between the time the car stops and the time the police officer sticks his ugly mug into the window, saying “Evenin’ ladies. Do you know how fast you were going?” During this time, I don’t know what Diana was doing, but I was contemplating making a break for it, just flooring it and praying that the amount of time it would take for the cop to get back in his car and start it would be sufficient for us to have gotten a big-enough head start that we could have found a place to hide. But I decided against it – who knows why? I was already breaking the no-breaking-more-than-one-law law. Why not just compound my list of illicit behaviors? Become a felon and never be able to show my face in civil society again? Anything would be better than being locked up. Anything.

Again, I feel like we’re in a movie. Every *click* of the cop’s heeled boots resonates as he approaches, in a way that surely must be fabricated to increase the amount of tension for the audience. If I hadn’t been too petrified to turn my head even slightly, I would have seen in my side-view mirror that this cop was even more hilarious-looking than most – aside from his dark blue uniform that was straining to stay buttoned over his one-too-many-donuts-sized belly, he had on a ridiculously wide-brimmed hat that I thought at first was indicative of how deep in the Midwest we really were, but came to realize later that in fact this absurdly shaped hat meant that this man was the sheriff of police. The fucking sheriff. He takes one look at us and smiles, but this smile is pure evil. This smile has bad thoughts about us in it. Despite our perky breasts, between my facial piercings and Diana’s dreadlocks, we never stood a chance.

“Evenin’ ladies,” he says in the kind of voice that makes me think he has never left the town that he was born in. “Do you know how fast you were going?” He is wearing sunglasses, but I can still tell that the look in his eyes is mocking us. He’s thinking “dirty hippies.” On top of that, I’m sure he hasn’t had anyone to harass all day, sitting there alone in his car with his dog.

He must be thankful that someone has finally come along for him to torture. The dog is still in the police vehicle, but I can hear it start to sniff the air and growl.

“Too fast?” I say with a smile in response to his question, trying to be cute and/or charming.

“That’s right. You were going 105 miles an hour. Lucky for you the speed limit around here is 55. If you’d have been going twice the speed limit, I would’ve had to arrest you ladies on the spot.” His voice is dripping with malice. In his mind, we are already labeled as complete scum. “Now, you wouldn’t want to be getting yourselves arrested would you?” We both shake our heads, and I am overcome with the sensation that I am walking on a tightrope suspended several dozen feet in the air, about to lose my balance. “Well then,” he says, still smiling, “I guess you wouldn’t mind stepping out of the car for me?”

Fuck. These were the words I was dreading. “Why, officer?” I ask. A million thoughts are racing through my head, but I don’t voice any of them for fear of incriminating myself. Everything I say can and will be used against me in a court of law.

“Well, it’s simple really,” he says. “Because anyone who drives that fast must not be in their right mind. Are you sober, little missy?” I look him in the eye and pray that my pupils have not yet dilated enough to betray me.

“Yes, of course!” I respond, and in that moment, it really was true. I had not yet begun to feel the effects of the acid. But I knew I didn’t have long.

“Prove it,” he says, pointing to the painted line on the road that separated the right lane from the shoulder. “Walk in a straight line for me.”

I passed his test with no problem at all, and started to see a faint glimmer of hope. Earlier I had found myself praying that another car would come along so that I could throw myself in front of it and get run over and die. I really would rather be dead than in jail. Now I just hoped that the inevitable speeding ticket that I was going to be given would be less than \$300.

The ease with which I passed the cop's test seemed to piss him off. "You, out of the car!" he says, looking at Diana. She obeys silently. "Put your hands on hood of the car, where I can see them." We both comply. I can only imagine what is going through her mind. For someone who is already tripping, she is handling this quite well. Her face looks calm, unphased, even.

The cop walks back to his car and opens the door to the trunk. The German shepherd reminds me of the Kraken, grateful to be released after what seems to have been millennia of enclosed solitude. The dog jumps out of the car with a growl so low and menacing that I couldn't be sure if I had actually heard it. It runs straight over to us and starts sniffing us all over, focusing mostly on our crotches. I see the policeman raise an eyebrow at this, and blurt out "We're both menstruating," in our defense. I specifically use the word "menstruating" to be as explicit about the matter as possible. It was not actually the case – the dog was most definitely interested in the drugs hidden in our underwear – but I knew that the cop would be too disgusted to enquire further.

"Smelly fucking hippies," he mutters under his breath, trying to pull the dog off of us and into our car. But the dog keeps sniffing and growling at our pants. "Alright, you two, get in the back of my fucking car so Rocky here can smell something other than your dirty pussies."

I am so offended by the cop's presence in the first place that his words have no ability to insult me. In fact, I find his manner entertaining. I am even grateful for the chance to be

separated from him for a moment – even if it does mean we have to get into the back of a police car – so that we can form some sort of escape plan. We are not in handcuffs yet as he pushes us into the back seat of his vehicle. For him, this is a huge mistake.

The inside of the car smells like wet dog, and I have to fight the urge to vomit. But Diana seems unaffected by the smell. Her mind is somewhere else. I see her eyes focus intently on our car, the cop, the dog. They are inside the car now, and we can't really see them. This, of course, means that they can't see us. She reaches her hand up under one of her thick, matted dreads, and pulls out a small bag of molly.

“Dude!” I hiss, “what the fuck?! This is not the time to be eating ecstasy!” I am completely incredulous. But then I start to consider the fact that if we're fucked anyway, maybe we might as well be trying to make the best of it.

“Not for us,” she says with a smirk as she opens the bag and dumps the entirety of its contents into the cup of coffee sitting in the cup-holder next to the driver's seat. I don't think I've ever had more respect for anyone than I had for her in that moment. I am so relieved in that instant that I actually laugh.

“How much molly was in that bag, dude?” I ask. “Won't he taste it when he drinks the coffee?”

“About a third of a gram,” she responds, still smirking. She slips the now-empty bag back into her underwear. For someone who does not normally partake in the consumption of ecstasy, a third of a gram is a debilitating amount, possibly even enough to cause the user to hallucinate. Even for someone who is experienced with the drug, a third of a gram is an overdose. Perhaps

just one sip of that now-contaminated cup would be enough to have some sort of effect on the cop. “Now we just have to keep him talking.”

“But I don’t get it...it’s like you knew...” I say, still incredulous about the fact that we may get out of this yet.

“Dude, this ain’t my first time in the back of a cop car,” she says so nonchalantly that I have the mistaken impression for an instant that we are on a ride at an amusement park, waiting for it to begin. “They *always* have coffee. Usually some food, too – specifically chips or M&M’s. Gotta have something to keep themselves busy with while they sit on their fat asses all day, don’t they? And if we’re lucky, his coffee is already spiked with some whiskey, so he definitely won’t taste the molly.”

I want to kiss her in that moment, but I notice that the cop is out of the car now, leading Rocky back toward us. The last thing we need right now is for him to hate us more for thinking that we are lesbians, too.

The cop has our weed in his hand, meaning that he has broken in to our glove compartment. I think back to a criminology class that I had taken in high school, where we learned about probable cause. This cop never had any. I want to tell him this, but know it is useless. There are no witnesses. The worst thing about the police is that they think that just because they enforce the law, they are above it. With people like us, it’s just the opposite. We know we are subordinate to the law, that the law is held in this arbitrarily lofty, untouchable position. We know that because of this, the most important thing that we can do is break the laws that we do not agree with. This may or may not include all of them. Civil disobedience at its finest.

The cop opens the trunk and Rocky jumps in. The trunk seems to be the designated area for the dog, but even though he is separated from us by a wire screen, he continues to sniff us and growl. Then the cop opens the door on my side and pulls me out.

“Turn out your pockets and put your hands on the car,” he demands, and I comply. I am subsequently frisked in a way that is borderline violent. I secretly hope that there will be bruises so that I can take pictures of them and use them as evidence in court in case we don’t get out of this and need to sue him for violating our fourth-amendment rights to privacy. Expectedly, he finds nothing in his search. This pisses him off even more, so when he finally snaps handcuffs around my wrists, they are far too tight. Next he forces Diana out of the car, frisks her the same way, and shoves her back in with her very own shiny pair of handcuffs.

“Seeing as I found this *marijuana* in your car,” he says, dangling the illegally-recovered baggie in front of us and lowering his own fat body down into the driver’s seat, “I’m gonna have to take you ladies down to the station. I radioed for another officer to come and pick up your car. It’s going to be impounded.” And he smiles. “Get comfortable, we have to wait for him to get here since I’ve got the keys. We’re at least thirty minutes out from the station.” And he smiles. Thirty minutes. This means I am pretty much guaranteed to start feeling the acid by the time the other cop gets here. But this also means that this bastard cop might start feeling the effects of his drugged coffee by then. If only we could get him to drink it...

And my mind starts racing again with all of the possible worst-case scenarios. What if the coffee is old and cold and he doesn’t drink it? What if he tastes the ecstasy before he swallows the drink, and spits it out? What if we were caught in the act of drugging him on the car’s security camera? What if he does drink it and gets so fucked up that he crashes the car once he

starts to drive us to the police station? Actually, that might not be the worst-case scenario. I'd rather be dead than in jail.

"I'm so thirsty," Diana says, baiting him. How did she learn to be this good? As if on cue, the cop reaches for his coffee and takes a nice, long swig, finishing with an exaggerated "*Ahhhh!*" that suggested to me that he might already have been expecting the burn of alcohol.

"Well that's just too bad," he says, thinking he's bested us again. He takes another swig, clearly not noticing anything strange about the way it tastes. "I just finished my coffee, and there ain't no other beverages in this here car." And he laughs in a way that threatens to cause one of the buttons on his shirt to burst off. I am tempted to duck to avoid getting hit in the face with it if it ricochets, but I notice that he has pulled down a divider to separate the back seat from the front. Like in a taxi cab, but much more menacing.

We are silent for the first half of the wait. The doors in the back seat have no handles or ways to open the windows, or else I probably would have made an attempt to jump out already. My goal is never to have to set foot inside a police station.

