

Memories In Transition
Zak Fishman

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It had been hours since I tried to fall asleep. For the fifth night in a row, my prayers had been unanswered. As usual, something troubles me, but I am unwilling to recognize the source of my pain, my constant companion of five years. During some periods the stabbing sensation has prevented me from living a normal life, while at other junctures I have been aware of my misery, but managed to put on a façade. Lately, the suffering has intensified no matter how laboriously I struggle to overcome it. I try to put my jealousy, my social anxiety, my loneliness, and my despair aside in order to recognize what my loved ones have identified as my accomplishments. Yet, every time someone praises me, I solely hear mocking . Hiding behind their encouraging smiles I can't help but visualize an indictment of the crimes I have committed against the person I used to be—the dreams I have prevented him from realizing. Some sleepless nights, I look at photos on my dresser from an ancient era. I know that the boy in the silver frame standing in his cap and gown with his mortarboard at a jaunty angle, is me but it doesn't compute. He seems so ready to take on the world, unaware of the tragedy coming his way. His smile is vibrant, teeth a brilliant shade of white, and his hazel eyes are sparkling with an intensity to rival all the stars in the galaxy. I venture towards the mirror hanging over my dresser, frequently with the picture frame clutched to my chest, and begin to examine myself. The once lively eyes which shone with enough light to conduct a lost ship at sea back to the harbor on a rainy night, now are as dull as the dirt thrown on a casket by a mourning child or spouse before the gravediggers mercilessly shovel piles of soil on top of it. Occasionally I try to smile, but the effect is lost. The teeth, whose porcelain shade

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once rivaled that of a Regency era monarch's artificially powdered face, have lost their luster, as I no longer brush regularly. As I compare the framed photo to the reflection of the man that the boy has abruptly become, the most marked difference is the energy emanating from the boy against the tortured, wheezing movements of the man. The boy is a picture of health; he is muscular, tall, and tan. In becoming the man, the boy appears to have aged several decades. He is hunched over and saddled with fat.

Tonight I bitterly recall the experiences that led to this transformation. I don't blame the transformation, transformations are natural and inevitable. I blame the specters that haunt my memories, those faces I wish I had the courage to track down and inflict physical scars upon to parallel the emotional scars they traced on my heart. As much as I love to pass my time in fantasizing about plucking out their accursed eyes, blinding them to the treachery of others the way I was blinded to their treachery, a rational portion of me can't help but recognize that this is counter-productive. I need to grasp my role in what has become my fate. Telling myself this and believing it wholeheartedly are two entirely different things.

Frustrated with the fruitlessness of the mirror exercise, I carefully place the frame back on my nightstand. It is practically a religious icon to me as it is one of the few pieces of evidence that testify to what I once was. I must be careful with the power which I imbue the photo; religious fanaticism of any sort is dangerous. Instead of crawling into bed and hiding under the covers hoping the despair that searches for me in the night might be tricked if it couldn't see my profile as my head rested on the pillow, I slowly head towards the window. Living in my childhood room the view from the second floor is comforting and familiar. During the spring and summer I can see the lush green grass

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on which my best friend Jane and I used to picnic. Tonight it is a frigid winter night with snow pouring from the sky. Nothing is visible but a white blanket. Not that it matters, even if it was a gorgeous summer night, Jane and I wouldn't be in the middle of a picnic. I can no longer bear the thought of a picnic with Jane; I take no comfort in beauty. I equate our picnics with innocence, and neither Jane nor I embody that at this point in our lives. Something odd came over me as I looked out the window; I felt a strong pull from the first snow of my 22nd year. Without putting on a jacket or gloves, I silently slipped out of my room and tip-toed down the hallway to avoid waking up my parents, being the notorious light-sleepers they are.

Once I exited the only home I have known, I took a walk around the block. My mother Susanne and my father Ted each built successful business empires allowing us to live in our state's most affluent suburb. Most of the houses I passed were sturdy Tudors or plantation like mansions sprawling over massive plots of land. As the snow landed on my bare head and the flakes melted down my flesh, I was joined by memories. To my left I saw images of my father and me on our evening runs before I lost interest in both my father and any form of exercise. To my right a black Jeep Liberty passed me, my mother in the passenger seat holding on to the door for dear life as I drove up and down the street studying for my road test before my sixteenth birthday. Behind me, I heard the fall of footsteps. I turned around and saw Jane and me in our Halloween costumes during our senior year of high school. She was decked out as Britney Spears and I was her Justin Timberlake. That was the last Halloween I would ever choose to celebrate, partially because I knew that our holiday, awesome costumes and all, was nothing without Derek, Charlie, Monique, and Lily and Beth, having irrevocably, albeit excruciatingly, severed

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ties with them in dramatic fashion only weeks before. As these ghosts circled me, I realized just how unfeasible it is to escape one's past. Unless one has Alzheimer's, memories are the glue that makes sure we stick to reality. Knowing that I would never be alone, not even in a snowstorm when most people in their right mind would seek the comforts of a fireplace and hot cocoa, I trudged dispiritedly back to my house. My brief vacation was almost over and soon I would have to face the challenges of the last few brutal weeks of the fall semester. If I continued to be this drained, I would certainly fail all my exams.

Back in my room, I glanced at the clock. I was disappointed when I learned it was only three AM. The sun would not penetrate the glass of my window for at least another three hours. Likewise, my parents and my brother Brandon would not meet me at the kitchen table for a hearty breakfast for quite awhile. I was left at the mercy of my thoughts. One thing I have learned about my thoughts over the course of my illness is that they become more pessimistic when I face boredom, exhaustion, or loneliness. In the transition between yesterday and today I was visited by all three conditions. I could try to read a book, or watch television, but I knew that it would stave off the inevitable for only a brief interlude. So I let my thoughts roam to the areas of my mind that I constantly failed at trying to suppress.

Initially, I lectured myself for refusing to be cognizant of all the good in my life. What right do I have to constantly dream of death when I have parents who love me? There are so many children who live in hovel-like orphanages denied the right to know their birthparents. Many of them are transferred from foster home to foster home prevented from obtaining the stability that permanent friends and family bring. I couldn't

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help but laugh at the direction in which my train of thought was leading. I had the best education money could buy, opportunities that most people dream of, and was showered in displays of affection by my attentive parents. Yet, this was not a recipe for stability. No matter how hard I work to regulate my moods and talk out my issues, I will perpetually have this curse I have been dealt. Until the day I die, I will always fear another debilitating breakdown; I don't have the freedom most people my age have. In the rare instance that I have tried to click with new people, most of my efforts were doomed because I could not stay out late to party on school-nights or the weekends if I wanted to prevent a dangerous mood-shift. People say they are open minded, but when they realize you are a potential ticking-time bomb, they stay away. The isolation leads to loneliness which feeds the depression which causes the cycle to continue its downward spiral.

When I have these thoughts, what I need more than anything is to talk to someone. But I can't call Jane at three in the morning every night, as that would be taking advantage of her inherent goodness. As for Dr. Johannsen, my shrink, I have his number, but unless it's an emergency, I am not really encouraged to dial his hotline and leave a message. We meet once a week, but by the time I have my appointments, I find that the harpy like thoughts that attack me during my bouts with insomnia vanished without a trace. In the rare instance when I do write down the issues I had been struggling with prior to my appointment, as I sit in the private waiting room rereading my notes, I can't help but laugh at myself. They are frequently petty and to voice them would be a waste of my parents' money and a waste of my allotted time for the session. That leaves my parents as a source of comfort. Though I love Susanne and Ted equally, I find it easier to

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relate to Susanne. When I was younger, I would fill her in on every minute detail of my life, and she would always find the time to lavish her attention on me. Now, it's harder to be upfront with her. She often tries to pick my brain, usually immediately after my session asking what I discussed with "the good doctor." I get frustrated every time she inquires, mostly because I am afraid to admit that I just sit there and bitch to Dr.

Johannsen about school, my family, my friends, and how much I wish I had never been born. It would kill my mother to hear such things, and while she often does hear similar things in moments of extreme discomfort, knowing that I feel that way the majority of the time would worry her. I have already prematurely aged my mother enough; she dyes her hair now to cover the streaks of gray from fretting over my well-being throughout the past five years, she has had a few sessions of botox to smooth away the lines on her forehead from diminished quality of sleep, hours of crying, and days crinkling her forehead in concern. I may be extremely selfish, but I have no desire to intentionally hurt her. As for Ted, he has a simplistic understanding of my condition. When we talk he always says I need to push harder at my treatment, or to lower my standards. He often speaks in terms of moral platitudes or of research he has done on other bipolar individuals who contribute to society. This usually leads to shouting matches triggered by my frustration at his inability to get me.

When my thoughts trouble me, and there isn't anyone to speak to, I find myself journeying back in time to where this all began, searching for some solution I haven't yet noticed hiding within reach of my eager fingertips. Most of my issues stem from high school, so that's where I usually start. Over the years, as I relive things, I jot them down in a notebook. I am still not certain what I mean to do with the notebook. Part of me

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thinks it is meant to be a private reflection, but another voice within tells me that if it was for my own use I wouldn't have a need to record things. Secretly, I agree with the second voice. I believe that part of my problem with my diagnosis is that I didn't know anything about the disease and its symptoms. Had I recognized it for what it was earlier, I might have avoided many of the unfortunate events that I still picture at my lowest moments. I also sometimes wonder if much of the shame and stigma I draped myself in would have been unnecessary if I knew how prevalent the illness is in people my age, and the population at large. It's with this in mind that I write. Writing has always been a passion of mine; I knew from the time I was little that I had very few talents other than writing. I dreamed of taking my writing ability and using it to forge my fortune and to change the world. In the first years of my illness, I gave up on my writing, as I doubted everything I had come to know about myself, everything about myself in which I had come to believe. It is such experiences that I hope to fashion into some sort of story to share. Whether I will decide to publish it as a memoir, or turn it into something fictional, is something I still haven't finalized. I am leaning towards memoir, as more people will believe it to be earnest and profit from its lessons. A book for manic-depressive teens by a manic-depressive adult who has been there could better the quality of lives, if not outright save them. I am also a firm believer that if I were to become a voice for the mentally ill community, more people would be informed about how their actions impact others. We might live in a more aware, compassionate world, and there would be fewer horror stories about teen suicides.

Occasionally a third voice rears its ugly head. I loathe this malevolent voice. It suggests that I am writing down everything that has impacted me over the last half-

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decade, as well as everything my family and close friends had to deal with, as a long suicide note. This voice argues that I know perfectly well that I don't intend to die of natural causes; that, in fact, once I finish what I desire to record, I will kill myself and leave the journal for either my family or Jane to discover. It is implied that somewhere in the last entry I will tell of my dream for the journal to be published to prevent a fate such as mine. The reason I hate this voice is apparent; I believe it is the most likely course of events when it comes to my future. I won't lie; suicide is something I have considered ever since my friendship with Derek, Monique, Charlie, and Lily and Beth ended.

Visions of pills and vodka, razors and shotguns have certainly provided comfort on the darkest of days. The few times I have spoken with Dr. Johannsen about these suicide fantasies I am rather dismissive of them. A proper doctor might immediately force me to spend time in the psych ward, to be evaluated, but Dr. Johannsen was never the conventional doctor. After all, he screwed up my diagnosis the first time I met him. If he hadn't, my life may have taken a completely different path. But I long ago made peace with the doctor's mistake. Therapy would be counter-productive if I held a grudge.

Whichever of the voices is privy to my ultimate truth, I am almost complete in my recreation of the significant events of the last few years. Now what remains is to read my story. This could prove to be a dangerous endeavor, but it is something I must do. I have to believe that I will be strong enough to separate the memories from the physical pain associated with them. Otherwise, the project will do me, nor anybody else who gets their hands on it, any good.

Memory 1

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As the summer of my freshman year of high school approached I came to a startling realization; I was a fat ass. For years my parents had prodded me to take smaller helpings at dinner, to work out on a regular basis, and to give up pop and fast food, but I always tuned them out. I guess that was my minimal rebellion. I was thoroughly convinced that the fat would just melt off one day as it had for my father Ted. Ted was obese until he turned sixteen, then he made the conscious decision to start running. Within two years he was down one hundred and fifty pounds. For the next thirty years my father would run twice a day for an hour or more. Some people say that his fitness routine was unhealthy, bordering on obsessive. Psychologically sound or not I have to give him credit; compared to all of my friends' fathers he resembled Brad Pitt...at least that's what my dad would insist. Operating under this misguided fairytale, I signed up for cross-country. Luckily, Jane joined, too.

All summer long we ran through our neighborhood together. I can honestly say nothing solidifies a strong friendship like sweat. Our workouts gave us ample time to discuss the vast terrifying unknown that was Jefferson High. Jane often voiced concerns about the academic challenges and the uninviting cliques, but I knew she was being insincere. Transition always comes easily to Jane. I can't say that change is something I embrace. Jane would insist that I had nothing to fear, that I am bright, well-rounded, charming, and kind. While it was nice of her to paint this portrait of me, I can't say that I was reassured.

My first encounter with my new classmates actually began two weeks before school started. Cross country required that we attend morning practice at the barbaric hour of eight AM. Jane and I made plans to arrive together and huddled nervously by the

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outdoor drinking fountain attached to the fence. Jane commented on the goose bumps rising on my flesh and I told her I was freezing; the truth was that I was scared shitless. What if I was the slowest runner on the team? What if I was wearing the wrong running attire? What if I proved socially inept? Would my high school career be a flop before the first homeroom even met? Jane tapped me on the shoulder abruptly ending my litany of disasters; apparently while I was occupied with thoughts of social suicide Jane had been approached by a group of three of our new teammates. Initially I thought they were seniors, as they seemed oh so glamorous and confident. Jane introduced them as Derek, Monique, and Charlie who also happened to be freshmen.

When I laid eyes on Derek I instantly knew I had to have his approval. He was your stereotypical alpha male, six-foot-two with a tan that could have rivaled the surfer boys of Laguna Beach. His blonde hair had been styled with care in contrast to my unruly dark hair that screamed bed-head. And that smile— it positively shone. He could have been a fashion model.

Monique was one of the sexiest girls I had laid eyes on in my brief fourteen years on this planet. She had legs that could have easily been insured for seven figures. Her narrow waist was complemented by her post-pubescent breasts. Were they natural? Would I ever find out?. Her shiny brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail and she wore a simple white tee with Adidas brand running shorts. Monique's radiant glow, so she always claimed, was not enhanced by makeup. If record executives spent some time with her in a studio and had engineers versed in the most current vocal improvement software, Monique could become a household name. Yeah, she was that hot.

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Charlie didn't really impress me. He was neither tall nor short, neither thin nor fat. He could have been replaced with any stand-in. I was slightly unnerved by his shifty eyes; they seemed to take in everything.

Before I could gauge their personalities, the coach turned on his megaphone and told us to take a ten-lap warm-up around the track. Ten laps as a warm-up? I was way out of my league. It would have been ok if Jane stayed with me, but she took off like a greyhound. Since when was she a contender for the Olympics? Derek and Monique darted off quickly as well; I wasn't surprised, as their bodies seemed designed for athletics. I was about to break down into tears of frustration when I noticed Charlie was still at my side.

"Man, how did I let Monique and Derek talk me into this? Running and early mornings are not my thing. But then I realized I'd miss out on inside jokes and memories."

"I'm having second thoughts, too. I just want to live up to my dad's ridiculous standards."

For the rest of practice Charlie and I stayed together. We eventually met up with Derek, Monique and Jane who had suggested we go for a big breakfast. Over pancakes and home-fried potatoes we compared our class schedules. Jane and I already knew that we were in all the same AP courses; we had been on the honor's track throughout middle school. We were thrilled that Derek, Charlie and Monique were enrolled in the same AP classes.

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That night lying in bed I reflected on my new friendships. I earnestly prayed that Derek, Charlie and Monique would be a major part of my life. With best friends like them high school would be a piece of cake, preferably with chocolate frosting.

Memory 2

At lunch on the first day of school Derek found us a booth in the cafeteria. Some seniors came up to us and told us that “lowly freshmen” weren’t allowed to sit in the booths; by social decree—we would have to sit at the round tables with crappy plastic seats—but Derek smiled at them and calmly told them to fuck themselves with an iron pole. I shuddered at the impending punishment his defiance would earn us, but miraculously the upperclassmen let it slide; they were obviously impressed with Derek’s guts.

Monique strolled to the booth with a tray in her arms. As she set her Caesar salad and can of diet coke on the table, she asked, “Who were those hot guys and how can I get their digits?”

Derek laughed, “It’s never going to happen, Monique.”

Charlie sat down with an energy that he couldn’t suppress. With a twinkle in his eyes and trembling hands, he announced, “The drama club is holding auditions for the fall musical in two days.”

Jane put on her practical pants. “It’s out of the question. We can’t survive rehearsal, cross country practice, and the hours of homework “

She had a point, a really good point, but I didn’t want to listen to reason. I had visions of the four of us on stage in costume singing our hearts out. So did Charlie.

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“All we have to do is sing for a minute; it can be any song at all. We also have to read from the script, but that’s simple. Monique, it’s your favorite play, Rocky Horror.”

Monique broke into an uncharacteristic girlish squeal. “Every Halloween my family dresses up and goes to see Rocky Horror at the independent theatre downtown. It’s fate; I am going to be Janet.”

While Monique flipped her hair, I shot a glance at Jane. She wanted to remind Monique that freshmen never got the lead in the Jefferson High School fall musical, but my stern expression told her not to derail Monique’s fantasy.

Memory 3

The day of auditions arrived. Derek mustered up the courage to ask our coach to allow us to leave practice early; he wasn’t pleased. He warned us that if we were cast in Rocky Horror, we would still be expected to make cross-country practice and meets our number one priority. If we wouldn’t be able to do that, we would have to choose between the activities. As we changed in the locker room I asked Derek and Charlie what they planned to sing.

“Bye Bye Bye; it’s the only song I know by heart.”

Charlie cast a withering look in Derek’s direction. Last year Charlie had been in *The Phantom of the Opera*. He had played the phantom and was prepared to dazzle the director with his rendition of “Music of the Night.” I had no idea what to sing. After all, how can the trained voice display its whole range in a mere sixty seconds? You certainly can’t run the gauntlet of human emotion in a single minute. Did I want to perform that old blue eyes standard “New York New York” Maybe I needed to shoot for something more contemporary like the Backstreet Boys. I agonized and I agonized till my head was

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going to burst. In the end I decided that the Backstreet Boys just didn't have the panache of Sinatra.

I had never been in Jefferson's auditorium and when we entered I was impressed. The stage was humungous and it had to have been varnished recently because the pinewood was gleaming. The lush scarlet curtains were luxurious. There was even a balcony. I was intimidated.

The directors did nothing to ameliorate my fears. Ms. Hardy, the choir director, was rotund and vertically challenged. In her booming voice she spoke of our school's reputation in the community, "All our shows are of professional caliber. If cast you will be expected to behave like a professional; rehearsals run several hours, five nights a week. This isn't limited to the leads. When you aren't stage I strongly suggest you do homework, as the theatre department will not take the blame for students who shirk their academic duties. During the final week before opening night the entire cast will be kept until at least midnight with no exceptions. If this intimidates you, please leave."

Several nervous looking freshmen did the walk of shame down the aisle out the theatre doors.

Shortly after Ms. Hardy's tirade, the auditions began. Jane was one of the first to take the stage. In a tender lilting voice she began Judy Garland's signature "Somewhere over the Rainbow." Before Jane could even mention the bluebirds, Hardy abruptly cut her off. When Jane sank down into the seat next to me, I gave her a hearty pat on the back.

The next half hour of auditions was tortuous. For every intimidating performance by an upper classman, like Lucy Livingston's rendition of "Memory," there were equally

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as many travails that would have put even William Hung to shame. Chief among them was Tommy Butler's butchering of John Lennon's "Imagine."

Finally, Monique was to have her moment. When Ms. Hardy called her name, Monique paused dramatically before rising from her seat; she wanted the audience to feel a strong sense of anticipation. As Monique slowly approached the stage, she allowed those awaiting their audition an appreciative glance at her tight fitting white dress and lustrous, wavy brown hair. She cleared her throat and began Celine Dion's love theme from Titanic, "My Heart Will Go On." I had to give Monique credit, she was a born performer. She never wavered, though even the untrained ear cringed at her caterwauling.

Derek followed Monique. When he started singing "Bye Bye Bye," Ms. Hardy cut him off immediately. Apparently, she was not a fan of Justin Timberlake.

When Charlie took his turn there was a swell of snickers from the back of the auditorium, but within seconds the audience was so impressed by his voice that they were moved to silence.

I had the honor of following Charlie's proverbial tough act. I was so intent on doing my best that I didn't notice the microphone cord and tripped over it just as I was reaching the apex of the song. With a jarring thud I landed on my back in the pit. The only injury I suffered was a bruised ego.

Memory 4

Derek, Monique, Jane, Charlie and I were all cast in the chorus. Charlie and Monique were absolutely livid; personally, Charlie may have had a reason to be upset, but Monique was lucky that she had even received a part. Ultimately, we didn't have much to do. We would sit in the very back of the theatre doing our homework, Jane and I

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intently focused, while the others just rehashed the school day, making fun of the kids in our AP classes whom they considered socially inferior.

During these sessions Lily joined us; she was in all classes but initially we didn't pay her much attention. She wasn't as bright as Jane, as sexy as Monique, as funny as Charlie, or as lively as Derek. Often she struggled with the simplest concepts, and we wondered why she was pursuing the honor's route. We didn't really want to associate with her, she was kind of eccentric, which was unacceptable in shallow ninth grade society, but she kept throwing herself at us. Eventually, out of exhaustion, we caved in.

The more time we spent with Lily, the more I grew to like her. Lily was always willing to speak her mind, and I respected that about her. I also realized that she was incredibly creative, and she was compassionate. Jane and I both agreed that she should become a permanent fixture of our group. The problem was that she had to get Derek's approval. We spent hours scheming for a way to ensure Lily's inclusion. It was Jane, as usual, who hit pay dirt. For weeks the cast had been buzzing about the cast and crew party to be held after the Saturday evening performance. While the theatre experience had been wonderful for us, Jane was quick to point out that we weren't exactly best friends with the majority of the cast, particularly the older students. Maybe we could talk Lily into hosting a small get together for the five of us? Jane insisted Lily would do it if we she was convinced it would cement her position as a member of our group. My only concern was that Derek, Monique, and Charlie might not be interested in leaving the all-cast party early; they wouldn't want to miss out on the opportunity to potentially ingratiate themselves with the upperclassmen.

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Everything fell into place easily. Derek, Monique and Charlie knew that the all-cast party would probably not be that exciting, and Lily's parents were so thrilled that she was bringing something with a pulse home, that wasn't a science project, that they were willing to open their home to us. Jane and I couldn't help but congratulate ourselves at how easily we manipulated our friends. I found it intoxicating. In coming up with a plan and carrying it out, it was like I was the alpha male for the night; that I was closer than ever to living up to my potential.

Memory 5

My parents and I got into an argument the night after the party at Lily's. They were displeased that I had broken my curfew, something I had never before dared. Jane had left at eleven forty five explaining that she had to visit her grandmother at the nursing home in the morning before she attended church with her parents. When midnight rolled around, I prepared to gather my coat

"Great party, Lily." This was the understatement of the year. She threw herself into planning the party with such fervor; I don't know how she found the time or the energy. She bought all the hottest CDs, which must have cost her a small fortune, and while we were at the rehearsals she observed what everyone's favorite snacks were so she could have them.

"Where are you going?"

"I have a curfew, Derek."

He shot me a scathing look. "High schoolers don't have curfews. At least I don't."

Derek glanced at Monique and Charlie in a way that was vaguely sinister; it was as though I expected them to start bashing me behind my back the moment I stepped on

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the porch. Typically, I would appeal to Jane, my personal voice of good reason, who would have told me that I should follow my heart and head home. But Jane had abandoned me; so I stayed at Lily's until two AM thinking I could sneak in past my sleeping parents. Unfortunately, the sleeping dragons were awake and ready to unleash their wrath on the foolhardy knight. The upshot was that they let me know they didn't approve of how I was changing since I befriended Derek and company. They warned me that my association with them would come to no good.

Memory 6

It would be dishonest to say that my new friendships didn't leave me a little uneasy and nostalgic. Prior to high school, Jane was the center of my universe. Since the day we met in preschool, Jane and I considered ourselves siblings. I grew up in the Jewish faith, so I was never exposed to the traditions of Christmas, until Jane and her family invited me to their Christmas day celebration. It became a yearly tradition. I counted down the days until the moment Jane and I decorated her family's massive fir tree. After we strung popcorn wreaths around the tree and planted the angel at its pinnacle, we feasted on Chinese food and watched "It's a Wonderful Life." When Chanukah rolled around, I reciprocated. Jane and I would light the menorah while nibbling on potato pancakes and chocolate gelt and playing dreidle.

Our parents bought adjacent cottages in Charlevoix and we spent the entire summer canoeing, roasting marshmallows and weenies, telling ghost stories, and camping in the woods. We had so much energy back then and never needed any sleep. We even developed our own language and had the ability to tell secrets under our parents' very noses.

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Now that Jane and I had invited Derek, Monique, Charlie, and Lily into our ranks, our relationship felt tainted. For the first time, we were bickering. I thought Jane was becoming sanctimonious. One night, after she had a particularly heated debate with Derek, which was becoming the norm, I called her, “What’s your problem?”

Her answer surprised me. “I hate the way you’re changing into a Derek clone. You break curfew and allow him to copy your homework, and that’s not you. And why do we always have to hang out with Derek and the others? Can’t we hang out on our own? Sometimes I wonder if you’re mad about something and plan to replace me.”

“You’re being ridiculous; you’ve always been a part of my life and I can’t imagine it any other way. Tell you what, why don’t we have an Adam and Jane night this weekend?”

“That sounds great.”

“But, you need to promise me you will be more open-minded about Derek. Shut off those warnings in your head and just let life happen, consequences be damned.”

“If you say so.”

She was hesitant, but I was relieved that the situation had been defused, for the time being.

Memory 7

During AP Bio Derek passed me a note. His parents were going away for the weekend and he thought it would be an excellent opportunity for a guy’s night. We could rent action movies like “Diehard” and “The Terminator” without the girls whining about the lack of romance and witty dialogue. Likewise, we could have pizza, chips, regular soda, cookies and all the other junk food that we weren’t allowed to have at get togethers

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because Monique insisted she was trying to lose weight, and the temptation was cruel and unusual torture. The idea really appealed to me, but I already had a commitment to Jane.

Derek wasn't going to let me get off that easy. After class he cornered me by my locker, "What exactly do you and Jane have planned?"

"Um...we might go bowling."

"That sounds typical. You could do that any day of the week; it's not like the alley is being torn down tomorrow. But, my parents don't go out of town all that often, and they don't let me stay home alone, either. We have to seize the moment."

"I understand, but Jane has been really insecure lately. She thinks our friendship is in trouble."

"Are you going to let Jane run your life just because she's on her period? Tell her to eat some chocolate and cut you some slack."

I suppose I could have asked him whom he would prefer ran my life, but I already knew the most likely answer was that my allegiance should ultimately be to Derek, and to Derek alone. I had to get to my next class, as did Derek, so I told him that the conversation was over for now.

During Honor's American Literature Derek passed me another note; how he found the time to be such a prolific scribe and managed to evade the teacher's notice was beyond me. This time the note held a veiled threat. "Charlie and I, Derek wrote, could have our own guy's night without you. Imagine how much stronger our friendship could become because of that. You wouldn't want to be left out and feel inferior, would you?" Most people, upon receiving such a juvenile note, would not allow themselves to be baited. Unfortunately, I was not that socially sophisticated.

Memories In Transition
Zak Fishman

As Ms. Kennedy went on about symbolism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, something about an old woman and her camellia garden, I debated whether I should blow off Jane. I didn't have enough spine to tell her why I would have to cancel our plans, if I did in fact decide to do so. I came to the realization that between Jane and Derek, it would be safer to piss off Jane. Jane clearly was more mature than Derek and wouldn't stoop to revenge. Derek, on the other hand, tended to react violently to what he deemed betrayal. He could wage war by spreading nasty rumors; he could cut you out of his life entirely and force his other friends to do it, too. If I were to alienate him, he could probably ruin my entire high school career. When the bell rang, I had made my mind up. Guys' night it would be.

I followed Derek to the boy's locker room as we prepared for cross-country practice. "I'm on for Guys' night. But how do I deal with Jane?"

"Lie."

I wasn't sure how I felt about lying to Jane. She had always been upfront with me, even when the truth hurt.

When the coach blew his whistle to begin practice, Jane approached me from behind. "I can't wait for the weekend. I know you won't believe me, but during class I made a list of things we can do."

"How very un-Jane-like of you."

"Shut up. I know we talked about bowling, but dinner and a movie could be fun, too. There's a romantic comedy with Reese Witherspoon coming out on Friday."

I felt like someone was squeezing my heart; I couldn't breathe and it had nothing to do with my running. I knew that I was about to betray Jane and that she would be devastated.

Memories In Transition
Zak Fishman

Memory 8

As much as I prayed to God for the week to drag slowly so the inevitable would be postponed, Saturday arrived. Faster than normal, it seemed, proving that yet again God has a sick sense of humor. Chances are he was aware of the horrible deed I was about to commit, and the pain I would inflict. He figured I should be punished for it. If the roles had been reversed, I probably would have reacted in the same way.

After breakfast I headed to my room and locked the door; this was one conversation I didn't want my parents to overhear. I dialed Jane's number and waited for her to pick up. As usual, she answered on the first ring. "Good morning."

Good morning indeed, maybe for Derek, but certainly not for Jane and me. I had practiced my routine all week; I had to make sure my voice was hoarse enough to be convincing, but not over the top. I croaked out, "Good morning."

"You sound like shit."

"I feel like shit. Can we reschedule?"

Jane was disappointed but understood. After I hung up, I ran to the bathroom and threw up my breakfast. Guilt has a vomit-like aftertaste.

Memory 9

At six o' clock on the dot I showed up at Derek's house. It was quite impressive; his parents must pay their landscape artist several grand a year. He lived at the end of a paved private drive in a brick Tudor that condescendingly intimidated money as it drank tea with an extended pinkie.

When I rang the doorbell I heard Derek's voice boom over the intercom asking me to identify myself. It took me a moment to respond, as I couldn't figure out how the

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Zak Fishman

intercom worked. Consequently, there was a shade of humiliation in my answer. Derek came to the door and informed me I was late. I was confused. He had said arrive at six o'clock, which I most certainly did. Perhaps his watch was a minute fast.

Charlie was already inside sprawled on the floor in front of Derek's 60 inch flat screen TV. As he munched on potato chips, spraying the crumbs all over the carpet, he exclaimed that Derek had a totally awesome surround sound system. Immediately jealousy pierced my side. Had Charlie been invited here before me? Did Derek like Charlie better than me? How could that be? What did Charlie have that I didn't?

Noticing my unease, Derek soothingly informed me that he had just explained all the TV's features to Charlie. I am ashamed to admit how relieved I was that my suspicions had been just that.

For the next couple of hours our Guys' night was typical of most nerdy freshmen. We ordered pizza with all the toppings, which we ate without plates, drank pop straight out of the liter without a coaster, and had contests to see who could produce the most impressive fart and burp. I lost, which for a moment was disappointing, until I realized that losing indicated that I was civilized.

Then Derek announced the evening's entertainment. Watching "Die Hard", couldn't believe how young Bruce Willis was. When the movie was finished Derek had another surprise. "We have a special intermission activity."

He went upstairs for a moment, keeping us in suspense, so he could get the supplies we needed. The supplies consisted of a grocery bag filled with rolls of toilet paper and bottles of Redi-Whip. In his other hand he had three black ski masks.

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Zak Fishman

“We’re going to attack Lily’s house. Monique’s in on it. Right now, the girls are at a movie. Lily’s parents are going to pick them up, which gives us time to get in and out without being caught.”

I was in awe of Derek’s evil genius. How he managed to plan all the details down to the moment was most inspiring. Charlie, on the other hand, was not pleased. “Why does Monique get to be involved? She’s not a dude?”

“Monique is the distraction to get Lily and her parents out of the house, and that’s all. She’s not helping us with the fun stuff. Get over yourself.”

As we walked towards Lily’s house, Charlie was still sulking.

“Decorating” Lily’s house was a blast. We hung toilet paper from the trees, the gutters, the doghouse, and on the cars in the driveway. We Redi-Whipped the windows, wrote “loser” on the garage and “skank,” “hooker,” “tranny,” and “slut” on the car windows. In retrospect, this was harsh, but I didn’t want to rock the boat like Charlie had. Derek had a way of keeping tabs, constantly comparing Charlie and me, and I knew that by gleefully participating and refusing to voice my criticism, I was the better friend. I was riding on a wave of glory.

Back at Derek’s it was time for the second movie. Just as Sarah Conner and Kyle fled the nightclub, I heard Jane angrily scream my name, “I can’t believe you lied to me to watch a stupid movie with Derek and Charlie.”

“How the hell did you get into my house?”

“Monique told me where you hide the key.”

Charlie, who had been silent to this point, blurted out, “I knew we shouldn’t have told Monique about Guys’ night and decorating Lily’s house.”

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Zak Fishman

Derek shot a withering glance at Charlie. Jane departed just as dramatically as she had arrived. "I'll be going to Lily's now."

"Jane, I am sorry I lied to you. You're right to be pissed, but please, please don't rat us out to Lily. I just wanted to be part of Guys' night."

Jane looked me straight in the eyes. "You can have Guys' night every damn night of the week. I'm not speaking to you."

After Jane left, Derek started blaming me for this mess.

"But you're the one who told me to lie. You insisted I come to Guys' night. Besides, it's not my fault that Monique played you and ruined your prank."

"Are you for real? I was willing to organize this Guys' night all by myself. I opened my home and I paid for everything. I just wanted everything to be memorable and you repay me with ungrateful insults? Maybe you should leave."

"I'll show myself out."

Charlie caught up with me on the porch. "Derek's an asshole. Why don't I come over and we can finish Guys' night without him."

I had had enough of everyone, and I had to do some serious damage control, so I declined.

Memory 10

I woke up Sunday morning with a pain in the pit of my stomach. All night images of a screaming Jane and scornful Derek danced before my eyes like a tickertape parade straight from hell. After taking a lengthy shower, I still felt unclean. It just didn't seem fair; a person shouldn't be punished just because his or her good intentions were flawed.

Memories In Transition
Zak Fishman

My mother called me from the kitchen and interrupted my reveries; Lily was on the phone. My blood froze. Before I could even get the words “I’m sorry” out of my mouth Lily broke into tears. “How could you do something so mean? I understand Derek and Charlie being this stupid, but I always thought you were a decent guy. Do have any idea how much those words on the garage hurt?”

“It was just a joke.”

“Not to my parents. They wanted to call the cops. I don’t know why I bothered sticking up for you.”

A cold bead of sweat trailed from my widow’s peak to my chin. Jane would have known how to defuse this potential bomb, but then again Jane was too intelligent to go against her morals to have done something this pathetic just to curry favor with people she deemed superior to her. Truly, vandals are assholes. I could see it in broad daylight when Derek wasn’t around to intimidate me.

“My parents agreed not to call yours as long as you come clean up the mess this morning. Call Charlie and Derek yourself and give them the same message; I refuse to deal with them.”

Lily must have known how nervous I would be about confronting Derek and telling him that he had made a mess and now it was his obligation to help clean it up. But Lily’s tone made it clear that I had no choice so I gathered my courage, and promised Lily the three of us would be over in less than half an hour. As I hung up my hands were shaking. Had I just made a promise I couldn’t deliver?

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Zak Fishman

Charlie didn't scare me half as much as Derek did, so I decided I would call him first. Unfortunately, his parents informed me that he had already left for work and would not be home until after six. I didn't leave a message.

Before I attempted to call Derek, I marched to the bathroom, locked the door and practiced what I would say in the mirror. In a groveling tone I would remind Derek that what we did was illegal. If we wanted to escape a permanent blot on our records, we had to clean up after ourselves. I also planned on relating how heartbroken Lily was. I would play to his tender side, assuming he had one, which was a huge assumption on my part, by reminding him that Lily was one of our newest friends and we didn't want to lose her over something this stupid. While I recognized the strength of my multi-layered arguments, my reflection challenged that Derek would not be easily swayed.

Time was running out. How I wished there was a pill I could take that would give me a jolt of courage and adrenaline. I had trouble remembering Derek's number. Never had I been so intimidated.

The phone rang on Derek's line for what seemed forever, then it went to voicemail. I figured Derek was screening his phone calls. Well, if he thought that I was going to cave that easily he had another thing coming. With righteous anger I hit redial. Still no answer. This time I left a voice mail. I knew I had to be cunning if I wanted Derek to pay any attention to me, so I made it sound like I felt terribly guilty about last night and desperately needed to apologize. Within moments my phone rang.

"It's about time you called to apologize. I knew you'd realize this was your fault."

It took total self-control to prevent my telling him to go fuck himself. "Derek, we need to get to Lily's pronto and clean up. It's the only way we stay out of trouble."

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Zak Fishman

“I am not going to baby Lily; I have plans to go to the mall with Monique. Get Jane to help you since she was so keen on doing the right thing.”

Before I could tell him that stung, he hung up. Clearly I was on my own.

Memory 11

When I pulled my bike into Lily’s driveway her parents were waiting outside with their arms crossed. They apparently were not going to let me just deal with the mess and head home with my proverbial tail hung low between my legs. Instead they lectured on how they had opened their home to us and couldn’t understand why we had expressed our gratitude by trashing the outside of their house. I received no credit for being the only one to show up to make things right.

I had a lot of time to reflect as I scrubbed the whipped cream off the car windows and the garage. I didn’t like the person I was becoming, but I wasn’t certain about how to proceed. Was I such a weakling that I would do anything under peer pressure? As much as I knew Derek was an egomaniac, there was no way I could give him up. Clearly he was toxic for my self-esteem, but I obviously didn’t have the maturity to face the remaining three plus years of high school as a social reject. I knew he would be in all my classes, and all my social activities because our interests were similar, I wouldn’t have the strength of character to be around him without feeling abject misery if I cut ties with him today. It would hurt my grades, as I would have all this unspoken rage that would distract me from my lessons. I recognized, though I was ashamed to admit it aloud, that I was overwhelmed by Derek’s manipulative, cold charisma and arrogance. I believe that it’s human nature to want to be bad in some way. Even if I knew, at the time, the terrible

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path I was doomed to follow, the pain and suffering that was to come, I wouldn't have changed my allegiances.

What I needed to do, if I was to survive Derek's whims, was somehow convince the others that we should add more members to our group. If I had others to fall back on, I wouldn't be as vulnerable. Perhaps at some point I could even bring about a schism that would result in two factions. Naturally, I would command the second schism once I learned how to emulate Derek.

Memory 12

Before I left, Lily came outside. She looked terrible, her eyes were red and she was inordinately pale. She had brought me a glass of water as a peace offering.

"I'm sorry my parents put you through this, Adam."

"You have nothing to apologize for. I deserve it."

"I want you to know I think you're a good person; you were so brave to come here alone. Derek and Charlie, if they had had the balls to show up today, would find a way to punish me for this."

It occurred to me that Lily knew just how easily one could sell his or her soul for popularity; I wondered if Monique was an equally merciless mistress. Lily interrupted my reflection by giving me a huge hug. A promise was inherent in that hug, that if things ever came to a near standstill between Derek and me, she would be on my side, no matter the cost. The positive energy of that gave me the courage to call Jane and beg for her forgiveness. Lily used her innate gift of interpreting people's thoughts and body language and helpfully suggested, "Call me if Jane gives you a hard time. I'll put in a good word."

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As I biked home I wondered how best to approach Jane. Should I appeal to her sense of nostalgia? Should I explain how difficult it was to defy Derek? Should I let her stew in her rage and pain a little while longer? I wasn't entirely sure. Jane and I seemed to possess one heart, share one pair of eyes. We were one being with one mutual interpretation of the world. Or, at least we had been. If this was still true, wouldn't I have been wise enough to prevent this disaster in the first place?

I knew Jane appreciated grand gestures. If I tried to make things right by calling her, she would see it as cowardly and dismiss my apology. I would have to go to her house and see her face to face. Suddenly I was inspired. Back in the day, our favorite show had been "Clarissa Explains It All." We had both been impressed by the relationship between Sam and Clarissa, how they kept a ladder leaned against the side of her house that led up to the bay window in her room that she kept perpetually opened. For a few years I would enter Jane's room in such a fashion, when she was grounded, or ill, or was supposed to be doing homework. Eventually, our parents figured out our trick, and it lost its magic. Perhaps today would be the perfect opportunity to resurrect the ladder. I told myself that Jane wasn't mad enough to knock over the ladder while I was climbing and that visions of falling to my death were melodramatic.

I parked my bike in the garage, where the ladder was stored conveniently enough, seeming like a sign Providence smiled on my plan. I grabbed the ladder with ease. I remembered how difficult it used to be to carry when I was younger.

Thankfully, it was a beautiful day, so Jane had her windows open to the world. Carefully and stealthily I leaned the ladder up to Jane's window, then slowly and what I hoped was silently, began my ascent.

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Ever the dedicated student, Jane was studying for our AP Bio test. I held my breath and said a silent prayer as I entered Jane's room. I then noticed that she was wearing headphones. I could have made as much noise as a Broadway show on opening night, and she wouldn't have heard a thing. I walked behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. Jane let out a high-pitched scream that could have shattered glass. Hopefully, her parents were at church. Otherwise, her dad might come rushing upstairs mistaking me for a burglar and shoot me.

The instant Jane made eye contact I knew that if she had found a glass paperweight on her desk she would have chucked it at me just like Scarlet O'Hara had at Rhett Butler. Thankfully, there was no such object accessible, because Jane had better aim than Scarlet. Jane hissed, "Get out; I'm not speaking to you."

"Anger and stress are leading causes of heart attacks, Jane. You don't one at fifteen do you?"

Jane was not amused. I tried another tactic.

"Gimme a break. I was the one who beat up Tim Jacobson when he stole your lunch money in elementary school. No one else dared to stand up to him because the brute was like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, and if I hadn't intervened you would have died of starvation."

She tried to suppress a laugh at that and failed miserably.

"See, your life would be boring without me because no one makes you laugh like I can."

"You need to stop speaking now. Do you get why I'm angry with you?"

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I tried to look contrite. She continued to stare at me, so I finally raised my hand and took a stab at her question. “Are you mad because I ditched you for Derek?”

Jane shook her head. “I am over that. I hate that we are having trouble communicating. We used to be able to complete each other’s sentences, like we had ESP. Now, there’s a channel blocking our transmission, reducing reception.”

“You mean Derek?”

“You lied to me, Adam. I wish we were back in the BD era (before Derek). You never felt the need to lie to me; you weren’t afraid of what my reaction would be. You were the first the first person to tell me the truth about my bad haircut in fifth grade.”

“Well, it did make you look like Geoffrey the giraffe.”

“We can’t continue if you’re afraid of me. I don’t want to drift apart. You’re the friend I want to point to when I’m ninety-five and gloat that we’ve been best friends our entire lives; everyone dreams of that.”

“And if I came to you telling you the real reason I wanted to break our plans, you wouldn’t have gone off on me?”

“I’m a big girl. I’d wouldn’t have been happy, but I would have survived.”

I didn’t think it would have been quite that easy, but I felt lucky that Jane was even speaking to me, so I wasn’t going to argue.

“You lied when I poured my heart out to you. It wasn’t easy to tell you I felt neglected, but I did it. All I wanted was the chance to hang out with you one-on-one because you mean that much to me. But I guess you weren’t listening. I’m not surprised it’s like no one can keep your attention unless they bring up Derek, Charlie, or Monique.”

“Alright, I was an insensitive coward.”

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“You were an ass. Look, we’re inexorably linked; my identity is your identity, and your identity is my identity. We’re better quality than Derek or Charlie and if you choose to emulate them, you won’t be unique anymore. That’s a reflection on me, too”

She had a point. I didn’t want to admit that lately I had been troubled by how much I wanted to be like Derek, that I was suffering from low self-esteem. I had been hearing an inner dark voice telling me that I wasn’t good enough; I wasn’t smart enough; I wasn’t handsome enough. The world would be a more interesting place without me. But if I told Jane how much I was beginning to hate myself, I think it would have harmed her.

I had to convince Jane how much she meant to me. I vowed to throw myself into displays of my admiration and affection for her.

“Alright, Jane. This week Derek, Charlie, and Monique don’t exist. You, Lily, and I are going to have a standing lunch date. If they can’t respect our need for space, screw them. Clear your entire calendar for the weekend; I am going to stun you and Lily with awesome things to do.”

“I’m glad you’re including Lily; we can’t leave her to the wolves. Just don’t let me down.

Memory 13

Monday morning I was so queasy I had to skip breakfast. I knew that taking a stand was going to require depths of character that I had previously been hesitant to tap.. But I reminded myself I had a duty to Jane and Lily, if not myself. Besides, who were Derek and Monique to intimidate me to the extent that my word was worthless? They couldn’t stare at me like a gorgon and freeze me into a block of slate...could they? They were just two freshmen at a prestigious high school who were dealing with their own

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insecurities. Sure they covered their fears with great skill, but it didn't mean I couldn't penetrate their defenses when I was at my most rational.

I arrived for my first period Literature class early; I figured that if I got there before Derek, Monique and Charlie I could find three seats somewhere in the front of the room and save them for Jane and Lily. Choosing the front was definitely significant, Derek and Monique made a point of sitting in the back so they could pass notes and converse quietly. Our teachers were never quite quick enough to catch them in the act. Sometimes I find myself wondering if maybe our teachers sensed some malevolence lurking beneath the cheerful facades Derek and Monique presented to the world and consequently were afraid to provoke their wrath. It's a laughable notion today, how could two students possibly frighten a teacher? Teachers, after all, at least the great ones, are sources of authority. Authority tends to keep it together when confronted by a threat.

I was relieved when Jane and Lily were the next students to arrive. They immediately placed their bags next in the compartment attached to the back of the desk. The sixth sense between Jane and me was revitalized; she offered her hand under the desk to keep me from wavering.

