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Baby Doll

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Baby Doll

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By

Abigail L. Hancher

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Baby Doll

June 17, 2009

If I were to tell you any of this I think something would be breached between us. We've been friends for years, but I think it has been there all along and underneath every word between us. I've been thinking long and hard about the words we've spoken over the past three years trying to parse out the subtext of what we have been saying. Like when you told me freshman year that there were guys who thought I was beautiful and that there were guys who would be lucky to know me, let alone date me. I wonder now if you were talking about yourself. At the time, I wanted you to be talking about Andy, and I cried myself to sleep for weeks when I heard that he thought I was weird and ugly. I wonder if I should have asked you then if you thought I was beautiful, but I didn't because I didn't want you to think I was beautiful; I wanted Andy to think I was beautiful.

I've been thinking about everything you have said to me so much it has blurred. I don't know what's real and what's fiction, which is why I bought this notebook, and why I am writing it down, so that I'll know for sure what you said, what I said. What we did.

You ask about this notebook too, and I don't know what to tell you because I don't know how to say that I am trying to decipher all of the ways I

have been trying attempting to say I love you or how long you have been saying it to me. If you are saying it to me.

*It's like that scene in **The Princess Bride** where Princess Buttercup has this epiphany that Westley is saying "I love you" every time he says "As you wish," except I'm not sure there is any epiphany to be found, that there is any explicit way you are coding your feelings for me in the things you say or do.*

If this were a novel or a movie I could find one, but this is what I am writing to you in a notebook.

You gave me the idea, actually. Remember when I found all of those letters in your desk that were addressed to you? And you told me that every time you had a bad day you would write a letter to yourself and seal it so that when you were on the other side of your depression and happy with life, you could look back at those small problems that had seemed so big to you when you were in the thick of it...

You were trying to see over a mountain to the other side. I am just looking for some clarity, trying to understand us. Are we just friends like I have been telling my parents for years? Have we ever been just friends? If you take away the attraction and the flirting, is there anything left? I usually get the answers to big questions by talking with you, but we can't talk about this, not really, not honestly. You can't answer my questions. So these are my letters.

I

Maggie began every morning of the summer break between her junior and senior year while there was still some dew clinging to the grass, walking to the top of the orchard. She liked how the wet grass stuck to her sneakers and sometimes her ankles if the grass was long enough. She liked to hear the birds chirping in the trees, which seemed to drown out the noise from what was happening on Bruce Kozlowski's hill: the rumble of 18-wheelers, the metallic clang of scaffolding being erected around the well.

At the highest point of the hill she could look—past the tire swing and down to the thicket of dark trees, clumped together like shrouded and hunched women, ancient in their grief, congregating in Our Lady's cemetery, or, if she looked behind her, she could follow the path worn by her feet and her dad's tractor past the crooked line of apple and plum trees to the bottom of the hill where the corner of the chipped and gray siding of her house was visible.

The house was built in 1963 after the Muse Mine had closed in '54; however, the orchards were planted in 1905 by a farmer, Seamus Ealy. Maggie had found some xeroxed copies of a ledger and a journal he had kept in the Canonsburg library while she was researching her house for a school project. He was an Irish immigrant who ended up in southwestern Pennsylvania 70 years before the mine closed. He started out in White Haven working on the Lehigh Valley Railroad but moved west with the promise of

money in Carnegie's mills. He ended up in Braddock, earning 14 cents an hour and working seven days a week.

He had been too young to remember the blighted potatoes his parents had pulled from the ground during the Great Hunger, and after working a long night in front of a furnace while walking home in the dark morning beneath a smoking sky he allowed himself to dream of owning land to farm—under a sky clean of smoke. After a decade of saving, he bought land outside Canonsburg, a small town 18 miles southwest of Pittsburgh. He dug into the soft earth for the first time and felt that everything was in its rightful place—finally. In 1923, representatives from the H.C. Frick Coke Company bought the land to the west of Ealy. From his hill, he watched the town of Muse spring out of nothing one summer: narrow, two-story patch houses filled the space between Ealy's ridge and another hill, as well as a company-owned general store, and a schoolhouse. The mine was in business by the fall, and as Ealy aged, he listened to the sound of the siren signaling shift changes at the mine, and watched smoke fill the sky, until finally he sold the land in 1941.

For thirty years, the orchards grew wild and forgotten till the apples were small and shriveled on the crowded boughs and the apricot tree kneeled from the immense weight of its fruit, and even after Maggie's house was built on the land by the previous owners, the orchards were left to grow unmanaged.

Her parents tried to maintain the wild trees after they bought the house. They cut back the boughs of the apple trees, they uprooted the pear

tree that had died after being struck by lightning, and they burned it with the rest of the pruned branches. They waged an unwinnable war at the beginning of every June with the birds to collect cherries instead of the picked-over pits. They tried to maintain the orchards, to beat them back into submission, but the fruit remained sour and the trees wild.

That summer, Maggie spent every morning on the hill breathing in the freshness of the air before walking down the slope, her feet tripping over the loose bits of sandstone and twigs. The sun already felt too warm on the back of her neck and sweat gathered at her nape where her hair was pulled into a loose ponytail. She stepped through the thick clump of trees at the bottom of the hill and emerged onto the sandy beach of a pond.

Maggie batted away a mosquito hovering by her arm and gazed across the still, black-green water. It felt 10 degrees cooler in the shade of the trees, an assortment of pines and birches closing around the oblong pool. A single willow leaned over the water, the narrow golden leaves reflected on its surface.

The pond straddled the very edge of her parent's property and the property of the farm next door. Next door was a loose term, the house was five miles down the road and Maggie had never met the owners; however, she could hear the mournful cries of the peacocks they kept at sundown every night in the spring and summer. When Maggie was younger it made her sad to listen to those lonely calls across the hills, and she would try to answer the birds—to let them know they weren't alone, but still they cried each night.

Maggie toed off her sneakers, and her bare feet sank into the ground. She stood still for a moment, listening to the wind ripple across the tops of the trees and feeling the way her toes curled around the cool sand, before lifting her shirt over her head. She unclasped her bra and let it drop to feet on top of t-shirt.

Maggie had been later to mature than most of her classmates. Freshman year, while other girls were filling out lacy push-up bras that turned their breasts into plush mounds beneath their Abercrombie & Fitch polo shirts, she wore sports bras—though there was no need to hold anything down and she wasn't particularly athletic—because training bras on a fourteen year old would be embarrassing. Her mother had said she had the beginnings of a “nice” figure, noting the slight inward notch of her waist; however, the promise of a “nice” figure did nothing to help stem the feelings of awkward ugliness as the eyes of boys passed over her and her twig-thin body in the hallways in favor of her classmates with rounder breasts and hips. She remembered standing in front of her full-length mirror willing something to happen so that she wouldn't feel so childish, so invisible.

Finally, the summer before her senior year, she had developed—her mother would say “blossomed”—into some kind of woman. She had begun to notice the stares at the end of last year, the ways boys in her class would watch her move down the hallways.

She shimmied out of her shorts, letting the denim drop onto the sand with her skirt and began to wade out into the cold pond till it gathered around

her hips as if it were the silk of a skirt, her feet and legs a pale smudge in the dark pool of water. Maggie gulped in a deep breath and covered herself completely.

The first dip beneath the surface of the water always felt coldest, and Maggie lingered till her lungs burned and the chill became familiar to her muscles.

When she was five, her parents enrolled her in swim classes at the local Y. They signed her up because she wasn't scared of the water, was, in fact too bold for a child who had no idea how to manage more than a weak doggy paddle, and she kept roaming past the tire swing to the pond and playing in the shallow water near the shore. Her mother was afraid that one day Maggie would wander to the pond and wade too far out before anyone noticed she was missing.

On her first day of swim lessons she nearly drowned after she jumped into the deep end and sank to the bottom. She sank without struggling, watching the bubbles, the tiny pockets of air, float to the surface. It was after the swim instructor dove down and wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up, and their heads broke the surface that she learned the first breath after a long time under was like rebirth: everything pulsed with blood, felt more alive and fresh. Excited now by her own breathlessness and nakedness, she began to swim to the center of the pond—an incomplete breast stroke, her head bobbing above the water, matching the undulation of her body beneath. She passed through a golden ring in the center of the pond where the foliage

of the trees couldn't block the sunlight, moving until she reached the opposite bank. She rested in the shallow water.

Sometimes she imagined someone watching her while she swam, someone noticing her body moving in the water. The summer before she started eighth grade, before she knew about the contamination in the water, she played with her cousin, Katie in the portion of Chartiers Creek that ran behind the American Legion underneath the train trestle. While she and Katie splashed and kicked water at each other, soaking their clothes till the pink of their training bras were visible beneath their shirts, Maggie noticed three older boys standing farther down the creek staring at her and Katie. Katie didn't notice. And they were probably too far away to make out anything distinct about the girls. Still, Maggie couldn't take her eyes off them, watching as they watched her. They were naked from the waist up and their basketball shorts stuck to their legs, sagged below their waist, exposing their plaid boxers. One boy reached down and groped himself. Maggie thought he might have made eye contact with her—that the movement was his silent acknowledgement that he saw her watching him and he knew. It was the first time anyone had ever looked at her like she was more than a little girl.

When she was home later that day, she locked herself in her room. The air was oppressively heavy and hot. It smelled damp and sweet like mildew and the wilting lilac blossoms outside. She touched herself for the first time, imagined that she was still at the creek, and that the boy who stared at her as he groped himself had approached her and—she wasn't sure what she wanted

to happen after. She could see him walking toward her in the stream, the water rushing around his shins, but afterwards what else was there? She didn't imagine him kissing her or touching her. The fact that he desired her felt powerful enough.

Now when she swam at the pond, she wanted someone to see her the way she imagined that boy had seen her. She wanted to feel wanted.

Maggie swam until her fingers and toes pruned. She pulled her t-shirt over her wet head and buttoned her shorts and began the walk back up the hill barefoot—carrying her shoes in one hand at her side.

Her dad's weathered truck was parked in the driveway when she rounded the back corner of the house, as well as a brand-new silver Honda Accord that belonged to her neighbor, Bruce.

In April, Range Resources had begun drilling on Bruce's property. He wasn't the only one in the area; all around Washington and Greene county wells were being drilled. Maggie could drive in any direction and find a well site—a large metal tower rising above the tops of trees, surrounded by trailers and tanks. Sometimes it took months of Range courting a family before a well appeared, but the promise of money eventually made most people give Range permission to frack on their land.

Like Bruce. At first, he had been hesitant to give Range permission to drill. He had told her dad about the reports from the middle of the state where people were able to set the water from their faucets on fire. Range Resources' representatives assured him that they operated well within the

guidelines the EPA had set up, so safe. Very safe. Now Bruce had a brand new Honda and a well tower on the edge of the hill directly opposite the orchards.

Maggie had heard her dad tell her mom that Bruce was a sellout. He'd said it was just Bruce by himself in his house after his wife passed—what was he even going to do with all that money? Maggie's mom suggested they look into getting a well on their own property. She said it could pay for a new car, new gutters. It could pay off Gina's school loans and ensure that Maggie could graduate college debt-free.

“They wouldn't drill on only three acres,” her dad said, “they need space. The best we can hope for is natural gas under our property.”

As Maggie rounded the corner to the house, she heard her dad and Bruce's loud voices from inside through the open front door. Her mom refused to turn the air conditioner on in the house unless it was ninety degrees or warmer, so the house was always wide open in the summer with only the screen door separating the outdoors from the indoors. Maggie waited by the corner of the house as the voices moved across the house and closer to the living room.

“Oh for fuck's sake, Bruce!” The screen door banged against the siding of the house as her dad strode out onto the porch followed by Bruce. While her dad was a man her mom would describe as “sturdy,” tall and broad-shouldered, with only a slight beer gut, Bruce was short and balding at the

crown of his head, he wore thin, wire-framed glasses and walked in a slow, shuffling way.