After several minutes go by, we start to notice the cop shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He is rubbing his fat stomach, probably thinking that he ate one too many M&M's, if that's possible. The thing about molly is that it can give you the shits.

Finally, after some longer amount of time that I can't verify because the handcuffs are preventing me from looking at the watch on my wrist, Diana breaks the silence, asking, "So why'd you decide to become a police officer?" This is may be a more brilliant question than she realizes. There's no better way to manipulate someone than by getting him to remember that he is a human being, and that the people he's dealing with are, too. At first I think that the cop

didn't hear her, then I realize he's probably chosen to ignore her. It never crossed my mind that he might actually be *thinking*.

With a sniff, he says, "I come from a long line of police officers, missy. Family business. When you're raised by a cop you don't know no other way to live."

"Oh," I say, catching on to her plan, "so you never *wanted* to be a cop, then? You were forced into it?"

"Now I wouldn't say *forced*," he replies, "but it might not have been my first choice. I just did what I had to do."

"Well was it worth it?" I continue. "Do you like being a cop?"

He seems to be considering this for a moment before he responds, "It doesn't matter. I just did what I had to do."

"But what about what you *wanted* to do. That matters. What'd you want to be?"

He sniffs again, and looks in the rearview mirror. At first I think he's eyeing us, wondering why we've become so inquisitive all of the sudden. But then I realize he's looking at Rocky. "A vet," he says. "I wanted to learn to help animals. When I was eight, my dog Sparky died of cancer and I...I...wait, why am I tellin' y'all this? I ain't never told anyone that before! Besides, what I wanted never mattered. I spent all my life just trying to impress my old man."

One of the other things about molly is that it's a veritable truth-serum. It can cause a person to talk and talk and talk for hours, without ever realizing what they're really saying.

The cop's head is starting to loll around lazily on his shoulders, as if he's drifting off to sleep. Finally, he says, "Scuse me a second," and throws open the car door. He gets out, stumbles to the other side of the road, and vomits. When he comes back, we can see that his pupils have completely taken over the colored parts of his eyes.

"Musta been too much...whiskey..." he reasons, "but I feel better now!"

"Wait, whiskey?" I ask. I think I hear him mutter "Shit," under his breath. "How can you live with yourself, sitting there arresting people all day, when you're breaking the law just the same? Who the fuck do you think you are? We'll report you!" I only realize the emptiness of this threat after I say it.

"I'm the damn sheriff of police, I can do whatever I want!" he shouts. "Ain't nobody tells me what to do! Nobody!" And he laughs, as if he's gone mad with power. Or something else.

"Except your father, apparently," Diana says. The cop stops laughing. I'm thinking we have him right where we want him, which is perfect because the other cop could be arriving any minute. "What a shame," she continues, "you wasted your whole life working a job you hate just to impress a man who never cared about you."

"That's not true," he says, "my father...cared..." and aside from his huge pupils, now there are tears filling up his eyes.

"But if he cared, why wouldn't he let you be a vet?"

"Why wouldn't he let you live your life the way you wanted to?" I add. "Isn't that what's most important? Don't you want to be happy?"

"I...I..." he stammers. His lower lip is trembling.

“It’s not too late you know,” I continue. “It’s never too late to change. You don’t have to be a cop. You’re not in it for the right reasons. Look what you’ve done. You’re ruining people’s lives when all they wanted to do was enjoy themselves.”

“Yeah,” Diana catches on, “we never tried to hurt anyone. But look what we got in return. We’re in handcuffs. All we wanted to do was be happy.”

“And you’re in handcuffs too! Metaphorical ones, that is. Your whole life you’ve been in chains. It’s like your father’s had a leash on you all this time. I bet you wish you could still hold Sparky’s leash. But I guess your dad wouldn’t have let you anyway.” We’re just milking it now, picking on every single emotion that he’s made vulnerable to us and squeezing it for all it’s worth. Like a zit. Another thing about molly is that it heightens one’s sense of empathy to previously unmatched levels. The cop begins to cry. Actually, ‘weep’ might be a more accurate word. I never thought I’d see a cop weep. And I definitely never thought I’d be the cause of it. I take a moment to revel in it.

“Plus, you’re a hypocrite,” Diana continues, afraid of losing the momentum we’ve built thus far. “You’re breaking the law just the same as we are. Why don’t you arrest yourself for a change? See how it feels. Have you ever been in the back of a cop car before? It’s pretty fucking terrible. It smells like wet dog. I bet Sparky didn’t smell as bad as Rocky does.”

“Seriously dude, you need to re-evaluate your life. Come on now, stop crying. You know what you have to do. Let us out and we can pretend this never happened. You can even keep the weed, and we won’t tell anyone how many laws you’ve broken today. Then you can quit your job and go become a vet like you’ve always wanted.”

The cop continues to sob, and I'm afraid we're running out of time. Finally, he wipes the fat tears off his fat face with the back of his fat hand and says, "You know, you girls ain't so bad after all. Thank you, thank you for this. You're right. You're right. I'll let you go."

And he does.

After he removes our handcuffs and hands me the keys to our car, I decide it's appropriate to give him a hug for good measure. "Come on now, Cornelius," I say, glancing at his name tag for the first time and trying not to laugh at the realization that he had had such a funny name all along, "everything's going to be alright. I think you've learned a lot here today. Good luck in veterinary school, and thanks for letting us go."

Still sobbing, he hugs me back, saying, "thank you girls, thank you!" And we jump back into our car to get the fuck out of there.

After about two minutes of driving, we pass what must have been the other cop that was coming to take our car to the impound lot. What a scene he's going to find himself at when he finally reaches Cornelius.

As we continue to drive down the road, I'm contemplating the concept of morality and ethics in general. What the fuck am I supposed to learn from this? That two wrongs do make a right? That sometimes the only way to get out of the clutches of the law is to break more laws? I'm so deep in thought that I don't even realize how much time has passed since Diana first put that sugar cube in my mouth. But I'm still not feeling the acid.

Diana opens the glove compartment to grab a lighter and a cigarette. She opens up her box of Marlboros, and takes out a small bottle of what looks like breath-freshener.

“Ooohh!!!” she exclaims, holding the bottle up to the light. “Looks like that sugar cube that I gave you was just a sugar cube after all! I forgot that I never dropped the acid onto the cubes! I just dropped a few drops straight into my mouth before! Sorry, dude!”

I am completely speechless. A minute passes, and I say the only thing that comes to my mind. But I appreciate the irony of the situation, and can’t help but laugh.

“Holy shit, dude. I fucking hate you.”

## **II. Feels Like Dying**

“This is your life. And it’s ending one minute at a time.” – Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*

Robin tells me I’m a good friend because when she comes over with a bottle of wine on a Tuesday night and asks me to drink the whole thing with her, I don’t say no. Really, I should know better though. Last month when Robin came over with a giant bottle of Pinot Grigio we ended up backstage at some concert blowing cocaine until our noses bled and missed all our classes the next day, which was great because really there’s so much more to be learned from partying with rock stars than there is from going to school, anyway. Then again, a white wine means celebration. A red wine, on the other hand, means self-deprecation. And as Robin comes in and sets her bag down on the table, the bottle is poking out in such a way that I can just see where it says “Merlot” on the top of the cork. All I can think is “Oh, God” as Robin takes the bottle out of her bag and her eyes simultaneously fill with tears. Tonight, it would seem, is a red wine night.

“Have you been taking your medication?” I ask as she starts rummaging through all the drawers in the kitchen in search of a corkscrew. A trip to the psych ward that occurred not long after the previous wine night left Robin with a handful of new prescriptions to abuse. But there’s no point in asking this question really, because even if she does answer there’s no guarantee she’s telling the truth. She looks up from her search momentarily to shoot me a glare that could mean anything, then goes back to what she was doing. Instead of telling her that the corkscrew is on top of the fridge, I reach into her backpack while she’s distracted and pull out the bottle labeled: Xanax 50 tablets, 0.25 mg each. There are plenty left in the bottle so I gently shake a few of them into my hand and pop one into my mouth to start this night off right.

Most people who know Robin have enough sense to steer clear of her on a red wine night. I, on the other hand, love these kinds of nights because watching Robin self-destruct before my eyes makes me feel a little bit better about my own shitty life. Yet, at the same time I'm jealous of her. It's just like watching television; she gets to have all the adventures and deal with all the problems while I sit here laughing, wondering what will happen next, and hoping beyond all hope that one day my life will be that interesting.

When Robin finally passes me the bottle, almost a quarter of the wine is already missing. She's got quite a talent for consuming substances, but the speed at which she's drinking tonight seems excessive, even for her. I take as big of a swig as I can so that she doesn't get more fucked up than I do. This shouldn't be a competition, but with Robin I always feel like it is. I can't just let her have *all* the fun.

"I've really fucking done it this time, Lily," she says, stealing the bottle back from me and chugging from it some more. "I am so fucking fucked."

"Oh, come on," I say, having heard this drama-queen routine before. The way Robin begs for attention sometimes, you'd think she was some kind of aging Hollywood starlet who couldn't accept her inevitable fate of being forgotten amongst the multitude of nobodies out there. "This couldn't be worse than the time you got arrested for taking off your clothes, setting them on fire, and throwing them from the roof of your neighbor's house, right? Remember?" But the truth was she probably didn't. Robin had a knack for getting totally, completely, absolutely black-out drunk. "You thought you'd be in jail for like six months but then you just ended up having to do 100 hours of community service." That night had ended with Robin banging her head as hard as she could against the glass window in the backseat of a cop car. Quite an exit, if I do say so

myself. The stuff Academy Awards are made of. But Robin was always managing to outdo herself, and somehow she always made it seem like she wasn't even trying.

“Remember that guy who gave us the coke at that concert last month?” she asks. I nod. “Well, I’ve been fucking him.”

“Alright, no surprise there,” I say with a smirk, trying and failing to get a smile out of her. “What, does he have a girlfriend? Or an STD or something?”

“No. He just has coke. *A lot* of coke.”

“Still not seeing the problem.”