Other students began to fill the empty desks. Though the semester was halfway through, I had never really taken the opportunity to notice them before. I mean I knew them by name, or at least by the snarky nicknames Monique had insisted on using as code in the notes she passed, but I never really made the effort to speak with them and see if they were worthy of our scorn. I began to wonder what kind of lives they led, like Kayla and Randy, for instance. Kayla's beauty rivaled Monique's; Monique, threatened I'm certain, always made a point of victimizing her. I wondered what Kayla dreamed about at

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night, what her passions were. Why had it taken me so long to even recognize her as a fellow human being? Derek always called Randy the “fairy queen” behind his back because he was most enthusiastic in our English and History classes and kept up with the preppy trend endorsed by J Crew, Banana Republic, and Abercrombie and Fitch. If that made someone effeminate, then Derek was flaming. Randy struck me as a compassionate individual with a vivacious sense of humor.

Lost in my reverie, I hardly noticed Derek, Charlie, and Monique saunter into the classroom as the bell rang. I was expecting sneers on their faces, Charlie complying only because he had no backbone, but if there was an impending catastrophe, the signs were so subtle the naked eye could not have perceived them. Maybe Derek understood that we all needed a little space and had the maturity to respect our privacy.

Memory 14

Oddly, as the day continued and I avoided Derek, Monique, and Charlie, I felt freer than I had in recent weeks. I certainly wasn’t liberated to the point of bursting into a song on the rooftop of the gymnasium, but my concentration was reinvigorated and my thirst for knowledge was refreshed. When lunch rolled around I found myself cursing the clock; I was intrigued by the discussion of Mendelian diseases and knew that a peanut butter and jelly sandwich wouldn’t fill me in the usual way.

Jane, Lily and I walked to the cafeteria and found a round table; I had suggested staying away from the booths, as Princess Monique and her royal escorts Sir Charlie and Lord Derek found round tables demeaning. I don’t recall all the specific details of our lunchtime banter, but I will never forget the changes I witnessed in Lily. Typically she would listen as Derek and Monique dominated the conversation, but that afternoon Lily

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was talking enough for the three of us. Her face flushed with an intense, beautiful energy I had never noticed,

I ,too, had exciting news. During third period my student leadership class had finalized the preparations for the Sadie Hawkins Dance. Tickets were going to go on sale next week and because our sponsor was going to allow me to lead the publicity campaign, something freshmen usually were not allowed to do, I would get a chance to write catchy announcement, design the ticket, and make posters to plaster all over the school. The dance wasn't for another three weeks, but that didn't mean that we couldn't start planning whom we would take to the dance as our date, the groups we would form for pictures and dinner, where we would go to dinner before, and where we would hang out after. After all, it was our first big function as high school students. Honestly I was kind of nervous about being asked to the dance, because Sadie Hawkins wasn't the kind of event you wanted to go stag to, but I absolutely had to attend being on the dance committee. Part of the difficulty of being a student council representative was that one had a duty to attend events, because if we didn't go, how could we legitimately expect others to get excited and go? I hoped by throwing a hint out there, Lily or Jane might ask me. They could hardly contain themselves not only out of pride for me, but also because visions of hunting for the perfect new dress, and receiving sweet-scented corsages which would be pinned to their bodice danced in their heads.

Suddenly, Lily got quiet.

“Is something wrong?”

“You said something about organizing a group, Adam, and I trust your judgment but I was wondering who you thought to include.”

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“Well, it would be the three of us, our dates, and Derek, Monique, and Charlie, and their dates.”

Lily looked disappointed; I began to feel concerned. After this weekend was over, I had expected things to go back to normal, or at least as normal as they could be when one is dealing with unstable nuclear devices like Derek and Monique. I knew Jane was reluctant about putting up with Derek and Monique’s bullshit, but I could manipulate her. But Lily’s distress was an element I hadn’t anticipated.

“Don’t worry, Lily. Three weeks is a longtime. I bet Derek, Monique, and Charlie are watching us from the corner of their eyes and wish they could be here with us. Everything will be resolved. You’ll see.”

Memory 15

That night as I lay in bed watching “Bewitched” on Nickelodeon, I was a huge Nick at Nite fan back then, I wondered how Samantha Stevens would have used witchcraft to manipulate Derek and Monique into being better people. Somehow I suspected that even her abilities would be stretched to their limits when facing that challenge. Before I could question myself about why I was so addicted to Derek and Monique when I knew they had major character flaws –or the even worse likelihood that those major flaws were in fact necessary to survive in this fast-paced world and that I would always aspire to be like them and obtain the heights they would—the phone rang. With hindsight I know that I was exhausted from another long school day and that I should have just ignored the call, but at the time I was so caught up in the fantasy that it would be Derek begging to apologize, to admit that he couldn’t take another day of being ignored by me, that I eagerly answered it. Much to my dismay it wasn’t Derek; it’s a law

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of nature that whenever you really wish and pray that a particular person is the voice that you will hear on the other line, it never is. Instead I heard Charlie's nasal greeting. I toyed with the idea of hanging up, or coming up with a quick excuse to end the phone call, but I considered that perhaps I could play Charlie to my advantage. At the time it never occurred to me that in fact it was Derek who was using Charlie to play me. But then again, it was still early in my disappointing career as a lackey to Derek and company, and I had never even dreamed of the concept of three-way calling.

"Dude, are you mad at me?"

"Not exactly. It really blew dealing with the aftermath of the vandalism by myself, especially when you and Derek were so eager to pull the prank in the first place. Then I had to fix things with Jane. Not an ideal Sunday. But there wasn't any permanent damage."

"Man, I'm sorry for how this went down. If I hadn't been at work, I'd have totally helped you at Lily's."

"Relax, Charlie. It's over now."

"You know, it was so stupid of Derek to come up with this in the first place."

I should have thought about a more politically correct way of sizing up Derek's actions, but I didn't know Charlie was following a scripted conversation intended to pitch me off a perilous cliff.

"It was a douche-bag move. At least you had a reason for not helping at Lily's, Derek was just being selfish. But I don't hate him, if that's what you're asking."

"So why the drama of avoiding us if you aren't angry?"

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“I haven’t been a good friend to Jane or Lily. I want to make things right with them, so I am going to patch things up with them by giving them my full attention for a week. I don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

“Basically you’re kissing their asses.”

“That’s not fair. I genuinely care about them. Don’t you, Monique, and Derek ever do things without us?”

“Rarely.”

“Then you shouldn’t feel threatened by Jane, Lily, and me doing things on our own.”

“But things will go back to normal next week?”

“Of course. Listen, I’m exhausted. I have to get up early to study for a test before I catch the bus, so I’m going to say good night.”

If I had known what that little ratfink had done, I would have reached over the phone line and ripped out his accursed vocal chords.

Memory 16

Jane, Lily and I shared an amazing weekend. We ended up going for ice cream at the Dairy Queen before it closed for the season, screaming in fear as the ghost of the drowned girl, Samara, came crawling out of the television screen to enact her revenge seven days after the stupid teens watched the videotape at an isolated cabin in the woods, and bowling at the alley during 50s Friday theme night as they blasted the soundtrack from Grease. After several frames of gutter-balls, I sulked as I sipped my chocolate malted. I only wish I had grasped that gutter-balls would soon be the least of my problems.

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Memory 17

On the Monday that ticket sales began for the Sadie Hawkins Dance, Derek, Monique, Charlie, Lily and I were all seated in a booth in the cafeteria. I had asked them what they did last weekend after Lily regaled them with stories of our weekend. Monique replied with a vague description, “We just sat around doing nothing. The three of you had the more exciting weekend.”

In what I now recognize as my foolhardy eternal optimism I remarked casually, “We could do something extra exciting this weekend to make up for it.”

“Derek will come up with something killer. He’s infallible that way, except when he’s distracted.”

If I hadn’t been consumed with the approaching Sadie Hawkins Dance, and the feedback that I was overhearing in the cafeteria from the other students as they reacted to the publicity for the dance, I might have noticed the hint of malice underlying Monique’s statement.

“Have you thought who you might ask, Monique?”

“Some of the varsity football players hinted that they would jump at the opportunity to go with me, if I asked them, but I shot all of them down. I’m taking Derek.”

I wasn’t terribly surprised, alpha females and alpha males tended to pair up. On my cynical days, I believe that underneath their “hot shit” posturing they were both afraid that they would never find true love, so they settled with protracted bouts of flirting during the times that they weren’t dating other people. When they were in relationships,

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they would compare significant others; if the romantic interest was found wanting, they were dismissed.

Jane boldly declared, "I'm taking Adam."

This was news to me, not unpleasant, as she and I had never really confirmed this. I would have said yes to anyone, even the girl we dubbed Big Bertha, because deep down inside I believed that I was unattractive and unintelligent. This complex likely stemmed from my parents' constant reminders that maybe I didn't want to order French fries with my dinner because I hadn't worked out that day, or the hints that my size large tops were starting to look a little snug.

I suppose I worried Jane was asking me out of pity. After all, she was a beautiful, charming girl with brains and a personality to boot. She could have any guy eating out of her hands. At the time, though, she hadn't found a boy that really piqued her interest, so she decided to ask the closest thing she had to a boyfriend, me. These days, I wonder, if things hadn't panned out the way they had, whether Jane and I could have been more than just best friends. Our society places great value on finding a lover who you can call your best friend, someone who knows your soul better than you know yourself. In many ways, if what I like to call Hollywood Realism had written the script for my life, we would have ended up together with a house in the suburbs and three kids, two girls and a boy. But neither Jane, nor I, could have seen the iceberg that was heading with my personal Titanic indicating the doom I would suffer, as I was neither unsinkable nor equipped with a lifeboat.

This left Charlie and Lily without dates. I am not sure at what point during the week they decided they would accompany each other, but she chose him out of necessity,

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fearing any other guy would have told her no. By the time she revealed this fear to Jane and me, I was dealing with the aftermath of Derek's revenge and didn't even attempt to convince Lily that she underestimated herself. I had my own wounds to lick, which cut as deep as Jesus's crown of thorns.

Memory 18

Friday afternoon I just felt like closing the blinds, crawling into bed, hiding under the covers and unplugging the phone. I was emotionally drained to the extent that I felt physically ill. I blame Mr. Lang entirely.

Math has always been my least favorite subject, but my teachers and parents seem to believe that I have some skill that I could further hone if I so desired. Whenever I protested that I would rather not take the honor's route in mathematics, my academic advisors would insist that hard work builds character and would refuse to allow me to take the lower level. I could shed tears and sweat bullets in that cramped office with the hideous carpet and the motivational posters on the wall, but to no avail.

That was precisely what led to my weakened state this afternoon. This unit's focus was geometric proofs, a language that I could not decipher regardless of the effort I put into it. Genetics, as usual, had cursed me out of spite; I wanted to damn the law of independent assortment, alleles, chromosomes, and recombination. On Tuesday Mr. Lang had announced we would have a test covering proofs, much to my dismay. With this knowledge I prepared to set my alarm ahead an hour every morning for the rest of the week so I could seek Mr. Lang in his office for extra help. He was patient and easy going, but he just could not make me see the logic behind the concept. Figuring that studying at home might be the environment in which an epiphany could be inspired, I spent my

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evenings reworking problem after problem. I had never studied so hard in my entire career, and it's not like I ever shirked my responsibilities when it came to studying,

As much as I hoped for a freak snowstorm, or a death in Mr. Lang's family, or a bomb threat at my school, fate chose not to smile on me. The bus was on time and while I tried to give my notes a last minute glance it was too difficult to concentrate. Between the driver's infatuation with speed-bumps and the shrieking of the girls as they cooed over Chad Michael Murray's shower scene on *One Tree Hill*, I was queasy and had a piercing headache all at once, neither condition ripe for synthesis of complicated material.

When I entered the classroom all my classmates seemed to emanate a vague enthusiasm. If I hadn't been so stressed I might have noticed it more intensely. The fact that no one had their notebooks or textbooks out gave me the willies; it indicated that everyone was assured that they had mastered the material. I began to feel inferior. Why was everyone else so much more intelligent and gifted than me? Were they better people than me? Was I being punished for not being religious enough as a child? I wanted to burst into tears when I realized that my hope for a heavy curve was dashed if Jane and the others did well. Nowadays, one low test grade seems to have little power over my state of mind, but back in the ninth grade when I still believed that every little incident had bearing on my future; it was enough to throw me into a blind panic.

Mr. Lang walked into the classroom with what I imagined to be a spring in his step stemming from some sinister glee. He seemed to be looking in my direction as if to telegraph solely to me how lucky he was that his days of grades and anxiety were over. Given his young age, which I estimate to be his mid twenties to early thirties, I now comprehend that he was probably still taking classes at night to earn his masters or even a

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PhD, but when you are fifteen and scared shitless, the world seems impossibly large and every authority figure practically ancient.

Given my fragile state of mind, what happened next was completely expected. Mr. Lang, who I believed to be representative of all society's evils, passed out the test that could destroy my future, let alone my GPA. When he announced that we could begin, I took a deep breath and read the first problem. The test could have been written in Olde English for all the sense I made of it. I wanted to scream, run out of the class room, find a gun and shoot myself in front of my guidance counselor to become some martyr to the belief that American youth had to be pushed to the breaking point in order to have successful futures. Instead, I just stared at the problem. I kept looking at it, waiting for some light bulb to illuminate, and was still contemplating that same damn question when Mr. Lang asked for the students that hadn't already finished to turn in their work. The only work I had done was to put my John Hancock at the head of the paper. I sheepishly turned in my practically blank piece of paper to Lang and fled from the room before he could question me.

I told myself I had to hold it together until I reached the boy's bathroom. I couldn't display my frazzled state in front of any other teacher or student as it would indicate to them that my appearance of perfection was just an illusion. I remembered that the men's room on the third floor of the building was deserted. I trudged up the stairs wearily, surrounded by students laughing and running up and down the same flights, and sought out my refuge. When I reached my destination I did a quick check to make sure all the stalls were unoccupied and open. At least I had success on that front. Not that I took much comfort in it. I chose a stall, slammed the door, locked it and began to cry

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profusely. It was like a dam had been breached by a torrential storm. When the tears ceased I approached the mirror and began ranting at my red-eyed reflection. If anyone had entered the room at that particular moment they probably would have had me declared mad. I don't really recall what I yelled. I suppose there was some indictment on the grounds of laziness and stupidity. That would be my mantra of choice for the next few years whenever I grew frustrated or was distraught. They were not charming company to keep. I only wish I could have evicted them from the guest list earlier and saved myself such abject misery.

The rest of that school day is a blur. I imagine I was just a body in a chair. I do remember skipping lunch and heading to the library instead, taking solace in a book, so I could avoid Jane and Derek exclaiming how the test was a breeze and they were certain to have aced it. I could not have handled, that given my competitive and jealous nature.

That is, as I said, what led me to hiding in my room after school. In such a dark place I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I remember is my mother tapping me repeatedly on the shoulder.

Memory 19

Sleepily I asked my mother who was calling. She replied that Jane was on the line and had been trying to reach me all afternoon. I wasn't sure I felt up to dealing with Jane at the moment, but given the still semi-fragile state of our relationship, I knew it was imperative I answer. I plugged my phone back in and answered the phone still semi-unalert. The words she was about to speak would wake me up quickly. I only wish that she had never had to relate this information to me, that I could have remained peacefully in

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the dark, both metaphorically and literally. Realistically that is a farce, the onslaught would just have been deferred, not defeated.

“Adam, how could you forget about Derek’s party? You’re an hour late. I was certain you would be standing on his doorstep before anyone else arrived.”

Party, what party? No one said anything about a party. Rapidly I rewound all my conversations from that week and did not find one reference to a party. “I’m pretty sure you’re hallucinating; Derek never invited me to a party.”

“He probably assumed that Monique or Charlie would tell you about it. I’m pretty sure the entire grade is here, so it was probably just an oversight.”

Never once, in my foolish hubris, did it cross my mind that Derek may have intentionally left me off the guest list. All things being equal, Jane hadn’t considered that possibility either. She just assumed we hadn’t discussed the party during the week because we each thought everyone knew about it. At the time it all seemed like a logical conclusion. With age and an understanding of Derek’s sneaky underhandedness, I now recognize that the bastard’s action was cold-blooded and calculating.

I asked Jane to tell Derek that I was sorry for being late and would be over shortly. I began to come out of my funk a little bit. Who could care about one test when there was excitement in the air and a guaranteed fun evening ahead. School wasn’t everything, and every now and then one needs to just live it up.

With renewed energy I opened my closet door to pick out what I would wear. I decided on my new blue cardigan from J Crew with a light blue button down oxford underneath and light chinos from the Gap. After a quick shower, I even sang “I Feel

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Pretty” as I washed my hair...hey it was that kind of night..., I got dressed and walked to Derek’s house.

When I reached Derek’s the aroma of pizza wafted to my nostrils and Eminem’s latest angry rap assaulted my ears. On the door was a sign that read in bold font “Party Inside, Come On In.” I took that as a sign that I didn’t need to ring the doorbell and I could just enter the door like I owned the place, and I was the one who had thrown the party. No one was in the foyer or the living room so I deduced that the party was in Derek’s basement.

As I descended the stairs the music stopped. I just assumed that the CD was over and that Charlie, who lived to play the role of DJ, was about to put a new one in the boom box. Given the semi-silence my steps were rather audible and everyone turned to look at me. I felt really cool; I looked hot and was the center of attention. I spotted Monique at the bottom of the steps.

“You look great, Monique. How are you doing?”

Hesitantly she responded ,“Gee thanks, Adam. I’m fine.”

Suddenly, Derek loomed in front of me. With a frigid sneer, he asked, “What are you doing here?”

Taken aback I responded, “I’m here for the party.”

Derek let out a slow, cruel, lingering laugh. “You mean the party that you didn’t get an invitation to?”

“I assumed I was supposed to be here.”

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“Assumed, you assumed. Don’t you know what happens when you assume?”

Loud enough for the room to hear, but not quite yelling, Derek informed me, “When you assume you make an ass out of u and me. I think you should leave now.”

He wasn’t rude about it, which I wish he had been. I could have handled being yelled at, because it would have made me look like that victim of Derek’s immature rage. But he stated his request like it was a scientific fact. Startled, I looked around the room. Only Jane would make eye contact with me. She mouthed she was sorry and started moving towards to me, no easy feat given the size of the crowd. Derek had invited practically our entire grade to witness my humiliation. Feeling horrified, embarrassed, and lonely, I broke down into tears again. This time I had no control over my emotions.

Jane finally reached me and put her arms around me. “You’re a prick, Derek. By the way, you throw a shitty party.”

Jane led me up the stairs as I could no longer see my feet in front of me. Everything was a blur. As we exited Derek’s house Jane kept uttering how sorry she was. “I had no idea he could be so vicious. I’m so pissed at myself, Adam. I should have seen through his scheme. He must have been threatened by the way you handled the situation with Lily; he can’t handle life unless he’s dominating everyone else all the time.”

“Quit the fucking psychological analysis; it won’t save my reputation. I don’t give two shits about Derek and the motivations behind his actions.”

“How about I come over and we talk?”

“I can’t deal with people right now; I need to sleep off the pain.”

Jane gave me one last hug as we went our separate ways, a tacit signal that she understood and would be there for me during whatever happened next.

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As I trudged up the stairs to my bedroom I passed my parents watching TV in the den. Over the sitcom's laugh track they asked me why I was home so early.

"The party was over when I arrived."

"That's a shame. You can watch TV with us, if you like."

"No thanks, I'm going to bed."

"You slept all afternoon, Honey. How can you be tired?"

"I didn't sleep well the night before, Mom."

"I Love you, Adam. Sleep tight."

It barely registered. It wasn't her love that I wanted or needed.

In my room I stripped of the sweater, shirt and pants that had been a silent witness to my shame. I put them in a pile and started stamping on them. Sure they were inanimate objects and couldn't feel the pain that was devouring my heart, but all the same the ineffective expression of my rage seemed rational at the moment.

As much as I professed that I was tired, sleep was inevitably impossible. Even if I had been tired, I would have relived my awful night again and again. That was something I couldn't take. Laying in bed staring at the ceiling, I wondered why my life was going to shambles. No one else seemed to be having troubles in school, and no one else had incurred the wrath of Derek. The world seemed to be lumped into two categories, me and everyone else. When you're standing on your own, you feel incredibly lonely. Some people find loners sexy, or want to be alone, but I wasn't of that mindset. I needed and craved people constantly in my life. It was through other people that I could get a true measure of myself. They liked me for my best traits, whatever those might be, because truthfully I couldn't think of one single good thing about me. There was nothing

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worthwhile about me. I was a waste, consuming materials that I didn't deserve, not giving back anything in return. It didn't take Derek and his posse to reduce me to hating myself. Hating myself had always been there, had always lurked beneath the surface in insecurities about school, about my prospects, about my friendships, but usually I could ignore it casually. Now that Derek and the others seemed to acknowledge that they hated me, it was easy to hate myself.

I cursed the zygote from which I sprung. I silently railed against my parents, wondering why they had to meet and marry. Why couldn't they have adopted? Why couldn't one of them have been sterile? The litany went on and on. It wouldn't do me any good, and deep down inside I knew that it would lead to trouble, but I couldn't help but indulge in my self pity.

Memory 20

Saturday and Sunday were a disaster. I couldn't concentrate on my homework. Every time I sat down to think about school I thought about the math test that would lead to my first zero on an assignment, or I thought about how Derek, Monique, Charlie, and many of classmates had witnessed what happened Friday night. My brain would be cramped with images of them mocking me, passing notes about me, spreading the story of my disgrace. This led to me calling myself a coward. Others wouldn't care about what had happened, they would move on and find a new group of friends and learn to manage when they had encountered their former friends and now foes. I, however, could not do this; I lacked the strength of character because I lacked confidence in myself.

Jane called several times to invite me out, but I told her that I was busy doing homework or had family stuff I had to attend.

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“You can’t fool me. Stop brooding in your room like Miss Havisham. It won’t do you any good.”

“I’m not wearing a wedding dress and I don’t see myself burning to death. You don’t have to worry.”

“But I am.”

Interactions with my parents were equally uncomfortable. They kept asking why I was so silent and I why I was eating less. I mumbled something about a new diet which shut them up, because they were happy believing that I had taken a new interest in my health. Honestly, everything just tasted bland or like dust. I kept telling myself I was a fat pig, but it didn’t inspire me to exercise or change my eating habits; if anything it just exacerbated how shitty I was already feeling. I just had this sense of hopelessness that I would always be fat and ugly.

The concept of school tomorrow frightened me. I knew I didn’t have the coping mechanisms to get me through the day. I was aware that my next course of action would be significant. I just had no idea what that course of action would be.

Memory 21

The sun reflecting off the snow assaulted my eyes moments before my alarm beeped shrilly. It was Monday morning and the usual sensation of disappointment with the end of the weekend being confirmed was replaced by dread. I knew that I didn’t have the backbone to attend school today. I had to find a way to convince my parents that I should be allowed to stay home.

My mother was adamant about the importance of school and insisted that physical evidence of illness was mandatory before she would call and excuse me. My sheets and

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hair were sodden with sweat from the tossing and turning, but that wouldn't be enough. She would just assume I was nervous about a test. I had heard that sometimes people would take an old-fashioned mercury thermometer and run it under boiling water before sticking it in their mouth, but my mother believed in progress and had switched to a digital thermometer years ago. There remained one indisputable proof of illness that was open to me—vomit in the toilet bowl or on the floor. Knowing that I would have to force myself to vomit, puking on the kitchen floor was not an option. Quickly I sprinted towards the bathroom. I had never tried to make myself ill before so I worried about the pain of sticking my fingers deep down my throat until I gagged. I also wondered what would happen if my parents heard me gagging and saw what I had done. Then they would be on to me and my mouth would taste like shit for nothing. I'd learned a lot about bulimia in my health classes, about the number of incidences in teenagers and how most cases go unnoticed for years. That knowledge gave me the confidence to stick two fingers into the back of my throat until sure enough I threw up in the toilet bowl. Looking at the pale yellowy puke in the bowl made me sicker and this time I heaved naturally until my stomach was emptied of its entire contents.

Now came the crucial performance. I staggered down the stairs as though I were light headed and spoke groggily, "I have the flu. Check the bathroom if you don't believe me."

Shortly after she hurried up the stairs she returned with an expression of concern across her heavily made up face. She demanded I go back to sleep immediately.

Most teenagers who faked sick would have snuck off to the movies or the mall once their parents went off to work. Even if I hadn't been the sort of ninny who would

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have been terrified of being recognized in public and reported to my parents, that particular Monday leaving the house was the last thing I wanted to do. I tried to read in bed, but John Grisham just wasn't doing it for me. I knew it wasn't his fault, the plot was fast paced and the voices of the characters were very credible, but I just couldn't concentrate. My mind was still reeling from Derek's treachery. I could have handled not being invited to his party, sometimes you just need a break from certain people no matter how much you love them, but his artistically orchestrated public dressing down was the part that destroyed me. To coordinate the timing of the music's cessation, Charlie must have been privy to the plans, approved them, and been a willing participant. That really smarted. If Charlie had a role to play, I was certain Monique knew what to expect. Jane told me that Monique was the one who kept asking where I was, so she had been eager for the performance. I didn't know who I could trust any more. I had always thought I was a decent judge of character, but apparently I had been blinded by Monique's flashing smile, Charlie's rambunctious laughter, and Derek's blonde tips.

How many days could I realistically stay out of school? I know that our school's attendance policy permitted ten absences before a student failed the class automatically. My mother was very aware of the policy; it wouldn't have shocked me if she had it sewed on a sampler hanging over her bed. So maybe if I really pressed my luck I could get her to excuse me for two more days. It would be midweek by that point and the potential that people would remember my disgrace was low. I knew that I had a short attention span and I assumed that was the norm for most teenagers. Besides, even if something crazy didn't go down at our school like a particularly dramatic breakup or a

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pregnancy, I could count on a celebrity to have a breakdown and distract us from the hierarchy of high school.

Yeah right. When I told my mom two more days were necessary for my convalescence, her eyes would widen, flashes of fire would replace her pupils, her head would spin 360 degrees, and she would let out a guttural howl. That was a thought; if she murdered me in her moment of rage I would never have to worry about school or Derek and his crew again.

Another possibility crossed my mind. All day people were probably talking about how I was absent. They knew it was very rare for me to miss school. It wouldn't be long before they would conclude that I was ashamed to show my face and the tale would be continue to be repeated. The fallout would worsen the longer I was away. If only I had a PR person who had lain out a plan of attack for me to handle this mess.

The sooner I faced that only I had the power to determine my social fate, the better off I would be. Sure, I could use Jane as a sounding board, but at the end of the day it wasn't her battle and she certainly was less preoccupied with popularity than me. But Jane had so much more potential than me; she didn't need others to feel good about herself. Jane always charmed people without lifting a finger. It was a quirk of fate that those who didn't crave an entourage or need one to see their self-worth had one.

I would go to school. I would submit myself to Derek. I would smile even if I was floundering. It was expected. The kinks in my relationships would be ironed out and I could finally see the real me.

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I had to learn a universal truth. No, not the idea that a single man in possession of a great fortune must be in want of a wife. Bold statements and plans can be stated until you're blue in the face, but at the end of the day they are gaseous nothings exhaled with carbon dioxide when you open your mouth.

Tuesday I made it my mission to wake up earlier than usual. I paid extra attention to my wardrobe, ate a hearty breakfast, and visualized success. My mother was thrilled with my quick recovery and gave me a peck on the cheek as I headed out the door to catch the bus. Jane was waiting at the stop. Her hair was blowing in the wind and she stood off to the side by herself. I snuck up behind her, threw my hands over her eyes and yelled, "Guess who?" Everyone turned to look at me and that was the point. I wanted them to see that I was there and was ready for confrontation.

Jane gave me a kind look, one of the only that I would see that day. "Feeling better?"

"It's wonderful to be alive."

Jane pursed her lips, as though she was thinking deeply about something. "Adam, I think you need to know..."

"Jane, I need to keep up my confidence; it won't help if I know people are gossiping about Friday."

I don't think anything could have adequately prepared me for the reaction I received when I boarded the bus. Most days the passengers were still asleep barely making eye contact. Today there was a sense of anticipation as I passed Marge the bus driver. Everyone looked at me. As if there was some teleprompter feeding them cues, the other passengers started laughing hysterically. I knew that Jane was behind me and that

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gave me the strength to hold my chin up as I roamed the aisle towards the back of the bus. By avoiding the empty seats in the front of the bus and taking the very last available seats in the back I hoped people would respect my nerve. The other passengers would whisper as I passed them. In later years I would wonder if it had all been a paranoid delusion, but at that moment I was certain every single person on the bus knew about my conflict with Derek and thought I was pathetic.

I felt that if Jane and I kept up some chipper conversation during the remainder of the ride to school I could distract myself. But the pink elephant riding in the row across from me would not go away, even if I promised a contract with the Ringling Brother's Circus and a lifetime of Planters honey-roasted peanuts.

If I had hoped that the bus crowd was a fluke and not representative of the population, I quickly became disillusioned. It seemed that conversations halted and every eye roamed over my body as I maneuvered down the hallway. I would have loved to conclude that they approved of the outfit I had carefully parsed together, but I wasn't that naïve.

I had no idea where I was supposed to sit during first period. Should I venture towards Derek, Charlie, and Monique telegraphing that I would yield to their demands? Or, would I sit towards the front with Jane and Lilly who had the right to sit with us but preferred the seats closest to the teacher? If I sat in the front everyone's eyes would be on me, which I suppose would continue to imply that I was over the events of the other day and that I didn't expect them to ruin my life. But Derek would interpret my seat in the front row as an act of aggression. The back of the room it would have to be. Derek, Monique, and Charlie were in their usual territory laughing about something when I

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approached them. Without a trace of hesitation I wished them a cheerful good morning.

Monique was the first to reply. "You seem to be feeling better."

"I'm fully recovered. I haven't been myself lately, but that's done."

Charlie smiled, "That's great, Dude."

No one wanted to broach the subject of Derek's party. I waited for Derek to speak. He didn't right away. I wondered what tactic I would have to use to break the ice wall between us. It was like trying to answer a Sphinx's riddle. I finally deduced that Derek probably expected me to apologize for the scene at his party even though I had been the victim. I wasn't happy about the power this action would give Derek, but I also knew that if I wanted people to stop staring at me like some degenerate, I would have to remain part of Derek's posse.

"Derek, I'm sorry that I've been taking out my stress on you. I value our friendship and I know my actions haven't always shown that. You're a great guy and I'm a moron for hurting you. How can I fix things? Name your price?"

Derek appeared to be moved by my humble speech, until he fired one last weapon from his carefully maintained personal arsenal. "I want to make some changes, too. Lately I have spent some time with Randy and I was wrong about him. If you hadn't been so focused on Lily and Jane, you would have come to the same conclusion. Anyway, he'll be hanging out with us now."

"That's great. I always thought we should be more inclusive."

"Randy and Kayla are kind of a joint package."

I noticed Monique make a grimace of distaste; she opened her mouth to speak. Was she about to challenge Derek? "Have you met Beth?"

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Were we running a charity operation now? I couldn't understand why Monique would want to align herself with such a mousy individual. If I knew what kind of manipulative bitch was lurking under those bushy curls, I'd have called foul. That was when I noticed the formation of our desks was slightly different. On Derek's right and left side there was an extra desk. Monique was on Derek's right, a subtle hint to the rest of us that she was his second in command. Charlie and I had the two seats on the left, usually switching off who would sit next to Derek. But now there was a third desk. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that the third seat was for Randy. My suspicion was confirmed when Randy, Kayla, and Beth headed toward our area. Beth was a buffer between Kayla and Monique. I made my way to the desk next to Charlie, but Derek insisted, "You can take the third seat."

It wasn't a request. Randy inserted himself between Charlie and me, a blatant display of the reduction in my rank.

A part of me wanted to rebel. How could months of hard work be undone in the course of two weeks? I was the injured party, not Derek. He should be the one supposed to beg for scraps at the table like a dog, not me. Even as I let my indignation run its course, I knew that I would never act on my anger. I obviously was inferior to Derek and would always be that way.

Memory 23

As it got closer to the Sadie Hawkin's Dance, I did everything I could to win over Derek. At lunch time I would always agree with him; he could have called my mother the whore of Babylon and my father a eunuch and I would have just laughed at Derek's

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wisdom. At night I would type up my notes for Derek so he didn't have to pay attention in class.

I kissed Charlie and Monique's asses, too, hoping they would argue on my behalf. One night I took them out for pizza. When Derek asked if I would also pick up the tab at the movies, I quickly agreed.

I grew to resent Randy. It had been my idea originally to add him to our group; I had been the one who recognized his potential, and in return he undermined my position.

Unfortunately, I had to make nice with Randy. Even when Derek insisted that I make copies of my notes for Randy, I held my tongue. I noticed Derek and Charlie would increasingly include him in conversation and ask his opinions about girls without offering me a chance to put in my two cents. When I would try to interrupt they became impatient. Gradually, I decided it wasn't worth it to put up a fight and just let them treat me like a second-class citizen.

All my pain and frustration turned inward. Of course, I didn't understand that I was beating myself up because of misplaced anger and frustration. I just knew I was unhappy, and that my life was becoming increasingly complicated. The simple things didn't move me anymore. Movies that typically made me laugh instead inspired tears. Instead of reading, usually my favorite spare time activity, I chose to watch television passively. Staring at all these attractive characters with fascinating lives, living their dreams, resolving problems in less than thirty minutes, only continued to feed my torment.

I felt alone, even though I had friends, both true and false, I believed no one understood me. I was speaking in hieroglyphics and there was no Rosetta Stone. I sought

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comfort in food. I didn't even notice it at first, but eventually as my pants grew tight and my face began to look fuller in the mirror, I realized all the candy bars and bags of potato chips were starting to add up. Instead of leading me to exercise and eat better, it just caused me to believe that I would always be fat and ugly, so why bother trying.

Sleep was a disaster. I had constant nightmares about Derek and Monique kicking me out of the group. I dreamed that I would end up living on the street in a box, dependent on the kindness of others like some warped and doomed Blanche Dubois, because I lacked the intelligence and cunning to survive in this world. I began to nod off in class, which led to several lectures from my teachers and detentions. The perpetual exhaustion kept me from doing homework and found me falling asleep as early as eight o'clock at night. My grades were slipping, too. Previously I held all As, now I was fighting to get Bs on my tests. When I began to fail tests or simply not hand in assignments, my teachers began to write notes on my work asking if there was a problem at home. They looked at me with pity and disappointment, which killed me. I felt that a stronger person wouldn't allow his life to fall apart; especially when he wasn't even aware of what was troubling him.

My mother and father started yelling at me on a regular basis and I would just roll my eyes at them. I didn't believe that they could help me, or understand me. My mother kept insisting that I was depressed and that I needed to see a therapist, which only upset me more. I didn't need to be branded mentally ill, even temporarily. What would people say if they knew I needed pills to function? I would cry at the dinner table blaming them for my failings, saying I wish I had never been born, or that I was somebody else. When I

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punched my hand through the bathroom mirror because my reflection disgusted me, my mother took a stand and set up an appointment with Dr. Johansen.

Memory 24

Even though my mother had told me she had scheduled a consultation appointment with Dr. Johansen, processing that fact and agreeing to it were two totally different things. My mother knew that I was both obstinate and proud; she grasped that these two traits would be difficult to overcome in getting me to the appointment.

That Saturday my mother dragged me out of bed around two—this had become somewhat of a trend over the last few weeks as I no longer felt the urge to get out of bed and would do anything I could to prolong my stay under the covers. Her plan was simple. When she got me downstairs, after standing outside the bathroom door to ensure I brushed my teeth and showered, she suggested that we go to the movies. My mother definitely knew the right hand to play; even in my abject misery a trip to the movies was something that could still reach me. As I pushed my spoon around the bowl of Rice Krispies in front of me, she went on and on about some movie that her best friend had seen last night. I vaguely recalled seeing commercials for the film when I had slumped in front of the TV the night before and decided that if the advertisement stayed with me over the night that perhaps this film could move me.

Though my mother did get me to shower and at least pretend to eat, she had no success in getting me to care about what I wore. As I followed her out to the car in my Scooby Doo pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt that was two sizes too big, she plastered on a grin that I would have identified as forced if I was really paying attention to the world around in me.

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During the drive my mother blabbed on about something, but I didn't pay her any attention. I just stared out the window. It was a bright winter day, but instead of appreciating the rare appearance by the sun, I found myself thinking it was too blinding. I briefly wished to myself that our car had screens that you could pull over the window like in an airplane. Instead, I was forced to look at joyful children building snowmen or having snowball fights in their backyards seemingly oblivious to any care in the world. I hated them all so much. I wanted to jump out of the car and knock over those damn Snowmen or throw ice in those kids' pink-cheeked faces. I wanted them to suffer the way I did.

When the car pulled into a side street with which I wasn't familiar, I wondered why my mother was taking a shortcut to the theatre. I found myself hoping that it wasn't going to turn into one of those shortcuts that actually lengthened the trip; my mother and her unfortunate sense of direction had a knack for doing so on a regular basis.

It was only when she pulled into a driveway in front of a small white house that I began to feel duped. How was it possible that a stop at someone's home could get us to the theatre on time? Lord knew I didn't want to miss the previews, nor did I want to be in such a rush that I wouldn't be able to get Reeses Pieces and a small buttered popcorn at the concession stand. Before I could voice my concerns, my mother stopped the car, turned on the child safety locks with a click that grated on my slowly unraveling nerves, and turned off the car.

Then she leveled with me. "We aren't going to a movie. We have an appointment with Dr. Johansen, a psychiatrist whom came highly recommended by a family friend."

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Immediately I began to panic. There was no way that I would take any medicine, I had an intense phobia of swallowing pills. Getting me to the doctor when I was ill involved much prodding and pleading, and once there I would always argue with the doctor about wanting a liquid antibiotic, regardless of how large the dose would have to be and how gross it would taste. What if I had to take medicine every day until I died? Besides the shame that accompanied medication, what would I do if they couldn't make it in liquid form? I began to tremble.

Instead of speaking in a soothing tone, my mother spoke in a serious voice that she rarely used to address me. "Your father's in the waiting room. We can do this the hard way or the easy way."

"I'll come quietly, but I'll never trust you again."

I felt like a gangster facing a squad of cops with a vengeance. She led me towards the waiting room where my dad was looking at a copy of Time. After a few moments I realized he was too preoccupied to actually read the magazine, as he hadn't turned the page.

I supposed Dr. Johansen had tried really hard to establish a pleasing environment in the waiting room, but I found it much closer to unsettling and eerie than comforting. The room had only four seats and they were all clustered together to the extent that you were practically seated in your neighbor's lap. There was a tiny radio next to a potted plant on an end table to the left of the last chair. The radio was tuned to NPR and seemed to broadcast a selection by Mozart lethargically. On each wall there were still-life prints of flowers. I wondered to myself if those flowers felt as dead inside as I did.

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As we continued to wait for the doctor, I felt myself struggling to breathe. The room continued to shrink in size as though it were becoming a coffin.

Suddenly a soft rap on the door distracted me from my reverie. Slowly, the door opened and I had my first glimpse of Dr. Johansen. I had expected some sinister Vincent Price figure with a cold glare that cut like a knife. Instead, Dr. Johansen appeared to be only a few years older than my parents. He was dressed in a red mock-turtleneck sweater and blue jeans as though he were headed to some dinner at a casual restaurant. I had to stifle a laugh at that, after all wasn't it required that all psychiatrists had a silver beard and were balding? For all I knew, this guy was a criminal who had murdered and robbed the real Dr. Johansen and was now planning the same fate for my family.

Before I could warn my parents that this guy was about to whip out a butcher knife and slaughter us in time for us to appear on the eleven o'clock broadcast, my parents stood up and offered their hands to the "doctor." They thanked him profusely for accommodating their busy schedules and told him he was a lifesaver. The "doctor" shrugged modestly and led us towards his office.

I had to give Dr. Johansen some credit; his inner sanctum was bursting wall to wall with medical texts. Some of them had frightening titles like *When Good Teens Kill* and some of them like *Masturbation: From Infancy On* made me want to laugh inappropriately. I noticed that Dr. Johansen had three low to the ground black leather chairs, which looked comfortable, as well as the stereotypical couch. There was no way in hell that I was going to lie down on it and pour out my soul. Fortunately, the doctor pointed towards the three seats as though the couch did not exist. I headed towards the

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middle seat in between my parents, as though they were the walls of a fortress that could protect me from attacking invaders.

Dr. Johansen sat across from us. “What brings us together today?”

My parents looked at me, prodding me with their eyes to speak about whatever was troubling me. I still felt betrayed and decided that I wasn’t going to give them the satisfaction of my cooperation. Dr. Johansen apparently had much experience with patients that were not willing to talk initially. “If Adam isn’t comfortable speaking, perhaps you could begin and he will jump in when ready.”

“Adam hasn’t been himself for months. It has something to do with this group of brats he calls his new friends.”

“They aren’t brats, Dad.”

“Whatever they are, they know how to put on a good first impression. I was pleased to see Adam less insulated; he had more spirit, too.”

“My husband and I completely misunderstood what he calls “spirit.” Adam was breaking rules and mouthing off. We had no idea this was the beginning of a slide into agitation and moodiness. Doctor, he doesn’t do his homework and he seems completely consumed with this group of friends, which can’t be healthy.”

“He let’s them walk all over him.”

I rolled my eyes; Dr. Johansen noticed this behavior. “Do you have something to add, Adam?”

I shook my head to the left and right swiftly, still refusing to speak to any of the adults in the room.

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“Doctor, he won’t confide in us. All he wants to do is sleep. I’m aware that parents have difficulty processing these situations objectively, but Adam’s teachers have contacted us as well. They recognize his potential and worry about the consequences bad grades will have on his future.”

What bright future? I thought to myself.

“These same teachers have observed Adam’s friends treating him as a subhuman.”

Maybe I would be doing better in my classes if my teachers spent less time playing Doctor Phil and focused more energy on devising an effective curriculum.

“I was horrified when these teachers described Adam as a servant going back for more intense lickings. Doctor, there is only one logical explanation. Adam must be depressed; he is allowing himself to be humiliated and internalizes these insults because he hates himself.”

Dr. Johansen cleared his throat. “I sympathize with your pain; it is absolutely horrifying to watch a brilliant child underestimate himself. However, you cannot expect your son to wake up one morning and decide his friends are the catalysts for his daily misery. Teenagers find themselves in a most vulnerable state, not only because high school is such a major time of intense change, but also because their brains are still developing. Many hormonal interactions cause alterations in the brain’s chemistry. The symptoms you report observing in Adam could be either situational or result from a chemical imbalance, which antidepressants could correct. You must understand that regardless of the cause, recovery is not an immediate process. Television commercials

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suggest medications are a magical solution; nothing could be further from the truth. It might take months for significant improvement.”

“That seems reasonable, Doctor.”

“Understand in Adam’s case, the use of therapy and medication will be necessary long past when Adam appears to have returned to a state of normalcy. Because he’ll be using medications which affect the chemicals in the composition of the brain, it is essential that you watch Adam take his medication; I can tell you many horror stories about patients who believe they are cured and stop their medications without consulting their prescribing psychiatrist. In these situations, the consequences are dire.”

“We can do that, Doctor.”

“The hardest part will be dealing with the day to day nature of depression. Some days, Adam will be upbeat and get things accomplished; other days, he will be a zombie. You must recognize how these moods manifest themselves and find appropriate ways to respond to them.”

“Anything to make Adam happy again, Doctor. We place ourselves in your capable hands.”

“Do you have anything to add, Adam?”

I just stared at him wordlessly.

My parents looked at me and positively begged that I answer the doctor’s question.

“It’s perfectly natural for a patient to remain silent during the first session. This unwillingness to cooperate is often a façade. The pain Adam is experiencing is so intense, and the desperation so suffocating, that he will quickly tire of playing games and do what

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I ask. He wants a miracle. Understand that some patients take longer than others to accept that a doctor knows what he or she is doing. It is akin to religion; some people accept God immediately and follow his commandments. Others perceive God to be a joke, until they absolutely need him. When they finally let God in, and God does what these individuals need, they are converted for life and eternally grateful.”

I'll prove you wrong, Doctor, I thought to myself. I am not going to accept “God” and ask for assistance.

Memory 25

When my mother and I walked to the car, I wouldn't even look at her. I was hurt by what I considered to be her betrayal. How could she air my dirty laundry to some Dr. we barely even knew? When my mother started the car she turned the dial to my favorite station, but I immediately clicked it off. Damned if I would let her placate me. I knew she was unnerved by my stony silence and I believed that it served her right. After a mile or two, my mother looked at me and made a suggestion. “If you don't want to talk to your father or me about the Doctor, maybe you could go see Jane.”

My mother had pulled into our driveway. She looked tired. Was it possible that in her own way she was suffering like me? I had never thought about the difficulty she surely faced each day watching her eldest child move about listlessly. I wish I had the maturity to let her know that I was sorry, that I too wanted things back to normal. Instead, I clung to my pride. I ran in the direction of Jane's house without looking back.

When I knocked on the door, Jane's mom let me in. She gave me a huge hug and told to go upstairs to see Jane. She even asked if I wanted popcorn—she got a huge thrill

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out of treating Jane's closest friends like royalty. At least something was still right in a world that no longer made sense.

Jane wasn't surprised to see me. "Don't hold this against your parents."

"You were in on it?"

"Stop being so selfish for a minute. I have been watching a show called the destruction of Adam and it's scaring the hell out of me, but I can't change the channel. It gives me nightmares; your misery is becoming mine. Since you couldn't speak up, I did it for you."

I wanted to lunge at her and cut her throat with the nails that I hadn't cut in weeks. On the other hand, I wanted to bow down to her in thanks because some secret part of me recognized that I needed help and was too hung up on appearances to ask for it. I didn't do either; I just stood there shell-shocked. Jane didn't say a word or make a movement. She was waiting for my cue. For two people who had always known how to proceed with each other, this was a rare experience. I broke down. "I'm afraid nobody has the power to cure me."

Jane patted me on the back and in the most assertive tone I had ever heard she insisted, "You'll be fine and this mess is going to work out. Maybe you can't count on Derek, Monique, Charlie, Lily, Beth, Kayla, and Randy, but you can always turn to me. If you need someone to help you stay on top of your homework, I'm there. If you can't see the beauty in the world, I'll point it out. If you can't fight your own battles, I have enough strength to crusade for you."

I was moved by her words. I knew our friendship was extremely powerful, but to hear that someone cares about you that much when you feel as though no one on earth

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loved you, well it was indescribable. Then Jane glared at me. “If you think I’m escorting a zombie to the dance, you’re dead wrong. Even if everything else in your life sucks, you’re going to fake having fun.”

Who knew, if I pretended I was enjoying myself with enough force and did it often enough, I might magically begin to enjoy myself.

