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QUARTER LIFE CRISIS OR HOW TO GET OVER COLLEGE AND BECOME A
FUNCTIONING MEMBER OF SOCIETY

by

PATRICK MARTIN LUTHER ANDERSON JR.
B.A. Florida State University, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2011

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ABSTRACT

As a writer, I feel like dealing with conflict in real life is the best way to deal with conflict in my fiction. *Quarter-Life Crisis or How to Get Over College and Become a Functioning Member of Society*, while a fictional novel, is very much about many of the conflicts I've experienced over the past few years.

Sean Easton is a twenty-five year old college graduate living in Miami, trying to balance out his life in a world that doesn't make as much sense to him as it did when he first graduated college, happy and looking forward to the future. Suffering through the aftermath of a major breakup as well as the death of his best friend, Sean is in the midst of a year-long alcohol binge when we are introduced to him, a period of time characterized by sporadic bouts of self-loathing interlaced with sardonic internal dialogue directed towards the world at large.

Sean's story eventually intersects with the second protagonist in *Quarter Life Crisis*, Lauren Ellis. Lauren is a twenty-four year old college dropout turned pharmacy technician. When we are introduced to her, Lauren's life is characterized by her child—Justin—and her husband Rick. Rick's a mechanic, and he, Lauren, and their son are all living a comfortably mundane life until the day Lauren comes home to find Rick having sex with eighteen year old Natalie, Justin's babysitter. From there, Lauren's entire life is thrown into disarray, forcing her to confront desires and dreams she had previously filed away in the mental category of "lost."

Together, Sean and Lauren represent a large portion of our society, a generation of individuals entering their mid- and late-twenties in the new millennium. Many of them have been told to dream big and aim high throughout their entire lives, that the next four years will be the best of their lives. And then the next four years. A few of us fulfill these dreams. Most don't, and

in a time when acquiring a college degree has become more an expectation than an accomplishment, Sean Easton and Lauren Ellis are two of many that are defined by their uncertainty as to where their place in society is. *Quarter Life Crisis* follows their journey from complete uncertainty to little less uncertain, bringing their lifelong dreams into direct conflict with what they are actually capable of achieving. Though the circumstances of Sean and Lauren's shifts in character are both distinct, their mentality and outlook on love and life are similar. In the end, they both find a balance that gives them hope for happiness which, they both realize, is the most they can really get in the long run.

The underlying theme of *Quarter Life Crisis or How to Get Over College and Become a Functioning Member of Society* is that college has become a fixture in American upbringing. The novel isn't saying this is a good or bad thing, just that it is something that hangs over everybody in the current generation's heads growing up, whether they attend college or not. The novel is an attempt to examine how people function in the new millennium after reaching the point in their life when college is no longer a factor, when they are thrown into the real world and told to fend for themselves. It's the story of how two people end up doing exactly that, and the hellish process they go through to get to that point.

Dedicated to all the loved ones in my past who won't be a part of my future: Roland Johnson (Grandpa), Osborn Elliot (Uncle Osborn), Karen Urbina, and Justin Morejon. Rest in Peace.

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WRITING LIFE

My ideas about what it means to be a fiction writer were formed from two things: years of reading and years of writing. Sort of like the chicken and the egg analogy, there is a question of which came first, only when it comes to me the question has an actual answer: reading came before everything. So it's only fitting that I should begin a description of my writing style with a description of what my tastes are in literature, as well as by stating the reasons why my taste has gone in the direction it has over the years.

What I Read

There are many elements of fiction that intrigue me, some of which appear in my own writing and others that don't, for one reason or another. One of the primary ideas that comes to mind when I think of what "good fiction" means concerns, generally, the dichotomy between "literary" and "genre" fiction. Literary fiction is generally described as character-oriented, while genre fiction is considered more plot-oriented. The fiction I love to read, however, usually does away with this distinction, combining both strong characterization and an intriguing plot to create a mainstream story that can appeal to a broad audience. Basically, plot means a lot to me, but I hate to read flat characters.

This preference arises from two developmental paths I took during my literary upbringing. From around the age of eight or nine, I read primarily genre fiction, with the genre I preferred most being horror/suspense. For many years, plot was always in the forefront of my mind when I sat down and opened a book. It's no wonder then that plot is still something that very much stays near the top of my priorities when approaching my own writing. Particular

novels that influenced me the most in this regard include Dean Koontz's *The Funhouse*, a story about a mutated child who grows into a monstrous being that terrorizes some teenagers at a carnival; Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park*, an immensely popular novel about a park where dinosaurs have been resurrected and, subsequently, terrorize the visitors in attendance; John Grisham's *Runaway Jury* in which a lawyer has second thoughts about his career after a man who his firm wronged walks in with a gun and takes a slew of lawyers hostage; and Stephen King's *The Stand*, in which a virus kills ninety-nine percent of humanity and the survivors must fend for themselves in a post-apocalyptic world. This last novel stays in my mind more than most because Stephen King's body of work as a whole and *The Stand* in particular are the best examples of what I mean by combining plot and character. Stephen King has been called the Master of Horror in many circles, and indeed the majority of his works have dark undertones and ominous storylines. But majority of his characters fly off the page, and by the end of *The Stand*, the readers are enraptured by the various people they've gotten to know within this eerie world where humanity is no longer the force it used to be.