“Dan, you know I can’t control what they do anymore than I can control God,” Bruce said, hands held up in a supplicating gesture. He leaned back against the railing and watched her dad pace the length of the porch.

“It’s your damn property!”

“And it’s their damn well.”

“My family can’t sleep, Bruce,” her dad said. “The noise and the lights make it impossible. What are they even doing up there in the middle of the night, anyway? Meredith and I wake up for work at six every morning.”

Bruce sighed. “I just don’t see what you want me to do.”

Her dad stopped pacing and huffed, “Forget it, Bruce. Don’t do anything. It isn’t like you have to work anyway.” Her dad walked back inside. The screen door rattled as it shut.

Bruce sighed again, stuffing his hands in his khaki shorts. He shuffled down the steps of the porch and noticed Maggie by the storm gutter.

“Sorry, Maggie. I’m sure your dad didn’t want you to hear that.”

Maggie shrugged, her shoulders tender beneath her t-shirt when she moved, and she thought that it hadn’t felt hot enough for her to burn while she was swimming. “It’s fine, Mr. Kozlowski.”

Bruce remained silent, his face inscrutable. Maggie shifted her shoes to her other hand. She didn’t like when Bruce wore shorts because it was

difficult to not stare at his right leg, which had been mangled in the seventies in a work accident at the Monessen Steel Works in the Mon Valley.

“Umm...goodbye, Mr. Kozlowski,” Maggie said, slipping past him up the front porch steps.

“Things are going to be changing around here, Maggie. Your father needs to understand that,” he said, “There isn’t anything wrong with getting ahead of all this and benefiting.”

Bruce turned and limped down the steps to his car. Maggie watched him back out of the driveway and drive down the road to his house.

Inside, Maggie’s dad was reclined in his chair, the Pirates game on the television. The ceiling fan spun and pushed warm air around the room, making the house feel small and drowsy.

Maggie’s bedroom was down the hall from the living room, the final door on the left across from her parent’s room, and her room was still painted the soft lavender she insisted on when she was nine, and trimmed with a border featuring teddy bears and ragdolls. The walls were lined with white shelves that housed books and her porcelain dolls. She loved the books and hated the dolls, but her mother gave her one for every birthday and Christmas and they accumulated on the shelves, staring blankly at the opposite walls of her bedroom.

Her twin bed was covered in a purple quilt her aunt made for her twelfth birthday and three stuffed animals Maggie couldn’t bear to put in the attic with her Barbies. The desk at the end of her bed was covered in

drugstore makeup and a hair dryer and curling iron, as well as an old Dell desktop that ran Windows 98 and couldn't connect to the internet. It used to be the family computer, but became Maggie's personal computer for writing after her mother found stacks of notebooks piled in closet filled entirely with Maggie's cramped cursive.

Maggie's bedroom was the smallest room in the house besides the powder room and the linen closet. It took her four and a half steps to walk across the center of the room from the door to her bed. She had counted it when she was fourteen and trying to convince her parents to give her Gina's room after Gina moved into her college dorm in Erie. Nowadays, with the collision of Maggie's childhood purple walls and quilt and the dolls and the computer and the clothes and the bras and the thongs the room felt more claustrophobic than ever.

Maggie dropped her t-shirt and shorts into the hamper and looked at herself in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of her door, inspecting the damage. Her shoulders were burned like she expected, as well as her cheeks and the bridge of her nose, which was already freckled from the sun. Her fingers traced the shallow dip in her clavicle, her nipples, the spaces between each rib of her ribs, the way her waist pulled in at her navel and flared at her hips.

She wondered if Toby would think she was pretty like this—naked and pink and skin-damp in her lavender bedroom.

June 19, 2009

I used to think my mom was Cinderella. A lot of people might think their mothers are princesses or fairy queens or something not-plain and momlike when they are children; maybe you thought your mom was Sleeping Beauty or Snow White at some point; I might have thought that too—that my mom wasn't a boring, old mom like the other moms that dropped their kids off at my daycare in the mornings but royalty. That isn't what I mean, though, when I say I used to think my mom was Cinderella, I mean that when we would get into arguments about her not letting me do certain things—like eating raw cookie dough or spending the night at a friend's house on a school night—and I would yell that she was being unfair, she would answer that at least I was never locked in an attic for not finishing my chores.

When I was five and I heard this, I thought my mother must have been Cinderella, locked in the attic by her mother and father because she didn't finish sweeping, or she didn't hang the wash out on the line, and was waiting for her Prince to let her out.

It could have been a lie that my mom told me to end arguments quickly. It almost sounds like the lie Gina used to tell me about me having an older brother that my parents threw over a cliff because he wasn't a good kid. Be good or you'll go the way of Frank, she'd say. Do your chores or we'll put you in the attic.

The summer before I turned eight, I used to go to my grandparent's house during the day while my mom and dad worked. While I was there, I would play outside in the sprinklers or help Nanny bake cookies or watch TV with Pappy. One day, I was helping Nanny put dishes into the dishwasher, and I dropped one of the plates on the floor and it shattered. I kept screaming at them, "Please, please don't lock me in the attic!" It must have taken hours for them to console me, to explain they would never do anything like that.

I didn't learn that my mom was married to someone before my dad until a few years ago. I always knew about my dad's first wife because before she moved in with us permanently when she was six, Gina used to move between our house and her mom's house. It seems strange to me that mom never mentioned her first husband; if I hadn't heard Pappy talking to someone on the phone about seeing him at the Isaly's, I don't think I would have ever found out about him.

Learning about the mysterious first husband got me started on the Cinderella story again. What if Cinderella wasn't put in the tower by the wicked stepmother? What if Cinderella was hiding from the Prince up there? What if the first draft of the fairy tale told a different story, like:

Once upon a time, there was a beautiful girl. She lived with an acute neurosis that kept her awake most nights, feeling like bugs were crawling across her skin while she lay in bed. On those nights, she snuck out of bed

and swept the floors and rearranged the furniture. Her parents often found her passed out by the fireplace covered in ashes and dust. They called her Cinderella.

There were no fairy godmothers or dormice that transformed into stewards or carriages that became pumpkins at the final stroke of midnight. Cinderella's family just wanted her to be less of a shut-in—get out in the world and enjoy herself, to stop rearranging the furniture. They sent her to the Prince's ball because they wanted her to have a good time.

At the ball, the Prince was really charming and maybe a little too forward for Cinderella's taste; after a couple of glasses of the punch, she forgot about her anxiety and cut the rug with the Prince all night and into the early hours of the morning. Cinderella's memory became a little hazy after midnight, but she remembers a kiss from the Prince. In her drunken haze, she was pretty convinced the kiss they shared was the first kiss from her true love, but in the morning she wasn't so sure. She didn't even know the guy. What was his name anyway; it couldn't be just Prince.

So when the Prince came to her house the only choice she had to get out of this uncomfortable situation of one individual clearly experiencing different expectations in the relationship than the other was to lock herself in the attic.

Is there a happily ever after at that point? After hours of banging on the door the rejected prince gives up and goes back to his palace?

*The other option to this story is Prince Charming wasn't so charming and he put her in the attic, and I don't want to think of my mom as **this** version of Cinderella.*



*I am noticing the theme of fairy tales in these letters. I don't want you to think that you are my Prince Charming, or my one true love (true wuv--if you are thinking of **The Princess Bride**). I don't know if I believe in all of that. Maybe I should because I am seventeen, and I haven't experienced any heartbreak to counteract any romantic ideas I might have. I don't think I believe in true love, though, or soul mates. Both of my parents were married before, and it didn't work out, and they seem happy enough now with their life, but they don't seem in love. They might have been in love when they first got married, but now it seems like not being together would be a hassle for them. Is that what ~~w~~e-people can expect? If they get married they will either get divorced or become two people too comfortable to leave once the fire has died. If so, why would anyone ever want to get married or fall in love?*

And yet, I do think I love you a little.

If you saw me write this, you might say, "Oh I know that, Baby Doll. You've said it before."

Yes, I have, but not in the way I have meant it before. I used to add qualifiers to my feelings: "I love you like a brother," and "You are my best

friend, of course I love you.” There are no neat phrases or qualifiers here. I think I love you.

II

“What do you think they’re doing over there?” Toby asked Maggie. He took a drag on his cigarette and passed it to her. It was just after nightfall and the sky was mostly purple with hints of orange left on the knuckle of the horizon. The moon was almost full, except for a fingernail-sized crescent that was still dark. On the opposite hill, the hill that Bruce Kozlowski rented to Range Resources, a crane was swinging a large piece of metal scaffolding into place. Since April, the white trucks with Texas license plates had been accumulating on the hill. It used to be grassy, but the barrage of pickup trucks and eighteen-wheelers had carved out a dirt road. They had installed stadium-style lights on the site that shined from sundown to sunup. Maggie and Toby used to sit out and stargaze when it was warm enough to sit in the orchard, they had an ongoing competition of who could identify the most constellations and also provide the correct mythology; now, with the light pollution from the well and Pristine Fields, the suburban nightmare nestled in between Maggie’s house and Muse, it was difficult to see any stars.

“Fracking. Dad says it is to extract natural gas from the land,” Maggie said, swaying into Toby’s space. He smelled like garlic and sweat and cigarette smoke, and beneath that something else Maggie only associated with Toby. Their shoulders bumped against each other. She passed him the cigarette.

Toby repositioned himself so the length of his thigh was pressed against Maggie's thigh. "I think I saw more of those trucks over at the Paxton farm last week, while I was working on that fence."

Maggie didn't smoke unless she was with Toby. During their sophomore year of high school when he had been struggling with clinical depression, and before he was put on the antidepressants he took now to balance his serotonin levels, he had stolen a half pack of Camel menthols from his mom. Maggie had caught him smoking after school one day. "You shouldn't do that," she said, "Those will kill you."

"The point, Baby Doll," Toby answered. "We should send you to schools, you know, the rate of teens smoking will be reduced dramatically. Do you have a presentation on drinking? Cause if you do, we're in business."

Maggie didn't know how to respond to her friend. She didn't understand depression like Toby had. She knew what it was like to feel sad, to feel disappointed, but not what it was like to give up the way Toby had that year. In that moment, all she felt like she could do was take the cigarette from between his fingers and bring the rolled paper to her lips and, between hacking coughs, stay with him.

"We're not going to see anything tonight," Toby said, taking his ball cap and brushing his brown hair, damp with sweat, back off his forehead. "Those fucking lights and the moon are gonna make it impossible."

"Well then you won't lose tonight."

“C’mon, I was up by four points last time.” Toby had a knack for finding the shapes in the sky. He had been a boy scout for years, and could find Polaris faster than Maggie, and from there it was just following an imaginary line to identify a handful of other constellations. He sucked at remembering the mythology, though.

Silence descended between Maggie and Toby as they sat on the hill, thighs and shoulders pressed together, chain smoking, listening to the construction on Bruce’s hill. Maggie liked this thing between her and Toby. They had been friends for so long that prolonged silences didn’t feel uncomfortable. Sometimes they could communicate entirely through shared glances.

The hours passed, and the sky behind them darkened into a navy so deep it was almost black. “You know,” Toby began after a silence that had lasted almost an hour, “if you actually wanted to hide in the night, you should wear navy, not black, ‘cause black isn’t naturally occurring. You can still see the silhouette of people wearing black.”

“Super useful if I ever want to stalk someone, Toby.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Toby said, “I was just thinking.”

“You were thinking about what color would be most appropriate if you wanted to hide at night?”

“Shut up. I read it in a book somewhere.”

“Well, what would you do if you couldn’t be seen?”