Memory 26

In all my moping throughout the week, I hadn’t realized that the day of the Sadie Hawkin’s Dance had arrived. Luckily, Jane was on top of things and had organized our plans. We were expected at Derek’s house around 5:30 for pictures, which would last around thirty minutes, so we could make it to TGI Friday’s for dinner by 6:15. If all went well, we would be at the dance around 7:30, just as it was beginning.

As I tried on my dress pants, I realized they were too tight; I could barely breathe, let alone dance in them. Nor did I have any back up pairs. I also had trouble getting my sport coat to button across my gut. I fell on the bed in exasperation. Was it impossible for just one single thing to go right in my life? I went downstairs looking for my mother. She was reading People magazine on the couch. I hated to interrupt her from stories about Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston’s fairytale marriage, but I needed her help. After I explained my problem, my mother asked about the dress code for the dance. I thought about it for a minute. Most people would wear suits with a dress shirt and tie, but I could probably get away with khakis and a dress shirt, if it came down to that.

When I entered the GAP, I felt out of place. The room was filled with some sort of upbeat soft rock tune, ala John Mayer, and all the customers appeared to be clones. They were tall, thin and tan—never mind that it was winter. They probably had never had

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to worry about finding pants that were not too tight. They all smiled as they browsed the racks, as though they hadn't a care in the world. It was disgusting.

While I stood around comparing myself to the other guys in the store, my mother had rushed towards the wall on the left hand side of the guys section where one could find a diverse selection of jeans and khakis in all sorts of colors and sizes. She decided that a classic chino would be a safe bet and grabbed three pairs. I followed her to the dressing room and shut the door behind me after she handed me the pants. Before I removed my own pants to try on the others, I couldn't help but feel like I was suffocating. Even the dressing room seemed designed for a certain body type. It seemed like I had a hard time moving around in there, but that might have just been all in my head. The first pair my mother found was a size 32, which I typically wore. I tugged and tugged on the zipper, but it wouldn't close all the way. The next pair was a size 34. I owned a few pair of pants in this size, as certain cuts at the GAP were less roomy than others. I was able to zip them and button them, but they still felt tighter than I would have liked. I knew I would pass out in them if I sat too long. With trembling hands I picked up the last pair. Before I put them on I slowly read the tag, which indicated the size and where the pants had been made. I felt like I had been punched in the gut when I realized that these were a size 36. I had never worn a 36 in my entire life. But, I didn't have time to try on every pair of size 34 pants in the GAP, so I pulled on the pants with a grimace. I was able to zip and button them, and even had room to tuck in a shirt if I wanted. I took them off and headed out of the dressing room with the pair in my hands. My mother looked at me as I handed her the size 36. "Sweetie, it's always best to buy pants slightly bigger than necessary. This way you don't have to worry about them shrinking in the wash. It's

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actually a sound investment; you'll be able to wear them for a long time without worrying about outgrowing them."

Her words of comfort did little to cheer me up.

True to her word, my mother got me home with just enough time to shower and change before I had to pick up Jane. I managed to find a blue dress shirt that wasn't too snug around my stomach, but the collar felt tight. Worrying that I might choke, I decided against a tie. When I headed downstairs my mother and father told me I looked great. I didn't believe them. I knew I was underdressed. This was going to be so embarrassing. I was the one who had planned the dance, surely I knew how people should dress and would dress.

My mother led me towards the car. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

I was confused. I had my camera, I had money, I had my cell phone, what more did I need? She handed me a small package. I was about to open it

"Wait, that's not for you. It's a corsage for Jane." I let out a sigh of relief. Of course, I had forgotten about a corsage for Jane. How would she have felt if I showed up empty handed while Monique, Lily, and Kayla pranced about with their expensive flowers as their parents exclaimed how thoughtful their dates were and how well the flowers complimented their dress.

When we reached Jane's house, I got out of the car and headed to her door. Before I rang the doorbell I wondered how Jane would feel about my outfit. Would she be ashamed that I was underdressed? Would she think that I considered her so insignificant that I didn't need to make an effort for her? I must have stood there a long

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time because my mother opened her window and called out, “You’ll never make it to Derek’s on time if you just stand there all night.”

She was, as usual, correct. I took a final deep breath for courage and rang the doorbell. Jane’s mother and father swooped down on me as they opened the door. She cooed, “You look darling. It’s so sweet of you to take Jane to the dance.”

Her father joined in a mock serious tone, “You better take good care of my baby. Don’t try any funny stuff.”

Jane, as she slowly descended the staircase let out a groan. “Daddy, stop the stupid jokes.”

I swallowed in awe as I noticed how beautiful Jane looked. She was wearing a red dress that was cut just low enough to be fashionable, but not too low to be tacky. The hem of the dress classily went down to her knees. She certainly was not the type to have a wardrobe malfunction as she exited the car. Her brunette hair, usually pulled back in a simple ponytail, hung about her head in a wavy halo. She chose the perfect shade of red lipstick to accentuate the color of her dress and her cheeks had just the right amount of color. She looked positively angelic and I was ashamed for her and myself that she was stuck with a schlub like me. I could barely get the words out to tell Jane how amazing she looked. But I think she understand what I meant and told me how thoughtful I was as she took the corsage from me hands. I acted completely natural when she opened the box and exclaimed with glee that I had picked out the perfect red roses. However did I know, she wondered, that her dress was that exact shade? I told her it was a lucky guess as Jane’s mother winked at me. She must have known that my mother had called her on my behalf

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to ensure that not only would Jane have a stunning corsage, but that it would also match her dress. I definitely owed my mom a thank you.

We posed for photos in front of the fireplace. Most of them were the typical cutesy arms around each other, or the sappy lean your head on his shoulder ilk. But we also took a few silly ones; with our tongues stuck out as we stuck up our middle fingers or gave the peace sign. As we took more pictures, I began to relax. Jane and I were the perfect match for this evening and nothing would or could go wrong. I was so fortunate to have a best friend like her in my life. I knew I didn't appreciate her as much as she deserved, and I was grateful that she stuck around anyway. Not many smart and pretty girls had the immense loyalty and huge heart that Jane possessed. She was a rare treasure, and tonight she was my rare treasure to show off to the world. When you had your arms around someone as stunning as Jane, you began to realize that it didn't matter how attractive or unattractive you were. Everyone's eyes would be drawn to her, and they would all be kicking themselves with jealousy.

As we headed out the door, my mother made us take pictures beside the car, even though it was freezing. Sometimes you just have to humor the elderly. She squealed with joy over beautiful Jane and kept going on about how wonderful we looked together. I cringed inwardly. Jane and I were more like brother and sister than lovers. I couldn't imagine being linked to her romantically, let alone what she would look like naked.

In the car Jane and I spoke as though it were any normal night. There was no nervous silence that sometimes accompanies bad dates or poor matches. We wondered aloud what would be in store for us at Derek's. I imagined Lily would wear something black and loose; her parents were not the type to allow her to dress in tight clothing.

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Monique would probably wear a champagne colored dress for the illusion of nudity. I pictured her dress ending mid thigh. She was the type of girl who knew she was attractive and liked it when the boys stared. It would be in character for her to flash a little something as she exited the car. Chances are she wasn't wearing any underwear. If she was, it would be frilly and see-through. Over the course of our friendship, I had become attracted to Monique. She was the ultimate femme fatale, and even if I would never be linked to her, I could fantasize about it. I dreamed of finding the courage to ask her out. It didn't matter that she was a preying mantis and would devour me when she was through. It would be an honor to be treated cruelly by her. But girls like Monique don't date guys like me. I wondered what Kayla would wear. Kayla was the type of girl I should date. But, Randy again had beaten me to the punch. There was something exotic about Kayla's raven hair and dark eyes. Her complexion was like that of a china doll. She had the intelligence and compassion of Jane without the familiarity. I could see her in a white dress, neither tight nor loose, but flowing just right. I hoped that I might cut in on a dance with her; she was so graceful.

Sitting in the car with Jane, as we made our way to Derek's, I began to feel more alive than I had in a while. I had worked hard to make this dance a success and I truly believed that the entire student body would appreciate it. I had approved the final lay out of the facility and knew that the staff would have filled the room with pink, white, and red balloons. Fresh flowers in elegant vases would serve as centerpieces. Each table would have Hershey kisses and other miniature chocolates sprinkled over the silky tablecloth. Even the beverages had been chosen with care. Tonight, I knew, would be magical.

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Memory 27

As I entered Derek's foyer, I felt out of place. Charlie, Derek, and Randy were clustered around the mock fireplace in the living room holding crystal champagne glasses filled with sparkling soda. I resented their happiness as they mugged for the camera. They resembled a reincarnation of the rat pack in their snazzy tuxes. They hadn't even noticed my absence. My sense of self worth plummeted to the floor when I noticed the marked difference to Jane's entrance. The girls rushed over towards her and cooed over her dress. They were giddy with adrenaline; I couldn't even fake feeling quite as alive.

I mingled with the girls before joining the others for pictures. I complimented their carefully chosen dresses; sure enough Monique was pushing the boundaries of good taste in a nude colored ensemble with a slit thigh and plunging neckline. Her tousled hair, which must have cost her an arm and a leg at some high fashion salon, screamed liberation and sex. She carried herself like a modern day Anne Boleyn, minus the oppressive husband. All the other girls were her maids in waiting and none could match her glory. Lily, on the other hand, was shy. Like I had predicted, she wore a reserved black dress that was suited far better for a funeral than a high school dance. Her hair was pulled back in a bun; she'd attempted to look retro-glam and failed, going too far back. I approached her, believing that she and I were kindred spirits this evening. I knew Jane wouldn't mind. It wasn't like we were promised to one another. "You must be excited for the dance?"

She tried to smile as she half-heartedly exclaimed, "I've been looking forward to it since it was announced."

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We both knew she was lying. Charlie wasn't the sort of guy that could appreciate Lily. We all knew he would neglect her all evening, trying to steal dances with the other guys' dates. I had an urge to punch him out. The least he could do was pretend to be happy to escort her.

Jane hollered at Lily and I to gather around the grand piano with the others for group pictures. I wondered what our grandchildren would say someday looking at these photos. Would they recognize Lily and I as mistaken guests, or would they laugh at Monique for pandering to the camera like some Playboy centerfold? I could imagine that Jane would be the only one to treasure the photos and share them with her grandchildren. They would probably be just as sensible as she was. Sure, they would feel for Lily and me, but what comfort was it in the moment to know that we wouldn't really be respected until a later date, by people we would likely never meet?

Apparently my thoughts were visible in my expression as Monique's mother screeched that I needed to smile more, or step out of the frame; she didn't want the photos to be spoiled. I could see my mother seething in the background. She had no patience for the likes of Monique's mother and would have happily punched out her shallow ass if it wouldn't have ruined the evening. The vision of Monique's mother laying on her ass with tears ruining her perfectly applied mascara, conjured the smile that she desired.

I watched as Derek, Monique, Kayla, Randy, and Charlie headed towards Monique's mother's Lexus. That left Jane, Lily, and me standing alone. My mother had volunteered to drive us to the dance, but she was taken aback that Charlie had abandoned his date. She started to protest that he join us, but Lily cut her off with a sweet whisper.

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“There will be plenty time for Charlie and me to be together once we get to the dance. I don’t need him in the car with me.”

My mother, God bless her soul, seemed to take Charlie’s slight personally and would have fought for Lily, but somehow she got the message. Our car would be a happier car without him sulking in the backseat.

As we headed toward the country club that our school had reserved for the evening, Jane, Lily, and I made fun of the others.

“Monique looked so slutty.”

“What about Derek and Charlie’s tuxes? Can you say stuffy?”

We suspected that they would be overdressed and out of place. This made me feel better about my own attire, as I knew I was underdressed.

Jane began to wonder about Kayla and Randy. “I can’t imagine them putting up with Derek and Monique’s nonsense much longer. Kayla, at least, seems sensible enough to cringe at the shallow, two-faced observations Monique and Derek are exchanging. She’ll probably get a headache from Charlie’s hyena-like laughter. But Randy has me confused. He must be blinded to Derek’s flaws by all the attention he is getting.”

Like me, I thought silently I wondered if he would wise up. Would we then form our own happier, more stable crew? As that thought crossed my mind I couldn’t help but mock myself. I would never allow myself to walk away from Derek, Monique, and Charlie. Even if they continued to treat me like a d-list celebrity for the rest of high school, barring me from certain parties and excluding me from selected jokes, I would stand there and take it with a shit-eating grin. Better to be mocked as a d-lister than to be some happy unknown.

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I was jarred from my thoughts by the valet opening the backseat door. We had reached the dance. I wasn't really sure what to expect. I had been to dances in middle school and they were very g-rated. The DJs weren't allowed to play any rap unless the songs were heavily censored and approved by our despotic vice principal. The girls and guys would stand at opposing walls, staring each other down, afraid to touch. The lights were turned all the way up, the whole dance, and parent chaperones strolled the floor, eagerly measuring the difference between the brave couples that took to the floor.

Thus imagine my shock when I entered the dance. The lights were turned down low so one could barely see without the aid of the flashing lights and the smoke machine. The dance floor was a cluster of bodies; it was nearly impossible to find space. And the dancing—I had never seen anything like it before. Bodies were grinding up and down, girls sandwiched between two males, girls practically dry-humping other girls as their dresses rose up barely covering their silky underwear. I recognized Jane's cousin in the mix and heard her scream "Hey guys, I have an open ass over her." I looked at Jane with her dropped jaw and couldn't help but break into laughter. Somehow conversation at the next family get together would be a little more scintillating.

Even the music was unfamiliar. Sure, I recognized all of my favorite songs from the radio. But I had never heard them in all their uncensored glory. There was something bizarre about hearing "ass" and "fuck" at a school-sponsored event.

I had been aware that teachers were chaperoning, I had been in charge of inviting them myself. What shocked me was their apathy. They didn't seem to care if two people practically had sex on the dance floor. They just stood around nursing diet coke and catching up. After Jane had an encounter with our English teacher, who hugged her

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tightly, kissed both of her cheeks, and squealed that Jane's shoes screamed, "Sex sex sex," I came to the conclusion that those diet cokes may have been laced with alcohol.

While Jane was recovering from being accosted and I took in the room, Derek, Monique, Charlie, and Randy had pushed their way to the center of the dance floor. Kayla seemed hesitant, but Randy grabbed her by the arm and tugged her through the crowd. Lily was pale and looked like she might faint. Somehow I suspected she had never even seen the movie *Dirty Dancing* or watched MTV on a regular basis. I did the first thing that came to mind. "Do you want something to drink?" I indicated a table off towards the left of the barely visible dance floor. After I made sure they were seated comfortably, I headed towards the "bar" and got three diet cokes. I sat between them and watched as they nursed their drinks. They didn't seem ready to hit the dance floor. Truth be told, I was a little nervous, too. I couldn't imagine grinding against anyone like that. Surely no one would actually be watching what we were doing, but at the same time I knew I would be extremely self-conscious.

After what seemed like hours, but had been in fact been only four songs, Charlie trotted towards the table. He was flushed with heat and dripping sweat. As he removed the tuxedo coat and loosened his bow tie he wondered, "Lily, why aren't you dancing?"

He seemed pissed that his date wasn't gutsy enough to join him. Luckily, Monique had been willing to share her front and back with Charlie and Derek, though she was a hot commodity and several guys had tried to cut in. I wanted to scream at Charlie to stop criticizing Lily. It wasn't like he had been an attentive date. He was only concerned about having a good time. "Charlie, don't worry about Lily. Jane and I will

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hang out with her. We'll meet you on the floor when we're ready." He seemed satisfied and shortly thereafter we lost sight of him in the massive throng of bodies.

I came up with an alternative. "Let's find a safety-zone between the dance floor and the tables; we'll dance there. Don't look at me like that. I'm not suggesting an Adam, Jane, Lily sandwich. We can move to the rhythm without our bodies touching." They looked at each other and seemed OK with the idea. After all, we enjoyed the music they were playing, and had paid a lot for our tickets. And wouldn't it be boring to sit on the chairs for another two hours while everyone else had a great time. It wasn't like we could make conversation over the noise of the throbbing techno beats.

Confidently, Jane strode from her chair towards the perimeter of the dance floor. She began to sway to music, her body twisting up, down, and around, as seductively as Britney Spears in her "Slave 4 U" video. I didn't know what to think. I had certainly never seen Jane release her inner sex kitten. Granted, the kitten still had a lot of maturing to do and wasn't quite as thirsty as the other members of her litters, but she was lithe and spirited nonetheless.

Lily turned to me with a mild expression of shock. Apparently she hadn't figured Jane could lose control if moved by the right beat. "Adam, I don't want to leave her out there, and she does look like she's having a great time, but I don't think I can do this."

I wasn't sure how to deal with Lily. I didn't think it would be right to leave her seated at the table by herself, watching everyone else pair up. Yet, Jane had invited me, and Jane did look like she wanted some company.

After a brief pause, Lily spoke again. "I'm not your date, Jane is. You owe her a good time."

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“You’re sure?”

Hesitantly, she decided, “If you lead me to Jane, I guess I can dance with you guys.”

I smiled at her encouragingly. “You won’t regret this. Now on the count of three, we’re getting up from these seats and joining Jane.” Lily took a deep breath and agreed. As I counted to three I couldn’t help but feel pleased with Lily’s trust in me.

Once we finally joined Jane at the perimeter, the dance went by too quickly. We lost ourselves in the music. Towards the end of the night Jane and I even tried what we would learn was called “freak dancing.” At first it was awkward as we were more like brother and sister than potential boyfriend and girlfriend. But then I reminded Jane that just because one danced with someone didn’t mean one was expressing an interest in him or her or promised to sleep with him or her. When we got that through our heads, we actually enjoyed ourselves. Lily was content to dance by herself and we respected that. Jane and I believed that Lily even getting over her fear of dancing at all was a huge victory, which deserved some sort of celebration.

When the last song played and the lights came on, Derek, Charlie, Monique, Randy, and Kayla found us. Kayla still looked a little unhappy, but the others seemed besotted with themselves. “ Monique, can you believe how we were the only freshmen who fought to the center of the crowd?”

“Derek, aren’t you jealous of all the upperclassman I ‘freaked’ with?”

Kayla was the only one to notice us. “Did you have a nice time?”

“We had a great time. We found a nice spot towards the edge of the floor and stayed there.”

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Charlie and Randy laughed. “You guys are such prudes.”

Kayla spoke above them. “It sounds like you had a really nice time. I’m jealous.”

Though she was dating Randy, it almost seemed that sometimes she was on the verge of suggesting that Randy was dating Derek, Charlie, Monique, and she was pulled into their vector by a force she couldn’t fight, but very much wished she could. I wondered what would happen to Kayla. She would have to crack with her misery, like I had, or she would have to find some sort of freedom. Though I had known Kayla a very short time, she struck me as a stronger individual than me. I had a vision of her dumping Randy and becoming strong friends with Jane. They had so much more in common than she had with Monique.

Monique interrupted my thoughts. “Don’t forget about the post-party at my house.”

“How could we?”

“Hold on a second, Adam. Lily forgot her overnight bag. We’ll have to pick it up.” I knew this was not the case. Lily almost blurted out that she had done no such thing, but then she seemed to understand Jane had something planned and that it would be in our best interest to let it play out.

Monique looked at Lily like she was an idiot and began to berate her. I couldn’t stand the pathetic scolded puppy-dog expression on Lily’s face, “Crap, I forgot my pajamas.” Derek looked exasperated.

“I’m so embarrassed. I have been stressed with planning the dance. Forgive me?”
Whatever Jane had in store for us had better be good.

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When we got in the car I looked to Jane for an explanation. “I couldn’t take another moment of Monique’s gloating. I need a break before we spend a whole night dealing with them.”

Lily was confused. “But they’re our friends and we saw so little of them at the dance. They are still our friends, right?”

I was not going to let Jane speak too forthrightly. “Why wouldn’t they be? But there isn’t anything wrong with the three of us going for ice cream by ourselves before heading to Monique’s.”

The crisis was averted for the moment. Jane glared from the front seat; I could tell she felt manipulated by my underhanded Derek-like manipulations. Maybe she really did want a clean break from the others. I would have to keep her from that course for as long as possible. There was no way that I could handle the torment of a break between Jane and the others. I would be torn between the two groups and constantly stress over where my loyalties lay and how my actions were being interpreted. I was already too much of a head-case for things to proceed in that direction.

Memory 28

When we arrived at Monique’s house she gave us a dirty look. “How could you be late? It’s like refusing an audience with the Queen of England; you just don’t do it. Period.”

Lily was uneasy, “I am so, so sorry. I don’t know where my head was.”

Jane just muttered under her breath.

Derek, Randy, Charlie, and Kayla were sitting on a black leather couch in front of Monique’s 60 inch TV. Freddy Kruger was on the screen chasing Nancy around her

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bedroom. Kayla looked petrified while the others were just bored. When Kayla noticed our arrival she walked over to us with a look of relief. “Can we please do something that doesn’t involve bloodshed?”

Monique would have none of it. “Scary movies are in the co-ed sleepover handbook. Just shut up and enjoy.”

Defeated, Kayla walked back to the couch and snuggled closer to Randy. How comforting it must be to have someone to hold you tight when you can’t handle what appears on the screen.

Derek and Monique were not content to watch the movie silently. They practically overshadowed the dialogue as they relived whom they had danced with and how hot they looked. I glanced at Jane. She was doing very little to hide her annoyance. Finally, Monique looked in Jane’s direction. “Is there somewhere else you would rather be?”

I silently telegraphed to Jane that she better be cool. Thankfully, she caught my drift and just yawned. Typically, Monique would have interpreted Jane’s sleepy state as an insult—some sort of dig at Monique’s inability to keep her riveted—but this evening Monique just scolded, “If you’re so damn tired, go to sleep.”

Jane happily left the room. She had probably pre-planned this performance and packed a book in her duffle. With Jane out of the room, I was able to relax. Slowly, *A Nightmare on Elmstreet* gave way to *Friday The 13th*. Kayla, Charlie, and Randy must have lost patience with the foolishly horny counselors and decided to hit the hay. Alone with Monique and Derek, I wondered what would happen next.

Derek put on a pitiful act. “Why did you avoid me at the dance? I was hurt.”

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“Jane was my date; I had to stick with her.”

Monique smiled triumphantly. She had been suspicious about Jane’s loyalty and now had hard evidence that she didn’t want to spend time with her. Quickly, I had to find a way to cover for Jane. “I also had to take care of Lily. She was terrified of ‘freak dancing.’”

Monique let out a sultry laugh at Lily’s prudery. “I wish all the boys were as sweet as you. Derek, why can’t you be more like Adam? Is it so difficult to be attentive when a pretty girl bats her eyelashes.”

What the hell was Monique doing? Was she trying to make Derek even angrier with me? Was everything a game for her? Derek, however, chose not to be needled by Monique. He let out a yawn and declared it was time for bed. I followed. I had done enough trailblazing for one night and now I had to return to my true persona—the supplicating follower.

Memory 29

My throat was parched; I needed a glass of water. Quietly, I exited my sleeping bag. Before I left the room I noticed something odd. There should have been three bodies still on the ground. Instead there were two. One of the bags was empty. Someone else was awake. Maybe whoever it was could be found in the kitchen. Perhaps they too were having trouble sleeping. Hopefully, it was Derek. We could bond one on one for a few moments. Maybe the remaining potholes could be filled. As I headed down the dark hallway to the kitchen, I noticed a sliver of light from Monique’s room. I still hold that what happened next was a result of my naivety; it was no calculated move. It occurred to my sleep-addled mind that Derek and Monique might both be awake, chatting casually. I

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was sure they wouldn't mind if I joined them. Looking back, I should have knocked. But, like I said, I was still half-asleep. So I opened the door and started to ask what was going on. The answer, of course, was already taking shape before my eyes. Monique was kneeling on the ground, her head bobbing up and down between someone's legs. That someone, in his moments of pleasure, happened to look in my direction. Randy and I made eye contact. Instantly, there was a look of horror in his eyes which I am sure was parroted in mine. I stuttered that I was sorry and almost slammed the door.

Like a zombie I stumbled towards the kitchen. Returning to sleep was the last thing on my mind. Images of Randy and Monique, then Randy and Kayla, then Kayla punching out Randy and sobbing hysterically appeared before my eyes. I couldn't picture this ending well. What was my role in this triangle? Was it even a triangle even more? Didn't my sheer knowledge of the act make it a quadrangle? Was it a square? No it couldn't have been a square because we didn't all have roles of equal magnitude. Such were the inanities flashing through my brain.

And what responsibility did I have? Did I have to tell Kayla? Could I stand Randy and Kayla both being mad at me? Would Kayla even believe me? What about Monique? With one word she could destroy me. Did I want to bring that wrath down?

As I sat in the kitchen attempting to piece the puzzle together, Monique appeared. I didn't know what to say to her. The lady in question was not at a loss for words. "You didn't imagine what you saw. It was a stupid mistake. Randy feels like a total shit and I guess I am a little ashamed." I figured she was ashamed at being caught, not what she did, but I wasn't about to go there. "So what are you going to do now, Adam?"

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“Monique, it’s four in the morning. How can I possibly make a decision right now?”

Monique stepped closer to me and put her hand on my shoulder. “This will be costly for all of us if it gets out. I’ll be the villain and I don’t want to go around school wearing a scarlet letter. I don’t have the strength for that.”

Bull shit, I wanted to tell her. Monique loved attention and she would eat up the role of the fallen woman. She would probably suggest that she needed a good man to redeem her and candidates would line around the block to fill her need. However, I didn’t feel like getting slapped by Monique, or evicted from her house. So I kept my mouth shut as she continued.

“If you don’t give a damn about me, think about Kayla. Kayla is disgustingly sweet and sees the good in everyone. It would shatter her world if she discovered Randy cheated. Can you handle souring mankind for Kayla at fifteen? Do you want her to be a lesbian? Think of how difficult life would be for her. And stupid Randy, who couldn’t keep it in his pants, what becomes of him? All the guys will think he’s a stud for getting with me, but they’ll think he’s a dipshit for getting caught. No girl would ever date him again because he’ll have a reputation as a cheating bastard. He’ll be lonely and turn to a life of hard drugs and die young, unloved and quickly forgotten. What about you, Adam? No one likes an identified gossip. You’ll never be trusted again; they’ll call you Judas.”

Monique knew my deep fears and she was playing them well. Then in a seductive whisper she suggested what she could do for me. “If you keep my dirty little secret, I’ll make sure Derek appreciates you. I know you aren’t happy and how hard you are

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working for his approval. It must be exhausting. No one likes to be at the bottom, do they?"

"How do you plan to do that, Monique?"

"I'm the one with the real power. Derek may be the top dog, but he forgets I am woman. He's putty in my hands. I'll just tell him about what happened tonight and emphasize how you kept my secret. Derek will be impressed and see you in a new light. Randy and Charlie will have nothing on you. I'm your Fairy godmother, poof you're back to where you were before Derek's party. Come Monday, you'll be a superstar. Isn't that what you've always wanted, Adam? To be a superstar?"

I was troubled by Monique's promises. Yes, I could have everything I desired, but how long would it last? Popularity is a fickle thing. The stain on my conscience from withholding the truth about Monique and Randy would probably last far longer than the benefits from my treachery. On the other hand, I had made my major goof with Derek earlier this year and learned my difficult lesson. Surely, I would never piss him off again. We would be best friends throughout high school and maybe even go to the same college. We could be roommates and then rush the same fraternity. He could be the best man at my wedding and maybe we could take trips with our wives and children once a year during the holidays. Not many people could say they had lasting friendships like this. All these benefits from one little lie. And really it wasn't a lie. It's not like Kayla asked me pointblank if I saw Monique sucking off Randy. I would just be withholding information to protect someone, in this case several individuals. Didn't people make entire careers out of withholding information to help out others? It's not like I would go to hell if I kept my big mouth shut. Hadn't my mother always said, "Do unto others as you would they do

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unto you?" If I was in a relationship and made the decision to cheat on my girl, I would do anything to prevent her from hearing the awful truth. Besides, who hasn't heard the saying "bros before hoes?" If Kayla ever learned about Randy's infidelity, it wouldn't be from me.

Memory 30

I didn't have long to be troubled about Kayla and Randy before another crisis needed my attention. It seemed like my high school career was going to be less about traveling from test to test, and more about leaping from drama to drama without getting caught in the line of fire. Shortly after Derek apologized to me and made me his second in command, constantly asking my opinion on everything from fashion to girls to weekend plans, Randy dumped Kayla. Later that afternoon, he asked Monique out. She agreed to date him. Kayla was heartbroken. She had assumed that Randy wasn't serious about the breakup and that they would be back together by lunchtime. Kayla needed a friend to step up, and given my new position, it sure is hell wasn't going to be me. Jane decided to be there for Kayla, finding an outlet for her frustration with our group of friends.

When I was on the phone with Derek, Jane would beep in. When I was on the phone with Jane, Derek would beep in. It was nerve racking as they were diametrically opposed and it was hard sometimes to remember where I was supposed to be on certain issues. Somehow, I managed to survive and continue to do my schoolwork. Because I was happier, my grades were improving, and my parents and teachers were noticing. Dr. Johansen was also pleased with my progress. I never told him what I had done to improve my social standing, because I doubted that he would approve. Instead, I made up some

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story about finally having the courage to tell Derek how I felt and his complete, and unexpected understanding. You would think a PhD would have a better bullshit detector. I was beginning to wonder if I needed my pills, and was less compliant about taking them. What harm could there be if I missed a morning dose a couple of times a week?

Simultaneously, I was using my new power for good. Sensing that Monique was going to need a new lady-in-waiting, I introduced her to Krissy, a member of the drama club who had a killer body but was socially retarded.

Thankfully, Jane found a new friend in Ken. He was passionate about changing the world and had a great sense of humor. He had very little patience for our classmates. He found them vapid. I was hurt by how much attention Jane was giving Ken. I found it increasingly common for her to sit with him at lunch because “our table was too crowded.” On the weekends, when we would all get together, Jane would make some excuse about Ken wanting to see a different movie, or Ken needing to go to the mall to get a birthday present for his sister.

One afternoon I called Jane on her new obsession with Ken. It wasn't a pretty scene. “All year you've been Derek and Monique's bitch. The few times we hang out by ourselves, you're distant. You're probably thinking about Derek and what he's doing. I can't stand when Monique is cruel to Kayla and Lily and you just laugh instead of defending them.”

I threw that back in Jane's face. “Where were they when Derek was making fun of me? Did they stand up and tell him to knock it off? No, they didn't. They were too timid to do anything like that. If Monique finds them flavorless and weak, that's not my problem.”

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“I can’t believe my ears. Did I call Derek by mistake?”

She thought I was a clone. That was painful. Jane was the one person who knew me better than I knew myself, or so I used to believe. It was becoming increasingly difficult to remember that when our conversations often degraded into shouting matches. I wasn’t sure where this was going. In marriages, I knew that if the relationship turned out to be this messy, it ended in divorce. Somehow, as caught in my life with Derek and Monique, I couldn’t imagine divorcing Jane. On the other hand, the more time I spent as Derek’s second in command, the harder I found it to believe that I could give him up either.

It’s a testament to Jane that she made things easier as the school year headed towards its inevitable end. Jane was still friendly with Monique and the others, but she and Kayla were drifting away to spend more time with Ken. Initially this was good for the group dynamic. It was awkward when Monique and Randy were lovey-dovey in front of Kayla. She was bitter about that, but she wasn’t willing to speak it out aloud. That bitterness, I imagine, had the potential to destroy her. I was jealous of Kayla. How was it that she hadn’t broken down like I had? It’s not like she was better than me. I wanted to ask her what got her through the day, but I didn’t have the balls. Part of me didn’t want to admit that she had a right to be angry with Monique and Randy, because I knew what that could lead to if I thought too hard about it.

I tried really hard to keep the two groups together. I would beg Jane to join us, reminding her how close we were and that we couldn’t let that relationship fail. She would consent every now and then, but could all sense she wasn’t having a good time. It was the same with Kayla. Ken, unless I was in charge, never got an invitation to hang out

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with us. I think that was really what made Jane want to take her final step to solidify her distance from the others. At the time, I didn't realize that she was shaping her exit strategy. I want to believe she could have talked to me about it and that I might have been able to sway her from taking action, but on reflection I know that I wasn't really hearing Jane anymore in the way that she deserved to be heard.

Part of me probably sensed that Jane was a big girl and could handle herself. She was smart enough that she wouldn't completely burn her bridges in some dramatic fashion, but that she was willing to make it known that things couldn't be the same for her again. I could juggle both factions with one hand tied behind my back. I just wish that it wasn't a skill I had to learn.

Memory 31

One evening towards the end of the school year as I was working on a final project for my history class, Derek telephoned. As he started to speak, I listened half-heartedly. After all, a phone call from Derek tended to follow a certain format which I had now memorized. He'd start off by bitching about our teachers and the amount of homework they gave. It never occurred to him that if he spent less time on the phone complaining about the homework, and more time actually doing it, it wouldn't be such an issue. Besides, it wasn't like he actually did his homework. He would depend on me to offer him a glimpse of my answers in the morning, so he could copy them down. Jane had witnessed this transaction many times, and it irked her to no end. But, by that time, Jane and her endless list of things about Derek that bothered her became something I could tune out as well.

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Derek would then continue about some perceived slight from a fellow student. Sometimes, they would be a member of our group of friends, oftentimes they would be a random classmate. Most recently, he would bitch about Randy. He seemed to think that Randy was dating Monique in an attempt to overthrow him. Try as I might, I couldn't convince Derek that Randy actually was into Monique and that social climbing had nothing to do with their relationship. However, a part of me understood how easy it was to give into paranoia, as I had a lot of experience believing that a look in my direction, or an overheard snatch of conversation or a giggle, was about me. I began to think that our paranoia was a link between us, and felt better about myself for Derek's anxieties.

Thinking back on it now, Derek never really asked me about my day. I didn't care at the time because I thought a) that he was experiencing my day with me, so there really weren't any mysteries and b) I was lucky enough to be privy to Derek's inner world. Who cared if he didn't want to be privy to mine?

The phone call that evening, though, deviated from its normal course. "I'm planning a pool party to celebrate the beginning of summer. But I'm not inviting Ken. He's a freak."

"Derek, he's new. We don't know him well enough."

"Everyone knows you don't associate with new kids." It occurred to me that at the beginning of the school year we were all new kids, too, and by that logic no one should ever associate with anybody else, but again Derek would find a way to tear that apart and it would just be a waste of time. I begged Derek to reconsider. "If Ken isn't invited, Jane won't come." I also knew Jane would be pissed at me because I hadn't

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fought for Ken to be included. Derek thought about it for a few minutes. Then he changed his mind. Ken would be allowed to come to the pool party.

I imagined it would serve as a social barometer for our summer. The people there would have Derek's seal of approval and be included in all our summer plans. Those missing would be outsiders. While it wouldn't be explicit that you couldn't spend time with them, it was implied that you would have to do it on your own time and that it wouldn't make you look like a better person. I knew Jane's fringe group, Ken and Kayla, would be included, but I couldn't prevent myself from thinking that trouble was going to rear its ugly head.

Memory 32

The day of the pool party arrived. The weather was perfect; 80 degrees and sunny. Derek's pool was Olympic sized. He had a diving board and a hot tub, both of which I was eager to try out. His mother had put out three round tables with umbrellas in the middle. For those who didn't wish to swim, it was a great place to sit in the shade and talk. Snacks were laid out on the table. I knew there was no danger of them running out as Monique and I had accompanied Derek to Costco to pick out the supplies for the party. When we were at the store, Derek's mother seemed to have an anything goes mentality. Derek would just throw bags of Starburst and Lays Potato Chips in the cart and she wouldn't make a sound.

Derek had set up a speaker system outdoors so we could blast music. As the songs played, the technology was so advanced, that I felt as though I were at a concert.

Krissy and Beth were the first to show up. They both wore the same pink two-piece bikini, which led me to believe that they had gone shopping together to pick out

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their attire for the party. I could imagine them vivacious and noisy as they ran through the mall, modeling swimsuits for each other. I wondered if each girl was critical of the other as they stood in their intended bikini. Did they make suggestions about which suits flattered their butts and hid their baby fat? Would that have led them to choose the same suit in different sizes?

Randy and Monique showed up together. She had on designer sun glasses and a black bikini and strode several feet in front of Randy as he struggled to carry a pink inner tube that Monique would use for floating in the pool, her towel, and a massive red tote filled with fashion magazines and sunscreen. The boy was whipped. He set the items down by a table and let out a huge breath as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

Lily was the next to arrive. She was in blue jeans and a white tee-shirt, carrying a small tote. Monique looked at her with disdain, “Did you forget this is a pool party?” Instead of replying, Lily quickly removed her jeans and shirt and stood before us in a silver two piece. All of us looked at her agog. Who knew she had such a flat stomach and lean legs?

Ever since the dance, Lily had subtly come out of her shell. Maybe she was finally comfortable with all of us, or it was just a natural consequence of maturing. But she laughed more, flirted more, and took more risks. I was proud of how far she had come, thinking that I understood what it was like to become increasingly comfortable with yourself. I was such a fool at the time. Neither Lily nor I were becoming comfortable with ourselves. We took cues from Monique and Derek and shut off the inner voices that told us to be on guard. It was pathetic really, and I look back at that period in shame. I couldn't say if Lily felt the same way.

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Jane, Kayla, and Ken were the last to show up. I wasn't surprised they had arrived together. Kayla wouldn't have been comfortable arriving by herself, thinking that there was an unspoken competition between herself and Monique. Ken wouldn't have dared to show up alone either. He would have been clueless about how to break the ice with the others if Jane wasn't in the vicinity.

Jane and Kayla headed for one of the tables while Ken removed his shirt and jumped into the pool. Derek and Charlie looked at each other and began to laugh. Poor Ken had a serious case of the moobs... male boobs. When he had jumped in, his belly had jiggled like Santa Claus at a vacation resort. I knew I was no Charles Atlas, but I took comfort in knowing that I was trimmer than Ken. As Derek and Charlie continued to laugh, Jane glared at me. It was like she wanted me to control them. I was incapable of such a thing, and we both knew it.

Ken rushed out of the pool and put his shirt on. If he could have, I am certain he would have cried. For the rest of the party he sat with Jane and Kayla. They were nice to stick with him in protest, even though the pool looked inviting.

Occasionally, Derek would venture over to Ken with a plate of food in his hand, and offer Ken something to eat. Ken always refused. At one point I caught Derek sit down right next to Ken and slowly devour a huge piece of cake. As he nibbled on the cake, Derek took a page out of *When Harry Met Sally*. I half expected Monique or Charlie to be in on the joke and say, "I'll have what he's having." It was cruel, and I knew it, but at the same time it felt good knowing that I wasn't the weakest link.

Then Monique came over with a disposable camera. "Derek, could you be a dear and take a picture of me and Ken?"

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“You should probably sit on his lap. Otherwise he won’t fit in the shot.” This little scene, I sensed, had to have been rehearsed. Before Derek could take the photo, Jane stepped in front of the shot. The flash went off and disaster had been momentarily averted.

Monique angrily informed Jane, “You ruined the picture.”

Jane wasn’t listening. “Derek, give me the camera.” I froze as I watched the showdown. Even if I had wanted to intervene, I couldn’t have. I felt trapped in a block of ice. It was no longer 80 and sunny.

“I can’t give you the camera, Jane, until I get the picture of Monique and Ken.”

“Don’t worry about that, Derek. I have a lot of experience with cameras; I’ll take the perfect picture.”

“There’s no way in hell I’m giving you the camera.” Before I could figure out what she was doing, Jane lunged for the camera, jogged to the diving board, and jumped into the pool with it in her hand. My jaw dropped and my heart stopped. Jane had always been on the verge of insurrection, but she had always straddled the line drawn in the sand instead of crossing it. This time, it was like she squatted and pissed on it until it disappeared.

Jane slowly climbed out of the pool, perhaps as slowly as Derek had eaten the cake in front of Ken. Her hands were empty. She looked at Monique and Derek, paused, and then told them, “You’ll have great photos of the bottom of the pool when the film is developed.”

Derek and Monique’s cheeks were flushed with rage. “Get lost and take your fat freak with you.”

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Jane packed up her things quickly, “I don’t know any fat freaks, but I know a few people with fat heads. I wouldn’t invite them home with me life depended on it.”

I ran up to Jane. “Do you know what you’ve done?”

Jane shook her head. “I don’t want to discuss it now. Go back to the party with those trained animals you call your friends. Maybe you’ll learn a few more tricks, since you’ve already mastered the ability to stick your head up your ass.”

I was exhausted. I didn’t want to fight with Jane. I headed back to the party and sat down near Derek, Charlie, and Monique. Randy was rubbing Monique’s back, “I’ll leave the party right now and buy you a brand new camera, baby.”

“Don’t be an idiot.”

Lily was clustered at another table with Krissy and Beth. I felt a little bit better about myself taking that sight in. I assumed that Lily had a fairly strong moral compass, and that if Jane had been right in her reaction, she would have marched out the gate right behind her, nearly treading on her heels. Lily, however, had done no such thing. She had kept quiet during the whole fiasco and had only now regained the power of speech. She looked at Beth, “Jane always seemed so level-headed. She has been nothing but kind to me, but now I think she’s changing and I don’t like it. She needs to get over herself; she can’t save the world.” I was stunned. Hadn’t Lily been the one who told Jane and me she would be there for us always? Wasn’t she the one that Jane had watched over at the Sadie Hawkins Dance? What kind of loyalty was Lily showing? But who was I to judge? Jane and I had been friends much longer, and Jane had done more for me than I could possibly imagine. And through my refusal to defend her and inability to accept her action, I was more of a traitor than Lily.

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Memory 33

As I walked home by myself, I decided I needed to square things with Jane. I had to know where I stood, where we stood. I headed towards her house and knocked on the door. Jane's mother looked surprised to see me. "Why aren't you at the pool party with Jane?" Apparently Jane had not come yet. She was stewing with rage somewhere, and I was clearly not welcome.

"Could you have her call me when comes home?"

"Not a problem." Of course she didn't think it would be a problem, she didn't have a clue about what had just transpired. If she had noticed any changes in our relationship over the last few weeks, she was playing dumb. Either way, I was thankful for it. I don't think I could have handled Jane's mother silently condemning me.

I wanted to call Dr. Johansen and ask him what he thought about my trouble with Jane. I hoped that maybe he could shed some light on the subject. If I had done wrong, I would atone. But, from past sessions with the Dr., I knew that he wouldn't tell me what to do. He might make the casual suggestion about how I could improve my communications with others, but that wasn't really his job. His job was to see how my medication was impacting me, and note any changes in my mood.

I could have asked my mother for advice as we sat at the dinner table over spaghetti, but I had an inkling of what she would say. She was pro-Jane all the time. She never cared for Derek or the others, and blamed them for both my depression and personality changes.

I had to digest my feelings about Ken. I didn't know him very well and yet I found myself resenting him. He had taken Jane's attention away from me and the others.

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If it hadn't been for Ken, she would never had made such a big stink at the party today. When I hung out with Ken in the company of the others, it was easy to see that he was dull as dirt. Why risk everything for him?

Eventually, Jane did call me. Mostly, she spewed acid at me. "You need to think about things from Ken's point of view. I know you have body issues and I know you would have been devastated if you had been treated like he was today." She was right, if Ken hadn't been there I would probably have been branded the fat ass and I would have sat in the shade with my shirt on, fantasizing about the day I would be skinny enough to swim in front of others without shame.

"It won't be long before Derek and the others do something to hurt you. Do you want anyone left on your team? Did we see the same thing today? It's pretty clear no one will ever stand up for you."

"Your point is irrelevant. None of the others like Ken, but they are close to me." I also thought smugly to myself about Monique's guarantee that my silence about her hook up with Randy would keep me in favor with the others. I couldn't tell Jane that, however, because she would tell Kayla about the hook up, and everything would blow up in my face. Furthermore, Jane was already losing respect for me. If she knew that I had gone against my conscience to increase my popularity, she would be horrified.

"Please, Jane, just apologize to Monique and Derek. It will be easy."

"Why? They're shitty human beings not worth my time. I saw what they did to you earlier this year and I'm still recovering from it. Maybe you're happy again, but it's for all the wrong reasons. Well, Adam, open your eyes. There is someone around you who is floundering. His name is Ken."

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“I knew you were grooming him to replace me.”

“Can’t you ever think of anything besides where you stand in a hierarchy? For the record, Ken will never mean as much to me as you do, but I can’t watch his agony. I need to protect him from Derek.”

“You’re trying to destroy our relationship.”

“Quit being so dramatic. I’m also keeping an eye on you.”

Memory 34

What happened next wasn’t entirely my fault. It is unreasonable to demand that a fifteen year old be capable of foreseeing how petty his peers can be. Life, unfortunately, passes without considering what is reasonable or not.

I thought it would be nice to have Monique, Derek, and Charlie over to watch a movie. While Lily, Beth and Randy and the others would have been a nice addition, the truth is that Monique, Derek, Charlie, and I were the hub of this social order and oftentimes found it easier to leave out the others. I stress that it wasn’t malicious. At least it wasn’t intended to be malicious.

Monique and the others agreed to come over around nine o’clock. Once Monique finally arrived at nine-thirty, as she was perpetually inclined to be fashionably late, I put my case of DVDs on the kitchen table. My collection was fairly inclusive and up to date, yet none of us could agree on a film. When I say none of us, I really mean that Derek was being a pain in the ass. Charlie, the occasional diplomat, suggested Blockbuster. When he said Blockbuster, something clicked. This was where I made my fatal error. “Blockbuster sounds great, but let’s go to the one near the ice cream parlor.”

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Derek whined, “Why do we have to go out of our way when there’s a Blockbuster half a mile from your house?”

Monique chimed in, “I’m on a diet that excludes ice cream. It would totally unfair for you guys to eat it in front of me.”

Charlie added, “I’m not in the mood for ice cream, either.”

Derek decreed, “It’s settled. We’re going to the Blockbuster half a mile from here.” This was the Blockbuster where Ken and Jane worked.

Maybe I was being silly in wanting to go out of my way to avoid Jane. It wasn’t like we had drawn some barrier between us with permanent marker. We didn’t end our conversation declaring never to speak again. If anything, we had settled on reflection and space. Surely I was mature enough to be in the same store as Jane without causing a scene?