My second reading path was into more literary fiction, a course that began in middle school with works such as Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, Elie Wiesel's *Night*, and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My real interest was sparked in high school, though. The very first literary classic that caught my attention and left a lasting impression was J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. As a disgruntled teenager myself, I related to the main character of Holden Caulfield, his feelings of alienation and his resultant cynicism. But this relatable quality of the narrator wasn't the only thing that drew me in to the novel. Even after shedding my teenage mentality, *The Catcher in the Rye* still stuck with me. The plot itself is not remarkable: a boy wandering

around New York City, hating everything and avoiding going home to confront his parents about his recent expulsion from school. What drew me in was the dialogue, which is essentially the most interesting part of the story for me. Holden's voice was captivating, his thoughts and actions real and so interesting as to make the plot a moot point. I was stunned reading this novel in my 11th grade class; after spending so many years reading stories where the plot was of primary concern, I had finally read something where this wasn't the case, and *loved* it. This same year I also read Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" and, combining that experience with my reading of *The Catcher in the Rye*, I realized two things: 1) hardcore horror/suspense novels were not the only reading material that interested me, and 2) I wanted to be a writer.

So, in a general sense of things, my reading (and, as a result, my writing) interests concern strong characterization combined with a strong plot. I don't necessarily think an aimless story is a bad story, as long as that aimlessness is subtly alluding to conflict that can be construed as a plot. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, the plot of Holden wandering New York trying to find himself is strengthened by his strong characterization and fresh perspective of New York, a perspective that is oddly both self-deprecating and condescending towards everybody and everything. Likewise, in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," a landscape is painted of a small rural town immersed in tradition, yet the plot of the story is strong and jarring, with the brutal ending being both a shock treatment as well as a commentary on the lengths people will go to keep up with customs.

Getting more specific about the mechanics of writing I am drawn to—as evidenced by my fascination with *The Catcher in the Rye*, I am extremely taken by dialogue-driven stories. This has translated into a love for first person pieces, simply because in a first person piece most

of the story is essentially one-sided dialogue between the reader and the narrator. When done well, a first person piece can immerse readers in a character's mind so fully that they can feel everything the character is feeling, even after the story is long over. Stories that affected me a lot in this manner during the writing of my thesis are numerous, but primarily include Josh Bazell's *Beat the Reaper*, and most of the works by Chuck Palahniuk, Bret Easton Ellis, Jonathan Tropper, Charlie Huston, and Nick Hornby.

Delving further into the topic of first person narrators, I find that I like first person stories as a whole, but particularly first person novels in which there are multiple narrators. The book that comes to mind here is Ron Currie Jr.'s *Everything Matters*, in which there are numerous narrators within a small community, including a second person narrator that speaks directly to another one of the main characters. The result is an entire world created within roughly three hundred pages, a world in which the reader is immersed in the thoughts and feelings of an entire family, each thought being related by the particular person experiencing it. I am most impressed by the successful utilization of this writing style simply because I feel it is easy to fall into a repetitiveness in which the various voices the writer is trying to portray all end up sounding the same. In *Everything Matters*, each character is distinct. They each have their own diction, their own views on specific events, and their own lives in general. Other examples of this style that helped me with my thesis are Hubert Selby Jr.'s *Requiem for a Dream*, Douglas Coupland's *Hey Nostradamus!*, Bret Easton Ellis's *Rules of Attraction*, Chad Kultgen's *The Lie: A Novel*, Chuck Palahniuk's *Rant*, and Max Brooks *World War Z*.

Thematically, I find myself drawn to stories that fit into either one or both of two areas: suspenseful fiction, and/or fiction concerning the pursuit of happiness in the face of alienation. I

don't propose that I look for works that answer the question "what is happiness?" I just look for works in which the author attempts to explain their belief of what happiness is and the lengths people will go to be happy in their society. In "The Lottery," the only people expressly upset that the woman is about to get stoned in the end is the woman herself and her family, and even then the family joins in on the stoning, choosing fitting in over protest and potential exile. In Jonathan Tropper's *How to Talk to a Widower*, the protagonist—Doug—loses his wife in a plane crash a year before the story begins and is trying to figure out how to get over his grief and reintegrate back into society. His feelings of disdain and sorrow make it hard for him though, and cause conflict between his desires and what his efforts to achieve those desires result in. The pursuit of happiness is what drives the story forward, and though we never really know whether or not Doug gets there, we get a sense in the end that it's the effort that really mattered.

In this sense, I don't look for moral judgments in stories; rather, I like to see journeys. And as far as journey goes, the end result is important to know but need not be clean-cut. The stories that capture me most effectively normally contain one major conflict, with a bunch of minor conflicts that arise between the presentation of the main conflict and the solution to that main conflict. Usually these stories end with many of those minor conflicts being unresolved, giving the impression that the characters are living on past the last page of the book. In another Jonathan Tropper novel, *Plan B*, the protagonist is part of a group of people who kidnap their friend and lock him in a bedroom for a week to help him get rid of his cocaine addiction. There's a lot of minor conflicts from the moment they commit the felony, and though the protagonist comes in contact with an ex-girlfriend he never got over and a couple of friends he rarely sees, and they all eventually get their drug-addicted-friend to kick his habit, in the end the protagonist

still has no idea what he wants to do as far as a career, or whether he and his reunited girlfriend are ever going to get married or—after finding out she’s pregnant—whether or not he’ll be a good father. But the questions themselves are part of what is making him happy, because they indicate a future that isn’t stagnant. Other novels that come to mind in this sense: Nick Hornby’s *High Fidelity*, Mil Millington’s *A Certain Chemistry*, and Tom Perotta’s *The Wishbones*.