“So he gave me some. He gave me, like, a lot. To sell, you know?”

“Okay, how much did he give you? Can we do some?” I ask, unsure of what the combination of cocaine and Xanax might feel like but more than ready to find out. At this point the alcohol is mixing nicely with the Xanax, making me feel as though I’ve had twice as much to drink as I’ve actually had. Maybe this is how Robin feels right now. Maybe if I can get on her level, something interesting will happen to me too. As fun as it is to watch someone else’s life get majorly derailed, I can’t help but find myself wishing that something like that would happen to me, something, anything at all, to make my life just a little more worthwhile. Just to give it a little bit of meaning. Even though Robin’s life is a ridiculous mess, at least she has stories worth telling.

The only story I have that’s worth telling happened to me right around the time I turned eight years old. Back then I lived with my parents and brother in a quiet suburb about thirty

minutes outside the city. This was the kind of town that was so quiet that everyone knew everyone else's business because there was simply nothing else to talk about. That, and everyone went to bed before ten pm, so it was actually dark enough to see the stars at night. I still miss those stars sometimes. On nights when I couldn't sleep (which was most of them), I would take the screen out of my bedroom window and stick my head out into the cool night air, staring upward and wondering, making up stories about how and why the stars looked the way they did. I used to love looking at the stars. When I was younger, all I ever wanted was to touch one of them.

Usually the stillness of the night air was enough to lull me to sleep. On nights when it wasn't, I'd sneak into the hallway and climb up into the attic, careful to avoid stepping on the creaky parts of the stairs so I wouldn't wake anyone up. Up there was a window that led out onto the roof. I always brought a teddy bear with me to keep me company whenever I went there, because after hours of staring upward into the vast expanse of the night sky, it felt awful and strange to snap back to our terrestrial reality and realize that I was so truly and utterly alone.

One night, after I had already been on the roof for about an hour, I heard the distinct creak of the third-to-last stair leading up to the attic. There was no place to hide, so I just sat there, unsure of what to expect. I wouldn't have been surprised if some alien creature who had spotted me from the heavens was about to appear and take me back to his spaceship for further investigation. Half of me truly feared that this would happen. The other half of me sincerely hoped that it would.

But it wasn't an alien. It was my sixteen-year-old brother, and he was just as surprised to see me as I was to see him. In his hand there was a cigarette and a bottle of beer, which he tried

to hide from my view at first, but then thought better of it. He came over and sat down next to me on the ledge. He smelled funny and had this weird look in his eyes. I couldn't have known it at the time, but that smell and that look were things that I would come to be very acquainted with. They were characteristic of someone who had been drinking a lot of alcohol. Too much of it.

“What are you doing out here, ol' kiddo? Ain't it way past your bedtime or somethin'?” he asked. The smell of his hot breath almost made me gag.

“Couldn't sleep,” I replied, turning my face toward the sky for some relief from that awful smell. “Look what I made,” I said, handing him my notebook where I had sketched all the stars I could see and tried to make my own constellations out of them.

“Ain't that somethin'!” he said, holding the notebook waveringly in front of his face. “You've got some imagination, kid. I hope it stays with you when you grow up. I hope you don't get all old and disillusioned like me.” He took a swig of his beer while I contemplated the word “disillusioned.” I didn't know what it meant, but I didn't like the sound of it. “Here,” he said, handing me the mostly-empty bottle. “It'll help you sleep.”

I took a sip. I can remember thinking that it was one of the most horrible things I had ever tasted, but I pretended I liked it to impress him.

“Man, take my advice,” he said, finishing what was left of the beer. “Don't ever grow up, man. This way you won't have to deal with all the bullshit. All the broken hearts.” He looked up. “It makes the sky seem so much...smaller.” His words hung there strangely for a moment, and in that moment I loved my brother so intensely. I wondered if I'd ever be as wise as him, but somehow I knew that I wouldn't. After another minute he stood, winding up his right arm to toss

the bottle into the night. “Because one day you might just have to kiss all your dreams goodbye!” he said, chucking the bottle as hard as he could. I’ll never forget that moment, even though it happened so fast. One minute he was standing on the ledge next to me, and the next all that remained of him was a sickening thud and the sound of glass breaking in the distance. The force of his throw must have knocked him off balance; he wasn’t just throwing away the bottle, he was throwing away everything he hated, everything in this life that had wronged him. Later I’d realize that perhaps this, in itself, was the problem. Perhaps we can’t live without the kinds of struggles that he was trying to rid himself of. Perhaps, if you throw away everything that you hate, everything that pisses you off, everything that doesn’t make sense in your life, then you throw away yourself, too. But then, in that moment, I wasn’t thinking about any of that. All I could think about was how on the concrete below, I could just start to see a dark circle of blood pooling around his head while the rest of his body lay crumpled and broken, like a bug that had been squished under someone’s shoe. I panicked and held my teddy bear tight. I didn’t know what to do. I looked up to the stars for guidance. But as soon as I looked, they were gone.

Robin takes another enormous swig and hands the bottle back to me. It’s already more than halfway gone, and I take several big gulps just to prevent her from being able to have that much more of it. I have to keep an eye on the amount of liquid in the bottle just to be sure that Robin doesn’t have the last sip. The last time she emptied the bottle, she immediately smashed it on the ground and used one of the shards to carve a nice-sized gash into her wrist, saying the whole time, “It’s artwork, don’t worry, I’m just expressing myself,” and licking up drops of blood like a cat as they dripped down to her elbow and onto the floor.

“He gave me a *pound*, Lillian. A *pound of cocaine*.”

“And we aren’t doing it right now because...?”

“Because dude,” she swallows hard and for the first time in a long time I see real fear in her eyes. “Because I fucking lost it.”

We both stare at each other for a minute. I don’t bother to ask her how she’s managed to do something like this. I’m so impressed with her ability to inadvertently destroy everything around her that I want to laugh, but I know she won’t appreciate it, so I hold it in. The thing about Robin is that she doesn’t have a creative bone in her body, so when she says something like “I lost a pound of cocaine,” you know she’s not making it up. I couldn’t even make up shit like that if I wanted to, and yet here she is, living it. It’s not fair.

“What are you going to do?” I ask for lack of anything better to say.

“Well, unless we can find a way to make twenty grand in the next thirty minutes, I’d say I’m pretty much fucked, because he’s coming over tonight to pick up some money that I told him I made from selling it.”

“What?! Why the fuck would you tell him that?!”

“I had to tell him something! He gave it to me last week and expected me to have made a bunch of sales by now.”

“And? Did you?”

“No. I just snorted a bunch of it.”

“GODDAMMIT ROBIN!”

“Don’t yell at me!” she says, letting a few tears trickle out of her eyes. “Don’t you think I know I fucked up? If he ever finds me he’s literally going to kill me.”

“Well he doesn’t know you’re here does he?”

“I guess not,” she says, sniffing and cradling the wine in her arms like a newborn baby whose cuteness did not meet expectation. “But I can’t just hide here. He’ll find me eventually.”

“Okay then,” I say calmly, trying to come up with a rational solution, but failing. And then it hits me. Maybe that’s just it – the reason why all these crazy things are always happening to Robin and not to me. Maybe it’s because Robin’s *not* trying to make sense of all of it. Robin just acts; I waste all my time thinking. Maybe some things just don’t make sense, and maybe that’s okay. “I know what we have to do,” I tell her.

“What, you know some rich guy we could whore ourselves out to for twenty grand?” she asks despondently.

“No,” I say, looking at her square in the eye. “We have to kill him.”

Ten minutes later we are at Robin’s place, and she is changing into her sexiest lingerie while I am attaching my personal favorite sex toy, the Bedroom Restraint Kit, to her bed. The Bedroom Restraint Kit consists of four long leather straps joined at the middle to form a big X that goes under the bed so that each corner of the bed has the end of one of the straps hanging near it. At the end of each strap is a big Velcro cuff that, when used properly, securely locks the wrists and ankles of whoever is lying on the bed in place.

“You lure him into your bed with promises of kinky sex,” I explain to the now half-naked Robin, “and make sure you strap him down good. Maybe even blindfold him if he’s into it. Then, you might as well give him the ride of his life, considering it’s gonna be his last one. And then, when the time is right – and you’ll know when it is – drop these into his mouth!” I say, handing her the bottle of Xanax that I took out of her backpack earlier and feeling quite pleased with myself. “Make sure you give him at least four of them at first because that will definitely be enough to knock him out. Then after that we can choke him to death or something and make it look like an accident – you know, auto-erotic asphyxiation and all that. I can hide in the closet just in case you need backup. That is, unless you think he’d be down for a threesome?”

The idea of killing someone while fucking them is so fantastic that I immediately become jealous of Robin once again for being the one who actually gets to have such an absurd experience. It isn’t like I have some weird fetish for dead people; it’s just that I’m attracted to the idea that when the guy dies it will be this big, significant moment for whoever is on top of him, just like an orgasm, where everything is perfect and the universe inexpressibly becomes the product of your own design for that one instant, and not the other way around. I could only imagine what it would feel like to have that kind of power. To be God for an instant. To do something meaningful. Just for once.

But suddenly my musing is interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Oh God, it’s him! Fucking hide!” Robin hisses at me. I dash back into the bedroom and crouch down in the corner of the closet, positioning myself so that I can watch them through a tiny crack between the door and the wall. At this point I’m more excited than nervous for this to unfold.

A minute later they walk into the bedroom together, with him saying something along the lines of “I just wanna see the coke first.” Robin’s face has turned a sickly ashen color, and I’m starting to feel around on the closet floor for possible bludgeoning items, because it looks like this situation is not about to turn out how we planned. But I can’t find any objects that seem heavy enough to crack a skull with, and I’m thinking about gauging his eyes out with my thumbs when he goes over to the corner across from the door, pushes up on one of the ceiling panels, and pulls out what very much appears to be a one-pound bag of cocaine.