When we got to Blockbuster, Jane was working the register. She was in the middle of a transaction with a portly father of four little girls who were all screaming that it wasn’t fair that they could only rent one movie. Clearly, Jane didn’t have the time to be distracted by me. Suddenly, Monique spotted Ken and made a face. Derek asked, “Why didn’t you bother to mention that the fattest kid in school worked here?”

In the back of mind I heard Jane berating me for allowing Derek to pick on Ken, and I couldn’t keep myself from stuttering, “I didn’t think it mattered?” Charlie giggled at the way my assertion turned into a question with the slight raise in my voice. Monique glared at him and he stopped abruptly. Monique exchanged a look with Derek; something passed between them that portended misfortune for some schlub and gleeful, free, entertainment for them. I hoped it wasn’t me. Monique ran her manicured nails through

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her straightened brown hair and teasingly suggested, “Let’s help Ken learn the lay out of the store. He can use all the exercise he can get.” A shiver ran down my spine.

Charlie snickered. “Yeah, because getting exercise on his own just isn’t a priority for Ken.” Great, I thought to myself, Charlie has decided that he needs to put on a show this evening. Derek squared his shoulders and deadpanned, “We will make him burn off a few calories tonight.”

Poor Ken chose that exact time to approach us. I tried to imagine what he was thinking. Part of him desperately sought our approval, no matter how low he had to debase himself. The other part of him despised us and would rather get fired than be forced to assist us. As he paused before us, I considered his likely actions, or at least his likely actions if this was a film and I had written the script. He would be obsequious and greet us with a hardy hello asking if we were familiar with the new releases, or if there was any particular movie he could help us find. More likely, he would hold his head up high and tell us to get the hell out of the store, because Blockbuster has a policy about underage attempts to rent R rated movies, and that we were trying to rent *Striptease*.

The scenario didn’t play out quite as I envisioned it. Ken cautiously asked, “Is there anything I can help you find?” He looked at his shoes as he waited for our response. Monique was the first to speak up. In a sweet voice she told Ken, “My cousin is visiting and I want to get her this animated movie about a pig named Wilbur and a talking spider, but I can’t remember the title.”

Ken said, “Oh you want *Charlotte’s Web*. It’s in the kid’s section. I’ll take you there.” After he pulled the video off the shelf he asked, “Do you guys need anything else?” Charlie remembered, “I heard rave reviews about this movie where some fat guy

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runs over a gypsy and then is cursed and starts losing tons and tons of weight, no matter how much he stuffs his face. Do you know the title, Ken? Could you show us where to find it?” Poor Ken was oblivious to the game being played.

“Yeah, it was based on a Stephen King novel called *Thinner*.”

Monique put on her big fake smile and asked, “Is there a special section for movies based on books?”

Ken laughed, not knowing the joke was on him. “No there isn’t. It would be in the horror section.”

Derek asked, “Ken, my man, could you walk us there?” We all knew where it could be found; it was on the opposite side of the store. After all, the owners wouldn’t want kids to go looking for Scooby Doo and end up with Cujo. Ken smiled and led the way.

There is no need to flesh out the entire episode; it not only makes Ken look like a fool, but it also makes me look pathetic. By the time the others were through with him, they had about ten DVDs with pigs in them, or about fat people. Ken finally caught on and began to blush. He led us towards the counter, where Jane was on duty, and gave her the DVDs. Jane rang them up and asked for our Blockbuster card. Derek, Charlie, and Monique gave each other mortified looks. “Jane, Baby,” Derek started, “I don’t know how to tell you this, but Monique forgot her purse. She thinks she left her card in a pocket on the seat of her bike. Can we go look for it while Adam stays in line?” Jane gritted her teeth as she acknowledged the formation of a line of customers.

A few minutes passed and angry voices collected. “I’m sorry, but only one register is open and it’s difficult to cancel a transaction.”

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That was when my cell phone rang. Jane looked at me. “They aren’t coming back, are they?”

“I, uh, guess not?”

“Great. Ken will have to put all those DVDs away by himself.”

“Isn’t there another stockperson?”

“Do you see one?” Ken had joined us at the counter by then; both of them looked irritated and embarrassed. I wanted to say something apologetic, but everything I thought of seemed insincere.

As I walked out the door, I noticed Ken walking back with the DVDs. He must have been upset or nervous because he tripped and they all went flying as he landed hard on his ass. I saw the tears pool at his eyes and wasn’t sure if they were of sorrow or anger. Either way, I had let down Jane and Ken. It made me sick to think Jane would determine that I was the only one who had known about her new job and had suggested this cruel trick as a way to make her pay for the things she had said about my relationship with Derek and the others. Even if I tried to tell her the whole story, about how I desperately didn’t want to come to her Blockbuster and had done everything in my power to keep Derek and the others away without arousing suspicion, she would just tune me out. Though Derek, Monique and Charlie had improvised this new way of tormenting Ken, it was pulled off so flawlessly that to Jane it would most certainly appear that Adam, the new Benedict Arnold, had colluded in this mess.

But how could I have colluded? I never said, “Omg you guys it would be totally funny if we made Ken find all these movies with pigs or fat people in them and then totally didn’t get them and he had to put them all away.” But I also hadn’t said,

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”You know what Ken, we can find what we’re looking for on our own because we just came in here to find a movie and we really have no idea what we want to rent.” As the game progressed I could have even said, “Ok guys, this is enough. Let Ken get back to work before he gets in trouble with his boss.” It’s incredibly easy to think of all the words that might be said to ameliorate a situation after the fact, but it is also incredibly useless.

As we gathered at our bikes I looked at Derek, Monique, and Charlie, and thought to myself the twisted dream world, which I currently embraced, would never allow an evening to pass without some sort of drama at the expense of another. I suddenly just wanted to sleep. “We’ve wasted too much time to go back to my house and start a movie now. Feel free to hang out elsewhere without me.” I anticipated some sort of argument from Derek, but Charlie spoke before he could. “I’m pretty beat. Maybe tonight wasn’t a good idea.”

Monique agreed, “I didn’t sleep well last night. I can’t afford to miss two nights of beauty sleep.”

Derek looked at us with contempt, but considered that it was better to allow this minor mutiny than to attempt to lead a crew of zero. We parted ways and I briefly wished there was a way that we could make this parting of ways permanent. But, I was already telling myself that the harm we had done was insignificant. I was hooked on the high and knew that withdrawal from the others would be a lonely, uphill battle. Yes, rehab existed for sex addiction and alcohol addiction, but I don’t think there is a Betty Ford Center for attention addicts.

I lay in bed for a couple of hours reading, but while Jodi Picoult’s words were riveting, I couldn’t keep my muddled thoughts from blocking out her novel. When the

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clock struck midnight, I turned on my laptop. I signed on to instant messenger, hoping that I could catch either Jane or Ken. Jane was on, but before I could IM her, she had put up her away message. It read simply, "Someone knows what he did; someone should look for comfort elsewhere because I am not going to placate him." Ken was still signed on. I began an IM. "Ken, I am really sorry about tonight." I hit send. I waited a few moments. Ken responded, "Not as sorry as I am."

I typed, "You have every reason to hate me," and hit send. Ken immediately responded, "I don't hate you, but I am not your biggest fan right now. For someone so smart, you can be amazingly stupid."

I stared at the screen dumbfounded. Ken was calling me stupid? He was the one who couldn't see when he was the target of a vicious joke. Maybe I made poor decisions, but I recognized the fact and worked to prevent myself from repeating them. That, in my opinion, does not equal stupid. I was about to throw something at my laptop when I remembered that breaking it wouldn't harm Ken. So I just signed off in a huff.

Yesterday, Jane and I had come to the conclusion that we needed some sort of space; that we each had to reflect on our relationship and how that relationship would affect our other relationships. In less than twenty-four hours that space was invaded. Something had to be done to mend things, but someone had to be the bigger person to start that process. Jane, obviously, was too enraged to think clearly and was incapable of being the bigger person. Likewise, my anger at Ken, which was really misdirected anger at myself, prevented me from being a bigger person. We had become miniatures in a snow globe, a snow globe shaken by Derek and then passed on to Monique for good

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measure. There were elements assailing us and we couldn't see through them. Even if we could have magically seen through these elements, neither of us would have wanted to.

Throughout the summer things remained strained between Jane and me. In addition to spending her time with Ken and Kayla, she had started dating Ralph. Ralph and Jane didn't seem to have a lot in common. He dressed sort of sloppily, was obsessed with cartoons, and skipped class as frequently as possible. He was on the swim team and I think Jane was simply impressed by the figure he cut in his Speedo. As far as I was concerned, he didn't have much going for him, and was beneath Jane. However, Ken and Ralph seemed to get along, so Jane had her own dream threesome.

I am the first to admit that I often dreamed of drifting away from Derek and becoming a fifth member of Jane's group, making the square some sort of pentagon. But those damn voices in my head told me Jane didn't miss me. At night they would whisper that Jane would laugh in my face if I attempted to reach out to her. When you lay alone in a dark room it's easy to cave in to these voices.

Memory 35

The evening of September 10th I was sitting at my desk struggling with an English assignment that was due the next day. Our class had recently finished reading *Sea Wolf* by Jack London. I found it to be boring; even if I hadn't lacked the motivation to finish the book, I was behind schedule. Bullshitting had never really been a scheme of mine, and even though I had paid attention in class during discussion and read Cliff's Notes online, I just couldn't wrap my mind around the paper. Eventually, I let out a roar of frustration and threw the book into the garbage can. I made peace with the potential C

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I would receive on my essay, the first of my academic career, and turned off the lights. I had no idea that the events of the next day would make my stress comical.

In the morning I woke up and went about my routine. My mom and dad had already left for work, so I ate a quick bowl of cereal at the counter by myself. I enjoyed the silence while I read the arts and entertainment section of the paper. I was excited to read that my favorite singer Britney Spears announced over the weekend that she would be releasing her third CD in about two months. At the time I thought this would be the major news story of the day.

It was raining outside, neither a torrential downpour nor a soft drizzle, so I decided to take the bus. The only seat left was next to Jane, who had boarded the bus the stop before mine. I casually said hello and she returned my greeting. Then she pulled out a novel from her backpack. If she didn't feel like chatting that was her prerogative; I didn't make a big deal out of it.

We arrived at the school and I headed towards my locker. I removed my science binder from the top shelf and slipped it in front of my English textbook in my backpack. I saw Charlie in the hallway and I waved at him. "Are you happy with your paper?"

"I stayed up until midnight to finish it. I'm beyond screwed; I didn't get past chapter two." It was comforting to hear him admit this. I veered towards the left and headed up the staircase to the science room and told Charlie I would see him next period.

Before the bell rang I found a seat next to Monique. Over the weekend she had cut her hair to a smart chin length style and added highlights to it. I had complimented it yesterday, but Monique was the type of girl who insisted that her fashion choices were a major event and ought to be discussed at length. Over the last year I had learned to accept

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her frequent vanity. I knew I had flaws that she had come to accommodate as well. After I paid homage to her hair, she asked, “Are you looking forward to today’s cross country race?”

“Not really; I didn’t train this summer. At time trials the coach told me I was the only one to add time to my PR.” I was beyond humiliated and the voices taunted me during each run for the rest of that week. We weren’t allowed to practice with headphones and I usually found myself a few strides behind my teammates so the chorus of discouragement triumphed.

“It was probably a fluke, Adam. We’ll definitely win today and you will PR.”

Class started and we worked in groups on writing up chemical reactions in terms of molecular structure. I wasn’t particularly challenged so the time kind of dragged. As our teacher made rounds to make sure everyone was contributing, I occasionally answered a question.

The morning announcements came on and I vaguely listened to the news that the swim team had come in first at a meet over the weekend. Likewise I tuned out the bulletin from the yearbook that they were still recruiting staff. My ears did perk up when I heard that drama club had a meeting on Friday afternoon, but otherwise I was lost in my own thoughts. Or, I guess I should say I was lost in the thoughts of the voices in my head, which insisted that I would disgrace myself at the cross country meet that afternoon.

The bell rang and I had ten minutes passing time to get to my English class. The hallway seemed more hectic than usual, but I couldn’t put my finger on what was troubling my classmates. A few girls were crying, which wasn’t unusual for our school. The girls were always fighting about something, or breaking up with the boy they thought

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they would marry someday. I passed Randy and asked him what was going on, and he just looked at me with shock in his eyes and kept walking towards our English classroom. Randy was usually carefree and had a smile for everyone; this uncharacteristic grave aura surrounding him made me uncomfortable.

Suddenly the Principal came over the PA system. He insisted we get to our classrooms immediately. I wanted to scream out that we still had five minutes passing time remaining, and that I desired an explanation, but obviously I couldn't have a conversation with a voice over the PA. And certainly I would be asking for trouble if I questioned the authority of our Principal.

I entered Ms. Freedman's classroom and noticed that the television was on. I couldn't see the screen very well, but I hoped that we were going to watch a movie. Maybe I could catch some Zs. When I finally got to my seat in the front row, I noticed that the television was turned to CNN and that the announcers looked stunned. Then I saw them replay footage of a plane crashing into a tall building that looked slightly familiar from the movies. I couldn't place my fingers on where it was located or why it was significant. But I didn't have much time to take the mental route to process those concerns as the top of the building became engulfed in flames and I noticed small figures jumping from the windows. What the hell was going on? Was this some sort of prank? Who would jump from a burning building to what appeared to be certain death? Suddenly, the building started to implode. It was literally crumbling to the ground. I registered someone loudly asking isn't that the World Trade Center? That was when I realized there was another tower next to the decimated building. Surely this had to be an unfortunate mistake. I heard Ms. Freedman let out a scream. Another plane was heading

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towards the other tower. My stomach churned. One plane crashing into a building was a mistake, two planes crashing into neighboring buildings within minutes? Something sinister was afoot.

I was disturbed and wanted Ms. Freedman to turn off the screen, suddenly *Sea Wolf* was a great alternative to whatever was happening in the moment. Someone started laughing and Ms. Freedman began yelling. “How dare you find this funny? Your world is about to change. People are dying in front of your very eyes and you find it amusing. For shame.” While Ms. Freedman continued her tirade something clicked in my head. It was Charlie who had laughed. But it wasn’t his usual hearty “I just made a funny” laugh. It was his nervous laugh that sometimes involuntarily bubbled from his lips when Derek did something much crueler than usual, or when we watched a horror movie and an unfortunate character was decapitated and the blood gushed from the stump of his or her head.

Instantly, Ms. Freedman was cut off by a piercing scream. Lily pointed to the screen and shouted that the second tower had collapsed like the first. Kayla, seated next to her, began to cry. It was horrible to see all of my friends unraveling.

Was I dreaming? I had to be dreaming. Things like this didn’t happen in a civilized country. We were the number one power in the world. Who would mess with us?

The reporters came back on and informed us that another plane had crashed into the pentagon. A fourth had crashed into a field near Pennsylvania killing all aboard. Much later we would find out that the passengers of that flight had acted heroically to foil a terrorist believed to be heading towards the White House.

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Initially no one knew what was going on. The media understand that these events were related, but didn't have a clue to who had initialized them, or the motive behind them. Later that evening the President would address the nation and introduce mainstream America to Osama Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, and the Axis of Evil. But as my friends and I sat in the classroom, we just couldn't comprehend what we were seeing. We had all seen movies where terrorists attacked, but they always ended with Bruce Willis saving the day. There were many heroes that day, ordinary, real citizens who would go into the buildings to rescue and recover the dead, many dying as the building crushed them. And as a nation we would come together to collectively mourn them. But in the moment, none of us could see these brave acts. We didn't know people were rising to the occasion in unimaginable ways.

I heard Jane sniffing in the back row. My heart felt like it was being wrenched apart. I wanted to comfort her despite our grievances. Truthfully, I had forgiven her long ago. I just didn't believe she could forgive me. All she did was be honest with me and ask me to recognize that I was selling myself short and making poor decisions. Whereas I had betrayed her by acting in cruel ways to the people she cared about. I wasn't the individual she had known since early childhood. Surely her brusque manner on the bus this morning indicated she wanted space. Wouldn't the ultimate gesture of a caring friend be to respect that? Hadn't there been some movie that suggested love means letting go?

Yet, there she was crying. Neither Ken nor Ralph were here to help. Lily was no longer close enough to Jane to feel that she had a right to assuage her fears. It struck me that there wasn't anyone in the classroom who Jane associated with. I needed to be the one to step up to the plate. It was better to be rebuffed than to sit and torture myself.

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I headed towards Jane's desk. The seat next to her was empty and I sat down. I whispered her name. She looked in my direction with red rimmed eyes and snot dripping from her nose. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I can't believe people can be so awful to one another. What about those women who kissed their husbands goodbye this morning as they exited the apartment, briefcase in hand, thinking of seeing him at dinner, but now they will see him on a mortician's slab when they were asked to identify the charred remains of the man who had slept beside them for not nearly enough years."

"Jane..."

"And the children. They'll have to grow up so quickly when they learn that the parents who made it to all their soccer games and ballet recitals will be never be home again to tuck them in at night." I hadn't considered any of these terrible repercussions and found myself shedding quiet tears as well.

Jane finally began to apply the events to her life. "Adam, we'll never feel safe again; we'll have to grow up. Forget about ignoring world events; we have to pay attention to protect ourselves. We'll be asked to make sacrifices; our friends might have to go to war."

"You're thinking way too much, Jane. We're all going to be fine." Jane was too bright to buy into my promised comfort; I sat beside her and let her cry on my shoulders.

I know it sounds horrible to be grateful for the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001, but I consider their terrible aftermath responsible for bringing Jane back into my life. Given the huge role Jane would have in providing stability in my life over the years to come, my selfishness seems acceptable. The support I gave her that day was a fraction of what she

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would give me when my own personal trials were to come. Without Jane by my side, when those incidents reared their ugly heads, most likely I would never have recovered. Of course, when Jane and I sat in Ms. Freedman's classroom clinging to one another, I couldn't have guessed at what was to come. At the time it seemed impossible to conceive of any personal struggles I might have in the future. It almost seemed that there would be no future to dread because suddenly our lifestyle didn't seem so secure. Jane and I both believed we could be dead that very afternoon; no one knew how many other planes carried terrorists or where those planes would be heading. In moments of intense turmoil, it is a truth that individuals can find out great reserves of strength and passion. The strength and passion Jane and I had to call upon is what supplied the cement to patch up the cracks within our friendship.

The rest of that terrible day, none of our teachers demanded anything strenuous from us. We were encouraged to discuss our fears if we so desired. Other teachers just wanted to distract us from the events. I remember specifically a math teacher who urged us to take out notebook paper and just color. It is almost comical now to envision this young teacher standing before a class of sophomores in high school and urging them to draw pretty, soothing pictures. But that day, nothing could be funny.

Memory 36

Before the end of the day, the principal had again come over the PA system to announce that due to today's unforeseen tragedy and discussions of insufficient security measures, the school board declared all activities for the week canceled. Jane happened to be in my history class when the announcement had been made. "Adam, will you come over? Kayla, Ken, and Ralph will be there and it would mean a lot if you were there,

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too.” Glad that Jane confirmed our relationship was secure again, waves of relief came over me and I agreed.

The bell rang and Jane led me through the hallway. In contrast to this morning, there was a deathly silence. Students rushed to their lockers and grabbed whatever supplies they would need for the evening without taking the time to exchange greetings with their friends. All they wanted was to get their bodies on the bus, the yellow school buses of our childhoods when everything was simple and we could count on naptime and story time during kindergarten, and arrive home quickly. They wanted to run into their parent’s waiting arms and hear that it was all a bad dream, nothing had changed, and we would be allowed to gossip about celebrities and fight with our girlfriends instead of contemplating the vast numbers of the dead.

Jane, Ken, Ralph Kayla, and I approached our bus solemnly. We took a row of seats toward the back. Jane sat with Ralph, positioned so she could hold his hand and reach across the aisle to hold mine. I sat with Ken and Kayla and I held her hand as well. On this day we just needed to draw on the strength of others. My differences with Ken were negated. We spoke quietly wondering how horrifying it would have been if our city had been attacked.

Jane, Ken, Ralph, Kayla and I disembarked from the bus. I found myself hoping that God was made of ears that day and would hear the innumerable prayers of anxious mothers and confused children. After all, no one had ever seen God, so it wouldn’t be a stretch to think he might be a shape shifter and the ability to become a gargantuan mound of ears. I shared this thought with the others and Jane laughed for the first time since the news of the terrorist attacks. “Adam, that’s a really intense vision of God, but don’t share

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it with anyone who is extremely religious; you'll be accused of blasphemy. Or, they might think you're possessed by the Devil because you've turned God into some creature out of a bad horror movie."

"Guess it's a good thing I'm a Jew." Ken laughed heartily and Ralph just looked confused.

Poor Ralph, he was so different from us. Ralph was an African American from the inner city. For years his father worked in construction while his mother was a nurse at a pediatrician's office. One day, as Ralph's father was standing near one of the building's iron pilings for inspection, the pulley system of the scaffolding above him snapped, and before he could move he was crushed to a pulp. His death was instantaneous and put Ralph's family in an excruciating situation; Ralph's mom was four months pregnant, and he had two younger sisters. Luckily for Ralph's family, they were members of a very family oriented Baptist church, and the community came together for Ralph and his kin, assisting his mother financially while the insurance investigation was going on. Eventually, Ralph's mother was able to sue the company that manufactured the pulley system and won generous punitive damages. Simultaneously, the insurance company came through and validated Ralph's father's life insurance policy, which was also substantial. With all the money, Ralph's mother Stella had some life-altering decisions to make. She sold the house when she concluded that the neighborhood was going downhill and not a proper place to raise her children. She also understood the importance of quality education and considered the scandals plaguing the school district in which her children were enrolled. Thus, in the summer before his sophomore year, Ralph found himself living in the neighborhood Jane and I shared so he could attend Jefferson High with us. I

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had been caught up in my work and my friendship with Derek, so I chiefly ignored his arrival, but Jane reacted differently. She noticed him running every morning around 8 AM, the same time she took her daily jog. Jane was in need of a running partner given our feud and voila she clicked with Ralph and they started dating. Of course, none of this would be explained to me right away, but these are significant facts of Ralph's history that I learned when I began to see him with my own eyes instead of through those of Derek and Monique. Keeping all this in mind, I can't blame Ralph if he was still aloof on that fateful afternoon.

When we entered Jane's house, her mother rushed to the door and gave all of us huge hugs. She squeezed me so tight I worried that I might breathe my last breath, but I know that was just her way of welcoming me back; she forgave me for the heartache that I had caused Jane, which I wasn't privy to, but that she watched every night as Jane cried on her shoulder. Jane's mother insisted we all call our parents immediately, as they were probably worried sick and just wanted to hear our voices. I let Ralph, Kayla and Ken call first, since I was worried about how my mother would react to today's events.

I got my mother on the phone and she answered in a shaky voice. "Mom, it's Adam, I am over at Jane's house, but I can come home if you need me right now."

"No, Adam. We'll have a lot of family time tonight. Right now it's important you be with your friends."

"What about Dad?"

"He'll be home early; he's fine." Truthfully, I hadn't thought he would be otherwise. My father was a tough man and wouldn't let national tragedy bring him down. He would bring his work home and keep it by his side throughout the night. In later

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years, I would understand just how much 9/11 had shaken my father. He kept much of our money in the stock market and was worried about the event's impact on our finances. That evening, when President Bush addressed the nation, before he came a much maligned mockery, my father considered legal briefs and jotted notes on them. In this way he could remind himself that life would go on and forget about a possible war that could claim either my brother or me, or the difficulties of paying our future college tuition. But again, that evening I was not sufficiently emotionally mature to be there for my father. The voice of experience insists that it wasn't selfish of me, that I couldn't have changed my innate personality in one night, but I still have residual guilt.

“How is Brandon?”

“Your younger brother is in his room blasting the Beatles. He's just as moody as ever and playing some violent video game. I guess that's how he's coping.”

Back in the kitchen, Jane, Ken, Kayla and Ralph were sitting at the counter, their elbows were on table and they just looked so pitiful. It broke my heart. As I took my seat next to them, I can't imagine I looked any better than them. Jane took action. “We're baking cookies. Can you imagine how good gooey chocolate chip cookies dunked in milk would be right now? I am talking so chocolaty that it smears all over our faces.” Never one to turn down comfort food, I agreed. I knew that Jane craved a task she couldn't mess up; she needed to feel she still exerted autonomy in her life.

Ralph mumbled, “Cooking is for chicks.” Ken quickly silenced him with a glare.

Jane allocated duties to each of us. “Ralph, preheat the oven and grease the cookie sheet. I'll find the sugar, vanilla, milk, eggs, flour, and chocolate chips, then dump in a bowl. Ken, Kayla, and Adam, you guys can take turns stirring the batter.” All five of got

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in on the cookie shaping action, and when there was only a little bit of batter left started sticking our fingers in it and eating it raw. We let our hands get all messy and laughed like maniacs; then we took turns licking the spoon. It certainly wasn't hygienic, but in the moment we wanted to pretend that life, as we knew it, was still normal. In our regression and childish antics, we hoped to escape responsibility and woe. Of course, this could never happen; our generation was in a critical state of transition, one which required sacrifice and demanded that we pay attention to the environment around us in order to improve it when we had the power to be heard.

The cookies came out of the oven and Jane reached for something out of the cabinet as we allowed them to cool. "Frosting! These cookies need frosting." It wasn't just any frosting, either, it was that extra special variety, the white kind with the multi-color candy pieces in it. Reaching in with the same spoon as the others to frost my cookies, I felt a strange intimacy. How could I possibly ever forget them, judge them, or neglect them when we would always remember this moment as the way we tried to heal. I envisioned them at my wedding, family trips at a shared cottage, and holidays celebrated at the same house each year. It was easy to think that in the moment, but in a few years, it would be obscene to think all of us could be in the same room ever again.

The voices in my head, which had been mostly dormant, as if they had been shocked by the events of 9/11, finally woke up and began to work at crippling my sense of peace. "Ralph and Ken, really? These are the people you want to associate with. They are outsiders and will always be outsiders. If you make the decision to be seen with them, you will be a pariah."

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Voice two chimed in, “Why haven’t Derek, Monique, or Charlie called you yet? I bet they are altogether right now and aren’t even thinking about you. Nor do they care about your state of mind.”

A new voice spoke up, that of a young woman, but I could barely hear her through the shouts of the others. “Adam, look where you chose to be this afternoon. Have you laughed like this, or felt this safe, in a long time? Isn’t this the truest you’ve been to yourself since the beginning of the summer? You don’t need Derek and the others. What you have here is so much more meaningful.” I wish I could say that this voice, a pseudo-Jane, made an immediate impact; but that would be a lie. I denied her existence and instead listened jealously as Ken and Jane laughed about some customer they had waited on the other night.

Voice two stage whispered, “You see Adam, you aren’t even good enough for these people. Sure, they accept you today, and embrace you as one of them, but it’s only a matter of time before they see you for the pathetic weakling you are, and drop you.”

I put my hands over my ears, trying to block all of them out, and Jane looked at me suspiciously. “Adam, are you ok?” I wanted to tell her about the voices, they way they were becoming more potent, and growing in number, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. To speak this aloud in private with Jane would be humiliating enough, but to even consider allowing Ken and Ralph to enter the darkest realm in which I dwelled would be insufferable.

“I have a headache; I should probably get going.” Jane gave me a hug as she accompanied me back to the door. “I’m glad you’re back, Adam. You can’t guess how many times I how many times this summer I wanted to hear your voice, even if I thought

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you were making poor choices. I only wish I hadn't been so hard on you. I know that you still don't really know Ralph and Ken very well, and Derek has probably brainwashed you into judging them, but please, Adam, give them a chance. You'll grow to like them as much as I do."

"I'll give them a chance, just like you gave me one today. But I need you to do something for me. Don't make me give up Derek and the others. I know you hate them; I get you think they are bad for me, but there are so many sides of them that you haven't seen. I can even understand that you refuse to wrap your head around that and that's cool. But what isn't cool is you holding me responsible for how Derek and the others treat Ralph, Ken, and Kayla. I'm not responsible for them. Being friends with all of you is going to tear me into pieces, but I'm willing to make the effort."

Jane was silent for a moment. She swallowed a few times, looked me straight in the eyes and said, "It's fine if you want to keep those creeps in your life. I don't get it, but there isn't any point in fighting about it."

"Great."

"I'm not done. I know they're going to hurt you one day because they thrive on betrayal. When they tear you into shreds there will only be so much I can do to put you back together. We both understand how strong the connection is between us so when Derek stabs you in the back, I'll feel the knife and I'll pull it out."

"Jane, I appreciate your advice, but I think you're going overboard."

"If you want to be a real man, Adam, you have to be true to yourself and be a good person. Those phonies are going to keep you from being a real man; they will effectively neuter you. It scares me just thinking about it."

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“So let’s not think about it. Obviously we can’t talk about them without making each other feel like shit.”

“It’s settled then. We’ll agree to disagree.”

Memory 37

As I stepped off Jane’s porch, I pulled my cellphone from my pocket and dialed Derek’s number. Derek answered crankily as though he had woken from a nightmare. How anyone could find the peace of mind to sleep at the moment was beyond me. “Were you sleeping?”

“Hell no. Charlie and me are playing Mario Kart and he just reamed my ass.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were hanging out.”

“Yeah, Charlie, Monique, and I got our parents to excuse us after lunch; all we had to do was pretend to be traumatized by this whole 9/11 thing. They bought it and I intend to milk this as long as I can. Maybe I’ll get to stay out of school for a week. At the very least, I should be excused from homework and tests. We’re just playing video games and shit; you wanna come over?”

“Sure.” I ignored the way my stomach turned over their ability to profit from the horror of an entire nation.

He continued, “We’ll watch TV, eat some pizza. It will be a great time. Where have you been anyway?” I decided not to tell Derek about my time at Jane’s, not because I was ashamed of being with Ken and Ralph, but because our afternoon of making cookies seemed sacred to me. “I went straight home; I was worried about Brandon. I wanted to be there with him until my parents got home. Everyone is cool now, so I guess I’m free to come over.”

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“Well, get your ass over here. Lily, Randy, Krissy, and Beth are on their way. Don’t let them beat you. I’m thinking we’re going to set up the karaoke machine and go hot tubing. No need for a swimsuit.” After I hung up I wondered if I would have been lost in the shuffle if I hadn’t called.

Memory 38

I arrived at Derek’s massive house and noticed that neither of his parents’ fancy cars was parked in the driveway. Several bikes were strewn across the well-watered lawn; I recognized them as belonging to Charlie, Lily, Krissy, and Randy. Monique lived a block away from Derek, so she had walked. Within the last year and a half, Derek and I had become so close that I was allowed to walk in the house without even knocking or ringing the bell. Though the front hallway was empty, I didn’t need to bother wondering where the others would be; I would find them seated in the basement. The basement housed Derek’s massive surround sound entertainment system. I say Derek’s because the basement was constructed as an add-on to the house, just to house Derek and his possessions that didn’t fit in his penthouse sized room. The addition and the entertainment system were Derek’s 15th birthday present from his parents.

The television was blasting as I descended the winding stairs. Part of me was hoping that Derek had been kidding about the video games, but I was quickly disabused of this notion. Lilly was brushing Monique’s hair as she applied gold-speckled nail polish. Charlie was practicing the dance moves to the last rap sensation; while Randy and Derek were playing Dance Dance Revolution.

Krissy was on AIM flirting with some guy she had picked up in a chatroom. Over the weekend Krissy had confided to Monique that she had cyber sex with this dude,

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Tailchase88, and was in love with him. Monique, of course, told Derek who told me. Charlie had suggested we set up a fake instant message identity and flirt with Krissy, just to see how far we could get her to go. I thought this was kind of sneaky and hoped that in light of today's events that we could just forget about setting Krissy up. After all, didn't we have enough dirt on her? Krissy had emailed the conversation to Monique and we all read it and laughed our asses off. What more was necessary? Knowing Derek, nothing short of total humiliation would be acceptable. I swallowed my guilty feelings and sat on a beanbag near Beth.

Beth was reading something by Simone de Beauvoir as she picked at an apple. Her eyes, hiding behind hideous coke bottle frame glasses, appeared studious, but I knew better. Beth was a snake in the grass. She was Monique's "spy." Beth might have seemed sweet and pathetic to the casual acquaintance, but she had a biting intellect and a photographic memory that ensured you didn't want to be on her bad side. Beth drew hurt and confused individuals to her confessional booth and absolved them of their myriad sins. Of course, she was taking notes and passing them on to Derek and Monique who kept a whole notebook with data about each of their friends and any disloyalties or incidents that could be manipulated at the appropriate time. I had seen the notebook, and I understood just how precarious the positions of some of our friends were.

Beth looked up from her book and told me to sit down. Her brown hair was pulled into two tight french braids, but I thought it most sexy when she let it flow loosely. Her body wasn't as glamorous as Monique's, but she was more voluptuous than Lily or Krissy. If she was so inclined, she could have had any boy she desired, but we were all pretty sure she was a repressed lesbian fantasizing about the day Monique would fall in

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love with her. It's ironic, Beth valued intelligence, but she was attracted to the epitome of selfish ignorance. "Beth, does any of this seem real to you?"

"What did you expect? National tragedy isn't going to change Derek or Monique. It might when Monique's parents whisper about money problems if the stock market nose dives, and it might if one of us has a family member die in a future terrorist attack. Until that day comes, they are going as childish, selfish, and insulated as possible."

"Surely you feel like your life has changed?"

"I've been reading the newspaper since I was ten; I always knew the world was shitty and less secure than most people thought it to be. As far as I'm concerned, the best thing I can do is live life to the fullest."

"But didn't you just call the others childish, selfish, and insulated? Aren't you basically admitting you'll act the same?"

"I'm not in denial like everybody else. That's the difference."

Memory 39

Watching Derek and the others made me realize that I could expect to escape this new troubling world only with Jane. I called and asked about her plans for the next day.

"I'm not up to going out."

"Could I come over with pizza and a movie?"

"That sounds great. No slasher flicks though. I'm in the mood for a romantic comedy." I started rustling through the CD cases that contained my DVDs. Hmm, I wondered aloud, Drew Barrymore or Julia Roberts? *Steel Magnolias* or *Beaches*? The task seemed impossible. Then I remembered that Jane had a thing for Heath Ledger. It took me a second but I remembered that I had *10 Things I Hate About You* hiding

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somewhere. I looked under the bed, but just found an empty DVD case for *A Nightmare on Elmstreet* (definitely not appropriate for this evening) and some dust bunnies. I wrote a note to myself to remind my mother that the maid needed to do a better job of cleaning up under my bed next week. It's not like there were any issues of Playboy hiding under there, so she had nothing to fear.

The next evening, I found the DVD and a plastic sleeve to place it in so I could transport the DVD to Jane's without damaging it. After I showered, brushed my teeth, and picked out a cozy outfit that screamed movie night, I called Dominos and ordered one large pizza with cheese and pepperoni. When two people are as close as Jane and I are, it's easy to order without consulting the other person. A few minutes later I biked to Dominos and picked up a warm, fragrant pizza. If the evening was as promising as this pizza, I would be the luckiest guy in the neighborhood.

When I reached Jane's house, I entered without knocking and yelled out for Jane. Jane hurried down the stairs in her pink bunny slippers, a pale blue camisole top, and a pair of fleece pants that were a darker shade of blue. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail on and she had just the slightest hint of lipstick and eye shadow on. As I took all of this in I barely noticed that Ralph was coming down the stairs right behind her. Ralph! What was Ralph doing here? I understood he was dating Jane, but I didn't think that gave him carte blanche to infringe on our plans. I certainly didn't want to be third wheel while he and Jane made out as the movie flashed on the screen. Likewise, if Jane sat between us, I didn't want him glaring at me like I was some threat. I thought back to my phone call with Jane. Had I said anything about it being just us tonight? Had she indicated that Ralph would be joining us? The answer stared me blank in the face; neither of us had

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communicated these thoughts. For so long our relationship had been based on some type of telepathy that easily telegraphed Jane's thoughts to me. The relationship worked both ways, Jane was privy to my inner thoughts; I had no need to voice them out loud.

I wanted to tell Jane that I was irritated by Ralph's presence, but I didn't have the courage. After all, we had only begun to fix the foundation of our relationship and the hired contractors were taking their sweet time in providing the cement. Clearly, Jane needed comfort from both her man and her best friend. I needed to swallow my pride and accept these terms. One of the cruel voices whispered to me, "What makes you think Jane would ask Ralph to leave? It's much more likely that she'll take your DVD, the box of pizza, and kick you out the front door." This scenario seemed feasible; it was the ultimate reasoning that prevented me from making a scene.

Just as I had composed myself and greeted Ralph with a hearty handshake, I heard the door open. In walked Ken. What the hell? Since when was Ken worthy of the ability to just barge into Jane's house without knocking? That was my right, not his

Let me make this clear, at this point I had hung out with Ken and Ralph and found them to be likeable people, if not a little bland; I was entirely cool with this. There was no logical way that all people could be created with the ability to generate the same amount of excitement within the others they encountered. But that didn't mean Ken and Ralph had to be around every minute of every day. Jane had told me that she wasn't going to placate me and make peace with Derek and Monique, but she also made it clear that while I was expected to learn to care for Ken and Ralph, and accept them for who they are, there would be times that Jane and I could spend alone. With Ralph still clutching my

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hand and Ken breathing heavily on my neck, I sure as hell didn't feel like Jane and I had the house to ourselves.

Ok, Adam, I said to myself, what would Martha Stewart do? She would be gracious to the unexpected guests and accommodate them. In fact, she would ooze so much compassion and interest in the guest that Martha would be asked to host next time and then she could maliciously cross the unexpected guests off her list. Maybe I couldn't make a raincoat out of Glad wrap, but I could certainly nail Martha's persona.

"Well everybody, who is ready for *10 Things I Hate About You*?" Ralph and Ken looked at me like I was from space and had sprouted three heads.

"Adam, sweetie, I know earlier I had said I really wanted to watch a romantic comedy, but Ralph told me that *Jaws* is on TV tonight and he was horrified when I said that I had never seen it. Because it's a cult classic, Adam, I think we should watch it." What could I do? I would look terrible if I insisted that we watch *10 Things I Hate About You* if no one else wanted to watch it. I couldn't imagine sitting through *Jaws* for the thousandth time, but I would totally score points with Jane if didn't whine about how quickly our plans had changed.

Things may have continued peacefully if Ralph didn't choose that moment to grab the pizza box and look at its contents. "Damn it, Jane, I hate Pepperoni. I thought we were getting Ham and Pineapple." Jane looked at me. "Adam, why didn't you wait to order the pizza until you got here? It isn't very fair to Ken and Ralph that they have nothing to eat."

Ken tried to be diplomatic and I gave him credit for that. "I'm ok with pepperoni. Seriously, I'm not even that hungry."

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Ralph on the other hand was still being a douche bag. “Why would you order just one large pizza?” Probably because Jane and I usually had trouble finishing a single pizza of that size by ourselves.

“I can eat that much pizza by myself in one sitting.” Jane put her arms around Ralph and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s ok baby, I’ll call Dominos and get them to deliver another pizza. We can all share the cost.”

Wait a minute; I had certainly not agreed to pay for the bottomless pit’s dinner. If he wanted his own pizza, then he should have to pay for it. At least Derek didn’t pretend that he was not a tyrant. Maybe I would be happier paying allegiance in his kingdom.

Memory 40

Before I can process any of what happened next, I have to look back into that filing cabinet we call our past. Certain things about the way I was raised, and previous events, definitely contributed to, if not shaped directly, all the events that follow. Oftentimes I want to blame my mess on the others, but I have to remember that in so many ways this was all destined. This inability to reconcile my destiny and the role of my friends in bringing it about is a conflict that has become the great mystery of my life. It is this pain and rage that frequently makes the songs I hear, the books I read, or the TV shows I adore, so difficult to watch when I feel that the messages contained within them are taunting me.

As early as I can recall I was your prototypical goody-goody. If I was given too much change at the cafeteria, I went back and returned it. When my parents told me I could only watch two hours of TV, and my homework had to be completed prior to that, I would never weasel my way around their injunction. Some people might construe these

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actions as a desperate search for approval or attention; but I know myself better than these so-called experts and believe that attention was not my motive. Nor was approval. I can say with great conviction that if approval was the currency by which I measured wealth, I would have found greater bang for my buck in covering for my classmates when they accidentally over-watered the class plant, instead of handing them over to the authorities.

I also want to make it clear that I was never some sanctimonious Puritan; at least not overtly. Well maybe I ought to amend that. I wasn't initially some sanctimonious Puritan. Many of the stances I would take in my high school years weren't popular, and certainly would be unbelievable to the more cynical among those who judge me, but when I say it wasn't my intention to make my name as the class prude, I am not lying to either myself or to you. I will admit that in the end some of my more radical...by radical I mean radically conservative...stances came about more as a way of insisting that I wasn't living a lie, or at least what I would consider a lie if I broke my rules. I wouldn't be human if none of these things appealed to some Hyde within me, but in the end I refused to let others damn me as a hypocrite. When the hangman's noose finally tightened around my neck, and I was branded as the monster of my graduating class, you have to understand that I took great satisfaction in knowing that I was not a member of the lynching party. Yes, I would come to hate myself much more than that angry mob, but our reasons were very different.

Memory 41

I hated my aunt Mindy; that was a prevailing theme throughout my childhood. How can I describe Mindy? Mindy was a tramp. If it weren't for the financial

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contributions my grandparents gave her, Mindy and her son Harold would probably have ended up in the trailer that would have been her perfect habitat. But Mindy was the only daughter my grandparents had, and she was the last child born to them...an unexpected gift ten years after my father was born. Every family has a Mindy, but at the time I didn't grasp that, couldn't grasp it. How do you explain to your traumatized six year-old that anyone could have made Mindy's mistakes? Don't get me wrong, I have wasted many of my sessions with Dr. Johnansen trying to understand my loathing for Mindy; I wanted to cease hating her as it made me feel like I had sunk to her level. But some planters warts can't be removed; you can try to use that Johnson and Johnson's wart remover that promises to freeze the unsightly bump off, but it fails. Perhaps my skin, in a perverse way, was so attached to the wart, and believed that the wart defined it in such a way, that it refused to give it up?

Some nights when I can't sleep I look at old family pictures. There was a time when I was a little child that I allowed Mindy to hold me and I smiled or graciously planted a kiss on her cheek. The evidence exists. But in later pictures one can see how I would find subtle ways to distance myself from Mindy. Or in the few pictures where I was placed near her, you can see resentment in my body language.

So where did Mindy and I go wrong? I remember an incident when Mindy was visiting us with Harold and her fourth husband Alejandro. Alejandro was a busboy that Mindy had met at a resort in Mexico during her marriage to her third husband Harold Senior. Harold Sr. had dragged Mindy and Harold Jr. along on a business trip and by the end of their brief stay on the island all of Harold Sr.'s business associates knew that Mindy and Alejandro were getting down to a business transaction of their own. Harold

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might not have cared about Mindy's antics if they had been private, but since it cost him a promotion at work, Harold Sr. demanded a divorce. Mindy agreed, as long as Harold would cover Alejandro's airfare to America. If you guessed that Alejandro had few pesos to his name, and even fewer pennies, you would be correct. This was why Mindy couldn't spring on a hotel during the Thanksgiving visit and why messy Mindy was sleeping in my bedroom. Forgive me for being a selfish six year old, but I was not pleased that I had to give up my room to Mindy; it was worse when I learned that I would be sharing my brother Brandon's trundle bed for the remainder of Mindy's visit

My father denies how Mindy's week long stay at our home ended with bruises on my backside, but I am only so creative and the tenacity with which I cling to this memory insists that I didn't fabricate the scenario. My father and mother had a no physical punishment rule; I didn't even know what a spanking was, but I could speak at length about timeouts and dessert privileges being revoked. At seven I didn't always make the best judgments. So one evening, after my afternoon nap had been ruined because Brandon had a cold and couldn't stop snoring, I took out my anger on my visiting cousin Harold. We were playing outside in the tree-house and he refused to play the baby in the burning home when I told him we were playing firemen and I was going to rescue him. He wanted to be the Dalmatian that followed along and got to wear a customized fire suit. In so many words, I told him that the fire department's dog had been put to sleep. He started to cry and I warned him to shut up because I knew making one's younger visiting cousin cry was a no-no. Well, the little snot wouldn't listen, so I pushed him out of the tree-house. Before anyone lets a huge gasp and wonders what kind of horrid little brat I was, he or she needs to be aware that the tree-house wasn't that big of a fall; I jumped

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from the top of it all the time and had never been injured. Harold landed on his butt, looked stunned, and began to scream bloody murder. All the adults came running and in between choking sobs Harold Jr. told his version of my attempt to assassinate him. Some assassination attempt, he broke his left arm and he's right-handed, so how big of a deal did the little shit need to make?

Mindy, of course, couldn't bother to drive her precious baby to the hospital because she left her insurance information at home. My mother, ever the gracious hostess, refused to let a guest leave her home in worse shape than he or she had arrived and took him off to the emergency room with my father and grandparents, leaving Mindy and Alejandro in charge. Big mistake. Alejandro got stoned (today my mother at least confirms that Alejandro was a shady bastard and had pot stashed in the house) and Mindy was already three sheets to the wind. Did Mindy stop to consider that I was seven? Did she think that her invasion of my home and my ruined nap were potentials for my behavior? No, that would be giving dear aunt Mindy too much credit. Mindy asked her strapping Hispanic husband for his leather belt and chased me around the house until she caught me and whacked me on the butt at least as many times as Lizzie Borden raised the axe to her parents.

About three years later Mindy met us in Vegas for my grandparent's golden anniversary. Another family visit, another husband. This time Mindy brought Lenny along with her. Surgically enhanced breasts and a taut tummy, which I suspect had been subjected to a tuck by a dexterous plastic surgeon, also made their grand debut. If Mindy hadn't tapped into Harold Sr.'s child support payments to cover her transformation, then she definitely found a way to trick my grandparents into shouldering

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the burden of paying for her procedures. I am not judging Mindy for her low-self esteem and her desire to re-vamp her body; what really upset me was her public drunkenness and the way it ruined our trip. The very first evening we went to a very expensive French restaurant within the casino; our travel agent had made the arrangements and made sure to note in the itinerary that the attire was closer to black tie than casual. Apparently before dinner Mindy and Lenny exchanged words; she had spent most of the day in the casino gambling away what little money they had, while she stuck him with Harold Jr. Lenny opted out of dinner, in a passive aggressive attempt to show who wore the pants, and Mindy came downstairs about twenty minutes late in daisy duke shorts and wife-beater that barely contained her ample assets. The maitre d' didn't want to let her into the restaurant, but Mindy seethed with rage and made sure the entire establishment reverberated with her nasal oaths. My grandmother rescued her enfant terrible and casually strode to the maitre d', slipped him a twenty-dollar bill and whispered in his ear that she was with us. The maitre d' looked at my grandmother with a curious combination of pity and disdain and escorted my aunt to the table. The waitress quickly appeared, a young woman with a Russian accent, and my aunt ordered a cosmo and a whiskey sour. Before the waitress could ask anyone else if they needed anything, Mindy asked, "Does your bogus accent help you score with the high rollers?" At ten I didn't know what a high roller was, but I had enough intelligence to know that scoring in this context had a negative connotation. My grandmother blanched, and my mother coughed in my father's direction. "We'll be ready to order in a few moments; you can hold off on the whiskey sour for now."