There are many more aspects of fiction I love to see when I read, including satire and pop culture references, which I find go hand in hand in contemporary literature (i.e. Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Max Barry’s *Syrup*). Commentary on modern day trends are not effective without both pop culture references and the resultant commentary on the *prevalence* of pop culture references in everyday life. Realism is key to my taste in reading.

What I Write

As a result of my literary preferences, I have a few very distinct ideas about fiction writing. First of all, narrative structure is very important to me. However, in recent years it has moved from its previously primary position to an extremely close secondary, coming directly on the heels of characterization. I cannot speak of one without the other though, which means I can honestly say they are both primary concerns. To further explain this, I think I should describe a typical first draft writing experience for me.

A story, for me, starts as a scene. I see or hear about a person doing something interesting or odd (or I myself partake in something interesting or odd) and get the urge to write that character. When I sit down to write, I have nothing but the scene and the character in mind, and tend to not only see in my head what the character is doing, but *why* he or she is doing it. This is always how my stories start, with one unscripted action and a description of the character’s

reasons for being in that situation. After I've written those pages and exhausted the action and character for that scene, I usually stop, let the scene sit for a few days or weeks, then go back and read it and ask myself exactly what story I'm trying to write. If it's a lengthy piece of work (something that could be considered a novella or novel), I map the story out, usually the entire plot right there. This isn't to say I write out a rigid set of actions the character I just created is going to follow. What I do is more create exactly what the chapter on "mapping out a plot" in Robert C. Meredith and John D. Fitzgerald's *Structuring Your Novel* implies: I make a map.

It's like if a pirate finds a treasure map with a straight line from point A to point B, directing said pirate to said treasure. The pirate could very well sail his ship in a straight line towards that treasure, pick it up, be happy, end of story. Or, he could keep his compass handy and swerve around a bit, veer off the path, make a couple of stops, see a couple of sights and get to the treasure eventually. And who knows, maybe the treasure isn't even what he thought it was when he set out. Without the map though, he wouldn't have the confidence to make those detours, wouldn't even know where he was going to begin with. With the map and compass and years worth of sea knowledge, he can swerve off course for days at a time and still end up back at the critical points he needs to be at to progress to the next critical point, and the next, until he reaches the end. Plot maps let me know I'm not lost, that my character is not lost. And when I know I'm not lost, it makes it a lot easier for me to explore.

As far as the specifics of mechanics and various elements that combine to make a plot and a character, I admit the point of view I feel most comfortable with is first person. It is usually the default when I sit down to write. Lately I've attempted a few projects where I break this trend, and find that I only feel comfortable when the second or third person narrator I'm writing

in is just as conversational tonally as if I were writing in the first person. It sort of comes down to the concept behind F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, in which the narrator, Nick Carraway, is not the focus of the story. This approach to writing, though not explicitly third-person, is still what always comes to mind when I think of how I approach writing third-person fiction. In this I think I am an ardent believer in the storyteller tradition. I love to feel like I'm being told a story, being gossiped to by somebody else. In *The Lie That Tells the Truth*, John Dufresne expresses a similar opinion when he states:

“Gossip, I loved it. And that turns out to be the writer's job: to attend to the gossip and spread it as far as you can. At the heart of all good fiction and at the heart of all good gossip is the same thing: trouble. If you think about it, fiction is nothing more than gossip about the people you've made up.” (Dufresne, 110)

I attribute my need for tonally conversational narrators—whether first, second, or third person—to this love of hearing both the story itself and the enthusiasm and personality of the storyteller.

As far as setting goes, I find that I am most comfortable writing my characters in urban areas, which is a general statement that means I pretty much like to set scenes in places I've lived (which are mostly urban areas). For me, though, setting is pretty low down on my list, a fact which I blame on my obsession with voice. I feel that any writer can set any story anywhere, as long as he/she's willing to do the minimal amount of research necessary to create a realistic place for their character and plot (the two primaries) to take over. I don't like to have my settings overly detailed, just referenced by the protagonist/narrator in a way that leaves the reader believing the story is taking place wherever the narrator says it is.

Other elements of fiction writing that concern me are use of time throughout a story, which I *try* to pay attention to in first drafts but usually end up having to tackle head on during the revision process. When deciding whether I should cut or expand a certain section of a work, what I consider is if the time given to this particular scene is too much or too little as far as the overall plot is concerned. For example, in my thesis, there is a four month period where the two protagonists are essentially just living normal lives. The period isn't illustrated in scene, but through the narrators' voices doing what they do best: narrating. It's hard to see when this is necessary in the first draft, so this is usually something I pay particular attention to as I'm finalizing a work.

When it comes to theme, I feel it's something that should stay in the subconscious—with maybe just a peek into the conscious—during the composition of the first draft. The character should take the plot through its course during the first draft (the way I do it being just my way: writing a scene, mapping the plot, then writing subsequent drafts based on the character's navigation of that plot), with theme seasoning the whole thing throughout. Then, after those first full drafts are done, theme can be tackled in depth as the author tries to take the story into its final stages. And the main question for me when I try to edit for thematic content is: why did I write this? And the reason why theme is sort of in the back of my mind while writing the first draft is because I don't think it should take too long to answer this question. If I can't answer the question "why did I write this?" soon after writing the first draft, I have no motivation to go back and attempt to finalize it. Therefore, I am conscious of theme during the first draft, but I also consciously prohibit myself from thinking about it in this initial stage, preventing myself from becoming bored with the piece before I'm even done with it.