Toby stared at Maggie as he ground a cigarette into the grass. Maggie felt like she had kind of lost the thread of the conversation. She wished that nonverbal communication was easier. Sure, sometimes, Toby could glance at her in class and she would know he was thinking that the answer somebody had just given was super stupid, or he would get fidgety and she would know he wanted to sneak out through the side entrance by the choir room and smoke. Tonight, she didn't know what meaning his glance held.

Toby's eyes cut away to the commotion on the hill. "I used to want to disappear all the time," he said. "I'm pretty sure being seen now wouldn't be so bad."

Toby pulled the last cigarette out of the half-crushed pack between them and offered it to Maggie. As Maggie reached out to take it, their fingers brushed and Maggie's hand jerked back. The cigarette fell between them.

"Does it scare you, Baby Doll?"

"You startled me." Maggie picked the cigarette up off the ground and lit it in the pocket of her cupped hands. Coughed a bit when she breathed in the smoke too fast.

"Easy there," Toby said, laying his long-fingered hand on her shoulder. Maggie's skin burned under his grip.

"I have sunburn," she said, shrugging his hand off her shoulder.

"Maybe if you didn't skinny dip in the pond, you wouldn't be burned."

"Fuck you," Maggie said, her cheeks as hot as her shoulders. Toby might be the only person in the world who knew the full-extent of her

swimming habits, and she thought every day that it was the biggest mistake she had ever made, telling him, because he brought it up at every opportunity. She worried that one day he would say something in front of her family or someone else and they would get the wrong idea about them.

A lot of what her parents were suspicious of Maggie doing with Toby were things Maggie thought about a lot lately. She could imagine moonlit trysts on the hill between the two of them, or taking him down the hill to the pond and getting naked with him. She fantasized about the scenarios coming true, and dreaded them as well.

Toby glanced at the screen of his phone. Maggie could read the time over his shoulder—2:30 am—and knew their time together was nearly up.

Then, Maggie and Toby walked down the hill together toward the house, where Toby's old Chevy S-10 was parked in the driveway. They lingered beside the open door of his truck neither wanting to leave, before Toby hugged her. "Night, Mags, Baby Doll."

Toby backed out of the driveway, and Maggie watched his red brake lights until he reached the end of Ridge Avenue, turned left, and disappeared down the hill.

Back in her bedroom, Maggie sat in bed, unable to fall asleep because of the florescent light from the well spears through the curtains of her bedroom window, falling in squares across her quilt.

June 27, 2009

When you showed up at my house Saturday, you still smelled like sweat and the garlic Jimmy uses in his pizza sauce. You didn't shower before coming over, and I know that I gave you shit for it, and made a show of wrinkling my nose when you hugged me, but it was because underneath that stink I could smell you.

You probably think you smell like your Old Spice deodorant or your cologne, but you don't--it is something purely you, something like old books in a pine box. I guess you have always smelled this way, but I didn't start noticing it till recently, and now I smell you all the time, no matter your proximity to me. Sometimes when I am alone, I catch myself remembering the way you smell or confuse myself into thinking you are sneaking up on me because I smell you even when you aren't there.

*I read in **Cosmo** that the smell of cucumbers and black licorice are supposed to cause sexual attraction in women, while the smell of lavender and pumpkin arouse men. I don't think this is right because you don't smell like either of those things, and I am sure that I don't smell like flowers or gourds. I probably smell like pond water. You smell like this secondhand bookstore I used to go to with my dad on Saturdays after Gina's soccer games.*

I have also read that smell is most closely linked with memory, that smell is associative. Do I associate you with good things? Do I feel warm

and content when you're around because I smelled you while walking through sunlit stacks of old books?



The year before I met you, my family drove down to Florida to visit my dad's sister, Aunt Maria. She lives in this town called Jupiter, which is south of Port St. Lucie--if you know where that is--and we used to drive down there every year for vacations.

When I was really young and my dad said we were going to Jupiter, I thought we were going to the planet, not some town in Florida. Later, I used to imagine that on the planet Jupiter, if astronauts ever descended below the stormy atmosphere, they would find a larger than life replica of the small, sleepy southern Florida town. On planet Jupiter the palm trees stretched a mile into the sky, and the lighthouse disappeared in the roiling storm clouds, and the beam of its light would take an entire day to rotate once around. There's a hurricane on planet Jupiter, and the big-as-an-ocean Jupiter inlet would not be unaffected by the storm—waves the size of houses would crash on the beach. The entire drive down to Florida, I pretended that I was in a spaceship headed to planet Jupiter.

If you spend any time underwater it is like being on another planet. I used to go snorkeling with my family, and while I drifted over the coral reef, I felt like a visitor. Once, I followed a stingray past the line of coral reef and

down over the shelf ledge into deeper water. I was so intent on catching the stingray I almost swam into a massive barracuda. I didn't notice the size of it at first, which must have been about five feet in length and torpedo-thin. Much bigger than any barracuda I had seen before. I was too busy staring at its eyes. They were motionless—black pits that seemed to see me and not see me simultaneously, and I couldn't look away.

I had always been scared of barracudas after I saw one no bigger than my forearm dart past me and tear a fish cleanly in half. One moment I had been swimming toward a Blue Tang, and the next there was a swirl of blood in the water. The Tang's fish tail was left floating in the water, spasming as if it might still be able to swim away; the barracuda was motionless again. Its gills opening and closing slowly like a fan, staring past me.

After the shock of coming face to face with the barracuda's eyes, I was paralyzed for a moment. I knew I needed to get away, but I was frightened that if I made any sudden movements it might pursue me, rip me cleanly in half. I had heard stories about barracudas attacking divers because they saw the flash of a watch, or the sun glinting off of a snorkeling mask. One of the first things my dad told me before we went snorkeling for the first time was to leave my earrings at the house.

I keep thinking about tonight and the things we were saying to each other as we swapped cigarettes in the orchard. I wanted to tell you the story about the barracuda, to see what you would say.

And when you asked me if I was scared. Maybe you were talking about the cigarette I dropped, but the way you said it and the way you looked at me while you asked it felt more intense. ~~More probing. Is that even a good word to use? Probing? It feels more sexual than how I mean it. I just looked it up and the dictionary says that it means to examine thoroughly, which is how you were looking at me~~ More probing. Were you actually asking if the way I feel about you scares me? Do you know that I am scared of all the things that could happen between us? Do you know how scared I am by the staggering need to be near you? Are you scared of this big thing looming between us too? This barracuda's eye.

III

Maggie crossed her forehead, her lips, and her chest at the start of the reading. Father O'Shea stood at the lectern, arms outstretched. Maggie's mom had said she didn't know how much longer Father O'Shea would be the priest at Our Lady of Miraculous Medal, and as Maggie watched his thin, veiny hands tremble as he held them out, she agreed with her mom. If he didn't retire, he was going to croak. She just hoped it wasn't during mass, or God forbid, in the confessional.

Father O'Shea cleared his throat and adjusted his thin, wire-framed glasses on the edge of his nose before beginning the reading:

“A reading from 1 Timothy: If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, they are conceited and understand nothing. They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction between people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of

evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

“The word of the Lord.”

“Thanks be to God,” Maggie said with the rest of the congregation as she sat, shifting in her long-sleeved dress. The air-conditioner was broken, and the church with all of the bodies pressed shoulder-to-shoulder in the pews was stifling. She felt self-conscious and hot. Her thighs chafed and her dress clung to her skin so that she was constantly pulling and adjusting the material whenever she stood.

Our Lady of Miraculous Medal with its plain walls and altar wasn't like some of the bigger Catholic Churches in the area, like St. Patrick's with its stained glass and renaissance style frescoes of St. Hilary's, which was a modern looking church and almost entirely made of glass, or Immaculate Conception in Washington with its gothic-inspired architecture, or St. Michael Byzantine with its shining gold domes where people wore suits and dresses to mass. Our Lady was small and casual enough that usually no one would shoot Maggie a nasty look if she wore jeans and a t-shirt to 11:00 mass.

Despite Our Lady of Miraculous Medal's relaxed dress code, Maggie wore the knee-length black dress with a conservative neckline and long sleeves that she wore to her National Honor Society induction; her mom and Gina were dressed in their Easter best from the year before because Maggie's grandmother, Grandma Jane had accompanied them to mass today.

Grandma Jane, even after nineteen years, made her mom nervous. Grandma Jane had disapproved of Maggie's mom from the start. When she started dating Maggie's dad she hadn't been Catholic and was still technically married to her first husband.

Grandma Jane was a rigid, dour woman with thin lips and beady eyes. She disapproved of everything, and found little enjoyment in anything but gossiping and complaining to her friends in bridge club. Her dad said that before he met Maggie's mom, Grandma Jane used to intimidate his girlfriends by talking exclusively about her dad's most recent ex-girlfriend. He said that once a girl he had nearly proposed to ran out of a dinner with Grandma Jane, crying because she continually brought up Becky, his last girlfriend, who she had claimed was her favorite by far.

She'd lost her husband, Jack, in a mining accident shortly after her dad—the youngest of four children—was born in '56, and she had raised her dad and his three older sisters by herself. She never remarried.

The night the mining company's car drove up to the front of Jane's house, she had known before the foreman got out of the car and approached the chain link fence surrounding the small front yard. "Are you sure it's Jack?" she asked when she opened the door already knowing the answer.

Becoming a widow at twenty-three with four small children probably changed Jane, Maggie thought, and her grief and resentment twisted up inside her like a wounded animal and she had been snarling ever since. It

made her hard and flinty and proud. Her dad said that love had made her bitter.

Grandma Jane still spoke in a thick brogue and leaned hard into the rs of her words despite the fact that she had immigrated to America from Ireland when she was a little girl. Maggie suspected Grandma Jane's accent was ornamental at this point and only used to sound especially intimidating as she recited scripture.

Father O'Shea cleared his throat and straightened the small oval spectacles that had slid to the edge of his nose during the reading. "We know what greed is. We have witnessed the rise and fall of steel and coal in our valley. Men have gotten rich off the exploitation of the workers' hopes.

"Once again, things are changing as a new industry rises in this area. There will be the promise of jobs and a growing economy—construction on a new outlet mall just began down the road as you all know, perhaps some of you will get a job there—and some will be promised money for the use of their land. While this wealth may seem positive and good and a blessing from the Lord, beware of your greed."

Maggie glanced at her dad as the priest's homily concluded and she lowered herself onto the kneeler. She wondered if he was thinking about Bruce's well and new cars and the things around their house that needed repairs.

Grandma Jane's cane nudged the middle of Maggie's back, a silent reminder to sit up straight and not roll her shoulders forward. Maggie had

some of the worst posture, according to her grandmother, and she was the particular focus of Grandma Jane's scrutiny this morning because Grandma Jane had overheard the argument between Maggie and Maggie's mom about how late she was staying out with Toby at night. To Grandma Jane there was a certain impropriety to such a close relationship with a male, which she made known to everyone on the car ride to mass.

"Think on your sins," Grandma Jane warned as their pew was called to the front to receive the Eucharist. Maggie remained kneeling, hands folded in supplication, eyes following her family, led by Grandma Jane, down the center aisle toward the altar.

After church, Maggie's family stopped at Jimmy Z's for a pizza to take home for lunch. Jimmy Z's was one of the few remaining Mom and Pop businesses left in the borough of Houston. The main street of Houston and Canonsburg, Pike St. used to be filled with small businesses, but had been in steady decline since the eighties. At the four-way intersection of W. Pike St and S. Main St., the heart of Houston there was only Jimmy Z's Pizza and Arnold Motor Company, formerly the Arnold Pontiac Dealership.

Jimmy Z's lobby was cramped and noisy. Jimmy, the owner, was in the back of the shop pulling pizza out of the oven while talking on the phone to someone, probably a customer. Toby was spreading marinara sauce onto a large square pizza. He looked up as Maggie entered with her family.