“Ah, here it is! Right where I left it. It looks like you haven’t made that many sales since the last time I was here though. No biggie! I’ll just take some of this back with me so you don’t have to worry about holding on to such a large quantity. Hey, you wanna do some right now?” he asks, and begins to unwrap the package with a smile. Robin just nods silently as she stares at the spot on the ceiling incredulously, a look of recognition slowly dawning upon her face. I should have fucking known! It was just like Robin to get so fucked up that she wouldn’t be able to remember something so goddamn obvious. And now I’m forced to sit here and watch the two of them do all that beautiful cocaine and not have any myself! I came so fucking close to actually doing something significant today, and *this* is what I get...banished to a closet to watch other people live their lives! But then, just as I’m about to give up and resign myself to sitting in the closet for the next two hours, a thought occurs to me that gives me quite a bit of hope:

*Maybe we should just kill him anyway.*

It’s perfect, really. We could get away with it. And it would be the ultimate story worth telling, regardless of the fact that we’d never actually be able to tell anyone.

I've only ever told the story about my brother to one person: Robin. She's the only person who I thought could handle the fucked-up reality of how close death really is to all of us at every second. And because of that, I figure maybe she'll understand if I just so happen to pop out of the closet and bash this guy's head in.

But first I'll need to find a weapon. I pray that Robin's got something in here I can use, because the idea of actually killing someone is giving me such a rush that if I don't go through with it I'm afraid I'll explode. Either that or I'll just have to go on some sort of killing spree later. It's way too dark to see anything inside the closet though, so I slowly sift through everything I can find on the floor with my hands, trying not to make a sound. I can hear Robin and my future victim snorting lines of cocaine outside the door, and this only gives me more incentive because the idea of having a huge pile of drugs to call my own is the nicest thing I've thought of in a while.

Most of the things in here seem to be shoes. Stabbing him with a high-heel could work, but if I really want to get away with this then I really can't have him bleeding all over the place, the blood from his head staining the carpet in the same way that my brother's stained the concrete, as if to say that no one should forget about how something significant happened here. There's an umbrella in here, too, but that presents the same problem as the shoes. A little deeper in the closet there's a pile of laundry. That could definitely work – I plunge my hand into the pile in search of a pair of pants or stockings or something, anything I could use to strangle him with. But at the bottom of the pile, my hand brushes against something hard and thick. My first thought is that it's a baseball bat, which would be a strange thing to be hiding in a pile of laundry but pretty ideal for this situation, so I go to pull it out of the pile but as soon as I do the damn

thing starts vibrating, and it's making this loud-as-fuck buzzing sound before I realize that it's not a baseball bat, it's a giant fucking dildo.

This would have been a hilariously perfect murder weapon if only it hadn't just given away the location where I was hiding.

"Do you hear that?" the guy asks as I'm panicking and trying to turn the damn thing off. "What the fuck is that noise? It sounds like it's coming from your closet...."

"Uh..." is all I hear Robin say before the closet door swings open and I'm blinded by the brightness of the light in the room. Next thing I know I can hardly breathe as I'm being lifted out of the closet by this dude with his hands around my throat, throttling me. I hear Robin shout "No, stop! She's my friend!" and realize that she can't exactly explain to him just why I was in there in the first place. If she did he'd probably just strangle me harder. But this dude is probably so coked up at this point that maybe he doesn't even hear Robin shouting or if he does he can't stop strangling me because for his coked-out brain this must be a hell of a lot of fun. And I'm not going to lie, I'm kind of enjoying the being strangled part. It's a sexual thing, sure, but even more exciting is the fact that maybe in a few seconds I'll be dead, which is just about the most thrilling thing that anyone could ever ask for.

After my brother died, I saw death everywhere I looked. Cars became speeding metal death traps. Any morsel of food was big enough to choke on. You could drown in the bath, get crushed by the TV, electrocuted by the light switches. Gored by scissors and knives. I should have been scared, being so horribly, vividly aware of how easy it was to get killed at any second. But I wasn't.

Black dots start swimming in the sides of my vision, but I'm trying to focus on the pain of having fingers digging into my throat so that I can stay conscious in this epic moment for as long as possible. If I'm going to die, it's going to be the most significant moment of my life, goddammit, and I'm not going to waste it by passing out first.

And then it occurs to me that if I'm going to die, the moment could only be made more precious if someone else was to die with me.

It's almost like a simultaneous orgasm. Almost.

The dildo is still vibrating in my left hand. If I swing it at the dude's head I'm not sure if it will cause him enough pain to make him stop trying to kill me. So instead, I ram the thing into his balls as hard as I can. I can tell he's in pain but I still can't help but wonder whether he likes the way those vibrations feel.

He stops strangling me and drops to the ground in pain, his mouth agape. My knees are too weak to hold me up, so I fall down too. The blood rushes back into my head, the air rushes back into my lungs, and I feel like I've just woken up from a strange dream. But now the tables have turned, so while he's rolling around clasp ing his balls and writhing in pain, I straddle him and raise the dildo high in the air. I'm trying to come up with something witty to say, you know, some silly one-liner like in the movies that perfectly sums everything up and makes the main character look like a total badass, but I can't. So I just shove the giant, vibrating, plastic dick into his mouth and shout, "Choke, bitch!" amidst the muffled gurgling noises coming from his throat. Tears start streaming from his eyes and he's practically convulsing because of how hard he's trying to throw me off of him, but I'm seated firmly on his stomach and I just keep trying to push

the thing even further down his throat. He probably can't breathe through his nose all that well because of all the coke he just did, but I pinch his nostrils shut just to be sure.

"Bet you never thought you'd die with a big cock in your mouth!" I taunt. The look in his eyes as he's slowly dying is priceless. It reminds me of the fact that I'm actually doing something significant, for once.

Finally, he stops resisting, and his body goes limp. There are no sounds of struggle anymore, just the mechanical vibrations of the dildo that sound strangely hollow now. I take it out of his mouth and turn it off, leaving Robin and I in an eerie silence that envelops us in a way that is simultaneously instant and complete.

The thing that I'm sitting on top of is no longer a person, but an object, and this is because of me. For some reason, I am reminded of that night on the roof with my brother all those years ago. How magnificent and horrible death is. How tragic and beautiful. That the most significant moment of one's life renders one insignificant.

I look at Robin. She looks at me. We are going to have to figure out what to do with the body.

"Cocaine?" she offers. It is really the only thing left to say.

"Sure," I respond. "But I want to do it off of the dildo."

### III. Synthetic

“At any streetcorner the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face.” – Albert Camus,  
*The Myth of Sisyphus*

Before class I'm sitting in front of the library smoking a cigarette on top of my favorite "No Smoking" sign when some bitch with her pink yoga pants and her fake blonde hair and her orange tan and her pathetic attempt at looking like a person comes over to me and says "You know you're not allowed to smoke there," and my first thought is that she needs to get fucked and my second is what would it be like to fuck her and my third is should I blow smoke in her face and laugh at the hilarity of the irony of the situation and my fourth is should I spit at her feet or maybe something more intrusive like lick her cheek to see how she would react and then tell her that I will eat her babies if she ever has any. But instead I take another nice, long drag and hold the smoke in my lungs for a minute to appreciate the way it feels there, stinging and burning so good making me feel like I'm doing something much more productive than just breathing while praying that it's giving me cancer just a little bit faster than everything else. I want to ask her who the fuck she thinks she is and who the fuck does she think I am and do I know her from somewhere because she looks familiar oh wait that's just because she looks exactly like everyone else. But of all the things to say to this girl in this moment I don't say any of the things that I'm thinking and I'm wondering about it all on a cosmic scale, like does this girl really think she's making any sort of difference in the world whatsoever by enforcing some arbitrary rule that she has no authority over, not that any of us has any more control over anything than anyone else but still we like to think we do, but this girl, she's standing there with this look on her face like what she's saying actually matters and it just amazes me to such an extent that I can't actually make any words come out of my mouth, that's how astounded I am by her stupidity and her

willingness to expose it to the world, waving it around and shoving it in my face like some sort of deranged exhibitionist with a huge cock that he wants everyone to see. How rude. So instead I just stare at her, blink once or twice, exhale all the pollutants and carcinogens that my lungs have to offer, and put the cigarette out on the inside of my left arm. And I've done this sort of thing so many times before that the burn made by the little cherry of the ember only causes me the same amount of pain that one might expect when one pinches oneself to see whether or not one is dreaming. But I know I am not dreaming as the smell of singed flesh reaches my nostrils and the nostrils of this girl, and I'm wondering if she can smell it because I can smell it and to be honest I think it smells pretty good, and I wonder what it would be like to taste human flesh if this is what it smells like when you cook it, and I wonder if she can really smell it because she has the kind of nose that looks like she used to do a lot of coke, or maybe she still does, and if she does then why does she have such a problem with fucking cigarettes, and the whole time not a muscle in my face moves and I'm not breaking eye contact because really she has very pretty eyes but also I want her to know that I'm not fucking around and that maybe I'm just staring right through her.

I throw the now-smoldering cigarette-butt on the ground and tell her thanks, tell her I didn't know that I was sitting on that sign so thanks for being so observant and catching my little mistake there because otherwise who knows what could have happened. I tell her that I was only smoking it to cover up the smell of the weed I had been smoking earlier anyway. Smoking weed, smoking cigarettes, always smoking, smoking, smoking, always trying to die just a little bit faster but not too fast, just trying to ensure that I don't make it past the age of sixty or maybe forty or even thirty because who would want to live that long anyway and wouldn't that just be fucking terrible to be that old, like my grandma in her hospital bed all hooked up to machines but

there's no machine for consciousness. And I'm still staring at her eyes those pretty eyes but there doesn't seem to be anything behind them because why is it her priority to tell me what to do and doesn't she have some fucking homework that she should be doing? And as I'm staring at her pretty eyes I notice that her makeup gives her eyes that "smoky" look and I nearly burst out laughing because of the irony of it all, but I don't because I decide I've tortured her enough for one day and I'll allow her to continue living her sad little life for now so she can go home and think about what she's done.