Basically, my writing style can be summed up as voice-oriented, character driven with serious attention to plot. I've given up trying to classify myself as a literary or genre writer, and I hope I don't get labeled as either if I make it in this industry (though that hope, I know, is hopeless). Overall, though, I simply love to write and read. I love to explore people and landscapes and the events that change people drastically and permanently. I love to read about these things because it interests me how other people see the world, and I love to write about these things because I'm confident I have something to say as well.

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STEP 1: ADMIT

-Sean Easton-

I haven't worn anything around the apartment but my boxers for a year now, ever since Maria left and Leon flew through the front windshield of his car.* I'm lying crooked on my bed facing my desk—a forty dollar Walmart piece of crap with one of the legs duct taped to the frame—and I'm alone, trying to muster up the energy to stumble over and turn on my computer and put some music on. It's way too quiet in here right now. I can hear myself thinking and it's annoying the shit out of me.

My underwear's medium-sized Hanes, 100% cotton: blue, brown, black, red, whatever. Anything but white. White shows stains. No matter how much bleach you use, it shows stains, remember that. They used to itch a little when they were new, when I bought a couple packs of them the last time I went shopping like eight months ago. Think it was Target, don't remember. Tonight, though, they've kind of got this frayed, lived-in look and feel. No shirt, no socks, no sandals, just my Hanes. I don't do it willfully. It's just—there's this feeling whenever I'm home, like I'm going to suffocate if I have anything covering any part of me but my crotch. It's kind of creepy actually; this clawing sensation arises in my chest and throat, like the collar of my work shirt is steadily shrinking and constricting my breathing until, I swear, I'm ready to rip my fucking clothes to pieces with my bare hands.

* Maria was my fiancée, up until she decided that she didn't want to be my fiancée anymore and promptly left me for somebody else. Cliché, I know. Still hurt though. Leon was my best friend, or still is if somebody can still be your best friend when they're dead. I don't know if that's cliché too or not. Frankly—as should be apparent in the fact that I wasn't wearing anything but underwear—I didn't really give a shit either way.

The thought makes me groan and I try to readjust myself, but to use that amount of energy right now, I might as well get the fuck up and turn on the music. But that task still seems unreachable so I just keep on lying in the same position.

“Derek,” I yell. * No answer, so again, “Derek!”

I know he’s probably sleeping right now, and I know it’s completely irrational to ask my roommate to come in here and witness me like this just so I can ask him to turn on my music, and I also know that even if Derek does come in here—which I doubt he will—he’ll probably stop at the doorway and yell at me before going back to the room without turning on the music. But I call for him anyways because the sound of me yelling effectively serves the same purpose as the nonexistent music. My voice only lasts for about thirty seconds though before it cracks and I shut up and go back to scratching my ass through the single layer of cloth covering it.

I’m not perverted or anything, don’t get me wrong. I only do this when I’m at home. An hour ago I was wearing my work uniform and sitting at Dill’s Tavern over on US-1 and Coral Reef. Granted, all I ever wear out is my uniform, which isn’t all that much better as far as variation goes, I know. But at least I’m publicly decent. Besides, none of this is calculated on my part, so technically I could say whatever’s happening hasn’t got shit to do with me, not the conscious part of me at least. Some other dude’s running things upstairs right now, some militant asshole with a whole different agenda than his predecessor. A different version of me I can’t see or hear but who’s got enough control over my autonomic body functions to pretty much make it impossible for me to resist any of these weird impulses.

* Derek was my roommate at the time, and pretty much the only true friend I had left, unless you count my brother, Marcus. This whole walking around in nothing but underwear every night didn’t sit well with him.

It's a daily ritual, all of it, not just the clothing thing. Earlier tonight—and pretty much every night save for one or two days off a week—I was bartending over at Shambles Barbeque and Grill in Cutler Bay before I ended up at Dill's then here. And the night before it was the same thing. It's almost every night, actually, that I follow the same work/drink/strip-out-of-my-alcohol-infested-uniform pattern. And if it weren't for the fact that I usually have to head back to Shambles the next day, I'd probably stay wearing nothing but my Hanes for days on end.* Some people would say that's a pretty obvious sign things aren't right. *You* would say that, probably. I don't though, because that would be admitting that I'm more fucked up than I'm willing to acknowledge. Denial is underrated, I'm telling you. Take it from a psych major: some things are better left tucked away in your subconscious, like that very first masturbatory sock shoved behind your dresser so your mom won't find it until years later when experience has rendered its existence irrelevant.†

I've had this same conversation before, too, with Derek. Last night, actually, when I yelled for Derek to come turn on the music for me, he actually came in the room and got all pissy about me lying here in my underwear.

“What the hell is *up* with that?” he asked, scrunching his face up like he'd just seen me shit myself.

“It's comfortable,” I responded.

“It's gross,” he said. “You know you don't live by yourself, right?”

* Actually, about four weeks prior to this particular day, Shambles gave me the weekend off and that's exactly what I did, sit around in my underwear for two days straight until my living room couch smelled like a high school locker room.

† I recognize this might just have been my experience. I think you get the point though.