“I didn’t know you were working today, Toby,” her dad said, leaning against the counter

“Trying to save up for a car, sir,” Toby answered spreading mozzarella on the large pizza. “Just the usual today?”

Maggie’s dad ordered a large pepperoni pizza, and her family sat down at the end of the bar to wait for their order. Maggie watched Toby work out of the corner of her eye. The sleeves of his t-shirt strained around his arms. He had begun working at Jimmy Z’s when he was a lot skinnier. She remembered how loose the shirt used to be on him. She wasn’t sure exactly when his arms had become so muscular. He had been picking up odd handyman jobs, in addition to making pizza, since last summer, so it probably began sometime around then.

“Are you going to be visiting again soon, Toby?” Maggie’s mom asked. There was a barbed pointedness in the way her mom asked the question, and a minute narrowing of her eyes let Maggie know her mom was still mad from their argument in the morning.

Toby must have noticed too because he hesitated answering, “Umm...only if I am allowed, Mrs. Coakley.”

Her parents used to like Toby. They used to joke that Maggie and Toby were going to get married just so they never had to make another friend. Up until last year, they allowed Toby to spend the night after late night movie marathons as long as he slept on the couch in the living room and Maggie slept in her bedroom. This morning after their argument, her mother laid

down new rules about Toby: her bedroom door had to be open when he was in her room with her, and the two of them weren't allowed to be out at night together past midnight, and if they watched movies, it had to be done in the main living room and not the rec room in the basement where they could have relative privacy.

"I don't understand," Maggie had said, "it's just Toby."

"He isn't fourteen anymore," her mom said. "Neither are you."

Maggie reasoned that they probably still liked Toby, but had realized that, like Maggie, he had rapidly matured in the past year. He wasn't a geeky boy who watched *Star Wars* and *Doctor Who* with their daughter anymore. Toby seemed closer to a man than he had this time last summer. It must have shocked her parents to see him—six foot and broad shouldered—they probably saw the future then, Maggie thought. They probably realized when they saw the manlier Toby hug Maggie, one day, some man would be scooping Maggie up into his arms, resting his hands on a waist that formerly didn't curve out into feminine hips. In Maggie's mind, she and Toby hadn't changed all that much, but to her parents she was sure the physical changes alone were staggering.

"Is that the boy you were talking about, Meredith?" Grandma Jane asked, glaring at Toby as he boxed a pizza. "The one Margaret has been running around with at all hours of the night?"

"He's just a friend of Maggie's from school," her mom answered.

“If I were you, I wouldn’t let her associate with a boy like that. He’s filthy,” Grandma Jane said, her nose wrinkling at the flour on Toby’s shirt and ball cap and the sweat on his brow. “Did he even go to church today?”

Maggie glanced at Toby. His back was turned to them and he was on the phone taking a customer’s order. A patch of sweat darkened the back of his shirt in the center.

“Toby’s family doesn’t go to church,” her mom said. She checked her watch.

Grandma Jane looked like she smelled something awful as she glared at Toby.

“I think they’re Methodist,” Maggie said. She wasn’t sure if that was true. She hadn’t ever discussed religion with Toby since it wasn’t important to either of them. She did know that Toby didn’t go to church. Toby’s mom was from California and didn’t believe he should be indoctrinated in a religion before he made up his own mind. Maggie thought that was kind of cool. She had never been anything but Catholic. She had sat through CCD classes every Sunday till she was confirmed. She knew all of the parts of the mass and had the prayers memorized to the point that she didn’t even have to think about what she was saying while she was saying it. Maggie often wondered if she had been given the choice, would she make the choice to be Catholic or would she be like Toby?

“Your order’s ready, Mr. Coakley,” Toby said, placing a pizza box with grease already collecting on the corners on the counter.

As Maggie stepped into the sunshine, an eighteen-wheeler hauling a massive water tank for one of the well sites passed, followed by a procession of white trucks with Texas license plates.

June 28, 2009

I hope Grandma Jane didn't offend you too much the other day. My dad says she is bitter—will die of all that bitterness pretty soon. He has issues with her because he has never known her any other way, but his older siblings can remember her before the mining accident when she was young and vivacious and danced in the living room barefoot. Did you know that the mining companies evicted the wife and children after an accident if the company's mine killed the wife's husband, the children's father? So not only was the wife a widow and single mom but she was homeless as well.

Grandma Jane didn't have any family in the Pittsburgh area, she only had a sister in Philadelphia, but Dad says her sister was a little batty and ended up institutionalized sometime in the seventies. Luckily, Grandpa Jack's family put Jane up until she found a job and rented a small house somewhere in Claysville.

Anyway, what I am trying to say is, don't judge Grandma Jane too harshly. I read this quote once that said if we all knew everyone's story it would be impossible not to love them. I wonder how true that is; does it make Grandma Jane more lovable now that you know her story? Or is she

just a bitch that you ~~have empathy for~~ can empathize with? Does it even matter?

My parents like to watch those television shows where detectives catch a serial killer based on random information like his shoe size and whether or not he likes Chinese take-out, which somehow indicates the serial killer's dad beat him when he was a child. I can't watch those shows. I stay awake and think about whether or not a person could be absolved of their crimes because they were abused as a child or something equally awful.

If you talk to anyone long enough they will tell you about something that happened to them that will make you think: so that is why they do _____!

But everyone has a past that has messed them up. Grandma Jane says that rain falls on the saints and the sinners alike, which I think is her way of saying that shit happens to everyone.

At what point do we become unforgivable in spite of our baggage?

Houston's municipal building was packed with people from Washington and Canonsburg, in addition to the residents of Houston. The movable panels that allowed the room's size to change had been removed entirely to accommodate the amount of people attending the borough's meeting. Officials had had to borrow metal folding chairs from the fire hall across the street once the padded maroon chairs they used for events filled up. Now, it was standing room only, and those who had not gotten to the meeting

early enough to get a chair were leaning against the back wall or lingering in the lobby.

At the front of the hall, a long table was set up facing the crowd. Seated there were impeccably dressed representatives from Range Resources who had been asked by borough officials to conduct an informational panel, so people could learn more about what the Texas-based company was doing in their town, as well as voice their concerns.

Maggie's dad had insisted they all go to the town hall meeting, which was why Maggie was sitting in between her mom and dad in the back of the municipal building, surrounded by people at least fifteen years older than her. No one her age cared about this stuff, and Gina was at work, so she didn't have to attend. Maggie wished she had a legitimate excuse like a job to get out of this meeting.

Range Resources began the panel with a brightly colored video, which explained the process they used to frack. The video also showed all the different things that natural gas—the cleanest burning fossil fuel—could power, such as the entire United States for 100 years.

After the video, the representatives began to take questions, a woman in the back raised her hand. “What about Dimock? Don't they need to have clean water delivered to them?” she asked. Apparently, Bruce had not been the only person to hear about the water in southern New York and Central Pennsylvania catching fire.

“We cannot confirm or deny that,” a bald man sitting on the end of the table said just as the woman was finishing her question. Maggie thought that he must have been expecting that question with the way he answered. “Those aren’t our wells. I can assure you, though, we are up-to-date on all of the EPAs standards and codes. We are doing this by the books and crossing all of our *ts* and dotting our *is*, so our employees and your families are safe.”

“I know this seems very scary,” a middle-aged blonde in a navy power suit said to the hall. “But this could change your life. Look at all the jobs this has already brought to the local economy. This area hasn’t seen this much growth since before the seventies. This is good for everyone here.”

Eventually, Maggie’s dad raised his hand, “You said you drill sideways a couple miles after you drill down?”

“That’s correct.”

“If you’re extracting the natural gas from beneath someone else’s property, what are you going to pay them?”

The blonde adjusted her glasses and smiled at Maggie’s dad, “Mr.—”

“Coakley, ma’am.”

“Mr. Coakley, the royalties from drilling don’t necessarily go to the surface owner of the land. The royalties will go to subsurface owner of the land.”

Her dad crossed his arms over his chest, “Wouldn’t that be the same person?”

The blonde glanced at her bald co-worker. Maggie thought it looked similar to looks shared between her and Toby during classes when they both knew the answer to the question asked but were waiting to see who would speak up first.

The bald man leaned forward in his chair, crossing his hands on the table, “Not necessarily. Owning the land only means you have the right to the surface of the land. It doesn’t mean you own or can use the natural resources that might be—let's say a mile—beneath the land.”

“Let me get this straight,” Maggie’s dad said, “we don’t own the ground beneath our feet?”

“You might, but the mineral rights and subsurface land might have been sold to someone else years—maybe even decades—ago.” The hall broke out in whispers. It became clear to Maggie, for a lot of people—like her dad—this was the first time they had either heard about or understood subsurface ownership of land; they had assumed the earth beneath their homes also belonged to them.

“Just what kind of con are you pulling here?” a man from the back shouted.

The representatives calmed the crowd and moved onto lighter issues, such as employment opportunities with Range Resources and college tuition waivers for employees of the company.

On the drive home, Maggie's dad was seething, "They're deflecting! 'It might poison the water, but your economy is stimulated. We're gonna rob you blind, but you can work for us! Isn't that great?' Isn't it great? Isn't it *just great* Meredith?"

Maggie's mom laid her hand on her dad's leg, "I'm sure it will all be okay. I am sure we can find a way to get what's ours."

Her dad remained silent, pulling the car over on the side of the road. He stared out the front windshield at the rolling hills and the fields left fallow. Finally, he said: "That's not it--they act like the saviors of this place. They act like it's dying—like they are the last hope we have, so we should just accept it."

Maggie didn't know what to say to her dad, and by the looks of it, her mom didn't either. They sat in silence. They were close enough to home to hear the peacocks crying in their cages, and overhead bats were jaggedly flying through the air

Maggie's dad started the car again and continued the drive home in absolute silence.

When they pulled into the driveway, Maggie, her dad, and her mom all paused before entering the house. Each one of them staring at Bruce's hill.

The lights were blazing. If Maggie squinted hard enough she could make out the crew—as small as ants—moving around the well. They seemed to be doing nothing, and everything all at the same time. Nothing was happening on the surface except for trucks driving up and down the hill at all hours of the day, but according to the representatives from Range Resources,

they had begun to drill and beneath the land Maggie could see they were boring a hole a mile and a half into the earth.

June 30, 2009

*Have you started the assignment for AP English? I started reading **As I Lay Dying** today, and it's okay. The voices and dialects are neat, but it is hard to follow at times. It's like I am hearing them all from a distance; I hear these distinct voices, and I understand what they're feeling when they say it, but I have no idea what the context is, so it all washes over me. I feel really lucky that we aren't reading **The Sound and the Fury**, from what Mrs. P says it is way harder than **As I Lay Dying**.*

*Did you read her email about our summer reading list, at least? All of the books that she picked are from the southern gothic genre, which I had to look up because I thought it was a whole bunch of southern Edgar Allan Poes and ghost stories. It isn't a bunch of ghost stories, in case you were wondering. **As I Lay Dying** isn't a ghost story--Mommy Bundren's ghost isn't swooping around the house, turning on lights and moving dishes.*

It is haunted, though, metaphorically speaking. The south is a big, old haunted house and all those ideas about southern gentility and slavery are the ghosts that torment the people living in the south.

*Do you remember the **Goosebump** books? One book was called "Welcome to Camp Nightmare," and it was so obvious that that shit was*

haunted and part of me was really frustrated reading this book because every sign says to turn around and go home. Like when the bus driver abandons them in the desert on the way to camp and then creatures try to eat them, Billy and his friends should decide to hitchhike back to civilization and forego summer camp altogether; spoiler alert—they don't and bad things happen to Billy and his friends.

This is not the same haunted as the south. This is not the same haunted as this place we live in.

You should have heard the way my dad was talking tonight. He said that those people from Range talk about this place like it is dying.