Then a few minutes later I'm walking into class, smelling my cigarette-self and sizing everyone up just like I always do in general but especially on the first day of class, trying to figure out who the fuck are these people and who the fuck do I think they are and who they fuck do they think they are and do I think that any of them would want to join me at the park to smoke a joint after class. There's this one girl who looks like a bird that my neighbor used to own, it was a parakeet and they had trained it to say "pretty birdy" and this was all it would say over and over again and I imagine that this girl does something similar when she's looking in the mirror getting dressed in the morning. There's an Asian boy hiding behind thick glasses and a book who looks like he's never actually spoken a word in his life, and I'm imagining his strict Asian father standing over him cracking a whip and shouting "Read faster, read faster, keep studying!" and I'm wondering how I would have turned out if I'd had a strict Asian father instead of the kind who loved me and cared about me so much that he had a heart-attack and died while trying to perpetuate the utopia of the suburban bubble that would end up instilling a rampant sense of cynicism in me anyway. This boy, he must see life as a giant homework assignment, a giant math problem to solve, and for a second I'm almost jealous of him and his ability to carry out orders like a fucking soldier because probably life is just a lot simpler that way. When I take my seat

next to an ugly short chick with a weird hat on I notice her scrunch up her nose probably at the fact that I smell like smoke and I want to say to her that at least it's not B.O. and then I think that next time I should find someone to have sex with before class so I can come in smelling like that instead and I want to ask her if that would be better but then I realize that she probably doesn't know what sex smells like so it wouldn't really matter. The thing is that I have to size everyone up because really I'm just looking for a friend but all of these kids seem like fucking squares and I guess maybe that's just what you get when you go to college at a top university but then again this is college and I wonder if I can't corrupt them all and get them to see that being innocent isn't really all that it's cracked up to be. And as I'm judging them I'm hoping that they're judging me back and maybe they're intimidated by the fact that I'm wearing enough eyeliner for all of them and have piercings in my face but really it's okay I don't bite and I'm not out to hurt anyone except occasionally myself and maybe if I could just find a cool friend I wouldn't have to do that anymore, either.

I always just automatically assume that everyone is stupid because that theory has just proven itself to me over and over again in the past, but maybe that was just because the high school I came from was full of trust-fund-kid heroin-addicts who knew all the names of the celebrities' babies but not of the state capitals of the U.S. Maybe if I stopped believing that the entirety of this country's youth is too distracted by the media to ever have room for an original thought in their heads then I would have an easier time of making friends. Then the professor walks in and he's this thirty-something dude with a ponytail and the kind of collared, button-down shirt and matching tie that scream "Academia!" but the ponytail counteracts it, and maybe it's just the ponytail but I can't help but think that he's kind of good-looking and what would it be like to fuck him right here in this classroom on his desk maybe even with all these bright,

hopeful students watching or maybe in the supply closet just before class and we'd fall out of the closet straightening out our clothes and zipping up our flies at the last minute, just as the rest of the class is walking in, then I'll ask the girl with the hat hey what's that smell can you smell it, and I don't want to fuck the professor just to get good grades because I can get good grades anyway, I just want to fuck him to see what it'd be like which is really the only reason I've ever wanted to fuck anybody, but I also think that this guy definitely isn't as stupid as the kids in his class probably are which makes him instantly more attractive, but maybe I just think he's smarter because he's older, or maybe I think it because I really want to believe that I won't be more intelligent than all my teachers in college the way I was in high school, or maybe I just want to fuck him because I've got a lot of pent-up rage inside me and he's pretty tall so I assume his cock is proportionately long and man there's nothing like a good fuck to make you feel better after you realize that the cigarette burn in your arm stings more than you thought it did and maybe cigarette burns really aren't the way to be going about getting your kicks.

It's at this point that I realize that whenever I'm sizing anybody up based on my first impression of what they look like the first thing I think about before I even wonder what their name is or where they're from or what they want to be if they ever grow up is what they would be like in bed, but I don't think that this is an unhealthy way of thinking because really the best way that you can get to know someone is by sleeping with them. Sure I can know that green is your favorite color and that chocolate is your favorite ice cream flavor and that you think the Clash is just okay but until my finger is in your asshole what can I *really* say I know about what your preferences are or, for that matter, who you are? I guess I've just never had an intimate connection with anyone other than a physical one and all I really want is to bridge that seemingly

infinite gap between myself and another human being to know that I'm not actually so alone in this world and then everything would be alright.

I probably should have been paying attention to everything that this sexually intriguing professor was saying but I couldn't get my mind off of how sexually intriguing he was and it was taking all the strength I had not to let my face betray the inner-workings of my mind as I imagined myself and this guy in every position in the Kama Sutra and even some ones that aren't. All I really heard him say was that his name was Professor Davies and that he was from New York and that he was here to teach us some philosophy.

On my way back from class I'm still thinking of him as I walk past this group of cubicles each with its own little theme or personality like this one with all its Hello Kitty shit and that one with the little Star Wars figurines that the occupant of the cubicle probably makes pretend to fight each other when he's bored or procrastinating and I'm wondering what Professor Davies' cubicle would look like and whether it would be decorated with pictures of all of his favorite philosophers and their inspirational quotations just to hide the fact that really he kept lube and some handcuffs in the bottom drawer of his desk, and then I catch myself thinking that I can't wait to have an office just so I can decorate it with little knick-knacks too to distract people from the fact that I'm actually a terrible person and what kind of cute little paraphernalia would I choose to represent myself so that people can think they're learning a little bit about me when they walk by even if I'm not there and that's when I begin to wonder whether I'm truly dead inside.

There are like five million bridges in this city so as I'm walking home I make a point to walk across at least one of them so that I can look over the edge and determine whether I'd rather

be standing on the bridge or falling as fast as gravity will pull me towards the ground below. I think about jumping because I've never been free like that before, just falling through the air with nothing at all telling me what to do except for time and space themselves. I don't think I'd mind being dead because first of all I'd be dead so how could I mind but also because what do I have to live for anyway except for all these wonderful opportunities that I don't deserve because how could I ever possibly make anything of myself when I'm so busy hating everything. I don't know how long it would take to fall the hundred feet to the ground because I never paid attention in physics class but I do know that those few seconds would probably be the most amazing and worthwhile thing that it's possible to experience.

A lot of the bridges around here have fences presumably to stop people from killing themselves but this one doesn't. And as I'm staring off the edge people keep walking by behind me but all I can view them as are these constructions of whatever society wants them to be and I just wish I could see them as people and not as victims but how can I when that's truly all they are and I'm really not any better even though sometimes I really really really really really really wish I was.

Below me are a bunch of rocks and trees and things that look like they will cause a lot of pain if you were to land on them from a hundred feet up. But as I'm peering over the ledge I see this rock come falling out of nowhere and it bounces off a couple of things on the way down then lands at the bottom with a sound so soft you can barely hear it and I realize that it's a perfect fucking metaphor for my life. But then another rock falls too except this one doesn't hit anything on the way down it just crashes at the bottom and settles there. And then another rock falls after that. And I'm starting to wonder where all these fucking rocks are coming from so I look around and wouldn't you know it Professor Davies is standing a few feet down from me on the bridge

and throwing these rocks over the ledge like it's a totally normal thing to do, as if he was feeding breadcrumbs to some damn ducks or something.

“What are you doing?” I ask before I can stop myself. His hair isn't in a ponytail anymore I guess because he's done putting on his professional façade for the day and his hair is blowing all crazy in the wind and it just makes him look like some kind of god or something. Also it makes me want to fuck him more than ever but that's beside the point because he's here now as if he knew that that was exactly where he needed to be at this moment. And then with all his might he tosses the last of his rocks as far as he can over the side of the bridge and he and I both are listening for the sound it will make when it hits the bottom but it never comes because he's thrown it so goddamn far. From just looking at this guy you can tell he knows shit, you can tell he's full of wisdom at least that's what I thought but he's smiling as he's looking over the edge and now I'm beginning to think maybe he's just a crazy person like everyone else, or even worse maybe he's just a crazy person like me wandering around and doing things for shits and giggles because he knows that there's no fucking point to anything.

“Each of those stones,” he says, looking at me right in the eye not wavering or blinking at all like a bad actor or maybe the best one in the world, “is someone you could have been.” And that's it that's all he says just like that he doesn't even wait for my reaction just turns around and walks away because he knows that he's said everything that needed to be said.

“Oh,” is all I can say because nothing has ever made more sense to me in my life so then I take a step back from the ledge.

#### **IV. The Ugly Fuckling**

“...maybe we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves.” – Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*

On the way to throw out the rest of my lunch, I take a little detour around the cafeteria to get a better look at the nerd table, but not before applying more of my favorite shiny, pink, cupcake-flavored lip-gloss. In health class they don't tell you about how the size of a guy's index finger is supposed to be proportional to the size of his dick, but I keep this in mind as I'm scoping out this smorgasbord of untapped male potential. Call it research. Anthropology, even. See, the popular kid's table, which is where I normally sit with my best friends Brittany and Britney, is all the way on the other side of the cafeteria, so I never really get the chance to see who actually sits over here. But looking at these geeks now, I feel like a tiger about to pounce on some tiny, weak, wounded little rodent. Britt and Brit are staring at me from across the room, looking bewildered and whispering to each other. I haven't told them my plan because I don't need them getting in my damn way. Besides, I can't pretend I don't like the attention.

All around me, the other kids in the cafeteria are chatting away, busily eating their lunches and flinging food at each other and trying to finish their homework before class. Probably most of them are thinking about sex. At least I know I am. So for instance, when I see that one of the dorks at this table has flaming red hair that's so bright it almost hurts to look at and a face so full of freckles that you almost can't see his pimples, all I can really think is how I don't want to find out if the hair on his nutsack is the same color as the hair on his head. There's another guy who looks like he's having a lot of trouble eating his sandwich through a mouthful of metal braces, and I am reminded mostly of a bear trap and only a little of cunnilingus. I think

one of the people sitting at the table is a girl, but her hair is so short and her shirt is so baggy that I can't be sure at first.