“So,” I said, getting all pissy. “You moved in with me, Derek. I didn’t move in with you. I could walk around with my balls hanging out if I wanted to.”

Derek paused, then said:

“Did you used to walk around in your underwear, not taking showers and shit when you and Maria lived together?”

Derek’s always had an uncanny knack for dealing low blows.

“Besides the point,” I said. “Dick.”

To which he responded by walking out of the room without turning on the damn music for me..

With the exception of Derek, though—who obviously has a closer view of everything than most people--I’m assuming I must seem pretty normal on the surface. Mid-twenties college grad, bartending to make ends meet until he figures out what the hell to do with his degree, hanging on to the drink/hangover/work/drink cycle from his college years in an effort to stay young and keep having fun. Most nights back at FSU—before I met Maria at least—you’d find me out with Leon and Derek having the same get-shit-faced-then-go-home-and-strip-down-to-my-underwear-and-pass-out sort of evenings. But there were minor differences then that, collectively, made the mood completely different from how things happen now. No two of those nights were ever exactly the same, and even if they did occur fairly regularly, they weren’t laced with this emptiness in the pit of my stomach.

Tonight, though, and every other night I’ve worked for the past year, there was nothing spontaneous about what I did. I didn’t even have to think about it, it all happened in exactly the same order it always does. About an hour before closing time, Shambles was dead, nobody in the

restaurant but us employees and one guy sitting at the end of the bar lulling in and out of a drunken stupor, so I started cleaning, scooping all the ice out of the large beer cooler and stowing the bottles away in the refrigerator and washing all the dirty glasses and wiping the bar top and dumping that cleaning solution on the floor that always burns the hairs in my nostril with its acidic stench then scrubbing the floor then mopping the floor then taking the floor mats out back for the dish guy to wash—sneaking a couple shots of Crown in throughout the whole ordeal—then suddenly it was all over and I was at Dill’s,, like I woke up there or something, surrounded by my drunken coworkers and I was fucking smashed, as usual, had been from pretty much the moment I walked in the place and my stomach felt bottomless, like I had no ass, no bowels, just a black hole where my intestines should have been and then it was closing time and I was too drunk to drive, as usual, but so were the few coworkers I came with so they didn’t notice me get in my car anyways and do my best to stay off the medians on US-1 south all the way past the dark, sleeping building that, earlier tonight, was awake and bustling and known as Shambles Barbeque and Grill, my place of employment, turned down a few streets, almost hit a dumpster, pulled into Palm Springs Luxury Apartments, * parked outside building five, my car parked sideways across two parking spots, as usual, and instead of fixing it said fuck it and stumbled up the stairs, slipped and fell on the sixth one right below the landing that leads to my apartment door, cracked my forehead against the stair railing, lay there for a second staring up at the flickering fluorescent light on the ceiling, as usual, took a deep breath and pushed myself up then stumbled over to the door, tried four different keys in the lock until I found the right one, then pushed myself through the doorway and slammed it closed behind me.

* Which had neither palm trees nor a spring and was so far from luxury-type living that I should have sued the fucking landlord for false advertising.

And right out there—outside my bedroom, right inside the front door, in that little square of tile where Derek and I toss our shoes and leave the trash to be taken out the next morning and lean sopping umbrellas against the wall to dry—right *there* was where I started to strip: first my socks* then a few tentative steps onto the carpet and my shirt came off, then my undershirt and, as I hit my bedroom door—literally—my pants fell to the ground and my transition from clothed to unclothed was complete. I fell crookedly on my bed so my head was sort of twisted around so I could see my ass sticking up in the air, one leg of my boxer shorts shoved completely up my crack, exposing the doughy, discolored flesh of my right ass cheek. And that’s how I’ve been lying for the past twenty minutes with my arm stretched towards my desk, wishing I could do some Jedi mind tricks or just get Derek in here to turn on some goddamn music so I can drown the ocean of activity in my head. As usual. I smack my lips and the sour aftertaste of alcohol make me nauseous, but not nauseous enough to move out of this position and go puke in the toilet. I wait for the feeling to pass then, take a deep breath.

“Derek!”

I know what you’re probably thinking. You’re probably thinking, “Well, Sean, what about your days off? Things have to be different on your days off since you just said you only go out to Dill’s on the nights you’ve been working, and therefore you can’t do the same routine *every* night.” And my response to that, smart ass, is that the only difference on my days off is I forgo the getting-smashed-at-a-bar-then-stumbling-upstairs-and-stripping-down-and-passing-out bit of the evening and, instead, sit here all day and night in my boxers watching *Around the Horn*

* Just a quick word on the socks: socks after a bartending shift are by far the most disgusting objects on the planet, soaked in the sludge that builds up on the floor throughout the night and seems to always sink through the material of my combat-like slip resistant boots and seep straight to my bones. It’s a smell you can never get rid of, that sticks to other parts of your clothing like static, no matter how much I shower or do laundry; a mix between sixty-year-old scotch, gasoline, and sick cat breath.

and *1st and 10* and *Pardon the Interruption* and every single goddamn one of the twenty episodes of *Sportscenter* they show all day on ESPN, all with my TV on mute and the Closed Caption turned on and the sizable stock of angry rock and hip hop songs housed in my iTunes library blasting from the computer speakers in the background, a twelve pack of what-the-fuck-ever within arm's reach so I can get smashed on my own. Hardly call that a break, you ask me.

“Derek!”