I don't think he wants to admit it, but I think we all know it is.

Sometimes it feels like walking through a graveyard here, like when we found the ruined tipple from the Muse Mine while walking last summer.

Or when you drive through downtown and on either side of the street are closed shops and boarded up windows.

Last summer, Gina took me night-driving and we drove down the old highway till we got to Cokeburg. Have you ever been there? I think if you've ever driven past it, you wouldn't know. As we drove up the main road into town, we passed the ballfields and the post office. In front of the post office, there was a WWII memorial that looked just like the WWII memorial in Canonsburg—two slabs of granite with names carved into their polished fronts and a flag pole. I've seen other memorials that look just like this in Brownsville and Charleroi and Avella.

Then we drove into the residential area of Cokeburg, which is just past the ballfields. There are maybe five streets that have the same two-tone patch houses from when the mine was still open. Sometimes, when I am in towns like this I try to imagine what it would have been like to live there when the mine was open.

Gina had me park the car in front of one of these houses. “Keep the car running,” she said. She slipped through the gate of the chainlink fence and walked up the rickety steps to the front door. She knocked and, without waiting, walked inside.

I sat in the car and fiddled with the radio trying to find something other than a country station and static. My phone didn’t have any service.

Gina was gone for ten minutes and when she came out she seemed nervous as she got in the car. “Let’s get outta here. This place creeps me out at night,” she said as I started the car, beginning to drive down the road out of town.

It always feels like deja vu driving through towns like Cokeburg, because they could be any town south of Pittsburgh. The same war memorials, the same houses. I bet if I had gone into that house with Gina, I would have seen the same fake wood-paneled walls that went out of style decades ago. These towns stopped growing when the mines that built them closed.

People are born and die in these towns, and go nowhere in between. I have classmates who have had the same teacher as their grandparents, and I

listen to them talk about how they are going to get out after high school. They say they will go to college and never come back to this town with all the same families, the same dead ends; the same nothing-to-do. I wonder if the things they say are just an echo of an echo of what their parents and their grandparents said when they were our age.

It isn't Camp Nightmoon; and it isn't a decaying mansion in the south; but it is a haunted house.

It is strange to me to think that a place can be haunted by something other than ghosts.

IV

Three weeks before the Fourth of July, lawn chairs began to appear on the sidewalks lining Pike St. They appeared in clusters, strung together with twine or bungee cords or caution tape. They were decorated with American flags and banners, and some chairs had red, white, and blue balloons tied to them, and by the Fourth the balloons dragged on the pavement uselessly.

The Fourth of July parade in Canonsburg was the second-largest Independence Day parade in Pennsylvania, and every year since Maggie could remember, Maggie and her family sat outside the Tiny Store and watched it for two-hours. Her dad would set up a small charcoal grill for hotdogs and burgers, while her mom drank wine coolers, and they would watch the parade pass.

Last year, her mom had split a strawberry daiquiri wine cooler with Maggie with a conspiratorial wink. It had tasted fruity and saccharine and hidden beneath all that sweetness was a hint of something bitter left on her tongue, but that was just the first sip. As her mom passed the bottle to her a third time, Maggie had forgotten all about the initial unpleasant taste of the alcohol, and she was tipsy by the end of the bottle. She had never had more fun at the Independence Day parade, and she began to understand why so many people enjoyed it.

Freshman year, Maggie had played the flute in the marching band, and had to march in the parade. Her school, Chartiers-Houston and the

neighboring school, Canon McMillan took turns switching between the coveted first spot in the parade lineup and the last spot. That year, Maggie's band was last. It had been in the nineties that day and for nearly an hour and a half the band waited in parade rest in full uniform and the metal instruments got hotter and hotter. By the time Maggie raised her flute to her lips to begin the opening of "You're a Grand Old Flag," her flute was so hot she burned her lower lip somewhere between the courthouse and Big Mike's. It was the most miserable experience of her life, and Maggie swore to never march in another Fourth of July parade again.

As the third pageant queen sitting in the back of a red convertible passed, Maggie began to grow restless. "I'm going to find some of my friends," she said standing up and adjusting her white shorts.

"Leave your hat so no one takes your seat," her mom answered.

Maggie dropped the red and blue felt top hat her mom had given her on the lawn chair, and for good measure she dropped the novelty beaded necklace with flashing American flags on top of the hat, and wandered into the crowd.

"Burgers will be ready in ten," her dad yelled after her.

It was chaos in the thick of the crowd at the edge of the sidewalk. Maggie shoved her way through middle-aged men and women waving flags, and tripped over the legs of chairs, narrowly avoiding waist-high children that had ducked out of the grip their parents to go dance in the street and collect candy and beaded necklaces off the road.

Maggie recognized some people she knew from school, like Brad, the quarterback her sophomore year, who looked softer around the middle since he went to college. Brad was shotgunning a beer with some friends, some she recognized because they had also gone to Chartiers-Houston, most she did not, all of them wearing matching button-down short-sleeved shirts with tiny American flags stitched on them and backwards baseball caps.

Hanging out on the edge of Brad's group were some girls who were freshmen in high school last year. They were dressed in tight shorts and shirts and their makeup made their faces look less round and more angular. The braver girls--the flirtier girls--were talking to the college guys, they were giggling and leaning into the words that Brad's friends were saying to them, while their friends hung further back, heads focused on their cell phones, texting furiously. One of Brad's friends hoisted a small brunette onto his shoulders to see the parade and her high-pitched laughter followed Maggie down the street.

Further away from the sidewalk, people were watching the parade from their front porches, or standing in the doorways of bars to watch to floats go by. Maggie recognized Mr. Russo, her fifth grade CCD teacher standing at attention on the porch of an old Victorian House dressed in an olive green dress uniform, his wife sat on the front porch swing beside him, while their youngest grandchildren played tag in the front yard. Mr. Russo's oldest grandson, Eric, a senior at Canon McMillan on the front porch steps of the old house listening to music on his iPod and ignoring the parade completely.

Maggie didn't know many people her own age who enjoyed watching the Fourth of July parade. For most, it was an excuse to drink or socialize with people they hadn't seen since the school year ended. Like Maggie, many of her classmates had been going to the parade since they were children with their parents, and even though the same floats passed year after year, they had found ways to make their own fun. Maggie wondered if her parents had hated the Fourth of July parade when they were her age. Did they swear that when they graduated high school, they would move out of Canonsburg and never attend another Fourth of July parade?

"Maggie! Maggie! Over here!" a voice drifted over the din of the Washington Post March, which she could hear the Canon McMillan marching band playing from two blocks away.

Across the street, Maggie saw Kelly waving her over to a set of chairs. Maggie pushed through the crowd and crossed the street quickly, narrowly avoiding a juggling unicyclist.

Kelly jumped from her seat and threw her slim arms around Maggie's neck. Kelly had a glittery American flag painted on her cheek, and when she smiled, her dimples created the impression that the flag was waving at Maggie. Her dark blonde hair was pulled into a high ponytail, and her lips were bright red from a cherry slushie melting in the cupholder of her chair.

As the dance captain of the Charettes, Kelly was one of Maggie's few friends still involved in the marching band. Kelly and Maggie had started ballet together in first grade, and by the third lesson Maggie had lost interest

in dance, but Kelly continued to take ballet lessons, and moved onto tap and jazz and hip-hop. She had been co-captain of the Charettes since her sophomore year of high school, and had a hand in all of the choreography for the high school musicals.

Kelly hadn't changed out of her burgundy velvet jumpsuit from the parade and the white and gold sequins that decorated the top half of her uniform and criss-crossed her chest sparked from the light of the sun. She might be one of the only girls that Maggie knew on the Charettes who looked gorgeous in the uniform. None looked particularly bad, but the uniform's thin, velvet material was unforgiving, and Maggie had once heard a Charette complaining that she could only eat salads and drink water on the day of a performance because she would look bloated otherwise. Kelly didn't seem to have this problem, she was tall and thin with large breasts, a thin waist and flat stomach and perfectly proportioned hips.

Maggie used to wish she was as beautiful as Kelly, that she was as effortlessly all-American. While Maggie had begun to appeal to some boys in her class, her friend seemed to be universally attractive. Plus, she was experienced in a way that Maggie, who had only kissed a few boys, was not.

Kelly had lost her virginity at the end of freshman year to a senior that was in the musical with her, and since then, she had gone through a slew of boys. It was considered kind of a right of passage for boys to hook up with her in their parked cars or in their basements while their parents watched tv upstairs.

Last year, Kelly had gotten suspended and banned from her junior homecoming when she was caught giving a blow job to the school cornerback in the LVS's light booth in the auditorium. When Maggie had asked her about it later, Kelly had just shrugged and continued applying her lip gloss.

"It seemed like it could be fun at the time," she had said, "and anyway, it's just a fucking blow job; if anything, they should thank me, Matt ran for like 120 yards that night."

"So?" Maggie said.

"Maggie—he's like second string."

Now, Maggie sat in one of the empty chairs beside Kelly, and stole a sip of Kelly's slushie, swishing warm, sugar water around in her mouth.

"My parents are talking to the commissioner about the wedding float. Did you see it?" Kelly asked. She clapped as a group of elementary-school aged dancers passed twirling and waving streamers haphazardly.

"Yeah, they're nuts," Maggie said. A couple had decided to get married during the parade this year. They had passed on a flatbed trailer decorated with American flags and dressed in red and blue. The bridesmaids and groomsmen had thrown rose petals on the crowds, while the bride and groom--both wearing white--embraced and waved.

"I think it's the cutest! Did you know that they met at the parade?"

Maggie revised her earlier thought about not knowing anyone her age who liked the parade. Kelly loved it. Maggie thought it might have something to do with being able to perform for people.

Kelly told Maggie about her summer—she had visited some local colleges, and her top choice was Point Park University, but she also thought some of the state schools seemed fine too.

“What do you want to major in?” Maggie asked.

“Jesus H. Christ, Mags, not everyone has wanted to be a journalist since kindergarten, but I’ve been thinking I might teach biology and teach dance on the side, or do female studies and teach dance on the side.” A fire truck passed and Kelly wolf-whistled at the fire fighters hanging off the side ladders of the truck. Maggie watched Kelly and thought that Kelly might be better suited for college in the city.

“Wanna beer, Mags?” Kelly asked, reaching for the stadium cooler under her chair.

“No, thanks.”

“So, you’ll smoke cigarettes with Toby, but you won’t drink with me?” Kelly glanced around for anyone that might tell her off for drinking, cracked open a sweating beer, took a swig and set it in the cup holder of one of the empty chairs.

“Toby and I share the cigarette,” Maggie said, “It’s different.”

Kelly hummed. “You two do it yet?”

Maggie blushed. “We’re just friends. Why does everybody think that something more is going on?”

“Cause Toby’s been following you around like a puppy dog since freshman year, and now he’s hot and you’re hot and generally hot people have sex.”

“It’s not like that.” Maggie reached for Kelly’s slushie and took another sip. She wondered if her lips would look as red as Kelly’s did, like she had just been kissed. She was sure that the red dye wouldn’t make her look freshly-kissed. More likely, it would stain her chin and her cheeks, and she would just look like a child who had made a mess. Maggie couldn’t see herself as “hot.” She knew she was at least average-looking and maybe even slightly above-average to some, but she definitely wasn’t hot. Maggie chewed on her lip to keep from asking Kelly if she meant it when she said she was hot.

“Well, speak of the devil,” Kelly said.

Toby was easily discernible even in the thick of the crowd clotting the sidewalk. He was probably the only person at the parade not in some variation of red, white, or blue. Even Maggie who hated the Fourth of July was wearing white shorts and tank with an American flag printed across it.

“You two look like America threw up on you,” Toby said as he sprawled out in the chair beside Maggie. His ankle brushed Maggie’s. Maggie blushed, hoping that Kelly didn’t notice the point of contact as acutely as Maggie did.