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My aunt started to screech. “I’m just having fun. You don’t need to be such a stick in the mud, Ted. But you’re right, I’ll cancel the whiskey sour. Bring me a bourbon; make that a double.” My mother rolled her eyes and unfortunately my aunt caught her response. “What the fuck is your problem, princess, are you paying the bill? Probably not because you have a husband that whips out his charge card whenever you promise to spread your legs, so you can just shove it.”

My mother muttered, “It’s funny that a woman half way on her journey to matching Elizabeth Taylor’s string of divorces should call anyone a whore.” Mindy got up, raised her water goblet, and splashed it in my mother’s face.

My father was having none of it. “Mindy, how many people do you have to offend to distract yourself from the mess that is your life? You had every single imaginable opportunity and look what you’ve become. When was the last time you actually held a job? Do you enjoy clinging from welfare payment to welfare payment while mom and dad subsidize your bacchanalia?” Mindy picked up a plate and threw it in my father’s general direction. Thankfully, this time her aim was so affected by her BAC that she missed. She got up and reached for Harold Jr., who basically sunk lower and lower into his seat, and pretended that he didn’t know this banshee that pretended to be his mother. I saw the tears in his eyes and wanted to help him out, but I was powerless. I can’t recall ever feeling that powerless in my childhood.

Luckily, my grandfather interceded. “Mindy, if you want to leave the table, that’s your prerogative, and I hope, for the sake of the rest of us, that you do, but my grandson is going to stay. We never see him and it’s his vacation, too. Let me remind you that we decided to treat him to this trip, just like we arranged for you and Lenny to come along.

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So before you bite the hand that feeds you, remember who is providing your airfare, your room, and your meals, including your drinks. You promised to behave. This is a special occasion for your mother, I'll remind you, and you're ruining it."

"Harold Jr. is my son and if I want to keep him locked up in the room for the rest of the trip, I will. The trip is already pre-paid, so what are you going to do about it?"

The maitre d' approached our table with a grave expression on his face. "Madame et monsieurs, many of other guests are here attempting to enjoy their own special occasion and this young lady" (he looked at my aunt), "I repeat lady "(he sneered it with such disgust that even I winced)" is preventing that. If she isn't going to settle down, then she must leave. If she refuses to leave, I will have to forcibly remove her."

Mindy glared at him and stage whispered, "All right you froggie fag, I am leaving, I didn't want your shitty escargot" (she pronounced it es-car-got) "and stinky cheese anyway." And with that the wicked witch of the south west grabbed her broomstick and flew from the room.

I wish I could erase that scene, but it haunts my dreams. It isn't the only one antagonizing me as I toss and turn in bed. There was the moment that she held me responsible because I lost Harold Jr. at the mall, when he had slipped off to the arcade to play pinball without telling her. There was the scene at my uncle Frank's country club when we all gathered for yet another Thanksgiving from Hell. Lenny had just left my aunt for a younger trust fund baby and Mindy began to sob into her glass of wine at dinner. "The world always shits on me; it isn't fair. Men use me and oppress me just because I'm a woman. My family despises me and I just want to kill myself."

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It was mortifying, especially when you consider that by this point I was in the fifth grade and believed that the public perception of an individual was much more significant than that person's innate goodness or intelligence. I never insisted that I was a saint, I was about as shallow as a kiddie pool. I blame pop culture for that. If I had grown up Amish, I would never have put on airs and paid attention to one's fashion sense over moral character. Still, even though I can admit that I was in the wrong here, I spoke up.

"Mindy, you're absolutely right. We all think you're a stupid bitch. We hate you and wish you were dead." She ran from the table sobbing and my grandmother had to go after her to calm her down. My allowance was cut, but it was worth it. The woman was making us all look terrible and the sooner the scene ended, the better. Perhaps the other members of the country club didn't know my entire family, but I still felt like we were being judged, and to a fifth grader who thinks he is sophisticated and understands the workings of the world, feeling like you're being judged is a fate worse than death experiences.

Maybe now you understand what happened after the homecoming football game.

Memory 42

Sports just isn't my thing; I am cursed with poor hand-eye coordination. Consequently, as I aged I wasn't your prototypical sports fan; my father and I never bonded in front of the big screen on Saturday afternoons watching college football and I would much rather read a book than go to a baseball game. However, because I was an elected representative of my graduating class, it was essential that I made an annual appearance at our Homecoming football game.

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During spirit week while everyone hyped up our cross-town rivalry I focused more on dressing up for our spirit days and encouraged my classmates to buy tickets for the game and the half-time raffle. But when that Friday afternoon pep assembly rolled along, I always put on a good show of caring about the game.

I tried to talk Jane into attending the game with me, but I didn't have a chance. She and Ralph were more interested in necking in front of a movie screen on a Friday night while Ken sat there munching heavily buttered popcorn and attempted to stay engrossed in the plot of the film. If Jane had been a little more flexible, I know the evening wouldn't have ended the way it did.

That Friday night, Beth and I met up with Lily, Randy, Derek, Monique, Charlie, and Krissy outside the gates to the football field. We were all decked out in red and white face paint, our school colors. I was wearing our class shirt; this year the theme was '80s films and we were *The Breakfast Club*. The marching band was warming up the crowd with a medley of '80s songs; Monique laughed as they butchered "Love Is A Battlefield." The cheerleaders were stripping down from their warm up tracksuits as we found our way to the bleachers. I wanted to sit near the bottom so all of our class could see that I was there and would remember to re-elect me, but Derek and Monique wanted to sit all the way at the top so we could keep an eye on everybody else.

I don't remember too much about the game specifically as Derek distracted me by mocking the students who were so riveted by the game that they partook in the ritualistic chants and dances led by the cheerleaders. I do recall the game coming down to the final minute and the senior quarterback scoring a final touchdown to break the tie.

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When the game ended, Beth invited us to her house for a post-victory celebration. We followed her to her house, which was about a half-mile from the school. I noticed that the lights were off. If I had been thinking clearly I might have made the immediate connection that Beth's parents weren't home and left before things got out of hand.

Beth unlocked the door and turned on the lights. She led us towards the living room and turned on the stereo. "Is anyone thirsty?"

Derek and Monique exchanged glances. "I wouldn't mind something to drink."

"Go ahead, guys. The fridge in the garage is filled and you can have whatever you want." Lily and I stayed inside while the others got something to drink. A few moments later Derek and Monique led the others back in to the living room. First I noticed they were giggling, then I realized that the cans they were holding didn't look familiar.

Monique sauntered towards me and asked with a seductive smile, "Do you want a sip of my beer?" Her beer? Was she kidding? I stammered, "Monique, you know we can't drink beer. Beth's parents could wake up any moment and see what you're drinking. Do you really want to walk into that shit-storm? They'll call all our parents and we will all be on probation. We've worked so hard to be trusted, do we want to blow it in one night on something that will just make us sick and probably taste like warm piss?"

Derek burst into laughter and almost choked on his beer; Charlie had to slap him on the back to calm him down. Beth just looked at me like I was a moron. "Adam, my parents are in New York this weekend; we have the house to ourselves." Yeah, like that was going to change my mind. I was flabbergasted. I knew that other people our age were drinking and doing drugs, in fact, our class president and his group of friends had recently thrown a party and been busted by his parents; all the parents met with them one

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evening after school and explained the legal consequences of underage drinking. One of the fathers was a district attorney and had access to a video about the dangers of drinking and driving and had shown them the horrible footage of blood-splattered roads and the burned out hulks of flipped over cars. Rumor was that the parents had even toyed with the idea of calling the police and watching as they received MIPs.

I never figured my friends would dabble in drinking and drugs; sure they broke the occasional rule, but we never flouted actual laws.

Suddenly, they all disgusted me and I didn't want to be around them. I thought of my Aunt Mindy and imagined that this was exactly how she started on her road to alcoholism and poor judgment. I knew I had to get away from them before I lost my temper and told them all what I was thinking. I pretended that my cell phone had vibrated and told them that I had to take a phone call. I went outside and made sure they could see me from the window. Out on the lawn, in the cold air, all by myself I faked a conversation with my parents. I made sure that there was the appropriate length between my responses and what I was hearing on the other line. I even altered my body language and facial reactions to show frustration with overprotective parents who insisted I come home early on the first night of the weekend. I knew I had to be convincing.

After I ended my performance I walked back into the house with a frown on my face, "Omfg, my parents are such tyrants. I have to go home right now. They never let me have any fun." Lily was sympathetic, but Beth just looked through me. She followed me out the door like the consummate good hostess and threatened, "I'm on to you, Adam. If you ruin this for the rest of us by blabbing to your parents, there will be consequences."

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I looked at her with what I hoped was confusion on my face. “Beth, are you on crack? My parents just want me home early. That’s their crime, not mine.”

“I am not stupid, Adam, and neither are you. Obviously, you are uncomfortable with alcohol, but don’t pretend you’re any better than us.”

I had this urge to confess everything to her. If she could understand the trauma my Aunt Mindy had inflicted on me when I was younger, perhaps Beth would be more compassionate. But I didn’t want to give her that kind of power over me; I didn’t need to justify my actions to Beth, who rolled her eyes at me. “What are you going to do the next time, Adam? Because there will be a next time. People are going to start to wonder why you aren’t drinking with them. Drinking is going to cause us to grow up faster and have a new bond; if you don’t participate the others aren’t going to feel as connected to you and might even become suspicious of you.”

“I had enough. Beth, I am going home. Interpret that however you like.”

As I walked home by myself, I felt more alienated than I had ever felt before. I couldn’t fall back on Jane because she had Ralph and I was no longer the center of her social universe; how could I compete with him? Likewise, Derek and the others no longer seemed to be who they were before tonight. I felt like my entire interpretation of the world had been wrong. Were they growing up faster than me? Who was to say that what they were doing was growing up? I didn’t think it was the alcohol that they were enjoying as much as they were getting off on the ability to push boundaries and get away with it. By playing at what they considered adults to be and do weren’t they just reverting to playing house like they had in preschool? I felt superior, but it was a false superiority.

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As autumn yielded to winter I was on the cusp of turning sixteen. My parents gave me my first car; it was a 1992 white Jeep Grand Cherokee. I took great pride in personalizing my car; I put a bumper sticker for my favorite radio station on my rear window. I ordered a vanity plate; Britfan. I even found a bobblehead of my favorite cartoon character and put it on my front dashboard with tickytac. The only flaw with my new chariot? There was no CD player. But my father bought me an adapter that allowed me to connect my CD discman to my tape player through my cigarette lighter and I was good to go.

Sometimes I felt like my friends were more excited about my upcoming birthday than I was. They talked about the new independence we would have; oddly, I felt that what they saw as independence was increasingly linked to my status as chauffeur. Particularly, Monique, Derek, Charlie, and Beth seemed to think that the four additional seats in my car belonged to them. They implied that once my birthday rolled around, the five of us could abandon Krissy, Randy, and Lily. Part of me thrived on becoming the center of attention, but another part worried that if they could carelessly shove aside Krissy, Randy, and Lily when they were no longer expedient, what would happen when Monique, who turned sixteen a month after me, got her license? What made Derek think I even wanted to stop being friends with Lily, Krissy, and Randy? They had become a part of my life and I wasn't willing to just cut them off like an unnecessary appendage because I didn't have room in my car for them. Couldn't their parents still find a way to drive them to the same places we were headed?

Memory 44

The night before my birthday, Jane called and invited me to dinner.

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“You just want to be the first person I drive without a parent in the backseat.”

“I wasn’t aware you thought so highly of me, Adam. How ever did you see through my shallow manipulations?”

“I have had years of practice.”

“Keep it up ,and you’re paying for your own dinner.”

I agreed to pick her up at seven o’clock. She promised I wouldn’t be disappointed. When I arrived at her house the next evening, I asked Jane where we were headed. It turned out she had made reservations at my favorite Mexican restaurant. As we nibbled on nachos and drank non-alcoholic daiquiris, we caught up on the latest events in our lives.

“Ralph and I went to this really fancy French restaurant for our anniversary; it was so cliché. I mean he even ordered in French. Who knew? When it was time the bill, his credit card was declined. I had to foot the bill.” We laughed until we were almost overcome by tears.

“I wish my life was that funny. I’m sure you heard about Monique’s breakup with Randy? It was awful. He tried to sit with us at lunch the next day and Derek told him he had to sit elsewhere. Before I could say we should be adults about the whole thing, Randy just walked away. It was like he saw something frigid in their eyes and knew it would be a waste of time to try winning them over.”

“Let’s not ruin a good time by talking about them.” I was so proud of her. Ever since the night of the football game, after I called her and told her about Beth’s party and the beer incident, she had more of an effort to include me in her outings with Ralph and Ken. Whenever I hung out with them, she seldom brought up Derek or the others, and

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would change the topic if I brought them up. I knew she despised them, but she did a good job of keeping it to herself. She could have capitalized on some of the alienation I felt that fall and tried to convince me to stay away from them, but Jane recognized that I had to come to that conclusion myself.

After dinner Jane told me to drive to her house. “My parents are out for the night. Don’t look at me like that, I’m not going to pull out a bottle of Bud and shove it down your throat. My parents are down with you coming over to watch a movie.”

“I’d hope so. I’m like a second child to them.” I parked the car in her driveway, locked it, and followed her through the garage into the family room. The lights turned on and my ears were assaulted as a large group screamed out, “Happy Birthday, Adam.”

I looked at Jane. I couldn’t believe she had thrown me a surprise party. I was even more shocked when I looked around the room and realized that she had buried the torch with Derek, Monique, Beth, Lily, Krissy, and Charlie for one evening and invited them to the celebration.

I gave Jane a massive hug and thanked her. I knew how much pride she had to swallow to invite my other friends into her house; it was the best gift she could have given me.

I walked towards Monique. “I can’t believe you actually kept a secret.” The others all laughed. Monique smiled. “Jane worked so hard to put this together; I couldn’t risk how devastated she’d be if I screwed up everything.”

Lily appeared from the kitchen with a cake in her hand. She looked radiant in the glow of the candles. I knew that she had baked it and was touched that she had taken the time out of her busy schedule to honor me.

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The party was one of the best nights I had in a while. I was able to forget all about the divisions that had become massive landmines threatening to tear my spirit and body to shreds. It was accepted that no one was going to ruin the evening by asking Jane if they could have something to drink, and I also appreciated that.

It was foolish of me to expect that the peace could last.

Memory 45

The weekend after my birthday was the beginning of winter break and Derek had asked me if I wanted to go on a ski trip. “Charlie, Monique, and Beth are coming. But I have two favors. One, could you drive us since my parents aren’t coming? Two, don’t breathe a word of this to Lily or Krissy.”

“Derek, I’m not comfortable driving us so far in winter weather. What happens if there is a snowstorm?”

“Adam, don’t chicken out on us. You need to learn how to drive when the roads are messy. The sooner you experience it, the more comfortable you will be.” How could I argue with such logic? It was a little harder to honor Derek’s second request. After all, Krissy and Lily had just attended my sixteenth birthday party and had given me such thoughtful gifts. Of course, Derek was the one who had organized the trip, so I wasn’t technically at fault if I didn’t push for the others to be invited. And I did only have four available seats in my car.

So I caved in. Yes, it was weak, but Derek was a force of nature; he was the tornado that could rip me, a house, from my foundations and throw me into another world.

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The trip started out innocently enough. I made a mix for the drive and the weather was perfect. When we arrived, however, and started to unpack my car, I realized how little Derek respected my boundaries. He had hidden several six packs of beer under his luggage. If I had known it was there before we left, I would have hurled it out of my car. How dare he put me in such a position. If we had been pulled over, or gotten into an accident of some sort, and the police had noticed the beer in my car, I could have lost my driver's license.

I began to scream at him and would have punched him if Charlie hadn't held me back. Derek was equally outraged. "Chill the fuck out. My house, my rules. Since I invited you, you have no right to order me around."

"That's not the point." He was being obtuse. I knew the others sided with Derek; it was going to be a long weekend.

Memory 46

. Ever since the failed ski trip with Derek, Charlie, Monique, and Beth, I've refused to speak with them. I went cold turkey on them for what has now been about two months. Jane is proud of me, but if she had any idea of how fragile I am right now, she might be a little less interested in gloating about her perfect life and try to help me re-evaluate the mess that mine has become.

The very first thing I did when I came back from the ski trip was make a mix tape called Adam's emotional battle cry; I would play it on blast constantly. At some point I scratched it to death, thank God for the play list function in my Windows Media Player. The CD was mostly songs about singers saying the big FU to their ex-lovers. While I was

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never in love with any of them, I still found that the way they had bewitched me into becoming emotionally dependent on them perhaps paralleled a romantic relationship gone awry. The subtext of most of the songs was something like: “You hurt me. I invested a lot of faith in you. I had to get rid of you. It still hurts. But each day I am getting stronger. I can’t believe how blind I was to your manipulations. I am never going to be weak again.”

It was one thing to listen to Alanis Morsiette, Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Justin Timberlake, but it was something else entirely to apply their wisdom to my life. Obviously, those pop stars had it easier than me; they’re attractive and wealthy so they could seek comfort in ways that I couldn’t. So I had to find alternative ways of bringing their lessons into my life. I threw myself into my schoolwork and fell back on my friendships with Jane, Kayla, Ken, and Ralph.

Yet, something was missing. I had classes with Derek, Beth, Monique, and Charlie everyday. It killed me that they were all laughs and smiles, as though my absence wasn’t affecting their emotional state. I wanted to see dark circles under their eyes from sleepless nights; I hoped for emails begging me to take them back. Even the occasional wistful look in my direction when I spoke in class would have satisfied me. But, of course, I was the one with the sleepless nights and guilty conscious. I was the one penning notes of apology in my notebook when the teacher wasn’t glancing in my direction only to hurl them into the trash can afterwards. And as for the pining looks, well it wouldn’t have taken a rocket scientist to see the ways I worked so hard to pretend that I wasn’t paying any attention to them that it basically telegraphed to everyone I was craving their presence back in my life.

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Beth—Whom I began to believe was actually the mastermind between Derek’s sadistic schemes but allowed him to take credit for her success so others would see her as confidante—found the most brutal way to torture me. She knew that Lily and I had been close in our first two years of high school; she also recalled how Jane and I had been the ones who worked to make Lily acceptable to Derek and company. Lily, while well treated on a superficial level by the others, had never ascended to quite the pivotal position I had in the constellation of stars that formed our universe. Over time she began to obsess about how to elevate herself. Whenever she found herself invited to a social event by Derek or Monique, she would debase herself to a level that was almost comical. She would volunteer to come ahead of time to decorate, to pay for all the snacks, to clean up afterwards, anything to make herself necessary. I cared enough for Lily that I thought her desperate displays were awful to view; I even entertained the notion, several times, of screaming at the top of my lungs, in front of the entire group at the party, that they would always deny Lily to the zenith of Mount Olympus and that they got a twisted satisfaction out of watching her increasingly servile actions and mocking them later. But, I could never hurt Lily in that manner. In truth, Lily and I had that desperate urge to please in common. Certainly, I had done worse things, privately, in my quest to keep my place on the mountain, than Lily had ever considered.

But back to Beth and her ploy to feed on my misery. After I publicly cut Derek and the others by aligning myself with Jane, Ralph, Ken, and Kayla, Beth began to prepare Lily to fill my vacated throne on the mountain. Like a treacherous snake, Beth whispered that Lily could only have access to the ambrosia if she abandoned me. I was a weight causing her to sink; Beth manipulated Lily’s taste for the melodramatic by

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comparing Lily to the romantic heroine of *Titanic*, Rose. In a few words she evoked the scene in the film during which Jack had frozen to death in the water and told Rose that she needed to let go of him and let his sink corpse to the bottom. I am sure Lily had a momentary crisis of conscious...albeit a very short moment...and then decided to give me the cold shoulder.

I won't deny that Lily's public denial of my existence was painful. Watching her flourish was even more disheartening. Somehow the role had been right for the whole time. She began to take edgy fashion risks as her confidence grew, becoming more beautiful and vivacious. Monique and Krissy would gather around her and coo about how much she had changed for the better. I won't deny that I was jealous; I had always felt the fragility of my status at the center of things. It took me a long time to quell my conscience, which had been strong back in the days before Derek and Monique became an obsession.

Having officially lost Lily, my remaining devotion was limited to Jane, Ralph, Ken, and Kayla. At times I found my standing here precarious as well. Kayla wasn't quick to forget that when Randy upgraded to Monique I had spread the rumor that Kayla was a frigid prude. In fairness I had been asked, no demanded, to find a way to make it acceptable for Monique to steal a boy in the midst of a relationship. Likewise, Ken had a hard time separating the allegedly new and improved Adam from the old spineless version. He wasn't convinced the retooling was permanent, and events would prove him to be correct in his analysis. As for Ralph and Jane, they were so wrapped up in each other that at times I felt like a ghost. They knew I was there, but they found it easy to push me from their thoughts when they needed alone time. Being a fifth wheel of dubious

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standing was a major demotion from being the center of attention. The fear of losing everything kept me awake at night, in addition to the heartbreak over my split with Monique, Beth, Derek, and Charlie.

This lack of sleep and constant anxiety began to undermine the amount of time I put into my schoolwork. I would read a chapter about FDR and the WPA during the Great Depression and the text floated in front of my eyes nonsensically. Or, as we moved into the most difficult topic of the semester in my mathematics course, formulas that laid the ground for the math classes I would take in my junior and senior years, I convinced myself I understood them and would turn homework assignments only to get them returned with red marks and the note, see me during my office hours, in the margin. It didn't help that the stubborn voice in my head had returned. The voice insisted that it didn't matter if I went to office hours or not, the teacher would never be able to explain things in a manner that I could grasp given that I was only a few IQ points above the definition of legally retarded. Even in my best subject, English, things were looking disastrous. Papers were being returned insisting that I had misinterpreted Estella's actions in *Great Expectations*, or that my thesis about Rashkalnikov in *Crime and Punishment* lacked clarity and focus.

Presently, I would realize that all these symptoms were endemic of my seasonal depression disorder, though it would not be correctly diagnosed until later. If I had been paying attention to my mood and any patterns, like Dr. Johansen had insisted I should do, or was being completely honest with my parents when they asked about my academic performance, I might not have swallowed my pride and continued down the path of destruction associated with Charlie, Monique, Derek, Beth, and Lily. But that's over and

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done with, and counting the could-have-would-have-should-haves will only make me rip out every single hair on my head.

Memory 47

Forty-eight hours after I almost punched my fist through the mirror in the men's bathroom at school, I showed up at Beth's house. It was a dark and freezing snowy night; the kind of night that kept most sane people huddled in front of a fireplace with a good book, but by this point I wasn't sure I was sane anymore.

When I knocked at Beth's door it was around 10:00 PM on a Tuesday night. Her mother answered the door. She had curlers in her hair and was wearing a fleece nightgown. I tried not to giggle hysterically at the mudpack on her face.

"I know it's really late, and I apologize, but I need to see Beth. We have this math test tomorrow and there's a concept I can't master. I was hoping Beth might be willing to make some quick cash and tutor me?" Beth's mother thought about my statement for a few moments. She wasn't the type of woman to consider mathematics as necessary to life, except when she received her monthly Visa bill, looked at it, and shoved it in front of her husband's face. Beth's mother was also bizarrely intimidated by her daughter's intellect. It made her feel inferior, and Beth's mother was the type of woman who had spent her life with a superiority complex.

"If it were up to me, I would let you fail the damn test, but if Beth wants to make pocket money by helping you out, I am not going to stop her. You can stay out here while I go ask her if she wants to see you."

A few moments later, Beth emerged. "What a performance you put on, Adam. I give it two stars. You actually had my mother convinced that not only did we have a huge

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math exam tomorrow, but that also you and I have been on speaking terms for the last two months. We both know there isn't a math exam anytime in the near future, so what do you really want?"

I wanted to slap her face and call her a misogynistic term, but that wasn't going to fly. Such an action would have to remain in the realm of fantasy, something I could readily conjure to treasure when needed. Instead I asked, "Could we please go sit in my car, where I can turn on the heater, or talk in your living room before I get hypothermia?"

Beth pushed her glasses down her nose and looked at me like she was a teacher scolding a recalcitrant student. "Why should I give you the time of day, excuse me, night, when you hurt my feelings?" Hah, as if Beth had feelings. One of the voices in my head suggested I get down on my knees and plead like I have never pled for anything before. A different voice, which sounded eerily like a hybrid of Beth and Derek, told me that I didn't have a chance to convince Beth that she should assist me in winning back my old friends.

"Did you hear me, Adam? You can come in, but only for as long as it takes to warm up. You definitely won't make it past the foyer; even the snow on your boots isn't good enough to be in my presence."

"Beth, hear me out. This hasn't been my year. When everything changed, and it happened so fast, I just wasn't ready. I wanted to cling to my childhood innocence. I came off as judgmental and that's not a great characteristic in a friend. If only I had been honest with myself, and with all of you, things would have stayed the way they should have. Maybe you haven't noticed, but I'm worse off now. The identity I worked so hard to craft is falling apart, and I need someone to hold me up again. In the past two months I

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have realized all the great things you and Derek and Monique and Charlie have done for me. I thought I was being brave in sticking to my guns; I thought I had the strength to abandon all of you, but clearly I don't. So now I am appealing to you, Beth, I want you guys to give me a second chance."

"Adam, that's sweet of you to come here and confess so many things about yourself that are hard to say. But, you are giving me way too much credit. I can't turn to the others at the lunch table, and say 'I miss Adam, let's take him back.'"

"Beth, now is not the time for you to play down the way you have used your cunning to control us all. I know others don't see it, but I do. I am asking you from the bottom of my heart, please help me."

"I'll sleep on it." My fate rested in her hands.

Memory 48

Waiting for Beth's verdict was impossible; I couldn't sleep. I paced around my room. Could Beth's compassion outweigh her ambition? Did the others even miss me in the sense that I missed them? None of them seemed to be falling apart so publicly and quickly. What would they expect of me if they agreed to take me back? Surely there would be consequences. There are always consequences.

I checked the clock radio by my bed. It flashed 10:16 PM. 10:16...it couldn't be. I for sure left Beth's house around two hours ago, didn't I? I couldn't be so lost that the ways in which time measured itself no longer made sense?

Something about 10:16 resonated within me. Well, of course, it's 10:16 on a Tuesday night. Jane would up be studying for at least another forty-five minutes. She would help me through this mess I created, wouldn't she? I know I would have stepped

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up for her if she had a major conflict with Ralph or Ken and desperately needed to win them back. If our friendship wasn't one-sided, which Jane constantly assured me, then she could certainly take a break from algorithms and factorial equations to hear me out.

I dialed Jane's number. Even punching the familiar buttons helped me to breathe easier. It reminded me of all the times we've spoken together over the years, the ways we have come to rely on one another, the crises we have averted, and how we always managed to come back together after our massive blowouts. A voice answered. "Adam whaz up?" I'll tell you "whaz up." Someone is pretending to be Jane and answering her home phone. What if it was a robber? But how would the robber know my name? Well, what if the robber had been stalking Jane for a while and knew all of her friends by name, including me, Kayla, Ken, and Ralph. Damn. I knew that voice was familiar. It was Ralph. He was the Marsha Brady to my Jan. I never dared to answer Jane's home phone, it just seemed like an invasion of privacy, and here goes her good for nothing boyfriend answering her phone like one of those morons in the old Budweiser commercial.

"Yo Adam, you still there man?"

Sure, Ralph. I am there and I will always be there. And when I get the opportunity to squash you like the little parasite you are, I will gladly find my heaviest pair of doc martin boots and stamp you out. But, of course, I couldn't say that.

"Adam, is there a bad connection?"

"Sorry Ralph, just a little distracted. Can I talk to Jane?"

"She's a little tied up at the moment, buddy."

Don't call me, buddy in that patronizing tone, Ralph. You haven't earned the right. I am not that desperate.

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Voice three picks up the extension and adds, “Actually you are pretty damn desperate right now. Isn’t that why you caved—like an addict who couldn’t get over his fix. Withdrawal was too much for you, old sport.”

If I could scream at the top of my lungs and put on a convincing show of sanity, I’d be prepping my vocal chords like Pavarotti on opening night. But conducting a frontal assault on your best friend’s boy and his unusual ally, the voice in my head, well, even reading it in my diary makes me shake my head.

“Ralph, listen, I know how Jane gets about math problems. But I really need to discuss something with her. Could you please tell her I will only take like five minutes of her time.”

“I’d be happy to do that for you, Adam, but she’s in the shower, can I have her call you back?” The shower! Ralph is in Jane’s room while she is showering pawing through her possessions? There is no society where this could be acceptable.

“Adam, are you still there?”

“Uh...yeah...um...could you please have Jane call me when she’s...uh...decent.”

“Not a problem man, see you tomorrow.”

“Sure thing.” Good lord, how long has this been going on. I knew Jane and Ralph were becoming one of our high school’s quirky power couples. Everyone knew they were dating; most people didn’t see the common bond, but they agreed the chemistry was palpable and stayed out of the way. But, I wonder how many of those casual observers had seen what I haven’t? Was she really sleeping with Ralph? And shouldn’t I have been the first one to know? Before I could answer that question, my own phone rang. I didn’t need to check caller ID to know it was Jane.

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“Jane, how could you betray me like that?”

“Nice to hear your voice too, Adam. Whaz up?”

“No...no...no...it’s too late...he’s polluted you!”

“Adam, you need to calm down. Who polluted me? And how did I betray you exactly?” Jane was used to my theatrics; in fact, she was probably one of the few people who didn’t take them personally anymore. “Jane, you’re sleeping with Ralph and you couldn’t even bother to tell me?”

“Whoa, slow down Adam.”

“Don’t tell me to slow down like I am some horse without blinders, Jane. I may be self-absorbed, but I am not a moron. You talk just like him. You’re becoming him.”

“Who is it exactly that you think I am becoming, Adam?”

“Stop it right now, Jane, quit screwing with my head.”

“Is this a joke, Adam? Because right now I feel like I am the one you owe an explanation.”

“Can’t you hear yourself, Jane. You have started...talking like him. You never used to speak in Ebonics, but next thing I know you’ll turn into Lil Kim at the MTV VMAs with your breast barely covered by a pasty?”

“Adam, that’s not only the dumbest sentence I’ve heard from your mouth, but it’s also beneath you to be so racist.”

“Yeah, well it’s beneath you to let Ralph get on top of you.”

There was a pause. A long, heavy, pause. Then she started to cry frustrated tears. Her teeth were clenched. “Adam, this is precisely why I can’t tell you everything. Do you know what your biggest flaw is? You only care about yourself. You don’t care who you

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hurt, and how you do it. You're completely wrapped up in your own little illusory world where you sit on this throne and hold this golden scepter. You spend every possible moment polishing your golden crown because you are so proud of it; no one else has earned it because no one can ever be as perfect as you. That's a shitty, lonely life, Adam. Over time, your subjects are going to revolt, or just move elsewhere, and your kingdom will be nothing. Is that what you really want?"

"The only thing I want, Jane, is a best friend who can be completely honest with me."

"I can't be completely honest with you, Adam, when you aren't completely honest with yourself."

"What the hell does that mean? Why are you being so cryptic?"

"I can't do this right now, Adam. Please just leave me alone."

"But I need your help, Jane."

"Take your needs to someone who cares, Adam. Now if you don't mind, I am going to give my boyfriend a French kiss because I think he's incredibly sexy. Say hi to your stuffed Scooby-Doo for me." Click. My heart wouldn't slow down. My pulse was racing with rage. I just wanted her to be there when I confronted Derek and the others, as a support system I could lean on. Surely, she would know what's reasonable while Derek and his dazzling brilliance blinded me. She could rescue me from making a stupid decision. And now, she was too busy rolling around in soiled sheets with Ralph. Everything I ever wanted—to be respected, to have so many friends that there isn't enough room for all of them to sign my yearbook, to star in theatre productions, to be crowned prom king—seemed to be in my reach. And what will Jane have? Well, it won't

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be her dignity because she gave that up to the first guy that actually showed an interest in her. Isn't that typical?

In my room I picked up a framed picture of Jane and myself at the zoo outside the tiger cage—we both had a thing for tigers; we thought they were such powerful creatures—Jane had given me the frame for my thirteenth birthday. She had decorated it at one of those do it yourself craft stores that are so popular. It was painted black and orange, to match the tiger's stripes, and there were sequins on it, too. She had put so much effort in it. Who knew that three years she would be so dickmatized that she wouldn't even have the time to talk me through my issues in my hour of need. I don't need to look at that shit anymore; I hurled the frame at the mirror on the inside of my closet. Listening to the sound of the shattered glass, it was like a chorus of angels. All this pent up energy, this rage, this sorrow, this confusion, it was just released in a moment of recklessness.

“Adam, are you all right?”

“Never better, Mother. I am going for a ride.”

“Isn't it a little late to go out on a school night?”

“What are you going to do, Dad? Take away my keys?”

“No, Adam, you're old enough to make your own decisions. But I just want you to remember the best relationships are based on trust and respect.”

“What would you know about respect and trust? What does anyone know about respect and trust?”

I slammed my bedroom door and stomped down the staircase. I knew my parents were wide awake, but I wanted the whole neighborhood to suffer. I wanted my brother to

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wake up, confused, I wanted the dogs to start whining. I wanted everyone to hurt just like I was hurting. I had hurt so long, all by myself, and it felt like it was the ample time for everyone else to hurt.

I got into my jeep and blasted my Adam's emotional battle cry mix. I made the conscious decision not to wear my seatbelt. I knew if I got caught I would have to pay a fee and potentially get points on my brand new license before the lamination even started to fade.

One of the voices in my head finally made an appearance. It said what I wasn't willing to. "So, Adam, you're not going to purposely crash into a tree or rear end another car, but...you aren't exactly praying it doesn't happen." Hearing your own death wish spoken aloud is a harrowing experience. I took the left turn from my street on to the main road at 50 mph. The limit was 25 mph. I wasn't sure where I was heading. I used to find security in seeking out the playground at the elementary school, which Jane and I had attended. We would sit out there in the rain when one of us was going through some sort of crisis. It's funny how one's definition of crisis changes as he or she gets older. When Jane and I were young, a crisis was a grape juice stain on Jane's new dress right before school pictures were taken. Or it was when George, the third grade bully, had pushed me in the mud and forced me to eat worms in front of the entire class. I would gladly be pushed in the mud daily and eat those worms if things could be simple again.

I realized I was starving. There was a void in my stomach the size of the void in my personal life; perhaps if I could at least attend to that, I wouldn't feel quite so miserable. On my way to Taco Bell, my favorite fast food chain, I reflected on the summer nights when Derek, Monique, Charlie, and I would sit on the bench near the

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trash compactor and just talk; as I waited in line behind several hummers filled with happy students a grade or two ahead of me, it was enough to make me nostalgic and resentful. Beth had the power to resurrect those days and the bitch was taking satisfaction in torturing me, like a grand inquisitor would stretch a heretic out on a rack even after he confessed. I wanted to call her, and beg, but I knew that weakness wasn't going to get me what I desired. No, not desired, desperately needed now that Jane had been written out of the story of my life.

I ordered a grande meal, of nine soft tacos; I knew that I could eat them all by myself. It wasn't that they even tasted that great, it was just the desire to feel a warm security in my stomach.

I wasn't ready to go back to my lonely room, to stare at a phone that wouldn't ring, a computer screen on which no IMS were waiting for my attention. There wasn't even anything on TV that could preoccupy me.

I found myself parking the car at the old elementary school and headed towards the swings. I was shocked to see two bodies pumping back and forth in the air; heedless of the cold, the hour. What kind of negligent parent would allow such young kids to be alone in the dark playing at a park. This wasn't 1950; sexual predators could kidnap them at any moment, or they could witness drug deals under the sodium lights.

I walked toward the swings slowly, I didn't want to frighten the children. They looked so familiar, but then again don't all young kids look vaguely familiar? I heard their high pitched giggles and that what was caused my stomach to sink. I would recognize those laughs anywhere. They were Adam and Jane circa the early 1990s. Sure enough, the little girl was wearing Jane's signature ponytails and her favorite pink scarf

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that her mother had knitted for her as a Christmas present. The little boy, who must have been some incarnation of my earlier self, was wearing the leather bomber jacket I had received from my maternal grandpa the Chanukah before he died.

Had these ghosts come to trade places with me? I could spend eternity on that swing with a youthful Jane while some misty entity would face the deconstruction of my delusions.

Slowly, I walked towards the figures. I had to look into their eyes. They could help me determine my future, and assist in reevaluating my past.

I got down on my knees in front of the children; I figured it was the only way I could down to their level.

“Adam, Adam, are you alright? Please, be alright. Talk to me.”

I looked up into Jane’s red eyes. “Why have you stopped swinging?”

“Adam, there wasn’t anyone on the swings. After we hung up, I got worried about you. I told Ralph he needed to go and hoped to make it to your house in time to talk to with you. Your mom and dad said you already left. They were frantic.”

“But how did you know...where did they go...why did you come...”

“Something told me you’d be here tonight, Adam. And it’s a miracle I listened. I saw you crouch in front of the swings like you were talking to someone and I was frightened. Suddenly, there was this huge gust of wind, and one of the swings struck you in the head. I was so worried you would never open your eyes again. I can’t express what I felt. Whatever’s wrong, Adam, whatever you need. I’ll fix it.”

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And so it was arranged. Jane and I would meet Beth, Monique, Derek, Charlie, and Lily at a local coffee shop on Saturday morning. I tried not to groan out loud when I heard that Lily would be there. While she had replaced me for all intents and purposes, her position was as fragile as mine. One screw up on her part, and she would be dismissed to some purgatory where anyone removed from a higher rung on the social ladder would wail about the raw deal they received. I had visited this purgatory recently, so I knew what it was like. These specters were sapped of color and drained of strength. Escape was virtually impossible. How I managed to find my way out eludes my understanding to this day.

On Friday night Jane and I gathered at her kitchen table to discuss strategy for tomorrow. “It’s going to be ugly. Don’t expect them to give you equal opportunity to air your grievances. You’re going to get a lot of shit shoved in your face, most of it ludicrous and petty. Are you sure you want this?” I was conflicted. But I couldn’t let Jane see my struggle; she would be able to sense my weakness like a shark senses blood in the water before it goes in for the kill. I would not be sent back to purgatory.

Jane looked at me like I was possessed by madness. She was waiting for a response. Had there been a question? Did I dare ask her to repeat it? It wasn’t so much a question as a proposal. “Obviously you’re going to throw yourself on the tracks to the mercy of train Derek. I can’t stop the wreckage, but it your fantasies—fantasies of returning to a state where you could saunter down the hallway in between Derek and Monique with Charlie and Beth at the ends of our formation, where you cut everybody in the lunch line, where the socially inept would yield their tables to you— well if these fantasies don’t play out, I’ll head the clean up crew.”

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Why, oh why, was I so hell bent on destruction? I think back to everything Jane offered; No one would ever offer me anything so secure ever again. Why wasn't Jane good enough? She'd been good enough all the way up to high school. Which one of us changed? At the time I thought it was Jane. I thought she craved attention more than I did. She fed off the light reflected in Ralph's eyes every time he saw her. It made me sick to my stomach. And Ken? He was like some attendant in a fairy tale. If Jane needed someone to carry the train of her dress; well, Ken would be mindless enough to do it. He was so servile. It was laughable.

An alliance with Kayla? That was out of the question. Ever since Randy had dumped her for Monique she sought solace in any relationship she could get her hands on. She had such low self-esteem. I have found that whenever I encounter someone with self-esteem lower than me, I have to run away, because looking at them would be looking at myself, and I am still not healthy enough to admit that out loud. I can write it in this diary, but that's about it.

Memory 50

I was jittery as hell. When I picked up Jane at her house she noticed the dark circles under my eyes and the way my hands were shaking. I ran my fingers through my hair as we sat at stop signs. If I had been old enough, I'd probably taken up smoking just for that morning. I can imagine the heat entering my body as I inhaled; it would have confirmed I was still alive. But I'll dismiss that fantasy. I am too much of a goody goody to jeopardize my health and breaking the law was the last thing I would do.

I was turning the radio dials constantly. I couldn't find the right song for the moment. I needed something upbeat. I didn't want profound lyrics; I just wanted

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something to replace the stream of conscious to which Jane wasn't privy. It was a dangerous game; if I didn't keep both my hands on the wheel, I would run us right off the road. For a second I considered it. Death seemed so peaceful; worms didn't differentiate between celebrities and hobos; each corpse looked the same.

Before I could run us off the road, however, I entered the parking lot of the coffee shop. I didn't see any cars I recognized. They wouldn't stand me up, would they? Beth promised. Weren't her words sacrosanct?

"You were driving pretty fast, Adam. I am sure we are just early. Besides, Monique makes a production of everything. You didn't really expect them to be here on time, did you?"

I didn't have enough time to wonder why they didn't want this as badly as I did. Derek pulled up in his SUV with Monique in the front while Charlie rode in the backseat between Beth and Lily. They parked next to us. Wasn't that a good sign? If they thought I was some sickening creature, or had some terrible disease, wouldn't they want to be as distant as possible to avoid the contagion?

I wanted to say something, anything, even a dumb comment about the weather, but I was momentarily frozen. I couldn't be the first to speak. I had to play it cool. If I was overeager like some puppy in a display window at the mall, they would just shake their heads and walk away. Because everyone knows that the overeager puppy has been in that window for a long time and no one wanted him.

Fortunately, Jane was the first to speak. She looked at Derek and said his name coolly. Derek was just as hostile. Beth stepped in before the two of them could lunge at the other's throat. She suggested we enter the coffee shop and try to find a table towards

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the back of the room. I was all for finding the table immediately, but Monique was cavalier about the whole thing. “God, I need a non-fat latte.” That was so typical of her. She was toying with me. She knew that I wanted to get this over with and that it would be tantamount to torture if I watched her flirt with the guy at the counter...she always flirted with the guy at the counter...even if he looked like that creepy shock rocker Marilyn Manson.

Derek saw the game Monique was playing and decided to make his move. “Yeah...I need something, too. What would you recommend, Monique?”

“Oh I don’t know, Derek. Are you trying to be healthy or are you craving something frothy and fattening?”

“Hmmm...frothy sounds good.”

“Well, if I could afford the calories, which I can’t because I am such a lard ass.”

Lily interjected, “Ohmygod Monique you are so not a lard ass. You could be a model.”

“Anyway, as I was saying, if I were you Derek, I would go for a caramel frap with extra whip cream.”

Couldn’t we just get down to business? They were picking drinks that would take careful preparation and a lot of time. I spoke up without thinking, “Jane and I will find a table.” Jane glanced at me. Shit, was this a test? Had I failed?

“Adam, instead of going to breakfast after this, we could just get blueberry muffins while we are here.”

Way to go, Jane, I almost shouted. She was going to be just as aggressive as the others. Beth wasn’t about to let Jane win round one. “Adam, you can wait in line for the

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muffins by yourself while Jane and I find a table.” I didn’t want to be separated from Jane unless absolutely necessary, and I think I was telegraphing that quite clearly.

“That’s fine, Beth. Don’t worry, Jane. I’m a big guy. I can carry two muffins on my own.” If Monique and Derek could play hardball, I would as well.

After I purchased the muffins, I joined the others at the table. Instantly, I realized my mistake. I was the one who had begged for this meeting; I should have been the first to sit down. Instead, I was the last to find my seat. It gave them a chance to look me up and down. I could only imagine what they were thinking.

Beth pulled out a notepad and a red pen from her purse. This was a little unsettling. Why would she need to take notes? And a red pen? The red pen suggested something sinister. Beth explained the rules. “We’re going to keep things simple. One person speaks at a time. That person will be the one holding this ruler, hereafter known as the talking stick. You can’t interrupt the speaker, ever, but you can raise your hand to indicate you want the talking stick next. Once the present speaker is finished, they pass on the talking stick to the person who I recognized as first to raise his or her hand. If someone abuses his or her talking stick privileges, I will take it away. Any questions?”

Jane raised her eyebrows. “Why are you taking notes?”

“Adam will be too emotionally involved to take in everything said about him today. The goal here is improvement. He’ll get a copy of what was said; I suggest he keeps it in his wallet and consult it as necessary as none of the things said will be frivolous. If he wants to be friends with us again, he’ll have to fulfill these conditions.”

Jane’s face turned red with rage. Beth continued, “Who wants first dibs at the talking stick?” Jane raised her hand.

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“Sorry, Jane, but an actual member of the disputing parties should speak first, not a proxy.”

Derek shot his hand up in the air. His words were not easy to process. “Adam’s a clingy attention whore.” I blocked out the rest of his speech. An attention whore? What the hell was an attention whore? I shot my hand in the air. Beth ignored my hand. Apparently Monique had raised her hand first.

“Adam is so judgmental and it makes me feel like a bad person. I can’t help that I like to drink. He can abstain all he wants, but he has no right to preach at me.”

I was still trying to get to speak up about the attention whore label, but Beth pointedly ignored me. Charlie spoke next. “In his question for attention, Adam makes it impossible to be trusted. He trades secrets for social capital. It’s one thing to be a gossip, but Adam doesn’t stop there. He changes his loyalties depending on who’s listening.”

I looked at Lily. So the sweet flower had been taken over by weeds. She planted herself in my rightful place between Derek and Monique. What I once considered a loyal friend now wore a plastered Barbie doll expression; She was Monique’s plaything.

I stuck my hand in the air and waved it around. Beth glared at me. “It isn’t about how showy you are when you raise your hand, Adam, it’s about speed. You have to earn the right to use the talking stick.”

After this trend of Adam bashing continued for about another hour, Jane stood up and let them have it. “I’m sorry but this is pathetic. Adam isn’t perfect, but he’s nothing like the asshole you’ve been describing. Why don’t you all try sitting and taking what has dished at him for almost two hours. I bet you don’t have dignity or grace; I wager all of you would have fled the table in tears and eventually be found floating in a bloody tub.