And in this way, I think my clothing choice is not just the initial symptom of my seriously jacked up priorities, but also the most telling. Which might explain the reason why the image of my computer across the room as I lie on my bed in my underwear is all I can think about whenever anybody asks me, “How have you been?” in that condescending manner, like they're talking to a golden retriever that had both its legs run over. Or all of this might not explain anything, I don't fucking know. People ask me all types of shit sometimes and expect me to have answers, mostly bar regulars at Shambles who are usually already drunk and haven't managed to find somebody as drunk as themselves to converse with so they talk to me because they know I'm obligated to respond. Perks of the job. They tell me little anecdotes about other people they know who have issues and think I'm going to be able to diagnose their friends or girlfriends or spouses because I have a “unique” combination of personal experience and a Bachelor's degree in Psychology. And I do diagnose their loved ones, not in depth or anything, just throw out some random technical terminology so they'll shut the fuck up and tip me. But what I really want to tell these people is that most of what I learned in college was bullshit. I want to tell them that most people have no idea what the hell they're doing with their lives, they're just sort of floating through it hoping something profound hits them one day—literally or

figuratively—so they can die happy. What I want to tell these drunken bar guests who look at me as some sort of inspirational figure with what they assume is this bank of knowledge that sets me apart from the masses—what I want to tell them is that sometimes—*sometimes*—people can just be assholes.*

*Before I go any further, I'm black. And white. Interracial, to be exact. My mother's second-generation British-American, my dad's second-generation-Jamaican-American, which essentially means they're first-generation-Americans who were raised with a whole lot of rules and shit. They met in college, got married after they graduated then had me two years later. I grew up in Miami too, where a lot of other mixed race people live, and a lot of non-mixed race people, a lot of straight black-American people and a lot of straight white Americans, white non-Americans, Asian people, a *whole* lot of Hispanics—a lot of people, period. It's fucking Miami. I know this has absolutely nothing to do with anything, I just felt I should mention it because some people seem to care, for one reason or another. Kind of like the Ethnicity question on all those standardized tests they made us take in school, with the heading "For Informational Purposes Only" and for which I had to always bubble in "Other." I'm Other, whatever the fuck that's supposed to mean.

-Lauren Ellis-

I never realized Rick's butt was so hairy. It's a little flabby too. It's not wholly unattractive, but his butt is definitely on a downward spiral, especially considering he's only twenty-four and it used to be something I admired. This is the first time I've noticed the deterioration though. The thought disconcerts me a little, I admit. Not that his butt is in this condition, but that I didn't notice it before. It makes me wonder, for a tiny second, if this is my fault. Though I will also admit I haven't really had reason to pay close attention to my husband's butt recently. Not unless we were showering together, which happens rarely nowadays. And even then, not as they clenched and unclenched with the thrusting action of intercourse. Typically, I'd be on the receiving end of those thrusts, and therefore wouldn't have the viewpoint I do right now: peeking around the corner of Justin's—our two year old son's—bedroom watching Rick move his body in time with our barely-turned-eighteen babysitter. His grunts are accentuated by her impassioned whispers and moans in his ear, which seem to be creating a kind of sound-cocoon for them. They don't even notice I'm here. They are so enraptured with each other, it's like they're in another world.

I consider saying something but my mouth is stuck in this thin line on my face and doesn't seem capable of shifting out of that position. I *want* to say something, actually, more than anything. I can't really tell what I'm feeling right now, as far as emotions go, but I know that this is the type of moment where assertiveness is called for. I can't help feeling like I've seen this all before though, like I'm in a movie. I almost expect Garry Marshall to step out of the bathroom at any moment and yell cut. Julia Roberts would be standing next to him, ready to give

me pointers. He'd tell me to take my place in the bedroom, then roll his eyes and hand me a copy of the script when it became obvious that I have absolutely no idea what to do.

Needless to say, I'm flustered by all the options I have. I could take the "What's going on in here?!" approach, and watch Rick's acid reflux flare up so suddenly he'd probably vomit right in Natalie's face. Or I could go with the more passive approach, the throat clearing and solemn stare at them as they both scramble to get their clothes in order (I never understood why people do that, the scrambling around; it's not like the person who caught you hasn't already *caught* you, so there's really no point in hurrying now). I could even let them finish—watch them until Rick's face clenches up, his eyes roll into the back of his head, and he does that little convulsive head nod that is characteristic of Rick's orgasms. I could wait until that precise moment to step into the room, pat him on the back, and say something sarcastically encouraging, like *Nice job, tiger*. I could do a lot of things, but I don't. I just keep standing here, watching them have sex.

Part of me recognizes that I'm more than likely in shock right now. I haven't actually moved much more than my eyes in the past thirty seconds. Not since I heard a moan, peeked around the corner and saw my husband bent over the girl who's been caring for our son every Friday and Saturday night for almost six months now. Rick and I met her at the same time, at the apartment complex's swimming pool one Saturday back in April when we went down with Justin to spend the afternoon. We struck up a conversation with Natalie that day while she was out tanning with her high school friends, all of them weeks away from graduating. She seemed so trustworthy then, such a good choice to help us out with Justin. Residing in the building right next to ours, she was easily accessible, young and friendly. Obviously too friendly.