Maggie felt transparent around everyone nowadays. She agonized daily over how many people seemed to know about her crush on Toby. She liked Toby, but she didn’t want people to make fun of her for it, or to talk to her about it like Kelly did. She worried that Toby might overhear one of these

conversations and judge her for it or let someone know how he really didn't like her at all.

Some nights when Maggie was lying in her bed she would imagine telling Toby she liked him. Most nights, she imagined it going kind of like the scene between Ally and Noah in *The Notebook* with the letters and the rain and the kiss. She imagined wrapping her legs around his waist and pressing her body into his and kissing him hard. She imagined his pelvis rocking into hers. Other days, she imagined that he rejected her. He would say he didn't like her and had never liked her; he would say she was nothing more than a weird, ugly girl he had felt bad for freshman year.

She didn't think she would recover from Toby's rejection if it happened. She had been rejected by other guys, but none of those guys were her best friend as well. She didn't know what the fallout would look like, didn't know if Toby would still be her friend or if she could even be his friend.

"So, Toby," Kelly said, glancing down at the point of contact between Toby and Maggie, "have you been working out? You look stronger."

Toby blushed, looking at the ground.

Maggie watched Toby watch a mass of ants carry an earthworm across the sidewalk. Her stomach felt heavy like it was dropping out of the bottom of her or like she drank too much sitting between Kelly and Toby.

"Doesn't he look stronger, Maggie?" Kelly asked.

"I haven't noticed," Maggie said. She took in the parade. Two clowns dressed like the Statue of Liberty and Uncle Sam passed, waving, and Canon

McMillan's marching band was right behind them, the brass and silver of their instruments flashing. The drums—deafening.

“Well, what have you been doing all summer?” Kelly asked.

“Working, mostly,” Toby said, “I go over to Maggie's too.”

Kelly smiled and raised an eyebrow at Maggie. “Well, that sounds really fun. You should come swimming at my place sometime.”

“I'll think about it,” Toby said, but he was looking at Maggie. The Canon McMillan marching band passed, and the Washington Post March faded until it was just distant strains of a melody.

After the parade was over. People milled around as if they were waiting for something else to happen. The raucous laughter quieted, and people drifted away from Pike St. They gathered their lawn chairs and dragged them back to their houses or packed them away in their cars.

Maggie saw one of Brad the quarterback's friends leading the brunette former-freshman to his car. She was swaying on her wedged heels and pressing her chest against his arm.

Toby said goodbye to Kelly and offered his hand to help Maggie out of her chair. Together, the two began to walk back to the Tiny Store where her parent were. Toby was silent, walking with his head tilted toward the ground. If it weren't for Maggie gripping his upper forearm, and pulling him out of the way he would have walked right off the sidewalk or run into multiple people.

“Do you think Kelly was flirting with me?” Toby asked.

“Do you like her?” Maggie asked and that nausea she had felt sitting between them returned. It seemed entirely possible she had been misinterpreting all of the signs.

“I don’t think so,” Toby said after a long pause, “she’s pretty, y’know? But she does have a reputation too.”

“I thought all of you guys liked that reputation?” Maggie tried to not sound petty.

“I mean some of the things I’ve heard, I really like, but--” Toby stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, his jaw tensed as if he were carefully chewing each of the words he was about to say.

Toby was always cautious and measured when he spoke. Maggie assumed his reservation was because he didn’t like hurting anyone’s feelings. She liked that he cared about people and that he was compassionate, but it always made her wonder what he wasn’t saying to her. She wanted to be the only person privy to what Toby actually thought, the only person who knew the private-Toby.

“But what?”

“You don’t really date girls like that,” Toby said.

Maggie thought about Kelly and how she had heard all about the guys that Kelly had drunkenly made out with at parties, or blown after school in the deserted underclassmen parking lot, or slept with while her parents were at the casino and realized that Kelly hadn’t had a boyfriend in two years. She

had had dates to school dances, and she had plenty of guys that she texted and flirted with, but nothing ever came of it.

“Well, what do you do with a girl like that?” Maggie asked.

Toby looked at Maggie as if she had said something particularly stupid, and Maggie realized it probably was stupid to ask that question because boys had been doing the exact things they did with a girl like that since sophomore year. Maggie hadn’t ever felt bad for Kelly and had always been a little envious of her, but she felt bad for her now.

“Do you want to sleep with Kelly?” Maggie asked Toby.

Toby remained silent like he was thinking really hard about what he wanted to say again. Maggie watched his profile. When Toby was considering what to say he didn’t make eye contact with Maggie, and while some people might find it off-putting, Maggie was glad for the chance to look at his face without him looking back.

“I’d rather sleep with other people.” Toby said finally, and before Maggie could respond they were back at the Tiny Store and her parents were calling for Maggie to help pack up the trunk of the car.

“I’ll see you at the fireworks tonight, Baby Doll,” Toby said pulling Maggie into a one-armed hug and then continuing down the street.

July 4, 2009

I keep turning over in my head the thing you said about Kelly, about how she wasn't a girl that guys dated. Guys won't date her because she isn't a virgin, you said, but guys won't date me either, and I am a virgin. So what do you think about that?

You don't know this because I haven't told you, but I kissed a lot of boys last year—a lot for me, at least. You don't know this, but I had my first kiss last year. I made out with TJ. I also made out with Brian and Tom and Michael, and when I would meet TJ or Tom or Brian or Michael after a football game or at the playground after sundown or behind the American Legion during the Friday night fish fry, I always thought that kissing was going to be the start of something, but it never started anything.

These trysts or make-out sessions all began the same and would start many days before I ever kissed a single one of them. After school would let out for the day, TJ or Tom or Brian or Michael would text me, and we would talk all night. ~~They would say things like “i always thot u were rly cute :),” and the fact that they couldn't even bother to spell out the full word or punctuate the sentence correctly should have been a clue that they didn't care all that much about me, and that they hadn't always thought I was “really cute” and I would blush and then I would carefully craft some kind of response that was a little mean and sarcastic while still being flirty, so that they didn't think I was too excited about being called cute. They would say dumb things—things that I knew they probably said to every girl they texted.~~

I knew they didn't really like me any more than they liked any other girl in our class. I was something unexplored to them, which made me interesting.

The funny thing, though, was that it was a little the same for me too. I didn't like them all that much until they started paying attention to me. The difference was that after, all I could think about was what it would be like to go on dates with them and hold hands on the way to class. Obviously, I thought about the physical aspects of a relationship too. I thought about making out and touching them and them touching me, and sex, but what I really wanted was for a boy to like me.

And so we would text, sometimes for a couple days and sometimes for a couple weeks. Michael asked if I could send pictures, and I knew he meant the topless kind, the kind you don't want your parents to see, the kind you hope your friends delete if you die suddenly so no one remembers you a certain way, but I acted like I didn't know and sent pictures of me smiling instead. Even though I didn't send him what he wanted, he said I had the most beautiful smile he had ever seen. I chose to believe that he meant it.

Finally, they would ask if I wanted to hang out with them alone at the park or after the football game; I would be so full the daydreams of them liking me and wanting to date me that I would go and meet them wherever they asked.

Before we kissed, there was always a moment where we both knew we were going to kiss, but we were just waiting for the other to make the first move. The air between us would feel charged like right before a lightning

storm, like when all of the hair on the body stands on end before the weightlessness, before the flash. They would look at my lips, and I would bite my lips because I was nervous and excited, but I had also read in **Cosmo** that it was sexy and I wanted them to think I was sexy. Then one of us would move.

It was always the sweetest and shortest kiss, and it would leave me cold and shivery. Brian asked me if everything was okay after this kiss and Michael pushed my hair behind my ears. ~~What I am trying to get at was how special I would feel after this kiss.~~

And then we would kiss a second time and this kiss would be less sweet. When I was kissing Tom in his truck after the football game, the gear shift kept digging into my lower back, and I almost laughed when he started kissing and biting my neck because I thought about that “hungry like the wolf” song by that one band my dad really likes.

After this, they’d ask something like “Wanna get out of here?” or “Wanna go somewhere else?” and I would say no and kiss them again. We would kiss for a bit longer, and then they would ask again and I would say no again and make an excuse to leave and they would let me leave.

TJ texted to make sure I got home okay, and Brian called me before I went to bed, but the next time we saw each other at school, they would treat me like they had treated me before we began texting.

I talked to the school guidance counselor about it once because he caught me crying in the hallway on the way to the bathroom. He said the

usual “guys at this age are jerks, blah, blah, blah” and that “college would be a much better experience” and then he said, “Have you considered that these guys keep trying to talk to you because they know that you won’t have sex with them and they think of it as a challenge?”

I don’t know everything about Kelly. I know that during the musical in freshman year she lost her virginity to the senior playing Tevye, and that after he didn’t want to date her. She told me that he had made her feel beautiful and grownup, and that while they were doing it he wouldn’t kiss her because she was wearing lip gloss. She told me that after they had sex at the overlook, he left her in the school parking lot after she said that she would call her mom for a ride home. She told me they stopped talking after that.

I think about kissing TJ and Tom and Brian and Michael last year because I wanted to feel special, and I think about Kelly at the overlook with that senior wanting to be beautiful and mature, and I don’t think we’re different.

And if you wouldn’t date a girl like that, why would you date a girl like me?

Maggie tripped over her feet as she walked down the sidewalk of Central Ave to the spot her and Toby had agreed to meet for the fireworks. She was a little tipsy from the wine coolers her mom had let her drink at the barbeque Bruce had hosted after the parade. Bruce had a barbeque every

Fourth of July where they sat at long picnic tables set up on his front lawn and her parents drank, while Bruce's nieces and nephews set off bottle rockets behind the house. Maggie found the barbeque to be dull, and had hoped that with her dad and Bruce arguing over the well that they wouldn't be going this year; however, her dad didn't want to stir up any more trouble between him and Bruce by not showing up, so Maggie spent the afternoon sipping wine coolers with her mom while Bruce and her dad made strained small talk.

Bruce told everyone that he was about to install an inground pool in two weeks. "This time next year we'll be grilling poolside," he said.

Her dad responded that if Bruce really wanted to be impressive he would also install a poolside bar like the Vegas hotels. Maggie and her mom excused themselves after that to go check on the festivities in the backyard. Bruce's youngest nieces were running around with sparklers, while Bruce's nephews were climbing the trees at edge of the backyard. Rising up over the trees, the low rumble of the drill's motor from the well site drowned out the sound of voices from the front yard.

Maggie's mom sat in the grass, the wine cooler in her hand sweating, the corner of the bottle's label curling up off the wet glass.

"They're damn fools, Maggie," she said, as she watched the boys hang from the thick lower branches of the trees. Her bony thumb rolled the label of the bottle further down and then smoothed it back up into place. She repeated this motion over and over, till the corner of the label became cracked and brittle and broke off.

“Dad?” Maggie asked as she sat down beside her mom. She took the bottle out of her mom’s hands, and took a sip.

“All of them,” her mom answered, as Maggie passed the bottle to her. Her mom only drank on special occasions, and Maggie suspected it was because she became particularly morose.

Maggie remembered an adults-only Christmas party her parents had gone to when Maggie was ten that had ended with her dad carrying her weeping mother into their bedroom and tucking her into bed. Maggie watched through the crack of their bedroom door as he removed her high heels and pulled her sweater over her head. Her mom sat half-naked on the edge of the bed, the jagged ridge of her spine stark in the dim light. Maggie had wanted to go to her and tuck her head beneath her chin, but her dad stopped her before she could get past the threshold of the door. “Let Mommy sleep,” he said, carrying her into her bedroom and tucking her back beneath the covers.

“All of them,” her mom repeated as one of Bruce’s nephews fell out of the tree and began to wail.