I can feel my pores start to clog when I see how the nerd table is totally covered with greasy chips, greasy pizza, and greasy fucking chocolate bars. Everything about the people at this table is pretty much telling me to run the other way, which is essentially the exact reason why I sit myself down next to the fattest, greasiest, most pimply one of them all, look him right in the eye, smack my lip-glossy lips, and say with a smile, "Hi there. My name is Tiffany."

At least girls are lucky in that their boobs will continue to grow if they gain weight. This way everything stays in proportion. Penises, unfortunately, don't work this way. But if they did then the boy that I'm sitting next to at this table would obviously have the biggest rod here. But I'm interested in him for other reasons. The kid pretty much has no idea what to do after I say hi to him so he just sits there staring at me from behind that crooked nose of his and shoves another handful of chips into his mouth. But honestly I've got no idea what to do either so I'm just stuck there watching him chew for a minute. The human mouth is such a disgusting thing. All it does is consume things and smell bad and make weird noises. Which can really be said of any living thing, I guess. So maybe we're all equal in that sense but I still can't shake the feeling that I'm a lot less gross than he is as a little piece of food flies out from his lips and lands awkwardly on the table between us when he says, "I'm Nathan."

I wait for him to swallow before I muster the courage to say what's really on my mind. The rest of the nerd crew is all watching intently, probably thinking that I'm about to play some elaborate practical joke on him. So it's no wonder that he's skeptical when I tell him no offense but I have this crazy fetish where I really, really, really want to bang an ugly guy.

Oh, how I wish I were joking.

In health class they don't teach you about how sex can be a weapon. Amongst all the talk of abstinence and Fallopian tubes and gonorrhea, they don't mention how much fun it is to be the one in charge, the one holding the gun. And they *definitely* don't tell you how shitty it can be when you're staring down the barrel of that very same, very loaded gun.

See, really, I don't have a thing for ugly guys. I do, however, have a thirst for revenge.

Last Wednesday it was Free Pancake Day at IHOP, so me, Britt, Brit, and their boyfriends Benji and Brody (respectively) all got in my car to skip our morning classes and start our days with syrupy, buttery, pancakey goodness instead. Of course I wanted my boyfriend Brad to come along, too, but he said he couldn't skip class that morning because he had to take a test. I should have known then that he couldn't be trusted. Anyone who turns down pancakes for school obviously has a deluded sense of priority.

We each smoked a cigarette outside after our meal. It was a nice Spring day and the smoke just kind of hung there in the air if you didn't exhale too hard, that is, until the wind decided to carry it away in every conceivable direction. I coughed as Britney inadvertently puffed a cloud of smoke into my face. But other than that we smoked in silence; the general mood was one of unspoken melancholy at the thought of having to finally actually go to school. And then I remembered that it was Wednesday.

"Does anybody have any weed?" I asked hopefully, formulating a plan in my head. Smoking weed was the favorite pastime of our little group of friends. A town like this didn't

offer much else in the way of entertainment, so naturally everybody always had their own sick little ways of surviving the crushing boredom. “It’s 10 am on Wednesday – that means my mom is out getting her hair and nails done so we could totally go to my house to smoke and chill! Why bother going to school at all today?” Everyone seemed in favor of the idea. It was settled when a search of Benji and Brody’s pockets revealed that we would have just enough weed to roll a joint with. Though I couldn’t shake this strange feeling that we’d be missing something important at school that day. Oh, well.

Me and my bright ideas.

We smoked the joint in my backyard once we got to my house, then settled in on the couch with some popcorn to watch cartoons. But television, like anything else, could only hold our attention for so long before we gave up on it entirely. The show we were watching ended and commercial after commercial flashed by with promises of things we needed but couldn’t afford. A commercial for Zoloft came on, asking have we lost interest in the things we used to love doing? No, I thought jokingly to myself, but maybe that’s because I was never that interested in anything in the first place. Maybe this Zoloft commercial is onto something here, though; maybe I should go raid my mom’s medicine cabinet for something fun. Me and my bright ideas.

Thinking nothing of it, I climbed the stairs towards my mom’s bedroom. I knew she’d have some Xanax but was interested to see what other goodies she’d be stocked with this week. Valium was always good. Maybe some Oxy if we were lucky. That shit really takes the edge off. One time I took too many of those and slept for 26 hours. But I don’t think my mom even noticed.

Alas, all of the benzodiazepine in the world couldn't have prepared me for what I was about to find.

In health class they don't tell you what to say when you find your mom banging your boyfriend in the shower.

Ok, I didn't actually see them (thank God), but as I got closer and closer to the master bedroom I could tell something was weird. First, my mom's bed was unmade, and that *never* happened. If there was one thing she was actually good at it was being a housewife. Then I kept hearing this weird, rhythmic, wet slapping noise coming from the bathroom that I probably wouldn't have questioned except that it was accompanied by gasps of "Oh, Brad!" and the all-too-familiar grunting sound of *my* boyfriend giving it to someone, hard.

I only came up here because I wanted a Xanax. Now I really fucking needed one.

Outside the bathroom door I sank to the floor and put my head between my knees to combat the sudden overwhelming urge to vomit. But that sound, that awful sound just *would not* go away. In fact, if I wasn't mistaken, it was getting louder. I thought about flinging the door open and exposing them, but really I would only want to do this if I had a camera, or maybe a gun. Plus, I couldn't decide who I should be more pissed off at. Besides, physically harming them wouldn't solve anything, even though at that moment I had pretty much never wanted anything more in my life. No. I would sink down to their level. Two could play at this game.

A week later is when I introduced myself to the handsome Mr. Nathan.

I'm trying to gauge Nathan's reaction as I let my question sink into his greasy head, but I'm awfully distracted by the tiny bread crumbs clinging onto his thin, scraggly beard. They're charming, in a way. I guess. Brad doesn't have a beard. Nor, for that matter, does Brad have a layer of fat that spills over the top of his pants when he sits. Nathan is pretty much the exact opposite of Brad, at least physically. That's why Nathan is so perfect.

"Did you lose a bet or something?" Nathan asks with a snort once he's swallowed his food and chased it down with half a bottle of Mountain Dew. Maybe he's a virgin. This would be ideal. A sacrifice for the greater good.

"No," I say, trying to focus on his eyes instead of his massive, caterpillar-like eyebrows. "I'm horny and I have a fetish." I bite my lower lip, all the while maintaining eye contact. "I can prove it to you."

In health class they tell you a million and one stories about girls getting raped by male strangers, friends, family. But you never hear about guys getting raped by their female acquaintances, which is a shame because obviously that makes for a much more interesting story. Probably the real reason you never hear about those kinds of things though is because there really aren't that many guys out there that would turn down a girl's offer to have sex in the first place.

"Fuck you," the chick that I wasn't sure was a chick at first says, glaring at me. The fire in her eyes suggests that perhaps she and Nathan have some sort of history together. She's not all that bad-looking really, and even though she's wearing a heavy sweatshirt I can still tell she's got a nice big pair of tits under there.

“Yes,” I say with a smile, looking only at Nathan so this bitch will get the hint that I really couldn’t care less about anything she has to say. “Fuck me.”

“He doesn’t need you!” She shouts, perhaps a little louder than she intended. Her knuckles are white from how hard she’s gripping the table. I bet Nathan likes a girl with a strong grip.

To be sure I get the message across this time, I lean over Nathan’s lap until my face is directly in front of hers. My lips are practically on hers and I’m taking the time to savor the feeling of her short, nervous little breaths that feel hot on my mouth as my lips curl into a devilish grin. We are way too close for comfort which is exactly how I wanted it but this girl isn’t going to back down, though I can tell she is worried because her lips are trembling slightly due to the fact that she doesn’t know whether I’m about to kiss her or spit in her mouth. “Honey, please,” I say, with one hand on Nathan’s thigh and the other caressing her shoulder so she knows there is nowhere to run. “I eat girls like you for breakfast.”

She gives me a look of pure hate as I slowly back away. Then, the ginger kid sitting on the opposite side of the table stands up and says, “Hey, I’m ugly too! You could fuck me instead!”

I smile and give the kid a once-over. He’s ugly, but not as ugly as Nathan. Beggars can’t be choosers, I suppose.

I glance at Nathan one more time to see if he’s changed his mind, and it looks like it’s working but just to be sure I casually mention how I’m not wearing any underwear.

I can only imagine the looks on Brittany and Britney's faces as they watch me leaving the cafeteria pulling Nathan along by the hand. I haven't even bothered to break up with Brad – let him figure out what I'm doing with Nathan the same way I figured out what he was doing with my mom. Lunch isn't over yet but I figure Nathan and I might as well find a nice, quiet, empty bathroom because with this sort of thing, it's never too early to get started.

I am able to convince Nathan to come back to my house that evening by telling him that no one will be home. This is only half-true; my mom usually gets home from her Zumba fitness class by 9:30. I plan to be getting plowed by then.

But when 9 pm rolls around Nathan and I are naked in my bed with him telling me about how he can't get it up because he keeps thinking about Helen, the girl from his lunch table.

"Ugh, I knew you guys were a thing!" I say, straddling him and looking down at his chunky white thighs. The way his fat jiggles reminds me of a waterbed. "Why didn't you say something? I would have fucked your redhead friend instead."

"We're not a *thing*," he explains, grabbing his glasses from the side table and putting them back on so he can see me properly. The lenses are foggy from the grease on his skin. "She's my best friend. I just feel bad about... ditching her, I guess."

"Well, that's nice of you and all," I tell him as I squirt some lube into my palm, "but this is not the time to be thinking about it. Besides, if she's your friend then shouldn't she want you to get laid?" I thought it was a solid argument. But I'm trying everything to get him hard and it

just isn't working. After ten more unsuccessful minutes, I decide it's time to try a totally different approach.

"You need to chill out man. Ever smoke weed?" I'm already fishing around in the drawer of my bedside table for my bud and some rolling papers when he tells me, predictably, that he hasn't. "It'll help you relax," I reassure him, "and it'll make you forget all about Helen."