The options I have as far as confrontation all seem out of reach, though. The outcome of each of them will inevitably be overly dramatic, too much for me to deal with in the long or short run. I normally hate drama, and I really don't want to deal with this right now. Part of me wants to just leave and forget all of this, come home tonight and eat dinner with Rick and Justin like we normally do. But I can't. This isn't going away, and there is no backtracking on something that's already taking place. I can't stop this. It's already started. No matter what I say or do, Rick is still going to be having sex with Justin's babysitter. So I watch them for a few minutes longer, trying to think of reasons why this isn't the end of the world. When the initial signs of Rick's climax present themselves though (toes clenching, increased rapidity of thrusts, louder groans) it's a little too much for me to handle.

I turn and walk quietly into the living room, pick my purse up off the coffee table and sling it over my shoulder. I walk towards the front door and am slowly opening it when something catches my eye, a hint of unfamiliarity near the dining room table. Turning, I see Natalie's book bag slung over a chair. I didn't notice it when I came in, and why would I? I had no reason to then. It's funny how things can change so rapidly. The bag is weathered and torn in what seem to be strategic positions, a carryover from her recently relinquished high school career. Last I checked, she's enrolled at Miami-Dade College—formerly Miami Dade Community College—and I find it odd that she wouldn't buy a new bag for the new phase in her life. I would have. There are little patches of graffiti written in White-Out across the small pocket. I didn't know people still did that; my own high school book bag was covered with various R&B singers, made-up catch phrases between me and my friends and the occasional boyfriend's name, if it was serious enough. One of the markings on Natalie's bag is fresh, a

brighter sketch that glares up at me with its newness. It says “N ♥’s R” and I shake my head. Natalie and Rick, sitting in a tree. Rick always was the little charmer.

I gingerly pick up Natalie’s book bag on the way out of the third floor apartment my husband and I have shared for the past two and a half years of supposed blissful marriage. I walk down a ways, towards the stairs and the elevator, and then hold the bag over the railing for a second, studying the White-Out sketches and letting them sink into my eyes, my mind, my body. Then I toss the bag and watch it land on the concrete below, splitting open and spilling its contents across the ground like a suicidal jumper. Notebook, pencils, pens, paper, a textbook, all strewn across the parking lot. I make my way back to my car then—pausing only to leave a very long and deep scar in the side of Rick’s ’02 Mustang courtesy of my house key. And it feels good, that little gesture. It feels good for all of two seconds, until I’m about two blocks down the road and the magnitude of what I just witnessed hits me. Then it doesn’t feel so good anymore. I pull my car off US-1 into the parking lot of a Burger King and hop out, bending over in the grass next to a bus stop bench and retching until my face is pained with pressure, only I haven’t actually eaten since breakfast so I’m basically spitting up bile. In front of me, cars pass on the street, a few of them honking. To my right, a man sits on the bus stop bench and watches with obvious amusement in his expression. I get a very strong urge to punch him in the mouth. I opt instead to climb back in my car, recline my seat, and cry until I can’t see anything anymore.

-Sean-

My room has the distinct odor of feet, but it's hard for me to notice this unless I actively seek out the stench.* I've spent the better part of twenty minutes now searching through my room for something to prop my feet up on while I drink and watch the Heat play the Magic on TNT, but all I've managed to find in the pile of crap that is my bedroom floor are a pair of brand new shoes that I don't remember buying and an old copy of *Guitar Hero 2* poking out from behind my bookcase. The video game's for my Xbox 360, and it's got a layer of dust on it that I have to scratch at with the nail of my thumb to break through. My Xbox 360 is hooked up to the TV, hidden inside the cabinet that's served as my TV stand for months now.

Under normal circumstances, I'd find this game along with the dozen or so other ones hidden around here somewhere, push them all aside and continue my initial search for something to put my feet on so I can lean back comfortably and drink myself stupid on my night off. But that would be under normal circumstances. Tonight is not normal circumstances. Tonight is Thursday, and I get weird when I'm off on Thursdays.†

Back at FSU, Thursdays were College Night at pretty much every bar in Tallahassee. Most of the students only had class the first four days of the week, so Thursday nights were basically the new Friday and the busiest night of the week for all the bars in the city and, therefore—odds-wise at least—the best night to go out and attempt to get drunkenly laid. I haven't had sex in a very long time, and when I'm off on Thursdays and sitting in front of my TV getting hammered, this fact becomes very apparent to me. I can never seem to muster the

* Which I did occasionally, for reasons unknown to me or anybody else. Don't act like you've never done it before.

† Assuming I wasn't weird every other day of the week.

energy to do anything about it though, which makes it all even more depressing, which makes any distraction from thinking that much more appealing.

Needless to say, holding *Guitar Hero 2* in my hands, I think I might have found the distraction I need. I haven't played it in at least a year, if not more. Not since Leon died.* I almost feel obligated to play the game, out of neglect or something. The cover of the box is colorful, cartoon rock gods with jagged-edged guitars and painted faces sticking their tongues out and begging me to join in on the virtual rock star melee. I get a flash memory of the apartment in Tallahassee that Leon, Derek and I shared around the time *Guitar Hero 2* first came out. The late night jam sessions we held. We'd invite people over every weekend back then, not just to play video games but to hang out overall, enjoy the utter bachelor-ness of our place, little get-togethers which would frequently turn into full blown parties with various groups of friends set up in all corners of our apartment partaking in everything from water bongos to beer bongos to beer pong to just plain crack-a-beer-can-open-and-chug contests. For a time there, all the festivities would revolve around the TV and the Xbox 360 set up in the middle of the room, two lists of names on the wall,[†] always at least two people playing with all the confidence that can be mustered from shredding a fake guitar. As a result, I get a huge sense of nostalgia at the sight of the crusty video game box and open it, brushing a finger against the CD inside.