Maggie wanted to ask her mom then about her first husband. Maggie had been thinking about him a lot lately, more specifically, wondering why her mom never mentioned him or that part of her life. From the bits and pieces that Maggie had eavesdropped from her Nanny and Pappy and her dad, her mom had married her high school sweetheart when she was eighteen and been divorced by twenty-three. Between those years something had gone

terribly wrong, and she dropped out of college and gave up on becoming a lawyer.

She overheard things that didn't seem believable, but when she put them together with the little bit of history her mother had told her directly, some sinister story began to unfold. She wanted to ask her mom about it because she wanted the story she had cobbled together to become fiction. Maggie almost asked in Bruce's yard about, but before she could get the question out, her mom was already up and moving across the yard toward the boy who was sitting up and cradling his arm.

Toby was waiting for her in front of the Canon McMillan Middle School by the WWII memorial, sitting along the low wall that separated the sidewalk from the patch of dried grass in front of the school and the memorial. Maggie pulled herself up onto the wall beside him. From here, Maggie could see most of downtown Canonsburg--a collection of vacant storefronts and closed antique shops. Across the street, people stood on the steps of the old National Guard armory that had been converted into a Christian youth center--waiting.

The fireworks didn't start till eight, but people were already sitting on blankets on the hillside or walking down to the football stadium to find a seat in the bleachers.

"Are you drunk?" Toby asked.

Maggie leaned against Toby, her head heavy and clouded. She was beginning to feel the fatigue from the day.

“I can’t believe it—you’re drunk,” Toby laughed and pushed Maggie’s head off his shoulder.

“I’m not,” Maggie said. “Just getting sleepy.”

Toby snorted like he didn’t believe her, but didn’t say anything more about Maggie’s drowsiness. Maggie spent the next thirty minutes till the fireworks began telling Toby about the barbeque: her dad and Bruce’s behavior, as well as her mom’s drinking.

“Why does your mom drink, Toby?” Maggie asked.

“To have a good time? Doesn’t everyone?” It was clear he was unsure where the thread of this conversation was going.

“I don’t know—if I ever got like my mom, I would never touch the stuff,” Maggie said, recalling her mom crying while her dad pulled her high heels shoes off and placing them at the foot of the bed. Maggie wanted to tell Toby about the Christmas party and the first husband her mom never talked about, but it felt like a secret, and not her story to tell.

“She’s probably just really emotional,” Toby said. “The drinking probably just heightens all of that.”

The sun was almost completely set, and everyone was becoming restless waiting for the first of the fireworks to begin. Maggie shifted into a more comfortable position on the wall, the stone beneath her still warm from the heat of the day, and she tried to draw that into her as cool air stirred the trees.

“I don’t know why anyone bothers with the parade when there are fireworks,” Maggie said as the first rocket launched into the air with a flash followed by a thunderous boom.

July 5, 2009

Everyone was asleep by the time I got home last night. Because it was a holiday, I hope they will forgive me for staying out late with you.

I took my shoes off at the door, so they wouldn’t hear my flip-flops smack off the floor while I walked to bed. My nose was still filled with the smell of smoke from the fireworks.

My mom peeked her head out of her bedroom as I was shutting the door to my bedroom. She’s told me before that she doesn’t go to sleep until everyone is home. One day, she says, I will lie in bed and wait for the sound of car doors to shut in the driveway and for the front door to open.



Once upon a time, Cinderella didn’t want to be a princess. She disagreed with the feudal system, and thought serfs and fairy godmothers and animals enchanted into carriage drivers should have the same rights as the king and queen. Her plan was to become a lawyer, so that she could represent the people—be a voice for the voiceless and all that.

Cinderella was also tired of cleaning her parent's house. She was tired of washing the same dishes day after day and beating dust out of the Persian rugs. She was tired of chasing birds from the attic. She wanted to trade in her cinder-covered dresses and aprons for power suits and stilettos.

She went to the Prince's ball hoping to rub elbows with some of the judges and intellectual elites from the university—maybe she could get a letter of recommendation! Instead, she met the Prince, and he whisked her away from a scintillating debate whether or not labor really did alienate the worker from the self to do the foxtrot.

Cinderella liked him, though. He seemed as passionate about a livable wage as she was because how could serfs pay off their debts and become land owners on less than one piece of silver a day? He said that when he was king he would make policies that would benefit the common man; he said that all he needed was a partner that could stand beside him as he made that change happen.



Once upon a time, Cinderella had dreamed of going to law school, but the Prince got her thinking that if she was queen, she could make change happen from the inside out. She started thinking it would be so much easier to become the power, rather than fight the power. Cinderella agreed to turn

down the prestigious university that had accepted her into their program to marry the Prince.

Five years after happily ever after, Cinderella woke one morning and realized she hadn't thought about the plight of the working class in ages.



*While I was waiting to use the shower this morning, I heard my dad and my mom in the kitchen talking quietly about seeing **him** at the parade. Dad seemed upset that he was in Canonsburg. "He knows you live here," my dad had said.*

Mom seemed sad and anxious and hungover. She kept asking Dad to keep his voice down, and picking at the skin around her fingernails. She told Dad he was allowed to be in Canonsburg, even if they didn't like it.

"You're still in love with him aren't you?" Dad asked angrily.

Mom laughed, but it wasn't a "ha ha" kind of laugh. It was bitter and short like she was spitting. She told him to think about what he had just said while she finished getting ready for mass.



Once upon a time, a beautiful girl named Cinderella turned into a middle-aged hospice nurse. She divorced the Prince and remarried a

regular guy and had a daughter. She whispered in her baby's ear while she was rocking her to sleep to never dream of being a princess.

Cinderella said to her sleeping daughter as she lay her in the crib, "Baby Doll, they will try to tell you to love the Prince, but the Prince is an entitled asshole who will take and take till there is nothing left of you. If you have to fall in love, fall in love with the blacksmith, who can forge a sword and shield. Or fall in love with the carpenter who can build you a house. If you have to fall in love, fall in love with a man that makes your life bigger and not smaller."

V

Maggie emerged from the water dripping. It was overcast and cool and her nipples tightened in the open air as she waded through the water to the beach.

She lay in the mud and watched the pewter gray clouds gather in the sky above her, threatening rain. It had been raining intermittently for the past week, and this was the first morning Maggie was able to get out to the pond before the rain began.

Toby had asked her once when she was fifteen why she chose to swim naked in the pond, and she had jokingly said that she liked the way the water felt on her bare nipples. They had laughed, of course they had, their own bodies still so confusing and interesting and embarrassingly traitorous to them that to mention anything about them so flippantly back then felt taboo. Sometimes it still felt that way.

Maggie had meant it though when she had told him how good the cool water moving over her bare chest felt, but she hadn't told him that when she swam breaststroke the water moving between the v of her legs felt even better, which is why she kept coming back to the pond.

She had secretly read all of her mother's books that had descriptions on the inside panel like "sensual" or "erotic," so she knew some of the ways that writers wrote about the female body. How they would call it a cave or a flower, it was either deep and mysterious or fragile. Maggie didn't quite

understand the comparison to flowers, didn't see petals unfolding, or whatever else they wrote, when she tried to look at herself in her bedroom mirror. She certainly didn't see beauty or fragility. Actually, she worried that if it was supposed to be a flower she was deformed in some way.

She wondered if other girls felt that way. If they looked down at themselves and saw folds of fatty pink and became anxious that something about their body was misshapen and ugly. Maggie hadn't ever seen a vagina other than hers. She couldn't exactly ask one of her classmates to lift their skirt so they could compare either, so Maggie just had to hope that there was nothing wrong with her.

However, she almost understood the cave metaphor when she was swimming in the pond. She felt open and exposed like the limestone walls of the caverns she had visited on field trips in elementary school—dark parts of the earth cut open for people to see. Maggie closed her eyes and tried to imagine her body as a cave. She reached between her legs and felt herself. What dark parts did she hold?

The sky was going to burst soon. The dark clouds, which were gathering a greenish tinge at the edge of the horizon, looked like they were low enough to touch the tops of the trees that were bowing as the wind began to swell. The water of the pond rippled as the gusts of wind became stronger, blowing leaves across the beach.

Kelly had told her last year that she needed an orgasm because she was too uppity and high-strung. Maggie hadn't bothered to tell Kelly that orgasms

didn't fix her anxiousness, rather they increased them tenfold. Maggie understood that masturbating and orgasms were perfectly natural—she had read enough about it on the internet, after all. However, she couldn't logic herself into not feeling ashamed every time she did it.

She remembered the first time she had encountered the word. It was right before her first confession. Under the bolded heading “It’s a Sin” there was a list of venial and mortal sins, which included telling sexual jokes, having sexual thoughts, and masturbating, among other things. She asked her CCD teacher, Mr. Godfrey what it meant, and had been told in no uncertain terms how disgusting it was, and how she was better not knowing.

Maggie also hadn't told Kelly men used to think they could solve the problem of “female hysteria” by shooting a stream of water at the clitoris, so in mental hospitals all across the country in the early 1900s they were strapping women into chairs and forcing them to orgasm until they were cured. So when Kelly suggested that Maggie needed to masturbate till she “calmed down” it was kind of perpetuating a sexist notion.

Maggie's mind wandered to what it might be like if Toby were with her on the beach. She honestly tried not to think what it would be like with him—if he would be gentle or not; if he would like the way she felt. She didn't want to think about Toby because it was getting hard enough to look him in the eye, and on the off chance they did get together and they did have sex, she didn't want to be disappointed by him.

She wanted to think that him touching her would be better, but she had heard enough nightmarish stories to know that was probably not the case. One girl, Leigh, had complained loudly in the locker room before gym about her boyfriend not clipping his fingernails, and that while he fingered her he cut her up all along the inside. She had also heard about Miranda's clueless boyfriend who had been told by his friends that the clit was located near the asshole as a practical joke.

Maggie felt bad for them because if the other girls were anything like Maggie, those girls knew about as much as their boyfriends did about their bodies. If Toby were with her at the pond, and it was going badly, Maggie wouldn't even know what to tell him to make it easier and better for both of them.

Maggie's feet dug into the mud, and she was close when the first raindrop fell on her face, and then all at once it was soaking the ground and her clothes that she had laid further up on the beach. She sat up and scrambled to get to her wet clothes. Maggie dressed quickly in her wet shirt and shorts and ran through the trees and up the hill.

It rained for most of the day. Maggie watched the raindrops slide down the window panes and drop from the roof. She occupied herself with her summer reading list for AP English. She had a goal that year to be the best student in her AP class. At the end of every school year, the teacher, Mrs. P, gave an award to the student who had the highest overall score in her class.

Maggie wasn't great at math or science, and while she enjoyed her history classes and her history teachers, she didn't take the same kind of pride in her work as she did with her writing.

She was smart, but because she was only good at a few subjects, she would never be valedictorian; she could be the best writer, though.

Sometimes she hated that she was only good at writing, especially when she started talking to her parents about what she wanted to *do* with her life. She had a vague image of her writing poetry in a shabby apartment in New York City, far away from Canonsburg, but her parents said being a poet in New York wasn't an actual career. So she supposed she could tolerate being a journalist, even if she did find hard leads and soft leads alike boring.

If she could be good at anything else, she would, especially if it got her out of Canonsburg. Her biggest fear was becoming a writer for the local newspaper, *The Observer-Reporter*, and writing the same story about the Independence Day parade every year till she retired.

She didn't want to be one of those people that dreamed of getting out of Canonsburg without ever achieving it.

July 8, 2009

*I finished **As I Lay Dying** for the second time today. Have you even started it? I think it is one of the best books I have ever read. I want you to finish it quickly because I need to talk to someone about it.*

I think I am going to go to the library tomorrow and find all of the books I can by Faulkner.