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And you need to open your fucking eyes. Beth is getting off on this slander being hurled through the coffee shop. When this is over who is going to resent her? If you all reconcile and I can't get why Adam would want that, you'll think she's some genius. It's a play for what you all call social capital. When Beth has enough of you, Derek, or even her secret crush, Monique, what's to stop her from getting rid of you?"

If Beth had claws, she would have torn the flesh from Jane's face. "Who has the ruler?"

"You can take that ruler and shove it up your..."

"Adam, if you can't control your representative, these negotiations are over."

"Jane, please, calm down. If this is too much for you, here are the keys to my car. Go sit there."

Derek spoke up. "I really don't care about Jane's theatrics. I've said all I need to and I feel better." Monique and Charlie quickly agreed.

Monique had something to add. "Tonight we're going out to dinner. If you consult the list, Adam, and drive a separate car, you can join us. Remember, your status is probationary."

"Beth, could you please hand me the list." Jane was silent. For a moment she must have thought that I would rip it to shreds right in front of their eyes and stride out the room a better person. There would be no need for this diary if that were the case. "Thank you so much for your honesty. I promise to make that list my bitch." Monique and Lily got up from the table and gave me a hug. Derek and Charlie also approved my words by shaking hands with me. Derek promised to text me later that afternoon with the name of the restaurant and the time of the reservation.

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Jane wouldn't look at me as we walked out of the coffee shop. As we got into the car, she was silent. When I pulled up in front of Jane's house, I stopped the car and locked the doors before she could get. I looked her straight in the eyes. "I'm not letting you until you speak to me." After she turned to the window, refusing to look at me, she muttered something under her breath.

"Nice try, Jane, but muttering isn't speaking."

"Fine. You want to talk, we'll talk. If you actually go out with them tonight, you're a bigger moron than I thought. How long are you prepared to agonize over them, Adam? You might be willing to forgive and forget infinitely, but eventually they are going to get sick of playing you and they'll push you out. I can guarantee you the pain you've been feeling for the last month or so will pale in comparison to what you'll be feeling the day that happens." I decided to ignore Jane. She could be so self-righteous when she played the Cassandra card.

"I guess that means you aren't going to help me pick out what I am going to wear tonight?"

"You don't need my help in debasing yourself. You seem to be doing an excellent job of it on your own. Call when you want to talk about anything else, I am there for you, I am always there for you...but I need a break from hearing about Derek and the others. Can you respect that?"

And I let her out of the car. Her candid words had earned Jane her freedom.

Memory 51

I should have spent the afternoon working on a paper for my history class, but I couldn't keep my thoughts together. Every time I started to think about the antebellum

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South, I couldn't help but compare myself to all of those plantation owners who went from being powerful to losing everything. When they were at the pinnacle of their success, they had never seen the downfall that was coming. Because they hadn't seen it coming, the fall was that much harder. And wasn't that what was going on here? I never realized Derek and Monique saw such an intolerable, horrible creature when they looked at me. Hearing the truth wasn't easy; I knew it had to be the truth.

I finally heard my phone bleat. I knew it was the promised text message from Derek. My hands trembled as I reached for the phone. What if he had changed his mind and was telling me I wasn't even good enough to be considered for a probationary dinner. What would become of me? How would I walk through the hallways with my head held high? Did the entire school know that I was a gossiping, judgmental attention whore? Did I have hypocrite tattooed on my forehead?

Calm down Adam. You haven't even read the text yet.

No, I haven't read the text. I am absolutely right. I just have to be rational. It shouldn't be difficult to be rational—people do it all the time. I am not an animal—I can be rational. And so I read the text. It wasn't exactly friendly, but then again, when are text messages friendly? Aren't they cold by nature? You don't hear a voice associated with the text and no one is going to write *Gone With The Wind* on a cell phone; they want to get something said quickly without needing to pick up the phone. Anyway, the text said to meet at Malibu House at 7:30 PM. The reservation was under Derek, if I got there first. Of course the reservation was under Derek. Derek, Derek, Derek, the world was his oyster. Sometimes I resent that bastard so much—and other times I just want to be Derek.

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Malibu House is a very trendy bistro; it has a dance floor with a DJ who plays the latest hits. The wait staff is condescending, the portions small, the prices exorbitant. Jeans and a polo shirt would not be acceptable. My clothes had to whisper “expensive” while intimating that it was effortless. I pulled open the oak doors to my closet with so much force they almost came apart in my hands. I started to rifle through my clothes; a veritable tornado tossing helpless articles through the air landing haphazardly.

Would it be my silver fitted tee with an open black vest and black suit pants? Nope, that was definitely trying too hard—who wore vests anymore?

Maybe my dark purple highly starched collared shirt from Structure with khakis. No, that wasn’t right either, asserted my reflection. It practically reached out from the , mirror with a pointed mocking finger while the other hand was held up to its mouth covering a cruel giggle. And who was this reflection? It couldn’t be me. My hands were clenched tightly at my side and I was frowning—something spooky was going on here.

Voice one started in, “Pull yourself together. You’re a sleep-deprived mess. They aren’t royalty, why put yourself through this much effort?”

“They are too royalty.” I heard a whoosh of air as someone rudely opened my bedroom door. It was my brother, Brandon. “Hey, Asshole, could you turn it down? You’re distracting me from my video game. Who are you talking to?”

“Um...I was on the phone with Jane.” I couldn’t let my younger brother know that I was talking to myself. He’d tell my parents. They’d call the doctor and I would be classified as just another Looney Toon.

“Yeah, so why is the phone all the way on your bed?”

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“Jane was being a bitch, so I hung up and threw the phone on the bed right before you got in here.”

“Whatever you say, dude, whatever you say. Why do you always have to be such a drama queen?”

I shoved him out the door, slamming it behind him. He stood in the hallway chanting that I was a drama queen. I fantasized about stabbing him with the scissors on my desk, they were blunt and would do a lot of damage, it would be so painful, but if I was arrested for murder, well then I couldn't go out to dinner with Derek, Monique, Beth, Charlie, and Lily, so I quelled my urges—for now.

With an hour to spare, I settled on a dusky blue cashmere pullover with Dockers and shiny black shoes by Gucci. Nobody had to know that they were from Costco. I pushed my hair back with a dab of gel and splashed Ralph Lauren aftershave on my face. It didn't matter that my face was smooth and I had never shaved in my life; it was all about image and smelling amazing.

As I headed out the door my mom told me that my outfit was inspired, but only imagine if I lost a few pounds and considered tanning. I wouldn't allow her words to derail my comeback.

In the car I blasted Justin Timberlake's latest CD. I sped towards Malibu House bopping my head to “Like I Love You.” By the end of the night Derek and the others would realize that I was a changed man. I would smile humbly when they asked me to rejoin the ranks of royalty; I giggled over Jane's sour expression as I posed my crown.

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“Now remember, Adam, they are going to be monitoring every single thing you do and every word out of your mouth. Be charming, but not cocky. When you walk in, no matter how nervous you might be, your body language will not express it. Hands, that means you will not shake. Legs, you will not pause. You will greet the others by rank; address Derek first, then Monique, Beth, Charlie, and finally Lily. And above all you must avoid any traps.”

I put the car in park, turned off the engine, and got out. I locked the door, put my key in my pocket, and made my way towards the entrance of Malibu House. The lawn on either side of the brick pathway was perfectly manicured; the lustrous grass sparkled like jade. I could hear the music blasting before the hostesses stepped outside. They held clipboards and glared at me as they asked for the name and time of my reservation. Just as coolly I stated that was a member of Derek’s party. They found his name on the list and motioned me forward as they opened the tinted glass doors to the restaurant. Malibu House prided itself on being exclusive; the privacy of its self-important patrons so imperative that approaching the establishment one could not see them waiting for their tables in the foyer.

I sat in a black leather chair and stared at the red carpet as I awaited the others. It was like a banquette in the VIP section of a club. The entire effect pleased me. This was the kind of place that should cater to me. If I could eat here, and no one looked at me as though I didn’t belong, then clearly my rightful place was at Derek’s side.

Within moments they arrived and everything was changed. Monique was in a little black cocktail dress that ended mid-thigh; it was cut so low in the front that she was on the verge of a wardrobe malfunction. Her hair cascaded in blonde rivers—she had

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taken to wearing extensions—from her skull—you could get lost swimming in them. Lily sported a red dress resembling a sweater. Her hair was pulled back in a classic ponytail but I could tell she had spent the afternoon at the salon being carefully styled by a beautician. Beth could have passed for Diane Keaton in her black tuxedo number. My sweater and khakis lacked pizzazz when I stood next to Derek and Charlie. Derek was wearing tight silver pants with a black turtleneck complimenting his pectoral muscles and abs. Charlie wore tight black jeans and a silver v-neck. Had they purposely collaborated on their outfits?

The waitress led us to a booth near the middle of the restaurant. We had a spectacular view of the dance floor; couples were grooving in time to the beat as though they had rehearsed the steps before filming a music video.

Within minutes the first test had begun. A waiter with frosted blonde tips approached our table and asked for our drink orders. Derek ordered for the table. “The lady in red will have an appletini, the lady in black wants a strawberry daiquiri, a shot of Gray Goose for the one in the suit. My friend and I will each have light beer.” I wanted to laugh at this preposterous situation; surely the waiter would realize we were underage and kick us out of Malibu House before we had even ordered appetizers. He didn’t even ask to see ID—maybe Malibu House believed that it was inappropriate to ask their upscale clientele to verify their age. After all, didn’t stars like Lindsay Lohan down Redbull and vodka at fashionable dinners? The waiter stared at me. “Just a glass of water please.”

“Sparkling or tap?”

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“Tap would be just fine.” As he walked away he snorted. What did I care if he thought I was a teetotaler cheapskate? It wasn’t about winning his approval; I just needed to impress Derek and Monique, because they would call the shots. In order to move on to round two I simply had to ignore their drink orders. Easy enough. Bring it on, bitches.

They were well prepared. Monique leaned in towards me, offering an eyeful of her cleavage. “I hear Kayla is up to her slutty antics. Do you know who she’s hooking up with right now? And the other day one of the girls in the gym showers told me Kayla had the Syph.”

I wasn’t about to go down this early in the match; I had to think fast. Did they want me to offer the latest gossip about Kayla because they considered her inferior so her secrets didn’t matter? Or, were they checking to see if I was capable of being loyal and keeping my mouth shut when necessary. This way they would know what they said at the table would go to the grave with me. Beth looked at her watch. Crap, was this like Jeopardy? Did I have to answer the question within a given amount of time? Oh the pressure!

I found a way to compromise. “Everyone has heard the STD thing by now, but I can’t confirm it; Kayla confides in Jane more than me. As for who she is hooking up with, it’s most likely she’s in some parking lot with two desperate married thirty somethings.”

Lily took a huge gulp of her appletini. I caught her make a face, but I didn’t say a word. If she wanted to pretend that she was somebody else for the sake of the others, who was I to judge? Later I would realize the irony of even stopping to think that she was

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pretending to be someone else, while I completely ignored how much I was censoring myself. I was playing the fool and the court was having a festive time.

Derek brought up the trick they were playing on Krissy. “Frankly, I am getting bored pretending to be some guy interested in her. It’s time to reveal that it was us wooing her. I can’t wait to see her face. But how we do we get the most amusing reaction.”

“Well, Derek, I think we should print out the portions of her chats where she attempts to get him interested in cybersex and he doesn’t pick up on it. We can pass them around to the entire school. That might work.”

“Nah, Monique, that’s kind of pathetic. Adam, do you a fresh prospective to offer?”

“Her fake online boyfriend IMs her, ok? He says that he wants to meet up at the mall and go on a date. She comes to Monique and begs for assistance. Monique offers advice about how to flirt, what to wear, how far she should go on the first date. All the things that Krissy is too dumb to decide on her own. The whole time, Monique has a camera hidden in the room and captures the entire conversation.”

“And that humiliates her how?”

“That’s only part one. Meanwhile we follow Krissy to the rendez-vous As time passes and he is late, we keep taping. We could even recruit a couple of guys in the mall to walk towards her and then head off, as though they are so disgusted by her they don’t want to hook up. She starts to cry, begins to gather her purse and leave, when suddenly a few of you guys appear from different directions of the mall. Each of you has a section of the AIM conversations and read it as you approach her. The whole time one of you is still

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taping this unseen. Krissy acts all confused and you fill her in. Then the cameraperson jumps out and gets a close-up of her face. Then put it on youtube.”

“Wow, that’s actually kind of devious. We can discuss this plan further tonight on the way to the movie.”

With a little fancy footwork the probationary dinner was a success. I briefly felt bad for Krissy, but knowing my status was closer to being confirmed, I pushed my guilt aside.

Memory 53

Tearing down Krissy was business as usual for Monique and Derek. With my assistance it was cruelly and efficiently accomplished. We were all riding on post humiliation high; we were like vampires sucking the self-esteem out of the pores of unsuspecting victims. This time, however, we would be quickly sobered up.

On Monday when I entered the hallway groups of two or three students were bunched in front of the rows of lockers. They whispered until I approached. I trudged through the dead silence and wondered why no one would make eye contact with me. I saw Jane clustered with Ralph, Ken, and Kayla. They looked devastated. Suddenly Jane snarled at me. “Get over here. What the hell were you thinking, Adam?”

Jane must have read my blank expression as a challenge; she slammed me against the locker hard. “Krissy’s dead, you smug asshole.”

“Krissy’s dead? Don’t be ridiculous Jane. I just saw her the other night.” It dawned on me. The last time I had seen Krissy she was bawling and running blindly out of the mall. “What happened?”

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“She hung herself from the rafters in her attic. To ensure she wouldn’t survive she tied a plastic garbage bag around her neck.” I remembered the way Krissy’s beautiful auburn hair used to swing from side to side. In my mind’s eye her swinging ponytail was replaced by her swinging feet. I wanted to vomit. I had never wanted to vomit so intensely. “Maybe she got a bad grade on a test or was stressed about something stupid.”

“Adam, don’t you dare try to talk your way out of this. She left a note including a copy of the fake conversations online and a link to the video. It’s pretty obvious why she did it. I can’t even be around you right now, Adam. I don’t know that I can be around you for a long time.” Ralph stepped between us as Jane started to shake and tears fell from her eyes.

Shit, why did Krissy have to be such a big baby about the whole thing. If only she had thicker skin, I wouldn’t be in this predicament.

Voice two came calling. “You were the mastermind, Adam. You’re screwed. Do you think Monique, Derek, Beth Lily, and Charlie are going to back up your version? I am sure the five of them already have a story worked out.”

“Get the fuck out of my head.”

“You and me are soulmates, Adam. I am never letting you go.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“I have all the time in the world. I love watching you sweat. “

The vice principal, Mr. Chalke, approached me with all the delicacy of an avalanche. He thundered my name, “Office, now.”

Voice two continued to be snide, “If only your cranium had the capacity for stadium seating. I’m craving some buttered popcorn for this show.”

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Mr. Chalke continued to bluster, “How are we going to clean this up, Adam?” I wanted to scream out that he was the disciplinarian not me, but if ever there was a time to not be a smart ass, this was it. “I asked you a question.”

Confronted by a starving lion, I trembled and stuttered. “Sir?”

“This is an unusual case, young man. If I had my druthers you’d be sitting on your ass in Juvie with all the druggies, robbers and murderers. But you’re a minor and there isn’t precedent for a situation like this. I can’t fathom how a good kid like you could be so twisted. I should expel or suspend you, but I can’t even do that because there is no evidence to indicate that the school was involved in the incident. That being said, I have a punishment for you. You are going to that funeral. You will be sitting in the front row and everyone’s eyes will be on your pathetic squirming body.”

I gulped. “Sir, I don’t think Krissy’s parents would want me there.”

“It’s already been worked out. They want you to see her casket lowered in the ground. They want you to see the consequences of your poor judgment. Pass it on to your underlings, Mr. Ringleader.” Isn’t it ironic? I had always wanted to be recognized as the head of our social group, but never had I pictured such a costly situation.

Memory 54

As I drove home from that hellish and exhausting day of school, I decided I had to make an emergency appointment with Dr. Johansen. I desperately needed him to tell me that what I had done wasn’t significant of something twisted and dying inside me. He had to promise me that my mind wasn’t deteriorating.

I called Dr. Johansen’s emergency voicemail and was shocked to hear him pick up. Everything came out in a breathless rush. “My friend Krissy killed herself. I’m pretty

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sure I'm somewhat responsible. But I resent that I others are making me feel guilty. I need to be absolved of this conflict."

As Dr. Johansen paused for the best response, I pictured him seated in his office, perhaps he had been napping on the blue couch leaning against the left wall. Or he may have been catching up on some reading, perhaps the newest issue of a Journal of Psychiatry or a recently published work addressing anxiety and childhood.

His soothing voice interrupted my rushed thoughts, "Adam, I have an open appointment since my 3:30 canceled. Why don't you come see me so we can discuss this face-to-face."

"Do you think you can help me, Doc?"

"Adam, I can't change what you did nor can I rescue you from the responsibilities you have. What I aim to do is give you a coping strategy. That much I can promise you."

I ended the call and continued towards the Doctor's office. Several times I felt the urge to pull over and throw up, but my body was just racked by dry heaves. Outside the sun glistened on the last lingering snow as late winter transitioned into early spring. The illusion of glittering diamonds appeared before my drained eyes. I could hear the early return of the thrushes and bluejays. They sounded so serene. What right did they have to be serene when I was in such pain? I imagined myself as a hawk swooping down on the defenseless birds and ripping into their meaty necks.

Voice Two interrupted my thoughts. "First your perversions kill one of your vulnerable friends and now you comfort yourself by becoming a predatory bird."

I pushed the voice aside. Like it's ever that easy. "If you have so much rage and a lust for violence, you might as well consider rape."

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“That’s enough.”

“You’re not the boss of me; you’re just living space.. I can make you do whatever the hell I want. You think Derek is a difficult master? You can’t fathom the horrible things I can make you do to yourself and to others.”

I was subdued and mourning, but the silence became a breeding ground for the voices. So I did what I typically do when driving alone. I blasted a mix of Britney Spears songs. I found such comfort in her voice; she was my missing half. Even as Britney’s pleasant voice filled my ears and I strummed my fingers on the steering wheel, I knew that someday I would have to confront those Goddamn voices. Sometimes those voices sounded familiar; especially at night, on the brink of sleep, I could practically place them. But by morning they remained a mystery.

I pulled into the small parking lot behind the two-story brick building in which Dr. Johansen leased his office. The absence of cars made me think that nobody else ever sought therapy. I had a vision of Dr. Johansen spending most of his days curled up on his couch waiting for me to interrupt him. The other patients existed only in my mind. I had to get a hold of my feelings. The parking lot was empty because it was late in the day for an appointment with Dr. Johansen. Likewise, the patient I would have encountered leaving the building had canceled for the day, which explained the stark environment of the parking lot. I know that therapy is a place where you let your guard down and speak things you couldn’t tell anyone because they could never relate to your problems, or you feared that they would judge you, but I made the conscious decision to lie to Dr. Johansen. It was true that the voices had been insinuating themselves into my life more so than usual, as though a barricade separating the mysterious realm from which they came

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had finally been breached, but maybe this barrier could be patched up. After all, so many stressful changes had characterized my life lately, but now I had Derek and a measure of renewed peace; the voices would retreat without the aid of medicine. What difference could it make if I missed a couple of days worth of my antidepressants? It's not like I would pull a Krissy. I laughed uncontrollably. Pull a Krissy— that would definitely become an inside joke for suicide. I had to write that one down somewhere.

I quickly marched down the stairs to the waiting room. I pulled my baseball cap down over my face. Even though the parking lot was completely empty, you never knew who or what could be hiding in the building spying on unsuspecting patients. I was not giving up my privacy that easily. Moments later Dr. Johansen pulled open the waiting room door and motioned for me to follow him to his office. I stood up, didn't make eye contact, or offer my hand in greeting because such intimate gestures gave me hives. I power walked the two hundred feet of gray carpet leading to his office and plopped into a leather chair. Dr. Johansen followed me inside a few seconds later. He pulled the door shut behind him and walked around the leather chair to a leather chair positioned across from me. There was a distance of fifty feet between us; it was meant to bridge the emotional gap between us but I resented being that close to the man. My hands shook slightly and I put them in my pocket and fiddled with my keys so he wouldn't notice the level of my anxiety and order an increase in my medication.

I always tried to edit the events of my week, the bouts of depression, the irritability, the paranoia, the constant sense of being subhuman so he wouldn't increase my medication. I hated taking the medicine I was already prescribed. I had hated taking it ever since my physical over the summer. The doctor was a family friend and during the

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invasive question period, asking whether I needed an HIV Test, he enquired if I took any prescription medications. I wanted to lie, but he took a blood sample so I knew it would show up in my results. I gave him a laundry list of various brands of anti-depressants. He stifled a laugh and concluded I was taking enough medications to tranquilize an elephant, and wondered who my doctor was. This made me defensive. His tone implied that he was skeptical of Dr. Johansen and would be checking into his medical background. Part of me was infuriated that he didn't trust the doctor whom my parents and I had selected, a man with whom we formed a strong rapport. A different part fretted that he would find flaws in Dr. Johansen's practices; if Dr. Johansen was wrong about the medications I was taking, or the coping strategies he suggested, what hope would there be for me? Needless to say, I never returned to our family friend the doctor.

A cough broke up my reverie. "Adam, I have been trying to get your attention for several moments now. Is the magnitude of this situation so severe that you are afraid to discuss it?"

I apologized to Dr. Johansen. He rapidly took down notes as I detailed the backbone of the prank. I made sure to mention my sorrow at Jane's abandonment in my time of need, and how the Vice Principal had proved not to be such a pal. I expressed my agony over attending the funeral. I concluded that I couldn't have predicted Krissy's reaction and that if people should be upset with anyone, they should be pissed at Krissy because she took everything so far.

"Why do you fear attending the funeral so, Adam?"

"You're the Doc, why don't you tell me?"

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“No need to get defensive, Adam. It’s just the situation involves making an example of you. You worry that in being marked as the one who orchestrated the not so innocent joke, that you will be judged. The public judgment you describe and the fear that it will escalate at the funeral are somewhat elevated. The true judgment you are grappling with comes from within.”

“KRISSEY DID WHAT SHE WANTED TO DO. WE DIDN’T MAKE HER WRAP THAT NECK AROUND HER NECK AND SNAP IT.”

“Adam, can you not see that even the mere mentioning of your role in Krissy’s suicide heightens your irritation? Your imagination of being the target of rage, when it is really a time to mourn as a community, is self-centered. At most funerals people focus on saying goodbye to a loved one. In the instances when the death was particularly unpleasant, such as Krissy’s suicide, the service will gloss over the cause of death and instead focus on remembering Krissy’s legacy. But you imagine the entire room filled with Adams; this sea of Adams all glare at you with rage and plot revenge because they believe you directly responsible for Krissy’s death. This is the anxiety that the funeral holds for you. Before you can take your place in the pew and do justice to Krissy the way it should be done, you must look at your reflection in the mirror and forgive yourself. If that doesn’t work for you, I suggest writing a note to Krissy expressing your sorrow and guilt. Then you can place the note by Krissy’s grave if you wish, or you can throw it into your fireplace. Either option will assist you in coming to grips with your conflicted conscience.”

“Are you telling me that no one is going to hold me responsible after the funeral?”

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“I can’t assure you of that. Individuals, in particular your dear friend Jane, have developed a certain reading of you. I imagine she will have take a difficult time reconciling her interpretation of Adam as saint or sinner with the complicated individual that is the sum of Adam and his actions. You must strengthen yourself for the inevitable pain. Perhaps if you distance yourself from Derek.”

“ABSOLUTELY NOT.”

“I can see that isn’t an option at this point. I recommend you focus on your schoolwork. This accomplishment will ease the pain and in the end will cause you to embrace yourself.” When I walked out from the session I felt Dr. Johansen’s advice was bullshit.

Memory 55

The night before the funeral my parents refused to look at me; even Brandon, typically who made it a mission to make my life a living hell, quietly stuffed his face with my mom’s overdone pot-roast and stared at his plate as if some message from God could be found in the mixture of potatoes and peas. I think he was cowed by the power I had over another; how I wished he could understand this was a power I didn’t want.

In my room I turned off the lights and fell back on the bed. I had to shut out reality for a few minutes; I couldn’t take the energy of living. I still wasn’t sure if I genuinely felt guilt over Krissy’s death, or was more devastated by the effects on my social standing. I missed Jane; she would have helped me face the funeral in the morning, but Jane wasn’t taking my calls; she had even instructed her parents to refuse my calls. The abject suffering I was feeling in the moment must have been like the last conscious misery Krissy felt before she asphyxiated.

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Memory 56

I vowed I would be early for the funeral. Sitting in the front pew was bad enough, but it would be considerably worse if I showed up late and had to do the walk of shame down the aisle. I wasn't a king of public relations or anything remotely like that, but it occurred to me that the community might begin to forgive me if I appeared bereft. I may have caused a friend's death, but I could still be traumatized by it. All attention to personal hygiene had to go. My unwashed hair was greasy; I didn't brush my teeth to convey that my suffering was so severe I could no longer accomplish daily tasks. I neither put on deodorant nor shaved. In short, I was a mess. But, this stunt was not applicable to my clothing. I picked out an elaborate black suit with a black button down shirt and a silk black tie with black dress shoes. When my father wasn't looking, I even borrowed a pair of his onyx cufflinks, a birthday gift from my mom, and rifled through his underwear drawer until I found a blank hankie.

On my way to the church I stopped at a local florist to pick up some flowers for Krissy's grave. Because the florist and I had a friendly relationship, she gave me a bouquet of yellow roses. The thorns had been removed and the stems were finely trimmed. Even so, I was repulsed; their final destination was a grave.

Driving to the church, with an hour to go, I thought more about the flowers. It seemed like a weak gesture. So many people would lavish Krissy's grave with flowers, photos, and teddy bears; my contribution wouldn't stand out.

I pulled into the parking lot of Krissy's church. With forty-five minutes before the ceremony would commence, the parking lot was packed. I barely found a parking space in the last row.

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As my stomach began to sink, Voice One remarked, “Standing room only; it’s like she was some celebrity instead of the brainless bore that she actually was.”

“Please God no. Not today”

“But think about it Adam. Suicide is a great way for people to suddenly care about the dead. They make a circus out of the mourning process because they think that by wailing and making a calculated appearance they can alleviate the guilt they feel as a player in that individual’s death.”

“I am not getting into an argument with you about why people are here today”

“They remember the time the deceased asked for a dollar and they wouldn’t give the dollar even though they had fifteen dollars in their wallet. And maybe, maybe for that special few, they recall a demeaning stare they cast in that stranger’s direction because her clothes were last season or....”

“Have some respect for the dead, you asshole.”

“I am just saying Adam, my main hombre, maybe you could save your neck by snapping it just like Krissy did.” I started screaming uncontrollably in my car. Every one has had one of those moments when they just need to vent by screaming in a contained space, slapping the steering wheel, cursing fate for a raw deal. What we fail to remember is that cars are not sound proof and our wails of torment can be heard outdoors. Admit it, you’ve seen one of those desperate souls in their automobiles, from Porsche 911s to VW Bugs from the 1960s, and instead of giving those people the moment they need, you look in and thank God you aren’t that loser. I could only see vague impressions through my tear of rages, but I was certain several people enjoyed the free show of the freak show starring Adam. Then I realized that was exactly the perception that I was aiming for in

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my clever contrast between poor hygiene and all the funerary trappings. Let them see my red eyes; it wasn't important that they couldn't distinguish between my tears for Krissy and those bemoaning my plight.

I got out of the car and walked slowly shuffling my feet, lips quivering, hands shaking. Once or twice I even wiped at my eyes with the silky blank hankie. Inside the church, students were jam packed, quietly socializing. Many had never been to a service and were unaware of the correct etiquette. Who I was to judge? I was solemn to the point of sullenness and drawing attention to myself. I should have remained in the social hall before the service commenced, but I knew I would fall apart and feel alienated. I heavily stumbled down the aisle to the front pew. I had arrived before Krissy's parents, thank god, because I could only imagine the resentment they harbored towards me. Many adults, and some of the students who genuinely adored Krissy, began to take their seats. I felt the heat on my neck and heard the whispers, but they were a relief from the voices in my head. But I couldn't stop thinking about Jane, Ralph, Kayla and Ken sitting in the middle of the chapel on the opposite side of the room. They had taken their seats earlier than I, as though they wanted to break me; they considered me among the damned. It burned that Jane looked at me like I had jumped a UNICEF trick or treater and stolen from his collection box, then grabbed the brat's candy and devoured it right in front of him before spiting in his face. But the burn was only second degree, with a little grease I would manage. If Jane's rage, someone for whom I would lay down my life, couldn't melt my flesh, then I could withstand the heated wrath of Krissy's parents for a few hours. Krissy being dead, what did they matter now?

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Surreptitiously I glanced at my watch. Where the hell were Derek, Monique, Lily, Beth and Charlie? The funeral was going to start in ten minutes. We all needed to appear contrite if we were going to get away with our reputation in tact. Finally, Lily arrived. She walked down the aisle quickly and slid, with an air of exhaustion, next to me. I could tell Lily had been crying; her eyes were a watery shade of reddish pink that one associates with the most tragic of situations. She wore her hair in a tight bun; it stretched so fiercely from her scalp that I imagined she would turn to me with the flesh removed from her face. “Are you sure you can handle this?”

She sniffled and croaked in response. Lily wasn’t faking her pain while my performance at the funeral was exactly that. Lily would have gone to the service even if we hadn’t been coerced; I didn’t have the balls or the compassion to do that.

I hadn’t noticed the beginning of the service; as usual I was too self-involved. From the corner of my eye I saw Krissy’s parents. Her mother had a Valium induced slack expression as her husband clung tenaciously to her. His age lines were more pronounced and I was deeply disturbed by his beard as he had always been meticulous about his appearance. Dante underestimated hell. There was a tenth circle and I had no friendly spirit guide to lead me way. But where the fuck were the others? They wouldn’t leave Lily and me to take the fall? No, they weren’t like that. They genuinely cared about us

Voice two whispered, “Just as much as you genuinely cared about Krissy.”

“They must be having car trouble”

“Nope, they are sleeping off a hangover from a massive party last night. They didn’t invite you. You may think that group of self-indulged shits cares about you, that

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they have joyously welcomed you back into their lives. It's a game, Adam. And the rules are way beyond your level of comprehension."

"SHUT UP!"

The entire congregation let a gasp. I couldn't have screamed out loud? But sure enough the minister was glaring at me soundlessly. Even Lily looked at me like I was beyond saving. Never had I wanted something so badly as to flee that church that moment, jump on a train, change my name and escape. This couldn't get any worse. And then it did. The doors of the chapel opened and Monique led a procession towards the front pew. My agony was just beginning. Not only was Monique sporting a spray-tan, but she was wearing a form fitting black blazer with the buttons open and only a black bra underneath. She completed her look with a short leather skirt with a slit up the side. I glimpsed her black panties underneath. This had to be a nightmare. Monique would never attend a funeral looking like she had come from the 50% sale at Hookers R'US. Jesus Christ, she was wearing Jimmy Choos with at least six inch heels and strutted like it was fashion week and she was a runway model. Beth was directly behind Monique. She looked like a gangster from the 1930s. You would have confused her for a guy in her baggy pinstripe suit and black fedora. Where was the empathy? This was a funeral, it was real, not some third rate production of Guys and Dolls. Charlie and Derek resembled a cross between secret servicemen and Anna Wintour. Like the Editor of Vogue, they refused to remove their black sunglasses inside. Didn't they get that Krissy was frozen in time? I hoped her ghost would haunt them for years. Appearing in front of them with the plastic bag still over her head and brushing the noose against their faces. Was that the chorus to "Smooth Criminal?" Derek's cell phone did not just ring. Did it?

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“Hello?” He didn’t even attempt to whisper or just hang up and shut the damn thing off. “Tonight? Yeah, I’ll have to consult with the others but it looks good. We didn’t have anything planned once we leave this total drag-fest. There’s no one here worth mentioning.”

That did it. I grabbed the phone and growled, “Derek will have to call you back. And no, he can’t party tonight. He has plans.” I closed the phone violently and then put it in my pocket. “Give me back my phone.”

“You’ll get it back when you can use it maturely.”

“Oh, you want to talk about maturity? You’re the one who got us into this.”

“Derek, stop, this isn’t the time or the place.”

“It was all Adam’s fault. He thought of everything. Right, Monique?”

I needed to focus but Voice three wouldn’t allow it. “Wow, Adam you sure know how to pick your friends. Why do you want to be like them? What’s so special about them?”

“Spare me the sarcasm.”

“You’re addicted to being conflicted.”

“I CAN’T DO THIS ANYMORE.”

I burst into tears of frustration, of rage, of embarrassment, and ran down the aisle. Was that Derek’s goal? Was I his puppet? Did he enjoy when I got tangled in the strings and found myself trapped? Maybe this was his way of making himself look better. Sure he was the kid that showed up late and answered a phone call, but at least he wasn’t the one who interrupted the service and then ran out like it was some horror film and he couldn’t handle any more bloodshed.

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Memory 57

Maybe the voices were right. It's extremely likely I am addicted to being conflicted. Anyone in his or her right mind could see that Derek and his posse were driving me crazy. Oh please, why should I even give the voices the faintest satisfaction; every group of friends has issues, differences of opinions, and grudges? Don't they? I had thought the good outweighed the bad the first few times Derek had betrayed me, or Beth belittled me. The unadulterated truth was I couldn't stand being alone. In ways I can't define, even after the funeral and my public humiliation, I still craved their attention. Who knew what would happen with Jane? I never imagined losing her. So I settled. Derek and his posse were the ones to keep the dark voices at bay. The attention they gave me, even negative attention, was enough for me to deny that something was wrong with me. I knew I was struggling with issues; I knew I needed help. But I was the type of person who thought therapy was a crutch. I was indifferent towards Dr. Johansen because I couldn't stand knowing I needed his assistance to sort out my demons. I didn't want to hear recommendations for pills that made me sleepy, shaky or fat. Summer was approaching. It would be the last summer of my high school career. As the temperatures went up, the roadblocks would recede. If they didn't see things my way, well then I could keep playing with my meds, pretending to take them. I just knew the pills were killing me. And I believed the voices were a by-product of the pills. Something insisted that the pills were also responsible for my reaction to Derek and the posse. I was uptight and needed to loosen up. Otherwise, I would end up like Krissy. I had too much going for me, too many aspirations to succumb to weaknesses like Krissy did.

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Memory 58

I called Derek's cell to see what was going on. He picked up and I could hear loud background noise. I repeated his name louder.

"Adam, whassup? Where are you? You're missing out, man, you're missing out."

Great, I was dealing with sloshed Derek. Sloshed Derek was definitely dangerous. He could be friendly and effusive one moment, and then the next he would start screaming at you, and swing his fist, accusing you of petty things, imagined threats to his high ranking status. The best way to deal with sloshed Derek was to allow him to talk until he came up for air and gave you a chance to get in something coherent.

"Man it's amazing here, you should see all the people jammed in the room, the music's loud, they're playing the best jams, and man, the girls, there are like...man....they are like friggin' nymphos. They just started skinny-dipping in my pool." Well, now I knew where to head. Mission accomplished.

"Omg you know what would be killer, Dude. You could come to the party and bring like a bunch of Tacos with you? Tacos Bueno Hombres and Senoritas? Dude, you got to bring the tacos everyone has the munchies so bad."

Great, it was going to another one of those nights. I wonder if I could trade my Jeep in for a Limo and chauffeur's cap since I was the perceptual designated driver or errand boy. Some nights, I actually learned interesting dirt that I filed in the back of mind. I figured someday it might be useful. Right now I had extra insight on Derek and his interest in Leanne, a transfer student to our school. Beth had befriended her quickly and found out that Leanne had been at some all girls' Catholic school and had committed

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some sort of sexual indiscretion that got her expelled. I imagined Derek was interested in her for two things; her breasts and her mysterious slutty reputation.

“Are you bringing me tacos or not man?”

Damn, how long had I been lost in my thoughts again? I was forgetting things.

“Tacos, um, yeah, sure. How many do you want?”

“Three grande meals. Make it snappy.”

The voices joined in again. “You’re nothing but a bitch boy. Bring me tacos, drive me here. You’re pathetic. Designated drivers are so easy to replace. Just remember that, Adam.”

“You don’t think I know that?”

“Well, you better drive fast then, make sure the tacos are still warm when you arrive.” Malicious laughter pealed throughout the entire car. The voices were getting louder.

Memory 59

Thirty soft shell tacos in hand I arrived at Derek’s. He opened the door and gave me a dirty look. I just smiled.

“Could you have been any slower with the food?”

“There was lots of traffic. And you know how those drive-thru people are. So incompetent.”

We headed toward the pool. Everyone was in the water, naked, except for Beth. She examined the swimmers with an expression of pleasure on her face. I snuck up on her and tapped her on the shoulder. “Enjoying the view?” Before she replied, I noticed she was slowly swinging her feet back and forth. An image of Krissy’s swinging legs

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overpowered me. The voices had put their money together and purchased a projection screen. I excused myself and entered the house. The lower floor was quiet, almost too quiet. It unnerved me. I heard a quiet cry from upstairs. I knew that hook-ups were an inevitable consequence of this drunken unsupervised party. You could change the location of the party, the main players, the city, the state, the decade, teens found pleasure in drunken sex acts. If an environment like Derek's party didn't lead to such events, well then there was something seriously wrong with the guests. But that didn't mean I had to participate or watch.

So I turned on Derek's flat screen, at this point he was probably drunk and naked in the pool so what would he care. I was amazed by the number of channels he had. My parents had finally upgraded to digital cable themselves, but they hadn't settled for the premium plan. It wasn't that they couldn't afford it; they just preferred to spend their money on things that were more meaningful. How many movie channels were out there, I asked myself as I scrolled through the five hundred channels. No wonder Derek felt such entitlement; he could sit up all night watching the latest movies, starting them around his schedule. I settled on something familiar; MTV.

After several music videos, the latest offering from Justin Timberlake, an older Britney Spears video, and a video from Beyonce's debut solo album, I was bored and headed outside. Beth was where I had left her, and sure enough the pool looked like one giant orgy. What was I doing there anyway? I didn't drink, I didn't do drugs, I didn't believe in pre-marital sex. As for being seen, by the time I got there people were so trashed they barely remembered my presence. No big deal. They were the golden ones

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and I wanted to be among the gold. They were celebrities and I got a full access pass to the movie set; it would just be nice if the remakes and sequels gave way to fresh projects. If I was going to do self-reflection, I might as well do it at home.

Voice one was feeling verbose tonight. “Your good days are dead. You’re a lost soul.” Were my Good Days Dead? I had to ask myself seriously when I last had a good time. It wasn’t in the hallowed halls of Jefferson High; I was convinced I was above school. Spending time with my family resulted in tense arguments—Brandon and I kept fighting over internet access, and my parents kept shoving college applications down my throat while I was catching up on reruns of *Sex And The City*. My only good times, or should I say the only times I felt adrenaline rushing through my veins, occurred when I spent time with my fellow lost souls. I planned on proposing we make Lost Souls underground class shirts for Homecoming. The summer was going to be glorious; I had nothing but good days ahead. Beer and weed at the beach wouldn’t change the beach. Besides, my sobriety would give an advantage over the others during strip DDR. To cap it all off, they had just handed me the pinnacle of my high school career; I was Senior Class President. In addition to planning Homecoming and Prom, I would be in charge of our class trip and community service projects. It was a culmination of all my high school fantasies. Before our schism, Jane and I had always talked about the day I would be class president. One of the slogans I used was something we came up with one night during our sophomore year. I wondered if Jane had even voted for me? I doubted it. The moment would have been perfect if she had hugged me afterwards.

Memory 60

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June was almost over and I felt amazing. There was no better feeling than being at a bonfire in the evening with my closest friends; the slick droplets of sweat on my face from the flickering flames, the taste of melted chocolate and gooey marshmallow—mosquitoes be damned I was alive. The radio blasting the soundtrack of my life, remixes of the Top 40. My happiness was as elevated as the temperature. My judgment, on the other hand, was relegated to the back of my mind. It never occurred to me as my friends passed bongos made from coca-cola cans and tin foil, that my presence could get me into serious trouble with the school or my parents. Even as I hid the half empty bottles of vodka under a towel in my trunk, so Derek could sneak them back into his room, it was like I had never heard the term MIP. What was initially a difficult conscious behavior had become a passive observation. The passive observation eventually gave way to self-delusion. My judgment, which had weakened during high school and the regime of my friends, needed a jolt if it was going to be revived from its zombie state.

It's all good to say this now, breaking down the set behind the curtains after closing night of the production that was this period of my life, but as the show came to the pivotal point of no return, well everyone had seen the script but me.

But as the good old voices in my head would remind me, if I were currently in touch with them, what kind of asshole gives the ending away? So I return to the scene of the bonfire.

“Adam, did you pick up the fireworks yet?”

Derek was throwing a Fourth of July party that promised to be huge. Only his most reliable friends received the honor of being asked to do Derek's errands for the party preparation so he could focus on getting himself ready. It crossed my mind that

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Monique was never asked to assist Derek, and she never complained about it, but I just assumed that was because everyone knew the only reliable thing about Monique was that she was unreliable about anything that wasn't related to her daily regimen of beauty maintenance. I couldn't leave Derek hanging for an answer because he would throw a fit, so I ensured him that I had the fireworks covered. In fact, I had made it my goal to be the best firework procurer ever. Anyone could get sparklers and party poppers at a local drugstore, but I knew of a roadside stand that popped up for a few days in the summer where the more expensive, illegal fireworks could be obtained. My dad and I had made trips there since I was a kid, so it wasn't that difficult. And they never checked IDs. It didn't matter that I wouldn't be reimbursed for them; just seeing the multicolored sparks reflected in the eyes of the guests and knowing I was responsible for it would be enough.

Memory 62

I woke up the morning of the 4th of July with a smile on my face. I had found an Old Navy American Flag shirt and firework printed board-shorts and knew they would show off my amazing tan. The fireworks were safe in my car. Nothing could go wrong I spoke to Charlie the night before and knew he was ready to DJ and felt even cooler when he begged me to lend him my CD collection, because no one else had one that was quite so diverse. I had promised to pick up Charlie because his equipment wouldn't fit in his small Ford Focus, whereas my SUV had a generous trunk and seats that could fold down if necessary.

I showed up at Charlie's house at the agreed upon time and laughed when he opened the door. Apparently he bought his 4th of July outfit at Old Navy as well. He

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didn't look quite as amused as me, but then again lately nearly every little thing set me off into hysterical bouts of laughter.

While we were driving, Charlie reached towards the dash and turned off the sound.

“What the hell, man. No one turns off Britney in my car. Ever. You know that's an unforgivable offense.”

“You can listen to her nasal moan anytime you want. I have something I want to talk to you about.”

Charlie kept insisting that he had something really important and interesting to say, so I stifled my indignation and let him fill me in.

“So you heard about Derek and Leanne right?”

I most certainly had. Derek filled me in exclusively. “What about Derek and Leanne?”

“Well, uh, you know...” Ha, this was such a set up. Charlie didn't know a thing about Derek and Leanne. Derek and Leanne had been quite the subject of conversation recently. Derek, who always got what he wanted one way or another, had his sights on Leanne. Monique would stick a finger down her throat in distaste every time Leanne's name came up while Lily would turn green with envy. Some people said that she had a threesome with a roommate and a guy from another school; others alleged that she had an affair with a twenty-something biology teacher. There was this mystique about her that gave Leanne social currency. Leanne, unlike the Monique or Lilys of the world, did nothing to play off that prestige. This of course added to her mystique and made the guys yearn for her more intensely. Thus, Derek knew that Leanne was the catch of the day and

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he wanted to use his top of the line rod to lure her in. He had studied her in order to figure out what bait would be most attractive to her. At first Leanne had rebuffed him mildly. It wasn't that she didn't find him extremely sexy—because she did—but she was brand new to the school and was looking to make friends just now. She figured that a boyfriend would take too much of her attention for the moment, but when she was ready, if he was still interested, she would take him up on his offer. Leanne was forbidden fruit to Charlie and me, but we both fell for her. I suspect this was Charlie's motive in keeping track of Leanne and Derek.

“Charlie, if I tell you, you have got to promise to keep your mouth shut.”

“No problemo man.”

Yes problemo. Part of my penance was that I had to stop spilling secrets for attention. And for a while I was great at it; there was an Iron Curtain between what I knew and what passed through my lips. Lately I'd been clumsy. Was I subconsciously annoyed that others could gossip and I couldn't? There certainly existed a double standard and I had every right to be bitter.

“I mean it, Charlie. If word gets out, you didn't hear it from me. Even if it means lying to Derek.”

“Sure.”

“No you need to repeat it. Even if it means lying to Derek.”

“Fine. Even if it means lying to Derek.”

I revealed that Derek and Leanne have been official for two weeks, but were keeping it under wraps. Derek made it to third, but Leanne wasn't letting him hit a

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homer. Tonight, the real fireworks were going to be flying upstairs in his bedroom. Once the ball was out of the park, Leanne was history.

“So when they break up, do you think I can go out with her?”

“I doubt she’ll want to associate with any of us again.”

“Well, she’d just be sloppy seconds anyway.”

“This is precisely why Derek didn’t tell you. He figured you would open your big mouth and derail operation Leanne; she would blue-ball him. Basically, he thinks you drink too much and would blurt it out.”

Shit. Kind of like blurting out that Charlie was reliable enough to DJ but not to be trusted. “Charlie, I am sorry. I didn’t mean for it to sound like that. Derek didn’t say it like that.”

“Whatever. We’re chill. You can turn on that stupid bitch that you like more than you care about your real friends.” That sounded menacing; who was he to say that I cared about Britney more than my friends?

“Forget it man, we’re about to go to a party. I took a cheap shot at you because I was upset by what you told me. If you haven’t noticed, we’re all vulnerable and have our own insecurities. Are we still tight?”

“Yeah, we’re still tight.” But I wondered if we were still tight. I had been so good about sticking to the list and Charlie made it sound like the rest of them talked about my progress on the list behind my back. Did they really think I was a hypocrite; there were few worse insults. Whatever, I had a fireworks show to put on.