I finish twisting up the joint and light it. "You're smoking that in *here*?" Nathan asks incredulously, looking around as if the police are sure to pop out at any moment.

"Dude," I say, inhaling deeply. The familiar feeling of smoke in my lungs instantly makes me feel less irritated about the other females in my life that are screwing everything up for me. "My mom is way too busy caring about herself to give a fuck about what I do."

I pass him the joint. Behind his glasses, I see him squinting as he tries to grab a hold of it, and for the first time I find myself thinking that maybe he could actually be kind of cute. That is, if his face cleared up and he got a haircut and shaved and lost like 60 pounds. He coughs for a solid minute after hitting the joint, but once he's able to breathe again I can tell he's high as fuck because his eyes are super pink and only half-opened.

"Whoa!" He says after a few moments of staring out into space. "Is this real?"

"Is anything real?" I respond with a light chuckle. Part of me is just trying to freak him out and blow his mind, while the other part of me is truly captivated by the significance of the question.

"DUDE!" he says, and I can practically see his brain working to keep up with this new way that his mind is functioning. "Well, if this isn't real, then it's okay for me to tell you this,"

he starts, and he looks so intent on telling me and it's taking so much concentration for him to form the words that I don't have the heart to tell him that as ridiculous as it may seem, this is, in fact, real life. "Helen," he says, to which I roll my eyes at the fact that he's still thinking about her, "is gay."

"Oh," I say, not entirely interested. "So she's like, jealous?"

"Yeah," Nathan says dreamily. "Jealous."

By the time my mom gets home Nathan is way too stoned to even speak, let alone have sex. But that's alright because the way my mom stares at Nathan and then stares at me tells me that she's come to the conclusion that we must have been fucking, anyway. Which is exactly what I want.

"Where's Bradford?" she asks skeptically, avoiding my gaze. Her voice is higher than usual when she asks this, making her sound like a third-grade teacher that's just been corrected on something obvious by one of her students. Nathan's attention is fixed on the TV, so he doesn't hear me when I respond by saying, "I don't think Brad will be *coming* over here much anymore," all the while making sure that she can feel the hate emanating from my stare. I look to Nathan, then look to her. Then back to Nathan and back to her, as if to say "I dare you. I fucking dare you to touch him." I know she thinks way too highly of herself to do it. And even if she does do it, I still win for making her sink to that level. Bitch. I can tell she has gotten the message when her lips tighten so much that they almost look like a butthole and she walks away silently. Okay, maybe I feel a little bad about using Nathan, but the satisfaction that comes from knowing that my mother will never look at him or probably any guy that I ever bring home again is almost enough to make me fall in love with him on the spot.

My mom is a serial dater. Actually, that's a nice way of putting it. My mom is a nympho. Actually, that's a nice way of putting it too. My mom is a slut. Ever since I can remember, I've come home from school to find her banging someone else. The TV-repair guy. The exterminator. The carpet installer. The piano-tuner. Her personal trainer. My boyfriend.

My parents were high school sweethearts, I guess. That is, my mom was the prom queen and got knocked up by the prom king on prom night. I've never met my dad, there's just this picture of him and my mom on the mantle, smiling, waving, and holding hands on the stage of their high school auditorium with these fancy crowns on their heads, sparkling with fake diamonds, the same way their smiles sparkle with fake happiness. Well, maybe my mom's smile isn't all that fake. She has told me time and time again how the moment captured in that picture was one of the greatest moments of her life. No, not even the day I was born measures up to being crowned prom queen. I was conceived just a few hours after that picture was taken. My dad would leave my mom just a few weeks after that. And ever since then, my mom has blamed me for stealing her youth.

So on the day when I find her banging Brad in the shower, as disgusted as I am, I really can't say I'm all that surprised.

Every day for the next two weeks I bring Nathan to my place after school to get stoned and have sex, and each time I end up liking him a little more. Sure, he's a fucking nerd, and he does this annoying thing where he laughs nervously after like every sentence he says, and he asks himself "What would Picard do?" on a daily basis, and he has no fashion sense whatsoever, but somehow I find it all charming. He's not trying to be anything he isn't. And this is a nice

change of pace, considering I grew up in a house where plastic surgery and celebrity gossip were of greater importance than actually spending time as a family.

“Why do you wear so much makeup all the time?” Nathan asks me one day as I’m reapplying my eyeliner after a quickie. Downstairs, I can hear the TV blasting and the faucet running, and I can’t help but smirk as I imagine my mom furiously scrubbing dishes and trying to pay attention to one of those channels that pretends to talk about news in an effort to tune out the obnoxious sex noises coming from my room.

“I don’t know,” I reply, realizing that I hadn’t ever really thought about it. “I’ve just been wearing it since like the fourth grade, I guess. It was my mom’s idea of course.” I sigh, looking down at the stick of eyeliner in my hand. “It’s just nice to feel beautiful sometimes.” I say this and know that Nathan cannot possibly understand what I mean. But then again, I’m not sure I do either. My mom is obsessed with the way she looks. Priorities, you know. She taught me about how looking good is important so that just in case everything else fails, I’ll still be able to find someone to pay for everything for me. Sometimes I wonder whether my mom knows the difference between what it feels like to be told that you’re pretty and what it feels like to be told that you’re loved. Maybe, for her, there is no difference.

“Well, I wanna see what you look like without it,” Nathan says. He’s lying on my bed looking at the picture frames I keep on the window sill. I’ll have to remember to get rid of those because Brad is in some of them. “I bet you’d still be really pretty.” I put the stick of eyeliner I’m holding down on my dresser and look at him.

“Wow,” I say. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

Helen isn't speaking to Nathan at this point, especially since I started sitting at their lunch table, but I think Nathan's having too much fun to care. On top of that, Brittany, Britney, Benji, and Brody won't talk to me because they think I'm cheating on Brad. I'd honestly rather have them think that than know the embarrassing truth and tell the whole school about it. Obviously, Brad and I have also stopped talking completely, and I thought that he had stopped fucking my mom altogether until this one fateful day at lunch when Brad just walks up to Nathan and punches him straight in the face.

Chants of "Fight! Fight! Fight!" are already breaking out amongst the nearby students in the cafeteria and before you know it we are all in the fucking spotlight with everybody watching this stupid drama unfold. I'm in the process of falling in love with Nathan at this point so naturally I immediately stand up to defend him as he's recovering from the shock of being sucker-punched and Brad tries to swing at him again.

"That's for trying to steal my fucking woman!" Brad shouts. There are practically tears in his eyes as he says this. But it doesn't make any sense.

"Brad I...I had no idea you still had feelings for me..." I say. I've wedged myself between him and Nathan so that they won't try to hit each other again.

"This isn't about *you*," he grunts with a glare so evil I wouldn't have thought him capable of it. "This is about...YOUR MOM!" And with that he tries to push me out of the way to attack Nathan again. "You MOTHERFUCKER!" I am too stunned to appreciate the irony of this particular insult.

“W-what?” I ask, but it comes out as a barely audible whisper. My head is reeling and before I know it I’ve been knocked back into my seat at the lunch table and Brad and Nathan are at each other’s throats.

Brad is holding Nathan’s neck with one hand and is trying to hit him with the other, but some of the spectators are holding him back. The veins in Brad’s neck are purple and throbbing with rage. Like a big, fat erection, but far less appealing. He looks at me with this crazed look in his eyes, and for a minute I don’t even recognize him. He is seething when he says, “I cheated on you with your mom, and then your mom cheated on me WITH HIM!”

There is absolutely no way in hell that this is really happening to me. “Tell me it’s not fucking true,” I shout at Nathan, but the look in his eyes says it all, so I slap him hard across the face. This feels even more gratifying than I expect it to. Besides, it’s the only thing I can do to keep from crying. “How the fuck did this happen?! How could you do this to me?! I thought...I thought we...had something....”

It’s only then that I realize how stupid I’ve been. This is what I had wanted. My mom will never forgive herself for sleeping with someone as gross as Nathan. If I’m lucky, she’ll spiral downward in a mess of alcohol and fattening food. But I hadn’t counted on getting my own feelings involved.

Brad has to take his hand off Nathan’s throat before Nathan can explain himself.

“Look,” he says, but his voice is hoarse from practically having his larynx popped like a zit. “It wasn’t my fault! Your mom is a crazy bitch! She fucking drugged me! She knocked me out with Xanax and when I came to she was on top of me.” I know better than to think that my

mother is above this. I am almost ready to forgive him when he adds, “Well, at least that’s what happened the first time.”

In health class, they don’t teach you what an orgasm really is. Until you have one, there’s just no way of knowing what it should look, sound, or feel like. But when it happens, you know. And this, well, this is kind of like that. Except that instead of waves of pleasure coursing through every fiber of my being, I’m overcome with tidal waves of anger and hate. If I don’t think about it too much, and only focus on the extremity of the emotion, this can almost feel like coming. But instead of having that one final moment of grandeur all by myself, the feeling culminates in me grabbing both Nathan and Brad by the hair and bashing their fucking skulls together as hard as I possibly can.

They both fall backwards, rubbing their foreheads in pain. The circle of kids around us has somewhat settled down now. Everybody loves watching a fight, but nobody had expected *this*. And then Britt turns to Brit and goes, “See? I told you she was just using the fat kid to get back at her mom for sleeping with Brad!” and they laugh. I am so angry that I can’t see straight.

“Oh my God. You *knew*? You bitches knew that my mom was fucking Brad and you didn’t *tell me*?!” I glance at the lunch tables in search of the nearest thing that can be used as a weapon. There’s a glass bottle that still has some juice in it; it’ll have to do. I grab it and raise it high in the air, wielding it like a sword. “You bitches better start running,” I hiss. They look at each other, then sprint out the door. I toss the bottle at them anyway, but miss.

Then I turn to Nathan and scream, “FUCK YOU! Out of the three of us, *you’re* the one that’s not getting cheated on? You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me! I’m so tired of this shit!” For

an instant chance at revenge, I grab the first person I see in the crowd and start making out with them. As luck would have it, it was Helen.