I started writing a short story the other day after I heard this really awful thing. I heard about these high school sweethearts that got married the year after they graduated. The husband had been super popular and funny and sweet and protective in high school, but after they got married it was like someone had flipped a switch and he became jealous and controlling, and his jokes got meaner and meaner till his wife found it difficult to laugh at them anymore.

I don't know how someone could change that suddenly. I think it was there the entire time, but because they lived in separate houses and when they were at school they weren't alone with each other, so it only showed itself occasionally. Maybe she swept it all under the rug and pretended that everything on the inside was as perfect as it looked on the outside. Maybe she convinced herself they really were the cutest couple.

You've heard about the Cutest Couple jinx, right? If every couple really has broken up within that first year after school, I would not want to be voted the cutest.

Anyway, this couple just got divorced and she has a restraining order against her former high school sweetheart, and his picture was in the paper because he pulled a gun on her. The story in the paper was not the awful thing I heard.

I was visiting my mom's parents for our monthly grandparent/granddaughter brunch when I read this story in the paper.

"I know them," I told Pappy and Nanny as we sipped coffee at their kitchen table.

Pappy glanced over the article, and frowned, and pointed something out to Nanny on the page. "Sounds like a thing Josh would have done," I don't know any Josh's, so he must have only been talking to Nanny.

Nanny cursed (I have never heard her say a foul thing in my life) and left the table. I could hear her in the kitchen, turning on the water and the metallic clang of the skillet being dumped in the sink. We didn't talk about the newspaper article for the rest of my visit.

It got me thinking again about this nameless and faceless first husband of my mom. I know you are probably sick of reading about it by now, but could you imagine if a person you have know your whole life, who you thought you knew everything about, had this secret life before you? You are the only person that I can talk to about this.

I am including the story that I started in here. I hope that you like it.



The night you shoot our dog, I was up to my elbows in dirty sink water, scrubbing dried marinara off a plate I had bought at the neighbor's yard sale. You walked in the front door, and my patience was pretty thin, all

things considered, because I **told** you—really, I asked you (I am trying to get better about letting you know what I need)—to wash up some of the plates in the sink. And I think you thought about it too, or started it and forgot because I got home from the diner to a sink half-full sink with strings of spaghetti and chunks of tomato floating in cold water.

And I guess it was my fault because I started in on you about how I need help, about how I hate having to come home to no clean dishes, about how I have to wash the dishes before I can even start dinner. I started in on you, and you have a hot temper—it's the Italian, your mother says, it can't be helped—and you hate being told what to do, and I make you feel defensive, and you started yelling back.

The dog slinked beneath the kitchen table, ears low and tail between his legs. A habit of his when we go at each other like rabid animals: all snapping jaws and exposed throats.

You stormed out of the kitchen, and I heard your footsteps echoing loud off the metal walls of our double-wide.

When you entered the kitchen, honestly, more like the space of the trailer covered in laminate instead of carpet, you have a gun. The handgun—oh, I don't know the name—that you bought a few months ago, when the Carlson's at the front of the trailer park were robbed. You said that you thought it was just Mrs. Carlson's ex breaking in to steal back his TV, but also that we should be safe, rather than sorry.

“That isn’t even loaded,” I told you. It was pretty brave too because you just took to safety off the gun, and pointed it at me. I turned back to the sink, and picked up the second-hand plate again, continuing to chip away at the dried sauce covering a blue daisy.

To prove a point to me, you shoot the dog.

*We called him Snoopy because he was a black and white mutt like the dog from **The Peanuts**, and because the only song my fingers can remember how to play on the piano from the years and years of piano lessons I took as a child is the theme song to the TV show. I used to play it like some people play, “Chopsticks” or “Für Elise,” a familiar ditty that I was able to bang out a couple measures of in the church basement surrounded by our friends. I had impressed you with this parlor trick when we were dating, but when we got married and I continued to play the same song over and over again for different people, you cottoned on to my lack of talent. Became annoyed with the up-tempo bass line whenever you heard it.*

You bought Snoopy off a man selling puppies out of a cardboard box outside of the garage you worked at. Sixty dollars and that man handed you a wriggling ball of black and white fur, complete with rolling brown eyes and a wet pink nose. You. Trusted you with a living, breathing creature.

You brought him home with some brown twine around his neck—a sloppy approximation of a bow. It wasn’t pretty, but you tried, and I figured that was all I could ever ask from you. To try.

“It made me think of that damn song you play,” you had said, dropping him in my lap, “I ain’t gonna train him, though. That’s you.”

Now that pup you bought me, the pup that I housebroke and played fetch with in the afternoons while you watched the Steelers or the Pirates on TV, the pup I taught to roll over, and who slept— curled like a quotation mark—at my side is bleeding all over my kitchen floor.

Snoopy’s not dead yet, and as I pull him into my lap he whimpers.

“You wanna tell me again how it isn’t loaded,” you say, setting the gun on the counter, kneeling in front of me. You took off your flannel and wrap it around his bleeding abdomen to staunch the flow of blood. Looked at me like the gun had been in my hand and not yours. Looked at me like “What have you done now?”

Snoopy is hefted out of my lap, and carried out of the door.

“If we leave now we can make it to Hickory before Doc closes up for the night,” you say through the open door.

I don’t think you know how close I am to leaving you most days: that when men smile at me in the diner, I imagine a whole new life for myself. One where I didn’t drop out of Pitt’s chemistry program to get married in that little church on up Rt. 40, and I didn’t move back to our one street-and-a-funeral-parlor-town.

*I don't often think about sleeping with the men who smile at me, but the thought crosses my mind when it is late, and I know that you are home waiting for me, and I would give **anything** to not go home quite yet.*

Most days, you aren't all that mean, but I worry every day that I'll do something to set you off.

If I could get into any man's car and have him take me away from Avella and you, I would do it.

I have stretched Snoopy out on a blanket in the bed of the trunk, and sat myself beside him, my back leaning against the back window. You drive fast, and dust kicks up behind us. Snoopy cries out at every pothole, at every pebble, we drive over, but after the first ten minutes he falls silent.

I keep checking to make sure he is still breathing.

"It'll be okay, Snoops," I tell him as the dark red stain on the flannel spreads outwards, and I know that it won't be okay for Snoopy, that even if he survives the gunshot, I can't bring him back to the trailer. That I will have to leave him at the pound, and if he isn't adopted by a nice new family, he will be put down. I kind of hope he dies.



I don't know how to end this story. I lost steam halfway through, maybe because I started at the end, which I am just guessing at based off a

newspaper article and some things my grandparents have said. I can't begin to guess the beginning.

Toby was waist-deep in the water before Maggie could kick off her shoes. Maggie watched from the beach as he waded further and further out. When he was deep enough that only his head and chest were above the water, he turned back to face Maggie.

“Why is it so cold?” he shouted as if he were more than thirty yards away.

“The sun went down hours ago, dumbass.” Maggie said.

Maggie was still dressed in the baggie t-shirt that she had said worn when she told her parent's goodnight. She had lain in bed for two hours in the dark waiting for Toby's text to say he was waiting at the pond. When her phone finally vibrated, buzzing softly beneath her pillow, she threw the blankets off and hopped out of bed, sneaking out her window.

The air felt tacky against Maggie's skin, but the water was cold and crisp that rose above her bellybutton. Maggie only hesitated for a moment before moving further out into the water. Her t-shirt ballooned out before pressing in tight against her sides like a vacuum-seal. Maggie wonders if he notices her waist the same way that she had noticed his shoulders when he took his shirt off before he got in the water.

“Do you think you could come in a bit, Toby? I can't stand where you are.” Maggie asked when the water was at her shoulders.

Toby swung his arm across the surface of the water and sent it splashing out in all directions, hitting Maggie in the face. She sputtered. “Not my fault you’re so little,” he teased.

He began walking back toward her, swinging his arms, splashing Maggie with water on each pass.

“Stop it, Toby!”

“Stop it, Toby,” he mimicked in a high-pitched whine.

Maggie ducked beneath the water and swam figure-eights around his legs. She was a stronger swimmer, and she could hold her breath longer than Toby, so she waited under the water a little before grabbing his ankles and yanking him under water.

They used to horseplay like this all the time during the summer at the Canonsburg Park’s pool. Maggie remembered that he used to go under so much easier. Now, when he sank beneath the surface, Maggie had a feeling it was because he was letting her win, if only momentarily.

The way things look underwater at night was brighter—more saturated and indistinct—than during the day. The color of Maggie and Toby’s skin was ghostly against the black water. The hair floating around Toby’s long face was almost red.

Toby grabbed Maggie’s shoulders, and they grappled underwater. Their bodies slid against each other. Maggie nearly kicked her way out of his hold, but then he was pulling her back, gripping her by the waist and they were chest to chest. They pirouetted together, Toby trying to roll Maggie

beneath him. Maggie pushed against Toby's chest and freed herself from his grip. She felt his fingertips brushing against her feet.

Lungs burning, Maggie and Toby rose to the surface. They gasped for air and choked on their laughter, as they were trying to do both in equal parts. Maggie felt like a kid again.

There was a temporary and unspoken truce as Maggie and Toby caught their breath and waited for their laughter to die, before they lunged at each other again. The game continued for ten, maybe fifteen more minutes, until Maggie was too tired to put up a fight against Toby anymore.

"Truce, truce!" Maggie yelled.

"I'll stop if you stop," Toby answered.

Maggie led the way, dragging her body across the pond into the shallow water and collapsed on the shore. Toby dropped down beside her on the beach, and they lay face to face. Maggie was hyper aware of how close Toby was to her, their shins made a line in the mud. His breath was hot on her face.

"So..." he says, grinning.

"So...what?"

Toby's foot brushed against hers. Maggie panicked. She remembered what she had imagined Toby doing to her on the beach the other day before it rained, and the moment felt too similar to the moment that happened right before someone kissed her.

Maggie does the only thing she can think of and rolls onto her back, and stares up at the sky. The stars were faint, but Maggie thought she could see the Pleiades.

“Pleides,” she said, pointing out the cluster of stars. “I can only see five of the stars tonight, but I am sure it is the one.”

Toby pressed his cheek against her cheek and followed the line Maggie made with her fingers, “I can’t see it.”

“You idiot, it’s right there,” Maggie said, dragging his hand up and pointing his finger at the handle of the mini-dipper.

“I still don’t see it,” he said. “Sure this constellation isn’t some ploy to hold hands?” Toby laced the fingers of their hands that were still held aloft together.

“You wish,” Maggie said, pulling her hand away and digging her fist into the mud. She felt it ooze up through the cracks of her fingers.

Toby sighed, and they were quiet. Maggie refused to look at Toby, even though she felt his eyes on her.

“It’s getting late, isn’t it?” Toby asked, standing and walking up the beach to gather his shirt and shoes. Maggie followed behind him.

They broke through the trees and walked up the long slope toward the orchards, their shadows long and skeletal because of the not-quite darkness.

“Good night,” Toby said, disappearing down the hill toward the road where his truck was parked. Maggie considered for a moment following him

and apologizing, but doesn't know what to be sorry for, and instead walks down the hill to her open bedroom window.

July 10, 2009

Last night, I did want to kiss you.

Thesis Booklist

1. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers
2. *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte
3. *The End of the Story* by Lydia Davis
4. *Out of this Furnace* by Thomas Bell
5. *Homestead: the Glory and Tragedy of an American Steel Town* by William Serrin
6. *Knockemstiff* by Donald Ray Pollock
7. *Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*
8. *Women* by Chloe Caldwell
9. *Machine Dreams* by Jayne Anne Phillips
10. *Mothers, Tell Your Daughters* by Bonnie Jo Campbell
11. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky
12. *Sanctuary* by William Faulkner
13. *Glaciers* by Alexis Smith
14. *Motherlunge* by Kirstin Scott
15. *Pointed Roofs* by Dorothy Richardson

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