Memory 63

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I glared at Charlie and Lilly as they oohed and ahed over the fireworks display. There was tension in my shoulders sitting next to Beth as I watched the sparks of green light and splashes of red and white burst overhead. Everyone was having a blast, but I had a lot to think about. I always had a lot to think about. They could all do whatever stupid shit they liked and get away with it and not be punished or fear a punishment. While I had this list I had to strictly follow at all times. I had thought I had come to terms with it, seen the suggestions as actual personality flaws that needed to be fixed to become a better person, but now I re-examined the situation. It was like I had signed some horrible contract without reading the fine print. When they had accused me of being a hypocrite— they were right. Everything I loved about Britney, that she was an individual who was true to herself and didn't give a damn about what others thought about her and she wouldn't limit her actions to what others would think about them—if people couldn't take her as she was, then they needed to get out of the way—these values I found sexy and essential in an individual, were completely void from my life. Why hadn't I seen it before? That was the wrong question. I had seen it before, but I had categorically denied it, or found justifications for it. I was like a politician; everything was rhetoric. I had been transfixed by the brass ring just like every other high school student in this media saturated culture and I had gone so far to grasp it; in losing Jane and my dignity I had fallen off and broken an arm, but foolishly gotten back on that damn carousel at Coney Island.

And I found myself at that same crossroad I had been finding myself at again and again this summer. Would my life be for the better if I walked away from Derek and the

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other bad influences in my life? After all, I still had the class presidency and I could win back Jane. Wouldn't that be enough for an amazing Senior year?

Voice one jumped in, "ABSOLUTELY NOT."

Voice two chorused, "You would fall apart in minutes"

And a third voice spoke softly, "All summer long you have been telling yourself how happy you are. How much energy you have. Why go through the drama of leaving these people. So they are hypocrites and you're a hypocrite. Who isn't? Are you going to allow one terrible conversation to ruin everything you worked for?"

Voice one and two in unison, " BESIDES YOU ALREADY TOLD CHARLIE YOU WERE STILL TIGHT." It was three against one and in a democracy the majority rules; all I could do was stare at the pretty firework display and ooh and ahhh just like the others .

Memory 64

It was time to leave the party. I had a great time, especially for someone on the verge of social suicide for a moment or two. The food was great and Charlie had even appeased me by playing two of my favorite Britney songs while I freak danced with Monique. Charlie and I were still packing up his DJ gear when Leanne appeared at my side. She asked for a cigarette. Charlie, with a dirty smirk, offered her a camel and lit it. In the Bic's flicker, I noticed Leanne falter before she placed cigarette in her mouth. "Could you give me a lift home?"

This was a surprising development. Would Derek allow her to leave? I glanced at his bedroom window. "I thought Derek would take you home later Leanne?"

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“I’m not getting in a car with someone who is too stoned to drive. I can’t wait for his buzz to subside. I have to go to church with my family in the morning.”

“There’s room in the car, let me just say goodbye.”

“Why don’t we just go? He’s really buzzed, and won’t remember one way or another.”

Charlie suggested, “We could call him in the morning, Adam.”

Something didn’t seem right about this, but I agreed; I was tired from the highs and lows I had been riding all evening. It made the most sense to drop Charlie off first. I wasn’t sure I wanted to be alone with Leanne; If she had yielded to Derek she may have already been dumped. If she hadn’t, then I knew more about the future of her relationship than she did and it would be a heavy burden to bear, but she could become suspicious if I went out of my way to be rid of her.

When Charlie got of the car, Leanne took the passenger seat. She asked if we could talk. Those were the words I was dreading to hear. I figured she was going to ask me about her relationship with Derek, or tell me some story about her and Derek. I suggested it was more of radio night, but she insisted she needed someone to listen; I knew what that was like. So I agreed. I should have listened to my instinct, but instinct was on vacation too.

Memory 65

Leanne continued to shake like a frail leaf facing the tumult of a late fall thunderstorm. She stared straight ahead as if riveted to something playing out in front of her; it frightened me. “ I know that the entire school has this fantasy of the expelled Catholic school girl as some bimbo, but I truly hoped that you guys embraced me because

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of the girl you saw. But you guys just tolerated me as some conquest for Derek. I was going to be a notch on his bedpost, and then you would all dismiss me as some slut.”

Her assessment was dead on. I couldn't stay out of Derek's machinations; I knew when Leanne was sent packing, I wouldn't even offer her a hand as she placed the heaviest of her luggage in a taxi.

“When I told him that I wasn't that kind of girl, Adam, do you know what he did to me?”

I could only imagine. He probably called her all sorts of vile names, maybe punched his fist on his mahogany computer desk, and told her to get the hell out of his house.

“He hit me Adam. He hit me.”

She had to be completely out of her mind. Derek may be President of the Douche Bag association, and he had done some despicable things during his reign of terror—hell, I had nervously been a guilty party to many of his schemes—but I had never seen him hit a woman. That would be a new low for him, and something even I would find indefensible. And yet she was incapable of continuing between the rush of tears and choking sobs. Here I was alone to face the aftermath. As usual, I had to clean up the mess. And who would thank me for it? God damn! There I was thinking just like Derek. Leanne wasn't a mess. Leanne was a human being. So I reached out from one human being to another and gave her a pat on the shoulder. I noticed her make up was streaming down her face. Sure enough, there seemed to be some sort of bruise under both her eyes.

“Leanne, you need to be clear headed for a second. What did he do?”

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“When I told him I wasn’t going to sleep with him, especially when he was high, he punched me. His fists lunged first at my right eye and then my left. He kept coming closer, Adam. He reached towards my neck like he was going to choke me, so I kneed him in the balls and punched him in the nose. It caught him off-guard and he fell backwards into his wall. I think I cold-clocked him. I was worried he would wake up and do worse, or somehow convince the others that I was the one who started a fight after a bad break-up. That’s why I needed to get out of there so quickly. And I don’t know what to do now.”

I knew what had to be done to prevent Derek from ever hurting Leanne again. I made a left turn deviating from the course to Leanne’s house. I needed to pick something up at the drugstore. After Leanne had told me her horrible story, I felt like there was a new intimacy between us, we were both victims in our own right. However, she had the courage to fight back. I lacked the backbone. Now was the time for my first stand.

As I pulled into the Walgreen’s parking lot, I asked Leanne to stay in the car while I ran a quick errand. She looked at me like I had lost my mind. Maybe I had. I ran towards the front of the store and grabbed a disposable camera. Pictorial evidence would be the key to gaining the upper hand.

Back in the car I opened the camera with confident fingers. “Leanne, I am going to take a picture of you now.”

“Are you crazy?”

“Do you want people on your side or not?”

“Why does it have to be about sides?”

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“It just has to be. That’s how we operate.” I snapped the picture of Leanne. I realized we would have to get together again tomorrow, because like the film from the camera, it would take time for the bruises to fully develop. As I pulled into Leanne’s driveway, I explained how I intended to return to Derek’s house and hopefully capture him still leaning against the wall with congealed blood around his nostrils.

“You want to blackmail the bastard, don’t you?”

“It’s not that simple, Leanne. It won’t ever be that simple. I am part of that bastard and he’s part of me.”

We drove to Derek’s in utter silence; I didn’t think Britney’s latest CD was appropriate in lieu of the circumstances, though I desperately needed to cling to her music as a reminder of beauty in our world. The ugliness and quiet of the moment made me wonder if I had conjured her existence.

Derek, in party mood, could be neglectful about everyday concerns and realities, like the need for security. Thus, while he was still presumably blacked out in his bedroom, his front-door was unlocked. Tonight Derek was going to wish he had been more attentive; I had come on Leanne’s behalf with a score to settle.

I took the winding staircase, the staircase I had learned to ascend with reverence, for it transported me to the sacred halls of a god, up to Derek’s room. Right now I wasn’t an acolyte; I felt like a technician from CSI. I just needed a pair of cool sunglasses and a briefcase filled with the latest technology used to catch a predator by the signs left in his wake. I wasn’t surprised to discover that Derek hadn’t moved. He was conscious and groaning. A little secret about Derek that hadn’t been revealed—he was always a big baby with a low threshold with pain. I wanted to take his broken nose and put it back into

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place myself. How could he be so damn selfish? Not a single apology for Leanne or a question or about her condition. Had I been that frigid and self-involved, too?

“Adam, thank God you’re here. That crazy bitch attacked. You need to take me to the hospital.”

“If I take you to the hospital you have to do something for me. I want to take a picture of you right now.”

“Dude, you’re a genius. Then I can sue that fucking tramp. You always have my back.”

“Not this time, Derek. I can’t believe you hit Leanne. How low can you be? How many other girls have you beat up before? Don’t answer that. I don’t want to know. Here’s the point. You say a word about Leanne, cast one questionable glance in her direction ever again, I am sending out those pictures to everyone in the student body. The only award you’ll win is most likely to be arrested for domestic abuse. Understood?”

“Don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out. And Adam, call Charlie and tell him to get over here pronto.”

“That’s not going to work this time, Derek, my man. Charlie, if you haven’t noticed, is infatuated with Leanne. If he knows you hit her, he’ll go insane. I might do damage to your ego tonight, but Charlie...he might just break your legs and fingers for starters. Let me guess? I should call Monique or Lily? Are you delusional? They’re both girls. When they see what you did to Leanne, I think that some sort of universal sisterhood might turn them against you. Is that what you really want? Do you want to lose all the power you carefully constructed? I can see the end of your reign, Derek. These pictures will cost you the throne.”

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Derek was stunned. I had never spoken so forcefully to him. I was stunned as well truth be told. Who was this whirling dervish of words inside me threatening destruction? I had never experienced a sensation so pleasurable.

“Take the fucking picture. Then take me to the ER.”

“Want me to hold your hands while you fill out the forms?”

Voice number three murmured cautiously in my ears, “Be wary of humiliating him to the breaking point. He is just as capable of scheming against you.”

Voice number one laughed uproariously, “Keep on taunting the prick. Show him who the new boss is. You always wanted to rub his nose in a pile of steaming dog shit and this is your opportunity.”

“Spoken like a commander, voice number one.”

“Who the hell are you are talking to?”

Ok, so I was caught up in the moment and was speaking to entities that didn't exist. That was understandable. Nothing to diagnose. “I was counting backwards. 3, 2, 1. Say Cheese.”

Derek just glared at me. Perfect, he would look much more dangerous. It would be a pity if I ever had to leak them. It was a warning. I had a last chance to walk away on my terms. I could return to Jane with my self-respect and cultivate new friendships of my own freewill, instead of from necessity. It was a profound truth that Derek was a part of me and I was a part of him; I couldn't leave myself behind. As I castigated Derek while he lay propped against the wall and blood congealed under his swollen nose, I was looking at a mirror image. It never occurred to me, while I gloated over Derek, that I too was fragile. I'd constructed a gilded throne on power plays. But I should have listened in

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chemistry—even the purest gold can melt when heated. And Derek knew something about turning up the temperature.

Memory 66

Leanne drifted away from us after that, Charlie professed betrayal by her sudden departure and her aloof demeanor when he tried to call her behind Derek's back, while Monique and Lily simply assumed that Leanne had quickly put out for Derek, was found lacking, and discarded—she was the newest civilian in Skank City—a notion Derek did nothing to disabuse. As for myself, I was beyond hurt. I went to a lot of trouble to protect Leanne, and now she was transferring to our rival high school.

The summer was almost over and I needed to devise a plan for the perfect welcome back event for our Senior class. Monique enthusiastically offered a helping hand. Usually she was disgusted by displays of school spirit unless it involved an opportunity to spend a fortune on a couture dress for a dance or a competition she was interested in winning. Originally, I had thought a simple barbeque by Turtle's Head lake, the local beach, would be enough, but Monique told me to think bigger. "We've had all summer to get high and skinny dip at Turtle's Head. Surely you haven't forgotten? It would just be a cruel reminder of the demise of summer. People would hate your administration before it even began. That's not what you want is it, baby? We need something grown up. Something sexier."

"Sexier than skinny dipping?"

"Grow up, Adam. Kids start skinny dipping at like five. It's really not that thrilling. People just like the illicit thrill of the alcohol and the weed."

"Monique, Jefferson has a zero tolerance policy."

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“Don’t be a moron, Adam, it gives me stress lines. Most of us are just turning eighteen. And there are a lot of things eighteen year olds can do that stupid seventeen year old juniors cant.”

“So you want to take a field trip to a sex shop to buy porn, smoke cigarettes on the bus, and end up at a random election and cast a ballot? Sounds like a great time.”

“Jesus Christ. You are so thick sometimes. Why do I put up with you? You have to be eighteen to get into Club Sweat.”

Club Sweat was the hottest nightclub in our city. It had three levels, the first playing the hits of the seventies, the second playing the hits of the eighties, and the third playing a combination of remixes of the top 40 and the greatest hits of the latest 1990s. There were banquettes for the patrons to dance on; strobe lights, velvet curtains, VIP rooms, and black leather chairs where waiters and waitresses in crumpled states of undress—to create the illusion of sweat—took drink orders. Because the club served alcohol, no one under twenty-one was allowed in, except for Wednesday nights when eighteen years could have their hands stamped and sip on virgin Cosmos and virgin Pina Coladas, spellbound by the illusion that they were one of the chosen.

“Have you lost your mind? The school will never OK that.”

“Sweet, simple, Adam. Couldn’t you have two welcome back events? One could be your quaint evening at Turtle’s Head Lake, which is what most students would expect of you and your limited imagination. You get a few teachers to chaperone, take some money from the budget for burgers and hot dogs, the usual humdrum fixings of a humdrum barbeque, and get Charlie to DJ. It all appears legitimate. Then you send out another email about an underground welcome back event at Club Sweat. If you grow a

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fucking pair, then you can go down in Jefferson history as the like coolest President ever.”

Monique nestled closer as I opened the file folder that contained the email list for our entire body; it was password protected. I was so caught up in the excitement of pulling off something legendary, that I never noticed Monique intently watching the six digits I typed. I threw something together about the Turtle’s Head Lake event, talking it up like any good class President would. Monique pointedly yawned. “Adam, why don’t I type out the invitation to the Club Sweat evening? It will sound...spicer. After all, we want every one to attend your moment of glory.”

She said it all so sweetly. Oh Jane, if only you had canceled a round of tonsil hockey with Ralph or stopped placating Ken when he put on another ten pounds and came to me. I wanted to believe in them so desperately, that’s what is imperative. It wasn’t just that I wanted the status, but I wanted them. I wanted these golden people, brutal Derek and seductive Monique.

Memory 67

It’s astonishing how comfortable one can feel lying. I smiled convincingly at my student advisor as I looked into her green eyes and laid out the plans for the Turtle’s Head Lake event. I even sheepishly apologized for sending out the invitations early. She just pushed a lock of her curly red hair behind her hair and mock scolded. We had worked together for three years and she trusted my judgment. We went over the budget line by line at a local coffee house and debated over which hip teachers deserved an invitation to chaperone one of the coolest events of the year. As easy as it was to plan to the Turtle’s Head Lake barbeque, it was even easier to pull off. Attendance was about

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50% of the Senior class. Normally, I would have professed disappointment and maybe even blamed myself. I would have seen it as an augur of my social standing; a loss of faith in my judgment. But I wasn't a fool. Who would go to a barbeque when they had the Club Sweat party the following night? I was shocked to see Jane show up with Ralph and Ken. I wondered why they would come when they clearly despised me. As Ralph and Ken chowed down on staggering plates full of chips, burgers, watermelon, and gooey chocolate chip cookies, Jane approached me. "Having a nice summer, Adam?"

"It would have been nicer if someone I cared a great deal about would get off her high horse and talk to me again."

"I was really hoping to see evidence tonight that you had changed. Glad I didn't hold my breath. I won't be at Club Sweat ."

I wanted to run after her. I wanted to beat her over the head with a platter of hot dogs. I wanted to cry in her arms and tell her about the voices and the doubts I had been having. But I had to play the consummate host. I owed it to my constituents.

Memory 68

The Club Sweat event, in contrast, had me sweating through my silk shirt the moment I arrived. What if one of the teachers was there on a date that night and noticed the unusually high proportion of Jefferson students grinding on the dance-floor? Suppose one of the girls, or guys for that matter, got their hands on a fake ID, which wasn't a far-fetched supposition, and ordered Jager bombs at the bar from the voluptuous barmaid and ended up with a fatal case of alcohol poisoning. Would I be accountable? Monique sidled up to me in silver strapless ensemble with a slit and black peep-toe heels that exposed her

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silver nails. In one hand she was holding a silver clutch and in the other a Cosmo. Like Monique, it was no virgin. “I have a surprise for you.”

She grabbed my hand and mentioned how clammy it was. We took the elevator to the third level. The lighting was dim to encourage drunken hookups and secret drug transactions. I heard Monique take a slight sniff of something. Over the loud music it was almost imperceptible; but you would have to be a fool to miss that she was back on cocaine.

We reached our destination and all my worries were crushed for the moment by the magic of the flashing lights. Then I heard the opening bars to one of my favorite Britney Spears songs “Slave 4 U.” I noticed all my classmates were on the floor shouting my name. They were begging me to get up on the banquette and dance like a maniac. Of course, I would oblige. While I was grooving to the beat and having what I believed would be one of the ultimate moments of my Senior year—after all how often does one, outside of a teen movie, get a standing ovation for throwing an awesome party and then become the center of attention for an entire song—I never noticed the flash of a camera amongst the flash of the various strobe lights and lasers.

Memory 69

Pulling off a major coup like the Club Sweat event takes a physical toll that even all the slaps on the back from your peers and the compliments tossed your way cannot diminish; at the time it didn’t seem unusual that I slept for forty-eight hours to recharge my batteries.

Of course, not everyone else was passively resting on my laurels. On the second day of my self-imposed rest, I was jarred to reality by a bleating phone call from my

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student advisor. Her voice was fierier than her red hair. “Adam, your little stunt has jeopardized the future of our organization. Principal Grayson is livid. I was a foolish student once, too, and did some arrogant things I regret, but I never felt the urge to email the entire Senior class evidence of my exploits.”

What the hell was she talking about? I had only sent out the email before the Club Sweat event. There was nothing incriminating in it...at least I didn't think so. How closely had I read the student handbook? “I realize it was wrong to throw two welcome back events, but I didn't use school funds.”

“There appears to be a miscommunication, Adam. Principal Grayson wants to see you and me in his office in thirty minutes. I expect you to be prompt, no excuses.”

She slammed the phone on me immediately. What happened to my best friend? The advisor I could tell the latest gossip? My mind was racing. Email, email I had to check my email account. My inbox was flooded. The subjects ranged from “Nice package, Adam” to “Ew, I think I just threw up in my mouth a little bit” and even one or two “Repent sinner or you're going to hell.” My hands started to shake and my lips trembled. What was this? I had heard of sleepwalking, of sleep-talking, and sleep-eating, is it possible to sleep-email? This couldn't be happening to me. I am a good person. Ok, I am a misguided person who has done some rotten shit in the name of popularity, but I don't deserve this, do I? DO I? There was no answer. Did I really expect one?

In all the turmoil I noticed an email sent from my address. My heart raced. If Freddy Kruger had popped out from under my bed with his razor claws poised to rip out my throat, the fear he'd inspire would pale to what I felt as I right clicked the mouse on the subject line “SOMETHIN' SPECIAL 4 MY FRIENDS & CONSTITUENTS ;)”.

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It was a jpg file and my AOL account asked if I trusted the sender and would care to download the image. I suppose I had to trust the sender giving he was me, but instinctively I knew things could never go back after this. When the computer courteously informed me “file’s done”—surely moments after opening the email but what I perceived as lifetimes—I jolted out of my seat. To this day I can’t describe the combination of emotions on the initial viewing of *that picture*. *That picture* sucker punched me in the jaw, it kneed me in the groin, like an Aztec sacrifice it ripped my heart straight out of my body, I wanted to gauge out my eyes. Rage, heartbreak, betrayal, I was out of my mind. It was Shakespearean.

That fucking picture ruined my life, and it wasn’t even me. Someone had photoshopped my head on a chubby body. The model was wearing a pink thong and had two bottles of beer in his hand. Someone (or several someones as I immediately began to speculate) had played on my deepest anxieties, my weight, and my hatred for alcohol, and made a complete mockery of me. And now I had to go to a meeting with Principal Grayson and act all composed? I didn’t have an ounce of reason in my veins at the moment. Who could I turn to? The Voices, dormant for a short time, spoke in chorus, “No one, you ignoramus. No one.”

“YOU’RE WRONG.” There was someone I could turn to, someone who I needed, someone I would crawl on my knees over broken glass if she demanded it, if only she would forgive me for being...for lack of a better word, an ignoramus.

Memory 70

There was only one way I could avoid crashing my car on the way to my appointment with Principal Grayson. I blasted Britney’s eponymous CD, as I always

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found it soothing and asked myself what my idol would do. I ticked off a strategy as I drove the familiar route between my home and Jefferson High. I would not stutter, there would be no tears, I would hold my head up, I wouldn't beg, above all I would not let the voices in my head toy with me. They were banished.

“You can't banish us.”

“YES I CAN.” God, I was getting nauseated by the Greek chorus they had ensembled. After doing deep breathing exercises to “What It's Like To Be Me,” I made my way out of the car and walked erect through the empty parking lot. I lost a little steam as the absence of others seemed almost desolate to me. Crazy images ran through my mind. Did Principal Grayson plan to torture me on a rack hidden in the janitor's lounge until I screamed for mercy? I wouldn't put it past him. He was a hard ass. Or, maybe Grayson intended to kill me and then cut the brakes on my automobile after he drove it near Turtle's Head Lake, so it appeared I drowned resulting from a nasty bump on the head during a car crash. Right, because Jefferson High makes a habit of hiring murderous principals.

I had been to Mr. Grayson's office on many previous occasions for official student congress business, and was always greeted with a cheerful smile by his personal secretary Ms. Todd. Usually I stopped and gossiped with her. Today Ms. Todd was absent. My stomach lurched.

I knocked on the Mr. Grayson's wooden door; it wasn't like I didn't know my way back there. His stentorian voice boomed, “Come in.” My student congress advisor was seated in a chair before Mr. Grayson's long oak desk. I was shocked to discover a

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balding portly man I recognized as the district's superintendent in attendance. Grayson motioned to an empty seat in between my advisor and the superintendent.

I had to cope with the unexpected, this was a successful life skill one must learn, and yet just the subtle placement of the seats felt like a sneaky attack to undermine me. Sweat was gushing from all my pores like a geyser, and pleading for mercy, I began my case. "Mr. Grayson it was so dumb of me to plan that event at Club Sweat. Whether I thought anyone in authority would find out or not is completely irrelevant. I guess my brain was still on summer vacation. I know I violated your trust, but isn't life about second chances? I vow here and now that I will follow every single rule diligently."

Grayson looked at me with complete disgust. "I don't like when students play the fool, Adam. You know exactly why you're here."

Of course I did, I just told him everything about what went down at Club Sweat.

"You broke the code of conduct. We have a zero tolerance policy, a strict zero tolerance policy, when it comes to alcohol and drugs, young man, and not only have you flouted it, but you have flouted it flagrantly. Sending emails of yourself half-naked and inebriated to the entire senior class and faculty."

"Mr. Grayson, you're making a huge mistake, it's comical, I saw the picture this afternoon, and I assure you that's not me."

"There has to be a punishment."

"Mr. Grayson., Sir, you aren't hearing me."

"Therefore, Adam, you are stripped of your presidency. You are suspended from all extra-curricular activities. Be thankful you haven't been suspended, or worse, expelled."

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“You’re out of your god damn mind, Grayson. I have rights.”

“Mind your mouth. Get out of my sight.”

Losing all composure, I burst into tears and got on my knees. “That’s not me in that picture. Someone is out to get me. I am sure of it. I have waited so long and worked so hard for the presidency. People believe in me.”

“My hands are tied. All you have is your word, and currently your word lacks credibility. Unless someone comes forward to lend credence to your paranoid fantasies, the decision stands. You’ll need to forward the list of student emails to your replacement.”

“And who the hell might that be, Sir.”

“Your friend Derek.”

I saw blood before my eyes.

“It was him. He did it.”

My advisor finally spoke up, “Adam, please, this is difficult for all of us. But accusing Derek isn’t the answer. The young man I have come to respect and care for would step aside gracefully for an easy transition under unfortunate circumstances.”

“BULLSHIT. If you really knew me, and really cared for me, you would know that I am not dumb enough to pull a stunt enough like this. You would also know I am a stickler for rules, and how I feel about drinking.”

Blindly, I pushed the chair aside and ran from the room down the silent corridors to the parking lot. I sat in my car, hit my head against the dash repeatedly and let out a primal scream. I was still screaming when there was a tap out my door. It was my advisor. “Let me in, Adam.”

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“Get lost.”

“Just for a moment. If you don’t like what I say, then you can kick me out, after all it’s your car.” She had a point. My car was the only place I had sovereignty now. It would be gratifying to let her in and then kick the bitch out mid-sentence.

“I have always enjoyed my profession, Adam. It warms my heart to work with students like you who have such passionate souls.”

“Yeah, we won’t be working together anymore.”

“I know you didn’t do it, Adam. I knew it the minute I saw the picture. I fought on your behalf all morning. But it was like talking to a wall.”

“But you were so angry with me when you called.”

“Misplaced aggression. I apologize for the way I treated you.”

“If you felt this way, why didn’t you fight harder during the meeting.”

“I had to toe the party line, Adam. But you should have come to me the second you were inspired to do this Club Sweat event, because I know that’s not your style either. I could have talked you out of it.”

“It wouldn’t have stopped the picture.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I didn’t either. I didn’t understand for nearly four years.”

Memory 71

As I headed in the direction of home the picture kept dancing before my eyes. It was accompanied by an orchestra of mocking laughter. Laughter I had heard before and participated in, the laughter of Derek, Monique, Beth, Charlie, and Lily. My emotions were indecipherable, I wanted to make them suffer, I wanted to kill myself. I needed

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someone who could save me from the emotional hurricane. It was Jane; good, practical, Jane. She foresaw all this and I shrugged her aside like a modern-day Cassandra.

I passed my house and pulled into to Jane's driveway. There were no cars around. I prayed that she was home. If she was out somewhere with Ken, Kayla, or Ralph, and I called her begging to come to me, I feared she would reject me.

Following my knock, Jane opened the door. She took in my tear-streaked face, my clenched fists, and threw herself at me. I was never so grateful for a hug.

"Jane, I am so, so..."

"If you say it, I'll kill you. Adam, I don't allow anyone to make scenes on my porch. Get in here I could use a root beer float, couldn't you?" She led me through the family room with the familiar leather couches to the kitchen with the black and white tiled floor and granite countertops. It was a balm for my soul that some things never changed. Jane's house had a positive energy, an atmosphere of love into which I could tap.

"Did you see it?"

"Ralph saw it first. He called me. Warned me to delete it right away."

"They cost me my Presidency, and any other extra-curricular activities I wanted to do. No drama club, no cross-country. Nothing."

"How dumb can Grayson be? Ralph says it's obvious that the picture is photoshopped. Have you confronted them yet?"

"I don't think I can even speak to them."

"You need them to admit what they did, Adam. Then you can get your presidency back. It will be ok."

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“Jane, I love you to death, but you and I both know this will not be ok. Can we change the subject? Why don’t you tell me how you and Ralph are doing?”

I spent the next hour listening to Jane tell me how sweet Ralph was and that she had never really known passion before she met him. For all that he made her feel, I knew that Ralph and I could be best friends, if he could forgive me for being thick-headed. She told me a little bit more about Ken, too, and I realized that he and I had a great deal in common. It was unexpected. Perhaps I was susceptible to their charms because I knew I needed to latch on to a new group of friends immediately or I would flounder, but I have to think better of myself. Or, at least, Dr. Johansen would tell me to think better of myself. A secret part of me had always longed for Jane when those stupid social lines drawn by graduating class after graduating class separated us. She had better instinct than I. What combination of genetics and environment had made her so damn lucky? As I sipped on my root beer float, I realized there would always be a ripple of resentment in my friendship with Jane. I told myself that was healthy, but what did I know of healthy when it came to relationships?

“YOU DON’T KNOW JACK.” I had to thank the voices at least they were dependable. And they didn’t have access to the internet.

Memory 72

A wise person might wait twenty-four hours before preparing for battle, whether it be of a physical or a psychological nature, in order to sift through his emotions and cast them aside; no one had ever accused me of being wise. After I left Jane’s, it was time for me to confront my enemies. My enemies, how it killed me to call them so, for they were a part of me, must I now consider myself an enemy? My thought process was becoming

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too muddled. The philosophical had to be ignored. Focusing on the red raw rage pooling before my eyes would better suit me. Lily would be useless to me, as would Charlie.

They were just foot soldiers in the squadron. Beth, Derek, and Monique; they were the obvious choices. Beth, Derek, and Monique. Derek, Beth, and Monique. Monique, Beth, and Derek. The names ran through my head. Who should it be? I settled on Beth. Derek and Monique might be crafty, but they enjoyed playing games and would be indirect.

Beth, though a cold-hearted bitch, could eviscerate with words I didn't need to hear, but had to hear. For a few moments I couldn't even remember her telephone number. I was that shaken up over the entire affair. In one day I had lost so much—unaware that by the end of the year I would lose so much more than these painful hours, would be laughable—I had constrictions in my chests and uncooperative fingers. But I managed.

“I wondered when I would hear from you.”

“I was a little tied up with Principal Grayson.”

“Two steps ahead of you. You should call and congratulate Derek. It all could have been avoided if you had just fulfilled your end of the bargain. Once an attention-seeking-judgmental-gossip-hound, always an attention-seeking-judgmental-gossip-hound. And if we had to hear that Britney bitch moan, “Get it, get it,” one more time we were going to wring your neck. And you thought you were so cunning with the Leanne debacle. We couldn't have that.”

“I didn't show those pictures to anyone or tell a soul about what Derek did. I kept my word.”

“You alienated your best friend. You had to pay for it.”

“Are you going to tell me how my best friend pulled this one off?”

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“It’s quite simple. Monique stole the list of emails off of your computer when she typed the Club Sweat invites. She also noticed your passwords for your email account and memorized it so she could send out the picture after it was taken. Charlie made sure that you had your moment of glory on the banquette by convincing the DJ to play a certain set list. Lily took the picture of you dancing. It was Derek and I who had the most fun. Derek and I used photoshop to make a creation that would resemble you, with a few alterations that we knew would push your buttons.”

“Ok, you have had your laugh. I have lost faith and doubt I will ever know how to judge people correctly. I will stay away from all of you for the rest of the year and write that in blood if you like. Just please admit what you have done to Grayson so I can get my position back.”

“You are so fucking naïve. We want to watch you self destruct in front of our very eyes. This was only phase one.”

“Beth, come on, we’ve had some great times. This is our last year together. It’s supposed to be magical; it’s supposed to be memorable.”

“Oh, it will be very memorable, Adam. You will remember this for the rest of your life.”

And then she had the audacity to hang up on me. Her ominous words had me reeling as though I had been cursed. It was reassuring that I could no longer live in a false fantasy where Lily, Charlie, Monique, Beth, or Derek deserved my confidence or smiles. On the other hand, it was devastating to learn that I had tried so damn hard to be a better person, to be a stronger person, to work on my flaws to keep their affections and to learn I had failed. I loathed myself for that. All I wanted at that moment was to sleep. Not the

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sort of sleep I had enjoyed after the Club Sweat event, but the dreamless sleepless of the grave that stretches for eons.

But I wasn't sleepy. The sun was sneaking through the gaps in my closed blinds, and my brother Brandon was making loud noises in his bedroom. I felt like screaming, but it was futile. I couldn't control my destiny, so how could I expect to control the sun or a moody little brother.

Some time passed, my pillow was damp from the tears that I cried, when I heard a knock on my window. It was Jane, standing at the top of the ladder. She motioned to me with her pointer finger, but I shook my head listlessly. Disgusted, she climbed down the ladder. I had been rude to Jane, but I would call her later when I didn't feel like the world had been pulled out from beneath my feet.

Then I heard a loud stomping up the stairs. Oh crap. Had the front doors been locked? My door swung open and Jane stood in the threshold like a warrior. Fiercely she strode to the window sill and pulled at the blinds with a jerk. She opened the windows and some obnoxious birdsong assaulted my ears. "Don't you dare try to block me out ever again, Adam. It's unproductive."

"I'm a monster, Jane. I made monsters hate me. That makes me worse than the monsters."

"No, Adam. Terrorists are monsters, serial killers are monsters, and pedophiles are monsters. You're just a confused teenage boy who fell in with the wrong crowd. Ergo, you aren't a monster. I am no Fay Wray, and you're no Kong about to pick me up screaming and charge to the top of the Empire State Building."

"I wish someone would shoot me like Kong."

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“Talk like that once more, asshole, and I will hit you so hard you will wish I shot you. Adam, I remember two winters ago. I am not letting that happen again.”

“I called Beth.” I gave her a rundown of the coolly calculated betrayal. Jane’s coloring went from red, to green, to red as I repeated Beth’s malicious words with tears streaming down my face and interruptions of gasping sobs.

“There has to be a weakest link somewhere. One of them has to still have a smidgen of humanity.”

“Jane, a girl died because of us. We ruined reputations. We were genuinely terrible people. I don’t think there’s the tiniest bit of humanity in our bone marrow.”

Memory 73

Derek, Derek, Derek! It killed me to see how the entire school fit snugly in his pocket. I vacillated between burning down his house in the middle of the night and slitting my own wrists. I had Jane and Dr. Johansen on my side, but was it enough? I was afraid of the person I was becoming. I couldn’t tell right from left, bad from good, or up from down. I made lists of how to win Derek and the others back, and rip them apart saying I was too good for them. But while I was at school, I would be near them and see them laughing and happy and be insanely jealous. Why couldn’t I be one of them? What was wrong with me? Try concentrating on *Madame Bovary* when you feel your own dramas are far more important.

Dr. Johansen kept prescribing antidepressants and sometimes I would take them faithfully, but other times I just flushed them down the toilet. They weren’t doing anything for me. Besides, I wasn’t depressed. I was angry and hurt. That’s not depression. At least I didn’t consider it depression. I was such a fool then.

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The things I did to feel better. I would pull up in the parking lot blasting Britney on repeat with the windows down and the sunroof open because I knew it would get stares and irritate the others. I roamed the hallways wearing headphones. I convinced myself I could find solace in Britney's world where I could be myself and damn the consequences.

Memory 74

The end of the first quarter is what fully did me in. In previous years I had organized Spirit Week and The Homecoming Dance; this year I would just be one of the lowly participants. Each day had a theme. Monday was Pajama Day, Tuesday was Sports Apparel Day, Wednesday was Formal Day, Thursday was Halloween Day and Friday was Class Color Day. Once the days were announced, I had my outfits carefully laid out. On Monday, I wore Scooby Doo slippers, a bathrobe, and a Ralph Lauren matching teddy bear pajama set, and held a stuffed animal with me all day. Tuesday, I wore jeans and sweatshirt for our state's hockey team. On Wednesday, I wore what I planned to wear to Homecoming, a dark blue pinstriped suit with a light blue button-down top and black shoes. Thursday excited me most. I decided to be a bad Catholic school boy in homage to Britney's famous bad Catholic school outfit, so I wore a wifebeater, a loosened tie and khaki shorts belted so my boxers were showing. Friday, I wore the stupid shirt that Derek had designed, and painted my face our class color, blue, and had even temporarily dyed my hair blue.

But something wasn't quite right. All the other seniors had underground class shirts they were wearing on Friday instead of the class shirt, but I didn't. Jane, Ralph, Ken and Kayla didn't really feel like spending the money. I was hurt because it was

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supposed to represent unity between us, and if they didn't want to do it, maybe our friendship wasn't as strong as I thought. Besides, I still believed that Senior year was supposed to be all about magic, and underground shirts were legendary because they were discouraged by the administration and often had double entendre.

I didn't start to act out until Thursday. One of our teachers wanted to take a picture of all the seniors in the class in our spirit day costumes. Well, that included me, Derek, Beth, Monique, Charlie, and Lily. And I absolutely refused to have anything to do with them, though a secret part of me still yearned for them to come crawling back to me begging me to be friends again. So when the teacher asked me to join in, I told him, "Fat chance." He rolled his eyes at me, expressed disappointment that someone was so immature that they couldn't get past cliques and snapped the photo. I completely agreed with him and felt demoralized inside. I also knew that particular teacher would judge me for the rest of the semester.

The very next day I skipped The Homecoming assembly. After all, what had the school done for me lately? I didn't give a shit about dumb Cro-Magnon jocks trying to string together inarticulate grunts while the slutty pom pom dancers tried to look hot dancing...at least what they called dancing... to the latest hits on the radio. They'd be better served slinging drinks at a strip club. Why waste my time. I was anxious about getting caught, but I had already suffered so much this year in such a short period of time. What greater punishment could be cast upon me?

Skipping wasn't wise. I went home and discovered my report card for the first quarter. My grades were less than stellar. Less than stellar, by my standards, were all Bs. I am a bit of a snob. I admit it. I tossed the paper to the ground as though it had scalded

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me and stomped on it. I tried to justify the lower grades. My classes were all AP...surely that had to be taken into account. But I had been taking AP classes since my sophomore year. And then it clicked. It was all Derek and Monique's fault. They were screwing with my head every single day and it was affecting my concentration. They were doggedly trying to destroy me. Until I dropped out of school and lived in a box on the street, they would never be satisfied. They fed—no they gluttoned—on my misery. Something had to be done, but what? It eluded me. I was cunning when it came to destroying other people's lives, like poor innocent Chrissy's, because I had an audience, but when it came to defending myself...I was a dithering, bumbling idiot.

Memory 75

First my mother pleaded. Then she tried to reason. Threats were the next trick in her arsenal, but I didn't give a shit. School was exasperating, life was exasperating, my mother was exasperating. I was going nowhere. How many times can you fake a headache and stomach-ache? I am not sure that there is an exact record in *The Guinness Book of World Records*, but I was gunning for it. During the day I would just sleep. There are no words to describe what sleep feels like for someone who is severely depressed. Escape doesn't cut it, nor does bliss. But when your head hits the pillow and you are wrapped in a blanket, perhaps clutching a teddybear, it's like coming home to a friend who loves you. Not that my sleep was always a blessing. Often I had to contend with images of Derek, Monique, Charlie, Lily, and Beth. In my dreams they became larger than life monsters. I would wake up screaming. But I could never express what triggered my screams. Was it hate? Was it pain? Words. There are so many of them and they are so

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essential to daily life. But when it gets to emotions, the currency of existence, one is always searching for the right word to express his or her truth.

The next two weeks were routine. At least as routine as they could be for someone who was severely depressed. I skipped school every single day—who gave a shit about *The Fountainhead*, p-values vs t-scores, or the defenestration of Prague—I wanted to learn more about Stephanie and DJ Tanner going through the trials of daily life and the simple morals that Danny Tanner could teach in thirty minutes. Plus, that Kimmy Gibbler was a hoot. In a perverse way, watching *Full House* also made things worse. It was torture because life always worked out perfectly for them; they felt loved, their fears were ameliorated, and when a friendship ended, or they broke up with someone, they were strong enough to get through it. This made me question my strength. Was I just some pathetic emotional weakling? Whenever I took the time to ask myself such questions, the voices would chorus, “YES.” The voices bombarded me left and right.

Every night I was begging God to kill me in my sleep. I would reason with him. “I know you have a quota for how many people have to die a day. You take innocent children constantly. You take those who have a zest for life long before their time. Please, take me instead. Let me give my life for one of them.” It wasn’t an altruistic act. It was completely selfish. I just wanted to die. I believe lots of people want to die; why is the suicide rate so high? I guess I was one of many of the walking dead at a deli counter and my number wasn’t high enough. Looking back now it sounds funny, or pathetic, but I would play games with God, in order for him to kill me in my sleep.

“God, if I hold my breath for a minute, will you kill me in my sleep?”

“God, if I don’t talk for thirty minutes, will you kill me in my sleep?”

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“God, if I lie stiff as a board for an hour and don’t even wiggle a toe, will you end my fucking misery tonight?” God was busy or lost my number.

Memory 76

“You’ve missed ten days of classes. How are you going to make up the work?”

“Dr. Johansen, I am not going back there ever again.”

“And college?”

“What about it? I hope to be dead by then.”

“Do you plan on taking your own life?”

“No. I am too much of a pussy to even do that right.”

“Fine. Then you have to plan for the eventuality that you will not be dead. Other than your severe depression, you are a perfectly healthy young man. I don’t expect you to encounter death anytime soon.”

“I thought you were supposed to be helping me.”

“Adam, right now we need to get your medicine regulated and you in a semi-functional state. That’s our goal.”

“I can’t go back there. I can’t look at them. They make me ill. They distract me. It hurts. I didn’t do anything wrong. Why don’t people like me?”

“Adam, if you don’t go back, they’ve won. Is that what you want?”

“No.”

“Then you have to go. I don’t care if you just put your head on your desk during all your classes. I don’t care if you only do half your work. You do only what you’re capable of. Above all, you must take your medicine, keep your appointments with me, and try not to isolate yourself. Do what makes you happy.”

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“It all sounds so hard. I don’t want to fight. I have no strength.”

“Oh, Adam, if you only knew how wrong you are. I have many patients with no strength. Many patients I don’t think I can save, and you surely aren’t one of them.”

I wanted to believe everything he said. But a cynical voice in my head reminded me that Johansen made money off my difficulties. The longer I was depressed, the longer I needed medication, and the longer I trusted him or felt a camaraderie with him, the longer I would be his cash cow.

Memory 77

Jane came over that very evening. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and she had traded her contacts for a pair of glasses that she seldom wore. Instead of her usual pajama bottoms and comfy tee-shirt, she was wearing a blazer and knee length skirt. “Good evening, class.”

“This is retarded.”

“You will not use such language in my classroom, and you will address me as Miss Jane at all times.”

“Jane, I am too tired to...”

“Miss Jane, I am too tired to...”

“Fine. Miss Jane, I am too tired to play this game. Leave me alone.”

“Not going to happen, Buster. In my teacher’s handbook...”

“Jane, you aren’t a teacher.”

“Miss Jane.”

“Miss Jane, you aren’t a teacher so you don’t have a goddamn handbook.”

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“I am going to pretend that you are cranky and nervous, young man. My handbook tells me exactly how to deal with your type. Obviously, I don’t expect you to read the chapters you have missed, or the books. So here is what you are going to do. I made a list of all the significant points we have discussed in each course, and you know my notes are more than thorough. Tonight we are going to go over them verbatim. Cooperate and this gets done quickly.” Jane didn’t provide a transfusion of passion for schoolwork that evening; I was still far too depressed for that. But she made it so I could show up the very next morning and at least pass for functional. I owe her immensely for that. But the transition back was not going to be smooth.

Memory 78

“I heard he had a nervous breakdown.” I could count on Beth to whisper behind my back to Lily. I ground my teeth and silenced her offensive voice.

“Check out his wrists if you get a chance. I heard there was a suicide attempt.” Derek and Monique felt it was necessary to talk about me a row in front of me as if I were so medicated that I couldn’t make out a word they were uttering. I wish it had been the case. And yet I was torn. I was a heroin addict when it came to the sound of their voices. I could inject it into my veins all day everyday. Those would be only marks on my arms.

Jane had enough. “Actually, Adam had a severe case of mono. He still does. If he could miss anymore school he totally would. But Adam has ambitions. He really wants to get into Columbia and he can’t risk all the sick days. But you wouldn’t get that Monique because you would probably just suck off the admission board to get a spot at community

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college and as for you, Derek, ask yourself this. If your parents didn't have any money and connections...where would you be going next year?"

"Stupid dyke."

"Were you referring to Beth? Because I understand she's not all that stupid."

The other students could smell blood in the air. I was fortunate Jane was my gladiator. She was armed with quips. The mono lie was a spectacular piece of work. I could use it on my teachers for sympathy points and appear lethargic simultaneously. Still a voice told me I didn't care about what the teachers thought. I cared about what Derek, Monique, Beth, Lily, and Charlie thought. I needed something to bring me back to life, and I wasn't sure pills would be enough.

Memory 79

If I had any energy left, I would have screamed at Johansen demanding to know why the pills hadn't kicked in yet. But I was just a reanimated corpse; instead of brains I craved sleep. When I wasn't sleeping, I was crying—dry sobs were all that remained; my river of tears had long ago been depleted. During classes I would stare into space or just put my head on my desk. My teachers tried to speak to me after class, to motivate me in any way possible. For the most part, they knew that I was a likeable kid and they didn't want to see me suffer. But the voices told me the truth. "LOOKS PRETTY BAD IF ONE OF THEIR ALLEDGLY BRIGHT STUDENTS FLUNKS OUT. THEY GET YEARLY PROGRESS REPORTS JUST LIKE YOU." If the voices said something, I knew it to be a universal truth. Still, I'd write their papers, with lackluster enthusiasm, and take their tests—half-heartedly studying with Jane. I am not certain if I was a heavy burden preventing her from doing excellent on each test, or if in teaching me the material she

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was preparing herself in a fashion more effective than studying on her own. We never discussed it, because I was too selfish to take interest in anyone's life but mine.

And a funny thing happened. I would get an A- or a B+ on a paper for a book I never read, and I would consistently score in the low A to high B range on most of my tests. Given that these tests were mostly essay questions, I began to suspect my teachers were colluding in inflating my grades. I was too afraid to confront them, however, because I didn't want them to know I had caught on to their act. Then, surely, my good fortune would come to an ignominious end.

Memory 80

"I told you I refuse to discuss it."

"It's a milestone."

"I have nothing to celebrate. I have no one to celebrate it with. There's nothing I want."

"You're turning eighteen."

"I wish I hadn't lived to see it."

My mother burst into tears.

"Stop talking like that, Adam. You're breaking your mother's heart."

"At least she still has a heart left to break, Dad."

"Why do you let those kids have so much power over you?"

"How dare you bring them up? We aren't discussing them!"

"It's not negotiable. We're going and you're going to have a great time."

It was true, once upon a time I had wanted desperately to go to New York. Every year I had pleaded that we go there for a family vacation, but my father would balk at my

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request. He said it was too filthy, too loud, too chaotic. This had not prevented me from applying to two universities in New York. I was still waiting to hear from them. In the right mindset, I would have appreciated the magnitude of the gift and the sacrifice my dad was making, but I was still numb. My birthday was a death sentence. It reminded me that I had lost Derek, Charlie, Beth, Lily and Monique. They would not come to a party if I threw one. There would be no birthday miracle where they would come to me and confess that they missed me. That was not a present that anyone could arrange.