I kiss her hard for a long time. Some guys in the audience start cheering. I don't give a fuck about anything anymore, I'm simply enjoying the way her soft lips feel on mine.

"You know, I've had a crush on you for over a year," she says meekly when I stop kissing her to come up for air. I try not to be too concerned about the fact that I had only known of her existence for these past few weeks.

"Good," I say, feeling the adrenaline rushing through my veins. "I'm swearing off of men for fucking *ever!*" And as soon as I proclaim it, I know that it's true. This was probably the only way that I could keep my mother from stealing my significant others. "Fuck you, and fuck you," I say to Brad and Nathan in turn. "And now," I say, turning to Helen and smiling, "I'm gonna fuck you!" With that I grab her hand and lead her out of the cafeteria. At this point I'm so high from the excitement of everything that had just occurred, and I need to get the rest of my aggression out somehow. So I pull Helen into the nearest bathroom and immediately start to take off her pants.

Helen chuckles softly to herself. "What is it?" I ask.

"I knew you weren't lying," she says.

"Huh? What do you mean?" I'm only half-listening as I'm tugging her jeans off, eager to get to the prize inside. I spread her legs wide and stick my face in between them.

"I knew you weren't lying," she gasps, "when you said you eat girls like me for breakfast!"

### V. The Moirologist

“Moirologist (n.) – Someone paid to mourn at a funeral, especially ostentatiously.” – The Dictionary of Weird Words

Denial.

The trick to fake-crying is actually to think about things that make you happy. Puppies. Kittens. Cotton candy. Love. Think about these things, and then think about them being soiled. Broken. Ruined. Desecrated beyond recognition with no hope of salvation. Sometimes, in Hollywood, when actors need to fake-cry, they put some sort of drops into their eyes that make them red and watery. This is cheating. I find it hard to believe that those actors don't have real things to be despondent about. I find it hard to believe that *anyone* doesn't have real things to be despondent about.

I do not know the person in the casket, but the mascara-filled tears leaving dramatic streaks of black down my cheeks say otherwise. In fact, I am not acquainted with any of the people in this room, be they living or dead. I am watching them through my fake tears, trying to learn all I can about the fresh corpse that is lying in the box at the front of the room. So far, all I can tell is that she used to be beautiful. I know this because there is a picture of a pretty girl next to the coffin; her eyes are bright and she is smiling one of those sparkling, toothpaste-commercial smiles. I know that she no longer looks like this, despite the best efforts of the people whose job it is to make corpses look like the people they used to be by dressing them up in nice clothes and doing their hair and makeup. I know this because usually the funerals here are open-casket, but this time that ominous wooden box remains conspicuously shut. This must mean that the body of this poor dead girl is so mangled and gruesome that we mourners are not

even allowed to see it. This makes me cry a little bit harder, since seeing the body is half the reason I came. Because there's nothing like seeing a dead person to remind you that you are still alive.

I grab a tissue from one of the boxes that is conveniently placed around the room, and use the pretense of blowing my nose to get a better look at the woman who must be her mother. From across the room, I hear her say, "Gracie is in a better place. At least that drunk driver will rot in jail. At least Gracie didn't suffer." By this, she really means, "My belief in the afterlife is the only way that I can rationalize my daughter's sudden, instantaneous death, and the person responsible doesn't deserve another single moment of happiness." Naturally, the only thing worse than dying is dying slowly and painfully. I know this because I nearly died once. It was an agonizing process that no innocent person should ever have to experience. Somehow or other, though, death will manage to catch up to all of us.

Now that I know the dead girl's name and cause of death, I can begin to converse with some of the other mourners. I scope out the room to find the most interesting candidate. Finally, I see him, sitting in the back of the room by himself, staring morosely at the ground. I approach him and, sniffing for effect, I gesture to the chair next to him and ask, "Is this seat taken?"

"No," he says, without looking up. I sit down.

"Were you her brother?" I ask.

"No," he says.

"Were you her boyfriend?" I ask.

"No," he says. "No, I *am* her boyfriend."

Anger.

“Who are you anyway?” he asks, finally shifting his eyes away from whatever spot on the ground had previously been captivating his attention. “I’ve never even seen you before.”

“I just wanted to see if you wanted to talk,” I say, dodging the question. “You look like you could use a friend.” I smile weakly. He looks at me intently for a moment, trying to decide if he is able to trust me.

“Well I don’t need a fucking friend, okay? Thanks but no thanks.” He goes back to staring at the floor, but I can see his lips start to tremble.

“Okay,” I say, “I just wanted to help. I know how hard this can be...” He looks at me again, this time with tears streaming and nostrils flaring.

“What the fuck do you know about this, huh? I just lost my girlfriend! We were in love! How do you even fucking know her?” His eyes are leaking trails of water that slide down his nose and drop to the floor. He licks the salty tears from his lips, but instead of quelling the fire inside him, they just seem to fuel it.

Bargaining.

“What the fuck do you even want from me?! Get the fuck away from me, or I’ll – I’ll...!” he demands. But I just look at him with big, watery eyes. These are the kind of eyes that say, “pretty please?” The kind of eyes that are meant to make men weak at the knees. He stares into them for a moment, and a tiny tear falls out of my eye and travels down my cheek, as if daring

him to take a chance. But finally, when he sees that I have no intention of leaving him alone, he stands up.

“Wait!” I say, doing my best to think about dead babies and abused puppies in order to summon the full force of all the fake tears that I have left. But instead, the act of his leaving makes thoughts of my past pop into my mind, and I begin to cry in earnest. Upon seeing my pathetic, uncontrollable sobbing, he must have had a change of heart, because he swiftly sat back down.

“Hey, hey,” he says, patting my leg. “I’m sorry, please, please stop crying. I didn’t mean—it’s just – I can’t –”

Depression.

He begins to cry with me. Deep, loud sobs emanate from his chest. His shoulders shake and he buries his face in his hands.

“My fiancé died,” I tell him, “a freak accident.” He peeks at me through his tear-stained fingers. “On our wedding day,” I continue. My voice is barely a whisper now. “*Before* the wedding.” I hold out my left hand to show him the scars on my wrist. It’s always so easy to tell the most intimate details of your life to complete strangers. “I tried to kill myself.” He gasps loudly.

“I’m so sorry,” he says, his eyes wide with shock and remorse. “I’m sorry for snapping at you, I – I had no idea.”

“So I understand your pain,” I say. I tell him about the moment that I found out that the love of my life had been killed. I tell him about how I would never have the pleasure of seeing my fiancé’s face again, because you can imagine that they don’t have an open-casket funeral when the deceased has been run over by an SUV. That’s what they referred to him as – “the deceased” – during all the business afterward. “What kind of casket do you want the deceased to be laid to rest in?” “What articles of clothing should the deceased be buried in?” “How much money are you willing to part with in order to give the deceased a proper burial?” It was like he wasn’t a person anymore; he was simply an object. An object with a price tag. God forbid that my emotions should get in the way of answering these practical questions. See, nobody ever tells you about the business side of a funeral. It’s the last thing you want to deal with after losing a loved one, but it can’t be avoided. As if the gaping hole in my heart wasn’t enough to deal with. I remember thinking that it was amazing how desensitized the people in the funeral business were, and how I wished that I could be like them so that I wouldn’t have to feel anything ever again. Sort of like being dead, but not quite as glamorous.

“I never had any closure,” I say, “I never got to kiss him one last time, never got to say good-bye.” I look into his eyes. “Do you believe in an afterlife?” I ask. He looks at the ground for a minute, then shrugs. “Well I don’t. I didn’t want to die so that I could ‘be with him again,’ like some people say you can be in death. No – I’d given up all hope of that. I wanted to die because I thought that death would be peaceful. No more anguish. No more suffering. Just,” I let out a sad sigh, “peace.” He glances at the pale, faded scars on my wrists, tears still streaming down his face and landing in a puddle on the floor.

“So what stopped you?” he asks, sniffing.

Acceptance.

“The guy who would have been the best man at our wedding,” I tell him, “he found me bleeding on the floor the night that I tried to kill myself.” I look directly into the man’s puffy red eyes and say, “he saved me. He stayed with me for days while I slipped in and out of sanity, while I cried and screamed and came to understand that I could never love again. But he showed me that it was possible to still be happy, at least sometimes. And what he did, well, I may not be totally proud of it, but it...well, it saved my life.” At this point I wasn’t crying anymore, but the boyfriend of the dead girl was bawling his heart out, weeping so hard that his face became the color of a sunset and I thought that his head might simply burst.

“Well how did he do it?” he asks between sobs. “How did he save you? It’s not fair! I’ll never be happy again! Help me, please, help me!” At this point the other funeral-goers have taken notice of our little scene, so I grab his hand and start leading him out of the room. Luckily I’ve been to enough funerals at this place to know just where to bring him. The funeral director’s office is upstairs, but the funeral director himself is busy offering his condolences to the friends and family of “the deceased,” probably because he thinks he’ll make more money this way. Alas, my contempt for him and his deluded sense of priority simply ensures that I have no qualms about what I am about to do. I pull the dead girl’s boyfriend into the office and lock the door behind us. Then I start to undress. First myself, then him. He is shocked but does not protest.

I’m not trying to take advantage of the fact that he is vulnerable and probably not thinking straight. This is not about power. It’s about healing. The guy who would have been the best man at my wedding, the guy who saved me – he picked me up off the floor the night I tried to kill myself, cleaned me up, bandaged me, healed me. He didn’t take me to the hospital. He

didn't tell me I was crazy. He just held me. Then, in the days that followed, he fucked me until I could feel again. Until I was able to appreciate the fact that there was still beauty in the world. Until I understood that I didn't have to die to end the pain, because every time I smiled I felt that my fiancé was there with me again. He *is* my happiness; he *is* that feeling of warmth that I felt radiating from within me. After that is when I started attending the funerals of people I did not know. I do this to save the lives of those in despair. My method might be extreme, but my intentions are nothing but good. Because, despite the way things might look sometimes, I want people to know that there is always hope.