I didn't have the strength to argue, it was futile, so I packed my bag. The whole time I packed, I silently prayed that the plane would crash. I know that such an act might ease my pain but would compound the amount of misery in the world, and yet I didn't give a shit. Who were these faceless passengers and their prospective grieving families to me? Clearly the plane didn't crash. Nor was there a car accident en route to the airport or to the hotel. I was powerless in my daily life, so why should I expect to exert any power over the lives of others? God didn't listen to me.

My parents had sprung for a suite at the Plaza. I'll admit I was impressed. The exploits of Eloise had been amongst my favorite stories when I was a child—when I still believed that the world was a magical place where good people were rewarded, where things were black and white, no gray ambiguities could trouble me. The king-size bed was luxurious, the pillows filled with a down so soft it defied words. And the sheets—beneath those sheets it was impossible to find monsters or nightmares.

I kept busy in New York—perhaps this was my parents, intent—so busy that Derek, Monique, Lily, Beth, and Charlie didn't exist. Each day started early and lasted late into the night. I saw the Statue of Liberty and Chinatown, and stood silently at

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Ground Zero. I took a carriage ride through Central Park and felt an exquisite peace beneath the lush greenery. And the shopping—it was spectacular. I would return to the room loaded with bags of books and dvds, clothing from exclusive designers.

I loved the hustle and bustle of New York, which my father had decried. Everyone was so lively, so attractive. They strode with purpose. I yearned to be just like them. I had to get better someday. Surely the fact that I was enjoying this trip was a testament to that? Maybe the plane hadn't crashed for a reason. Maybe I hadn't died in my sleep for a reason. Just around the bend, I was meant to recover and become just like these ultra chic individuals. For once the voices had nothing to say; after all, they hadn't received a plane ticket, so how could they have accompanied me here?

Memory 81

Embarking on the plane, homeward bound, my spirits started to sag. The further away I hurled through the clouds from New York, the less I could recall its charm. The colors and the sights all began to fade; my humdrum life and the pitfalls of daily existence blocked every other dream or sensation out. What was the point of the expensive clothes, when they wouldn't impress the people I so longed to move? I had a respite from school, but tomorrow morning I would be back to the same desk in front of the same horrible people, the same horrible people who I couldn't exorcize from my heart. Was I weak? Was I stupid? Probably.

The next thing I knew I was in my room feeling oppressed by the luggage I had to unpack. I threw the suitcase under the bed—if I couldn't see it, I didn't need to summon the energy to deal with it. I hurled myself on the bed and buried my face in the pillows.

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My peace lasted a nanosecond when I heard a rapping at my window. What the hell was Jane doing using the ladder in the middle of winter? The footing would be extra treacherous—I knew this much because in the past I had nearly broken my neck using it to visit her, that of course was back in the day when I cared about visiting others. Even though she had a striped scarf around her neck and a knit pompom hat on top of her blonde waves, her face was red where the wind had nipped at it. It would be inhuman to keep her waiting a moment longer.

“Most normal people would pick up a phone, or just knock at the front door.”

“And most depressed people find a way to ignore a ringing phone.”

“I didn’t tell you Johansen’s diagnosis just so you could throw the term in my face whenever it suits you. Using it as ammo isn’t fair, and you know it.”

“I am sorry.”

“You should be.”

“I didn’t come here to fight. We still have to celebrate your birthday properly.”

“I am all birthday-ed out. Let’s just pretend you sent me a card. I oohed and awed over it. End of story.”

“Don’t think so. We’re going out to dinner next Saturday, just the two of us, my treat.”

“If it’s a treat, why does it sound like a command?”

We argued about it all week, but she wouldn’t budge. She even appealed to my parents, what a dirty blow, of course they sided with her. She wasn’t even of their blood. I was, but that didn’t stop them from ignoring my much-voiced wishes to be left alone. But that didn’t mean I had to be compliant. I’d make Jane wish she never proposed this

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evening. When she came to pick me up, I answered the door in sleep-pants and a gray hoodie. I felt mildly bad when I noticed that she was dressed in her homecoming dress, and that she had taken the trouble to have her hair styled. But like I said, I felt mildly bad. She was kidnapping me. Jane was a real sport. She didn't roll her eyes at my attire.

“Where's the ransom note?”

“Actually, I am being paid to take you away. They don't want you anymore.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“If this evening is going to work, you're just going to have to trust me.”

I supposed I could trust her. She was my best friend and those were in short supply, so I stopped asking questions.

We pulled up in front of Jacque's, a five star French restaurant. As I stared up at the faux chateau structure and smelled the sumptuous odors wafting in the air, I felt guilt rise from the pit of my stomach to the top of my throat. I didn't know how Jane could get a reservation here, unless she planned it months in advance, and I hadn't the slightest idea how she proposed to pay for our meal. Jacque's is notorious for prices that make people observe that they charged for oxygen during the meal. “Jane, let's just go to McDonald's. They'll never let me in here like this.”

“We're paying customers. They'll accept our money and make fun of us in the kitchen, but they will not deny us service. It's not my fault you chose to dress like a jackass out of spite.”

“You should have said something at the house. I would have changed.”

“Don't worry, Adam. I thought of a solution to this eventuality. Look in the trunk before the valet attendant takes the car.” Once the valet opened the doors for Jane and

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wished her a good evening, I approached the trunk and opened it. There was a garment bag with my name on it. “Jane...”

“Not another word. Go change while I order drinks.”

Making my way through the restaurant to the bathroom was humiliating, but I deserved it. I had never changed in a bathroom stall before, and it is an experience I hope never to repeat. Changing your pants in such a cramped place is more complicated than running an obstacle course. But the effort was worth it. When I made it to the table in my black tuxedo, Jane stood up and applauded. “I ordered frog legs as an appetizer.”

“Ick.”

“They’re supposed to be a delicacy. Besides, you only turn eighteen once.”

The frog legs arrived, and after staring at them in horror for a few moments, I took the plunge and tried one. I was supposed to trust Jane, and I am glad that I did. They tasted just like chicken. Expensive chicken, but succulent delicious chicken nonetheless. As we sipped on Perrier and waited for our Duck L’Orange, I started to laugh. This was like playing dress-up. I wanted to ask Jane why she hadn’t packed any stuffed animals to join us at the table, but I didn’t think she would appreciate the joke.

Jane reached for her clutch and withdrew a small package wrapped in silver paper.

“Jane, this is too much.”

“If it makes you feel any better, all of this is from my parents and me. I think you will really enjoy this present.” I carefully opened the gift; it was a beautiful Mont Blanc fountain pen. “I know you’ve always had a passion for telling stories, Adam. Things haven’t been easy for you lately, but I know someday soon, hopefully sooner than later,

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you'll want to start writing again. And when you do, this pen will come in handy because it should only be used for documents of the highest quality." I started to cry; it was such a beautiful gesture. "Cut it out, Adam. There is no excuse for tears tonight."

We finished our dinner and waited for the attendant to bring us the car. Even if I couldn't say it aloud, I knew that this evening was exactly what I needed. Still, I didn't feel like I deserved all this fuss.

"You're awfully quiet, Adam."

"I was just thinking how the hell am I going to top this when it's your birthday?"

"All I ask is that you're healthy by then. Having you back would be the ultimate gift."

I didn't know that I could come back, or ever would come back. Did I even want to come back? The Adam that existed before this year was so polluted by petty things and didn't have the ability to value what really mattered. Hence the troubling thought—if he returned and I embraced him with welcoming arms, what would stop my mistakes from defining me? Jane brought me back to reality. "I said, do you want to come inside?" I didn't really, I just wanted to go home and curl up with a good book under the covers and block out my fears, but I owed Jane. And it was relatively early for a Saturday night. I could still read later. So inside we went and I was frontally assaulted by Ken, Ralph, Kayla, my parents and Jane's parents screaming out, "Surprise."

Kayla pulled out her digital camera and snapped a picture of my disgruntled face. "Look how dapper you are in your birthday suit. How about a smile?" For a moment I fantasized about having a homemade bomb strapped to my chest and pressing the

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detonator. All of our bodies bursting to bits satisfied me. “Jane, we need to talk. Outside. Now.”

“But Adam, everyone has been patiently waiting for cake and ice cream..”

“OUTSIDE NOW!” The fury in my voice must have paralyzed Jane because she didn’t have a witty remark and she could barely make it out the front door. “How could you do this to me?”

“Maybe you’re too blind to see it, but the four of us really care about you, and we wanted to do something special...”

“ I don’t need anything special. I don’t want a fucking pity party. And that’s exactly what this is. You even had to include our parents, just so it felt like there were more bodies to fill the goddamn room.”

Jane burst into tears, “I could have invited the entire Senior class, and it wouldn’t matter to you. You and I both know there are only four faces you would really long to see. And guess what? They would never come.”

“How do you know? Did you even ask them?”

“I wouldn’t have them in my house for all the money in the world.”

“If I was anybody else they would come.”

“Can’t you just stop listening to those shitty dark voices in your head?”

“I have to go home.”

“If you do, we’ll just move the party to your house. We’ll follow you from room to room. If you escape to the roof, we’ll have it up there.”

“Why won’t you just give up on me, Jane?”

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“It’s simple. Whatever you think you care for Derek and those other bastards, I care for you a million times more. The agony you’re facing right now would only be a fraction of what I’d feel if I lost you.”

“Then you’re just as pathetic as I am.”

“That’s not the case, and you know it. While it may be breaking news to you, you’re actually someone to grieve losing. They aren’t.”

“So why aren’t they falling apart?”

“Because they aren’t human. They are parasites.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“Sure you do. You come inside and eat your damn cake and ice cream. Even if it tastes like sawdust, you smile like it’s the best damn thing you’ve ever had because Kayla baked it by herself. And you open your presents. If you ever breathe the phrase “pity party” around any of them, I’ll wring your neck.”

Memory 82

As the winter months dragged on, much remained constant. Though I continued weekly sessions with Dr. Johansen and took several prescribed anti-depressants, I was still lethargic and despondent. During a typical session I would ask Johansen when I would see progress and listened in exasperation as he reminded me that as I was no longer skipping school, improvements were being made. But I needed something bigger. That grand gesture arrived at the beginning of March.

I walked to the end of my driveway to pick up the mail. Trudging through the snow I shuffled through its contents; mostly bills for my parents. The last envelope was addressed to me, much to my surprise. Eager for some sort of communication with the

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world I quickly tore it open. It took me several readings to fully process that I had been accepted to my first choice university. I ran into the house shouting, only to remember that my parents were not home. I could have called them, but I realized this was news I wanted to share in person.

During dinner that evening I re-read the letter several times. My parents were bursting with pride, but also looked at my acceptance from a practical angle. Given the expense of the school and the long distance from home, my parents insisted that before I could commit I would have to attend a visitation day. My mother specifically worried that I had selected the university because of its reputation. They believed that I should meet some of the other students considering the school to see if it was the right environment. This seemed a reasonable request. At the end of the meal I consulted the university's website to learn more about the campus visitation program and registered for a weekend two weeks away.

I tried to do my homework that evening, but I couldn't focus. I was living out an escape fantasy. I pictured myself on campus during a home football game, wearing the school's colors, with my face painted. Thousands of voices united to sing the school's fight song. The faces behind, in front, and beside me smiled with warm welcome. The scene transitioned to a student government meeting where a tall, blond upperclassman clapped me on the back as I took the podium to propose a fundraiser. Then I was in the front row of a crowded lecture hall, my voice projecting absolute confidence as I identified the correct differential for a calculus equation. This was a chance to reinvent the tragedy of my senior year; there would be no Derek on campus to stamp out my dreams. However, there would also be no Jane to partake in my triumphs. I dismissed that

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troubling thought remembering that Jane and I could keep in touch through emails, text messages, phone calls, IMs. Maybe she could even visit me and I could show her around campus and introduce her to my new friends, like the big man on campus I would become. For the first time in recent months the future was something to celebrate; not a dark unknown that left me trembling in terror.

Memory 83

The plane ride was interminable; I couldn't lose myself in the Stephen King paperback I had packed. I shifted in my seat to the discomfort of my fellow passengers and got up to use the bathroom multiple times. My parents remarked that they felt like they were traveling with an unwieldy infant; in some ways the metaphor worked. I was a newborn taking his first step.

Once the plane landed I raced to the baggage claim. The sooner we had our bags, the sooner we could get a taxi to the campus, and the sooner I could begin making life-long friendships with fascinating people. My parents caught up to me, breathing heavily, and followed me out of the terminal.

During the taxi ride I felt like that young Adam who used to shout out, "Are we there yet?" during any trip that took more than fifteen minutes. I took the rear passenger seat so I was the first to see the sprawling campus. My heart immediately belonged to the green grass and the stately oak trees; the old brick buildings, towering above, inspired an intense craving for knowledge. Students passed us on skateboards, bicycles, and on foot. There were Preppies and Goths, Jocks and Nerds; they all seemed vivacious. I sensed kindred spirits who dreamed of changing the world. This was more powerful than any antidepressant I had ever taken.

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The programs began the evening. Parents would attend an official meeting while the prospective students would be divided into groups and eat in the cafeteria. Each group consisted of eleven members—ten prospies (as we were called) and one leader. My group's leader was Bryce. Bryce was the embodiment of what I aimed to be; he was a member of the student government, sang in an acapella group, recently joined a theatre society, and majored in journalism. Bryce was intelligent, poised, and answered our questions to the best of his ability. His devotion to the university was a selling point. I imagined that the campus was full of Bryces; I didn't find this intimidating as he was the type of person I wanted to be associated with. The other members of my group came with pedigrees that testified to the high standards of the university, but they weren't conceited. I quickly connected with Mary Ellen, who came from Louisiana, and Patrick from Seattle. Mary Ellen had worked for an organization that brought art projects to mentally handicapped children. From the way she spoke about her efforts, I knew that she had truly been involved; that it was not just a choice spurred to pad a résumé. When she spoke about leaving them behind her brown eyes filled with tears. She hoped to find similar charities on campus, or start her own. Patrick, though he could appreciate Mary Ellen's community service, explained that most of his time had been devoted to his school's yearbook and newspaper. I had always wanted to write for Jefferson's paper, but never found the time. Throughout dessert I asked questions about how he became involved with the paper and what features he worked on. I thought it was a great sign for a future friendship when he revealed that he did movie and book reviews. Mary Ellen, who also had a great interest in films and literature, began a discussion of our favorite movies. Bryce told us that we would be rejoining the other groups in the auditorium to

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attend a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by one of the theatre groups. I couldn't believe the size of the auditorium; it definitely was quadruple the one at Jefferson. The seats had shiny brass armrests and were upholstered in red velvet that matched the curtains. There was even a balcony and a pit for the orchestra. The room smelled of wealth. Before I could take in any other further sights, the lights dimmed, and the curtains parted.

I don't remember much of the production. I was too impressed by the professional quality of the sets and how sophisticated the players appeared. I am certain, however, that it easily rivaled a Broadway production.

After the play we were assigned to our dorm rooms for the night. I was pleased to discover that Patrick and I were roommates. As we settled in for the night we enjoyed the sights and sounds of the students. We were flattered by how many came to our door and introduced themselves. They gave us reasons for why we should accept the invitation to study at the university. Some even invited us to go to parties, but I was too exhausted. Patrick wasn't really interested in going out either. Instead of giving us a hard time, the other students understood why we chose not to join them, and told us there would be plenty of time to hang out with them in the fall if we rushed their fraternities or joined their clubs. It didn't matter if I was just another prospie, among many, to them; I couldn't care less if their specific offers were insincere lures to bring us to the university. I had already made up my mind; this would be my home for the next four years.

Memory 84

After the visitation, I made my decision to attend the university. During the past year I had been stuck in a rut, but after sending in the deposit, I felt more alive than I had

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in months. I began to correspond with Mary Ellen and Patrick regularly, as they decided to enroll as well. Patrick even suggested we request to be roommates; I was flattered and took him up on his offer.

It may sound petty, but as other students received rejection letters from colleges, I flourished. I took great pride in hearing that neither Derek nor Monique had been accepted by any of their top three schools; Charlie and Lily had already committed to our state university. Beth did get an acceptance letter from her second choice college, but her parents decided that they couldn't afford the steep tuition. When Jane finally received her acceptance letter from her first choice school, I cheered. Out of all the schools which accepted students in our district, Jane's was truly the most prestigious. These developments proved, if nothing else, that there is some sort of karma.

I'll admit my arrogance was inappropriate and short-sighted. At the time, I justified my behavior by concluding I hadn't had anything to be happy about in so long. Likewise, I remembered that no one, other than Jane, Ken, Ralph, and Kayla, had reached out to me during the year. My suffering wasn't transparent and the voices—still having their occasional say—insisted that the best revenge was to make those who smugly observed my downfall jealous. In consensus with their interpretation of my past, I ordered vast quantities of my school's registered apparel from its website. My most obnoxious acquisition was a gaudy watch with the school's mascot. Every time I raised my hand I made sure that the other students could see it. Jane never commented on my lack of subtlety; I am not sure if it was because she too was lost in her own world thrilled about her future, or if she was just happy to see me smiling again.

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Spring break came and went. When others had made plans to vacation in Cancun or the Bahamas, I had still felt dead inside. By the time my resurrection commenced, it was too late to find rates that weren't exorbitant. Fortunately, Jane, Kayla, Ralph, and Ken thought Senior spring break was excessive and would rather save the money for school. Instead of feeling lonely, I spent all my time with them. We rented movies like *Jaws* to remind ourselves of the perils of the deep blue sea, while drinking tropical drinks and wearing swimsuits. If we wanted to swim, we turned to the local gym. In the back of my mind I wondered where Derek and the others were and feared they might be having a better time than me; they would come back with fresh tans and memories to last a lifetime. But I quickly remembered that Jane and I had a powerful bond built on mutual respect and adoration, while Derek dominated his friends with an iron fist. How much fun could it be to relax on a beach if they still had to deal with drama the whole time? There wasn't anything to envy.

During this period I did something extremely foolish. At the time, I couldn't recognize the stupidity of my action, as I was eighteen and had a new lease on life. I began to play with my medication. I didn't know as much then as I do now about chemical imbalances in the brain, and how they could be created or stabilized. It never occurred to me that my happiness wasn't just situational. For months I had been on antidepressants, too many to list or name, and the dosage changed dependent on the manifestations of my symptoms. I would get frustrated with the lack of results, regardless of Dr. Johansen's pleas for patience, and slowly resented my pills. I hated that they made me semi-sleepy and increased my weight. Consequently, when the correct cocktail of medications took effect, I believed my elevated mood was a result of my circumstances

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and nothing else. This was a dangerous fallacy. Immediately, I stopped taking my pills. In the morning I would leave out a glass on the counter, still glistening from tap-water, as “evidence” that I had taken my medication. In reality, I flushed the pills down the toilet, ensuring that if anyone looked at the bottles he or she would believe I was taking my pills religiously. I kept tabs on when I would hypothetically need new refills, and requested them from Johansen. I knew I was wasting my parents’ money, but what did I care, I knew better than everyone. I was going to my dream school. I was escaping the torment, and I had solved the problem all by myself.

Johansen wasn’t surprised when I asked to cut down my therapy from once a week to bimonthly forty-five minute sessions. Perhaps, if he had vigorously campaigned against this, things may have ended differently. On the other hand, my disease was progressing quickly, and the depression had only represented one phase of it. I can’t blame Johansen for missing the signs; I wasn’t being honest with him. Nor was I self-aware enough to recognize that things were beginning to spiral out of control. I had been the victim of an unyielding depression for so long that I forgot what happiness meant. It never occurred to me that someone could be excessively happy.

Memory 85

Prom was a week away; sleep was impossible. This was my last school dance and it was going to be perfect. Ken had decided he wanted to take a friend, Valerie, from another high school, so it was natural I paired with Kayla as Ralph and Jane were still going strong. If I couldn’t organize Prom like I had dreamed of doing since freshman year, I’d control the rest of the evening. When ticket sales were announced, I called Ralph and Ken relentlessly that evening to ensure they brought checks for the tickets the

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following day. We would not be able to sign up for tables until we purchased our tickets, and I did not want to get stuck seating with some couple not in our group because Ken or Ralph had waited until the last possible second.

My next step was to rent a party bus. Limos were usually in fashion, but after I had heard Derek whispering to Monique about the party bus he was getting, I decided to one-up him. When I contacted the rental group I was informed that most popular model was disco themed; it had a disco ball hanging from the ceiling, a CD player with the latest digital technology in speakers, and white suede couches, instead of actual seats. It was also equipped with several mini-fridges where one could store beverages, pop in our case.

Because Ken and Ralph were clueless about color coordinating corsages, after I called Jane to find out the color of the dresses the girls were wearing, I told Ken to order white roses and suggested red roses to Ralph.

About two weeks before Prom, I arranged an appointment for Ken, Ralph, and me to rent tuxedos. I had already decided on a classic black with a cummerbund and bowtie, when Ralph and Ken announced they were going to rent white tuxedos with the less traditional tie and vest. Though I thought it would look better if we matched styles and color, Ralph and Ken vetoed me stating that I had become a Prom dictator and that they should have enough freewill to choose their attire. I gritted my teeth and agreed.

It was up to me to throw the perfect post party. While many couples would be renting hotel rooms or heading to one of the gigantic parties being thrown by our classmates, such as the one Derek and Monique were holding, I knew this would not be the route for us; not only did we not drink or care to be around it, but also we were blacklisted from Derek's bash. Luckily, my parents had relinquished the house, after

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much drawn out begging. As the weather would be accommodating, I decided it should be a pool party. After all, we would be sweaty from dancing, so a nice dip in the cool water would be perfect. I purchased inflatable rafts, multicolored foam noodles, and a water volleyball net so we could either lounge or horse around. When I informed the others to bring their swimsuits, they knew that they were in for an awesome evening. I was obsessed; I bought candles to encircle the pool for a romantic setting. I found sparkling cider and plastic champagne glasses for the illusion of sophistication and drink mixes for non-alcoholic versions of Margaritas and Daiquiris. I planned for brie and crackers as well as Godiva chocolates. It was over the top, but I didn't care. The night had to be perfection.

Memory 86

Prom night finally arrived. I had spent the day doing last minute preparations for the post party as well as running quick errands—the corsages needed to be picked up and I didn't trust Ken or Ralph to remember. The dance started at eight-thirty sharp, and I didn't want to miss a minute of it. I had written up an itinerary two nights before the dance and emailed it to my friends. Each couple was to meet at six-thirty at the girl's house for individual pictures; approximately thirty minutes were allowed. At seven the other couples were to arrive at my house for group pictures. We would have an hour to take these pictures—this allowed the girls any last minute touch-ups. By eight we would all be in the party bus and drive toward the old Witherburg mansion, an historical site that could be rented for special occasions like weddings or proms. We would arrive around eight-twenty, assuming traffic was cooperative, ensuring that we could be among the first to check in—nobody likes long lines, especially at formal events—and then we could

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quickly get our professional photos out of the way, and hit the dance floor before it was overcrowded.

Around five o'clock I began to get ready. I took a long, cool shower to relax and then put on my tuxedo. My mom came in during the dressing process and took photos while crying like a baby. In between tears she talked about her own Prom and how special it was. She was glad that I had so much enthusiasm for the dance and hoped it was everything I had envisioned. When I was completely dressed my dad came in and handed me his Ralph Lauren cologne. It was true that a lot of guys my age wore expensive cologne on a regular basis—Calvin Klein or Diesel, even Armani. But I was a deodorant kind of guy. So the cologne made me feel grown up.

Then my father accompanied me to the garage and handed me the keys to his Mercedes, a huge sign of his trust in me. The car was extremely meaningful to him and he handled it with a kid glove. Before I left to pick up Kayla, we went over the operation of the car one last time—where the turn signal was, how to turn on the headlights, and how to put the convertible top back on if it started to rain. When our bonding session was over, I pulled out of the driveway with a jaunty honk and headed toward Kayla's house.

Everything went according to plan. By the time Kayla and I left her parents behind, we were both blind from the relentless flash of the camera. We reached Ken's house just in time for more pictures; forty-five minutes later my friends were tired of posing like celebrities. As their complaints filled the air, the party bus pulled up at the exact time I had requested. We waved goodbye to the crowd with sighs of relief.

Once we were inside, I reached into a bag I had already put in the bus and pulled out five CD cases. This was my coup de grace. Unbeknownst to my friends, I had made

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everybody a Prom Mix. The CD consisted of the year's hottest hits—a time capsule that could be kept into old age. My friends were touched by my efforts and asked the bus driver if he could play it for us on the way towards the Witherburg mansion. Of course, I had already arranged for the CD to be ready and waiting, so all the driver had to do was press play.

As we pulled up to the Witherburg mansion, we stopped chattering for a moment to appreciate its beauty. The Prom committee had strung paper lanterns through the estate's majestic Oak trees. The valet attendants stood in the circle drive in livery straight out of Cinderella, waiting to let us out. We entered the mansion and stood in the foyer for a moment admiring the oil paintings of Witherburg descendants from the Victorian era; the Louis the XIV furniture placed underneath huge windows surrounded by velvet curtains captured our eyes. The ballroom was down a sprawling hallway and music floated out underneath the plate glass doors. I imagine we could have stood there the entire night appreciating the beauty of the mansion, but we were rudely sent hurtling to reality when Derek, Monique, Charlie, Lily, and Beth shoved past us to reach the check-in table before us. Casually, I checked out their attire and decided they looked like white trash with an expense account. I promised myself that was the only time they would enter my minds; nothing could spoil this culmination. Once I entered the doors, my new found peace was shattered. I was confronted with a trellis of roses spelling out “Romance With The Stars” That was my dream theme. I fumed as I remembered a conversation I had with Derek over the summer when I was still blind to my fate. I had told him that as Senior class President and head of the student congress I couldn't wait to plan Prom. I already had picked the theme, Romance With The Stars, using famous couples from

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iconic romances as my inspiration. Each table would be a different couple, Jack and Rose, Rick and Ilsa, Rhett and Scarlett, and so forth. I would have a picture of the couple blown up and framed as the center piece and at each setting there would be a miniature of the picture made into a keychain. While I was frozen in place, Derek made eye contact with me from across the room and smirked. That was this bastard's ultimate revenge. He'd planned this to be the final outcome of the picture incident; not only did he take my position, but he took my ideas and got all the credit. I could hear the chaperones exclaiming that this was the best Prom in the history of Jefferson High. I was seething. This had to be a nightmare. But it wasn't. I was about to rush up to him and punch him in the nose, or head to the DJ booth, steal the mic and scream that Derek had stolen the credit for my theme. But I stifled the urge. I saw that particular route ending badly for me. I might get kicked out of the dance and Kayla, Jane, Ralph, Ken and Valerie would probably be tossed out with me, or feel obliged to do so in a sign of solidarity. I couldn't be responsible for ruining everyone's night; I'd be no better than Derek. There was only one thing to do. I had to look like I was having the most fun out of everyone in the room. Derek wanted a scene; he yearned for my further disgrace. It wasn't going to happen. I would steal his thunder by doing something memorable—some sort of act that would be talked about at all the after parties and maybe make its way back to the entire school. And then it hit me. With a little help from Britney Spears, I could simultaneously have my moment of glory and simultaneously send a big FU to Derek and his cronies. Jane was the only other person in the room who knew what Derek had done. I signaled to Jane that I was alright. She initially doubted me, but once I filled her in on my plan, she was thrilled to see my fighting spirit revived. She quickly agreed to be my accomplice and

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called for Ralph. He rolled his eyes—he wasn't a fan of drama—but Jane wore the pants in their relationship, so he would accommodate her wishes. When no one was paying attention to him, Ralph made his way towards the DJ booth. He spoke to the DJ for a few moments and returned to our spot on the dancefloor. Jane glanced at him and he just shrugged his shoulders. Then the music stopped and the DJ spoke up. "This next song is a special treat. I hear Adam is a huge Britney Spears fan. His best friend insists that I play that addictive smash "Toxic" and dedicate it to him. So this one is for you, Adam, from Jane."

As the swelling synth beats of "Toxic" began to blare throughout the room, Jane, Ken, Ralph, Valerie, and Kayla formed a circle around me. How the rest of it evolved I don't quite remember—the music took over my body and I was someone else—I grabbed Kayla and pulled her towards me and moved up and down her body like I was seducing her. I began to gyrate on the floor at her feet like I was possessed by a demon, and by the first chorus, the entire floor had formed a circle in which I was the center; they knew they were seeing something memorable. I spotted Monique, who I had decided would be my next target, I strutted up to her and pulled her into the circle with me. Derek glared and blurted out to return his date, but I ignored him. Monique did as well. She always craved attention, a characteristic on which I was counting, and knew this would be the "it" moment of the prom. While Derek was throwing his impotent fit, Jane snuck up behind him with her glass of pop. Just as Monique was getting into the dance, possibly forgetting who I was, I shoved her back into the circle where she slipped into Jane. I didn't see the pop go cascading over Monique staining her dress, as I was in the middle of my manic performance, but I heard the aftermath. Monique let out a scream to rival

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Carrie as if she were drenched with a bucket of pig's blood; she began to hurl unrepeatable invective at Jane and even attempted to throw a few sucker punches. But no one gave a shit about Monique; they were too busy snapping pictures of my dance. It was ironic—earlier in the year I had paid dearly for losing my inhibitions on the dance floor, but this time I could tell intrinsically that these pictures weren't part of an evil scheme—they were just for posterity.

When "Toxic" ended, the DJ paused before the next song so the entire room could erupt into applause. Monique, Derek, Beth, Charlie, and Lily all looked like someone had slit a puppy's throat in front of them. They turned on their heels and fled the Witherburg mansion. Mission accomplished I had ruined their Prom and ensured that mine was the perfect evening.

Memory 87

After the success of my Toxic dance and my plans to destroy Monique's trashy Prom dress, I developed a taste for revenge. My moment of glory had felt so invigorating; I just wanted to relive it. I had been dead so long; it was time to make people pay the price.

I scheduled my next attack for commencement. This time I enlisted my Brandon's assistance. Derek would be the speaker as he was class president. That should have been my job, and we both knew it. There could be nothing more humiliating than the speaker—we didn't call them the valedictorian at Jefferson because the class president didn't necessarily have the highest grade point—making some gross error. Many parents tape recorded the ceremony, so if the speaker made a mistake he or she had no control over its distribution. Even worse, the commencement address was supposed to be one of

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the most meaningful speeches a student would hear during his or her high school career. It was meant to inspire as students went on to meet the new challenges of the larger world. I had obsessed over this when I was first elected Senior Class President and even begun drafting such a speech before the picture incident, reasoning if I spent a whole year tweaking it, it would be the best damn speech ever. But now my task wasn't to give the speech, it was to destroy it. So I paid Brandon one hundred dollars to sneak a paintball gun into the ceremony with him. He would fill it with red paintballs and during Derek's speech, whenever he felt inspired—the cruel justice—he would pull the trigger and aim for Derek's face. To ensure Brandon couldn't be linked to me, he'd stay at the top of the pavilion, wearing a hat pulled down to cover his face and black sunglasses; the gun's range should be sufficient that he wouldn't need to come any closer.

I didn't stop to think that I was ruining a day that so many had dreamed of for four arduous years; it was something that kept them motivated when they were overwhelmed by moles, crying over the predicate nominative, or stressed out because they never realized it would be so demanding to participate in a sport, a production of Shakespeare, and take three AP classes simultaneously. Even if I had weighed the repercussions of my actions and discovered how many innocent victims I would leave in my wake, I wouldn't have given a shit. This day was already ruined for me. I had worked just as hard for this school, for a dream, and it had all been denied me because I wasn't pure evil like Derek and his minions.

Brandon's actions weren't that big of a deal either way. Derek's speech was a giant cliché. I could sense he wrote it the night before, with little thought. When the red paintballs exploded in his face, the pavilion filled with a collective gasp. I tried to look

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innocent and just as surprised as the rest of the audience, but when Jane made eye contact with me, I knew she had figured out the truth. So I winked at her. She didn't wink back. Perhaps Jane was one of those individuals who thought of this sacred ceremony as she strove to overcome fractals.

Memory 88

Jane kept my secret; initially she was pissed that I decided to strike during commencement, as if I were some terrorist on Christmas Day, but then she watched the video of the paintballs hitting Derek in slow motion with me and cracked up. After she left, I went into the kitchen and made some popcorn. I headed back to the living room, sat in front of the flat screen, and watched the tape a few times, I had the volume on so loud that I could hear the balls as they splattered Derek's face and his sharp inhalation of pain that I didn't hear my dad sneak up behind me. "I didn't raise you to act like this."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Adam, you're taking pleasure in the suffering of another human being."

"Derek's not a human being."

"You can't live in the past, son. It's not healthy. It will only end in heartbreak."

What did he know of heartbreak? He hadn't lived a non-life like me for the majority of this year.

"If I want advice, I'll ask Dear Abby."

"Adam, please. We only have a few months together before you go off to school. Can't we just be a happy family?"

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“ I am done living my life by other people’s rules. Just don’t stand in my way. That way we’ll live in peace for the rest of the summer.”

Memory 89

I roamed the streets in my car intent on sabotage and blackmail. I would stalk my prey wherever they would be gathered. In black sweats and a hoodie, regardless of the sweltering heat, I would sneak up to the windows and spy on their antics. I kept a little notebook with me and recorded all the little things that they would do. For instance, on Wednesday July 3rd 2004, I followed Beth to a rundown looking house. She looked around nervously and knocked on the door. Concealed in the car with my headlights off and digital camera on, I zoomed in as a scrawny white man with a goatee opened it. He peered out like a mouse from a hole in the wall sensing the presence of a cat; I could tell he had the shakes of a heroin addict in need of a fix. I snapped a picture as Beth removed a wad of cash from her purse and snapped another as the fidgety man handed her a bag filled with cocaine. I felt a rush knowing that I had power over Beth, even if I wasn’t sure quite how I would use it.

Stealth campaigns and revenge were not the only ways I filled my free time. Because I couldn’t sleep anymore I became an internet junkie. Through Maryellen, I had discovered a site called Facebook and was spending hours on it. Facebook gave me the opportunity to meet all the other students in the class of 2008, before even arriving on campus. I could scroll through profiles and identify potential friends or individuals that I would avoid because we had nothing in common. I friended almost everyone, reasoning the more people I knew on campus before I arrived, the easier my transition. Most of

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them friended me back, and I got a thrill every time I checked my email and saw that I had a friend request or a confirmation of a friend request.

Through Facebook I was able to message my classmates directly. It would be four AM and I could be talking to someone in California about why I felt Lindsay Lohan was a great actress. My parents would wake up the sounds of my fervent typing and exchange looks as I came down the stairs with dark circles under my eyes. They would make some comment about how my body needed regular sleep and depending on my mood, which was no longer stable, I would either snap at them, ignore them completely, tell them how much I loved them, or just chatter about all the exciting things Jane and I had planned for the day. Unfortunately for them, snapping seemed to be my favorite response.

Memory 90

Knowing when and where Monique was having sex, or having photographic evidence of Beth's drug use, wasn't going to satiate my thirst for revenge; my campaign had to end in torment and abject humiliation. There had to be a way to get all of them at once. I sat and stewed about it for awhile; initially it wasn't obvious. Then I remembered a story I had heard about a Jefferson graduate a few years ago who had been busted as a minor in possession of a alcohol at party. He didn't receive any jail time—he just had to perform a few hours of community service and pay some fine. However, his situation with the university he would be attending, was more severe. He had to inform them of the MIP, and he was on probation before he even arrived on campus. It was awful to think of having a record before even getting to start anew. And there it was, the proverbial light bulb.

Memory 91

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It was time to go to war. I put on a pair of camouflage shorts and a hunter green t-shirt and pulled a black ski mask over my head. Intuition told me that tonight my greatest success would arrive tailing Derek. I snuck into Brandon's room, he was sleeping by now, and stole his car keys; again some mystical knowledge told me that I couldn't use my car.

As I reversed out of the garage, I lit a cigarette. It was a new vice, expensive and filthy, but there was something exhilarating about playing with fire, literally. I wanted to blast Britney's latest CD and sing along at the top of my lungs, but I couldn't blow my cover. Driving in dull silence, I pictured Lily's yelling parents, Beth's whining pleas, Derek's smug denials, stern police officers, and Charlie's tears. I sighed aloud in pleasure.

All the usual suspects—and then some—were at Derek's house; the more I could bring down the merrier. I parked a few houses down, I couldn't have gotten closer even if I desired so, there were Hummers, CRVs, and Mercedes blocking access. Perfect, it would be harder for them to get away swiftly.

There was no need to get in trouble with the police. I would confirm my suspicions before placing the anonymous call that would shatter the partiers' illusions of invulnerability. I got of the car and carefully shut the door—there could be no slipups tonight—and got on my hands and knees crawling across the cement towards Derek's front lawn. The sprinklers were on and I got splashed in the face, but I didn't care. I dropped further down onto my stomach and pulled myself across the grass using every muscle in my upper body. I wouldn't describe myself as macho, but the adrenaline and the rage made a world of difference. I darted behind a tree in the backyard and used

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binoculars to peer into Derek's basement. Sure enough, my enemies, and various civilians caught in the crossfire, were a mass of thrashing bodies with red cups in their hands. I knew all about those red cups. They were liquor's bold calling card at underground parties. Of course, the bottles of Grey Goose, beer, and Jose Cuervo on the bar, served as further confirmation.

Calling the cops and telling them that there was a party with underage drinking would probably bring them over, but I worried that it wouldn't be enough to get them inside the house. Fortunately, Charlie had thoughtlessly left the speakers on their highest setting. Why the neighbors hadn't called about a noise disturbance, I'll never know, but I am going to conclude that God had finally caught on to the suffering I'd endured and was willing to send a little luck my way so my agenda could play out as planned.

The call was brief, which was fine, I needed the time to get out of the area before the cops arrived and began to breathalyze the guests. I wanted to stay and watch the bust go down, but I knew a report of the event would be in the paper within a day or so. Recently our city had signed a new law that held parents responsible, whether they were present or not, for any parties with underage drinking; they would be fined. Given the number of people at Derek's house and the status of his parents in the community, this scandal would not just be swept under the carpet like so much dust.

Memory 92

I didn't need to wait for the paper to learn of the event. I constantly checked Derek, Monique, Beth, Lily, and Charlie's facebook profiles waiting for an indication of my accomplishments. Sure enough, Charlie's wall was flooded with virulent comments blaming him for the presence of the cops, calling him an untalented DJ, and an all

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around unthinking jackass. Monique and Derek's walls were comical. Beth lambasted Monique for answering the door with Derek, instead of letting her handle it and arguing with the cops calling them "porky po-pos". Lily wrote that Derek's parents should have to pay everyone's attorney fees and fines because it was their house. Reading the way they turned on each other made up for not being able to watch the arrests, hear fighting parents, or eventually get to attend all their court hearings.

It was time for the grand reveal. First I changed my facebook status to lyric's from Britney's song "Showdown." When I was done, it read: "Adam is, I dare you to stand in my way/just give in when you are ready to play/ like this here comes the showdown/ what goes around comes around/ and the crowd's all waiting play." I uploaded a picture of myself smiling and sticking up my middle finger, and then wrote on Jane's wall, "OMG, you have to read what Derek and Beth and Monique and Charlie and Lily are writing all over each other's walls. It's funnier than an Adam Sandler movie."

Memory 93

I decided to go to Club Sweat to celebrate my success. Waiting in line for what seemed like hours, I could barely constrain myself from yelling at the bulky bouncer. Why wouldn't he just let us all in? Was he on some power trip? Fire codes my ass. It's not like there were undercover firemen in the club counting every body waiting for that one extra person to be admitted, and then demanding that all patrons leave while he dealt with the owner. But I finally got in with a big black x on my hand. People who looked like they stepped out of an Abercrombie catalogue or the latest issue of US Weekly surrounded me. It was a little intimidating, but then I remembered that I was Adam and I was in control. I was the victor. I wound through the thrusting bodies and found the

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center of the dance floor and began to move like a dancer out of a music video. Or at least that is what I thought I looked like. It's what I felt like.

Then the bartender announced it was last call. I looked at my watch. It was four in the morning? How was that possible? But I wasn't tired. I didn't want to go home.

Where else would I go? There were restaurants that were open twenty-four hours, but I wasn't hungry. I was just thirsty and covered in sweat. Home didn't look so bad. Who said I had to go to bed? I hadn't been on Facebook all day. Surely that would keep me entertained.

I pulled in the driveway, but apparently I wasn't quiet enough because my mother met me in the garage in a pink terrycloth robe. "Where the hell have you been? Why haven't you answered your cell phone?"

"Mom, I'm going to be at school soon. Living outside your house. Get used to not knowing where I am."

"This is not acceptable, Adam. There are going to be consequences."

"I'll just find my way around them."

"Who are you?"

"Your beloved first born Adam, light of your eyes, blood of your blood."

I moved past her and stomped up the stairs.

"We aren't finished. You're going to wake up everyone."

"If anyone wakes up, it's because they heard your bitching."

I closed the door to my room with a huff like I was a movie star who hadn't found everything to his satisfaction. I stripped to my boxers—it was really warm—and sat down in front of my brand new laptop and connected to the internet. I waited for Facebook to

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load while I plugged my headphones in and put them over my ears. I started to read my profile in shock, as music invaded my brain. This didn't make sense. I blinked. I saw the exact same thing. I had to think. The music was distracting me; I shut it off and slammed my fist on the laptop as though it was responsible for what I was seeing. Earlier that day I had 450 Facebook friends, now I had 150. Was facebook having some problem with its server? Had people just decided that facebook wasn't fun anymore and deleted their profiles? Neither of those explanations made sense. Three-hundred friends. Where did they go? My wall provided an answer. One person called me a Narc; another called me judgemental; I scrolled down the page and bold words appeared before my eyes, psycho, freak, judas, bastard, stalker. There was only explanation; Derek had struck again. How could he be this powerful? I checked his profile. I wanted to scream. His status was Britney Spears lyrics. He hated Britney Spears. But sure enough it read: "Derek is, did you think I am so naïve/ how dare you play with me/ I gave you heart and soul yeah tell me baby please/ why you screwing with my head/ I don't think you understand/ I wont take your shit no more/ don't knock on my door." That motherfucker. He was calling me out. And he was using my very theme song, the one I had played again and again after they hurt me, as if it was his song, too. He couldn't steal this from me. He'd done something. But what? I couldn't handle this right now. This was supposed to be my day to celebrate. I was supposed to be the one in control. But apparently I hadn't gotten the memo; I wasn't in charge. I would never be in charge. I shut off the computer; exhaustion took over.

Memory 94

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I woke up twelve hours later and started to laugh. It was all a horrible dream. Derek hadn't outsmarted me. I still had all my Facebook friends. I would be leaving for school soon and I would have my fresh start. The computer would confirm it all for me. I stood in front of it shifting my swaying back and forth. Insufferable machine. Was it always so fucking slow? It shouldn't be. It was brand new. The ink on the warranty was still wet. Breathe Adam, breathe, remember this was just a nightmare.

My Facebook profile came up again. Friend count: 4. I clicked on the link to view who my four remaining friends were: Jane, Ralph, Kayla, and Ken's pictures came up. Those were the only pictures that came up. Everyone else was gone. All the chats in cyberspace amounted to nothing. I couldn't even look at my wall. I already knew it was full of vicious comments. Vicious comments I hadn't rightfully earned. My inbox had one message in it. The sender was Beth. In the form message Beth introduced herself, she told them about what I had done, and made me sound more deranged than Glen Close in *Fatal Attraction*. She warned them I would betray them the first chance they didn't live up to my ridiculously high standards.

Leave it to Beth to come up with the ultimate destruction plan. She must have spent hours first writing down the names of each of my Facebook friends, then actually imputing the names mailing lists for the message.

As I pondered this, my inbox showed four more messages. Derek, Charlie, Lily, and Monique had sent copies of Beth's message to each of my Facebook friends. It was 5 against 1; their word against mine.

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Everything was ruined. What did anything matter now? I marched down the stairs with a grim expression on my face, ignored my parents as they called my name when I passed them in the kitchen, and found a shovel and spray paint in the garage.

I just started walking. I was barefoot. I was still in my boxers. I didn't care. Cars passed and people hooted and honked, but it was superfluous noise. I reached Derek's house first. I took the shovel and started breaking all the windows on his car.

He came outside and started screaming at me. Everything he said was insignificant. I took the shovel and hit him in the right kneecap and then in the left kneecap. I wanted to hit him over the head with the shovel and watch him die, but I couldn't do it. He wasn't worthy of the deliverance that death brings. I'd ensure he'd live and remember with guilt what he'd done to me. So I punched him in the nose and watched the blood flow.

Memory 95

Where the hell was I? Everything looked unfamiliar. I was lying down, but this wasn't my bed. It was too small and uncomfortable. There was a needle in my arm and I wanted to pull it out. "Don't." Jane? What was Jane doing here? Why was she sitting in a brown chair at the side of my bed? Her eyes were all red and bleary. "Is somebody dead?"

"No, Adam, everything is going to be OK now."

She began to cry again, huge choking sobs. "Why are you crying if everything is alright?"

"Adam. You're in the hospital."

"What the fuck did Derek do?"

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“Adam, stop talking about Derek. He’s not important right now.”

“It’s his fault I’m here. I’ll sue him.”

“Adam, you’re lucky he isn’t suing you. You beat him up pretty badly and damaged his property. You were on the way to Monique’s when your parents found you and brought you here.”

“Where is here, exactly?”

“The psych ward. The doctors say you suffer from Manic Depressive Disorder.”

“Very funny, Jane.”

“It isn’t, Adam. You have to stay here for a while so they can observe you and get you stabilized. You won’t be going off to school. Not this term anyway.”

“I’m getting the fuck out of here. You’re all crazy.”

I started to pull at the needle again. Jane was hysterical at this point. She reached for a red button. “Jane, how could you do this to me? I despise you.”

Before she could respond, a nurse entered the room.

“Jane, Jane, Jane, I didn’t mean it, please don’t go. I’m sorry.”

Jane cried louder and louder and the nurse came closer and closer. She had a cup in one hand, a pill in the other. I started to scream and scream. I pinched myself. But all I could see was the ugly nurse and Jane’s contorted, wet face. The nurse was at the bed now. Her hands in my face.

“I’m not taking anything you give me.” Jane lingered at the door, defying the nurse’s order. She was still sobbing, but I could hear her. “Take it for me, Adam. Get better for me.”

Jane was always so wise. I wouldn’t deny her this.

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