* This was an ever-present addition to my thoughts for a while there. The human mind has a tendency to do that in the face of tragedy, dividing time into a "before-" and an "ever since-" i.e. absolutely every reference to 9/11, ever since 9/11. My 9/11 experience was probably par-the-course for most people my age. I was in my freshman homeroom class that morning, where we used to watch the news headlines every day. Our teacher turned on the TV and I saw the first building smoking and noticed the headline beneath it right as the second plane came smashing into the second building, and I laughed. I thought it was a movie commercial. I felt like shit when I realized it wasn't and all hell broke loose on the TV. Still feel kind of crappy about that to this day.

[†] One for beer pong, one for the 360.

I readjust my underwear as I stand and turn towards the TV, switching the channel from TNT to Input and turning on my Xbox, wondering if it even still works—that’s how long it’s been. For all I know, the thing could short-circuit the moment I press the power button, and then my little trip down memory lane would come to a jolting halt, a thought that’s a bit of a downer, but not much. I’ve still got my beer, either way.* The Xbox does work though, and I rifle through the junk next to my TV stand until I find the wireless guitar controller which, unsurprisingly, has no power. I plug it into the charger, feeling this hint of expectation rising in me all of a sudden, a feeling that is so foreign I have to pause for a moment until recognition hits me: I’m a little excited. About something other than drinking. The controller gets a little juice and I turn it on, scrolling through the menu screen on my 360, the feel of it strapped around my neck both alien and familiar at the same time.

The 360 still has saved game data from the last time I used it and I’m instantly signed in under my old Xbox Live ID[†]. Within minutes I’m sitting on my bed with my fingers wrapped around the neck of the guitar and *Rancid*’s “Salvation” blasting from my TV speakers. At first the change in my mood is staggering, instantly lifting the moment I see the little colored circular musical notes scrolling down the TV screen. Then my fingers start fumbling and I fail the song before I’m even halfway through. Disappointment sets in. It’s been so long since I played, I suck now. Still, for a second I was having more fun than I’ve had in as long as I can remember. I restart the round and lean back in my chair, using the twelve pack in front of me to prop my feet up.

* I’ve wondered on numerous occasions since if everything would have played out differently if the system hadn’t worked that night. Talk about butterfly effect.

[†] EzioAuditore3876

What I'm guessing is hours pass by before there's a knock at my bedroom door. I yell for whoever it is to come in and, moments later, Derek's standing next to me, surveying the room. I know he's surveying the room because I can feel his eyes, scanning, reading, judging, but I ignore him in favor of Nirvana's "Heartshaped Box," which I've managed to complete on the Hard level and am now attempting to do on Expert. It all came back to me pretty quickly, actually. The presence of Derek throws me off though, and I fuck up on about forty notes before the screen shakes and the word "Fail" pops up above my Avatar. Derek laughs and I glare up at him, my eyes bloodshot from staring at the TV so long. Everything in the room seems like it's liquefied and is now running down the walls like syrup, straight into the ground. It sort of feels like I'm drunk only I still haven't cracked open my twelve pack, a minor miracle. I remember the phenomenon though; playing *Guitar Hero* for too long makes your eyes do this rolling thing, where everything around you looks like it's trying to float into the stratosphere. I assume this is along the same lines of staring at a white dot for a really long time then looking at a black wall or piece of paper or something and seeing the white dot there still, even though it's not. The human body/mind relationship is all fucked up. Seems most relationships are.

"What the hell's so funny?" I ask Derek, who's still chuckling and shaking his head.

"You still suck," he says.

"Still?"

"Still," he repeats. "As in, you sucked before, and you still suck now."

"Seem to remember beating your ass on a regular basis," I say.

Derek gives me his bullshit face, which consists of him flaring his nostrils as wide as he can and craning his neck like a bird.

“In which lifetime?” he asks.

“Here then,” I say, holding up the guitar controller for him. “You play, you think you can do better.”

Without a word Derek takes the controller and scrolls down to the last song on the menu—*Lynyrd Skynyrd*’s “Free Bird”—and proceeds to completely demolish it on Expert. His fingers glide over the guitar buttons, a blur of movement that leaves me dizzy as music notes fly across the digital fret board. His tongue hangs out of his mouth while he does it like he thinks he’s the Hispanic version of Michael Jordan or something. His dark features, heavy eyebrows and goatee all combine to make him look very odd right now wearing board shorts and a long-sleeved t-shirt even though it’s like eighty-five degrees in here. Don’t know what’s up with that. I should have known Derek would still be good at *Guitar Hero* though. The man was a video game fanatic back in college, not to mention the only one out of us who could actually play the guitar. Though he always made it a point to tell me and Leon that “playing a real instrument and playing *Guitar Hero* are not the same, fellas.” To which I’d respond that being a douche and being a douche who can play an instrument *are* the same.

When he hands me back the controller, he has a smirk on his face.

“Screw you,” I say.

“You asked,” he says.

“You cheated,” I say. “You’ve got more experience.”

“Haven’t played since undergrad,” he says, sitting next to me on the bed. He sniffs the air and pokes a dirty sock with his toe, wrinkling his nose. “Dude, it smells like ass in here.”

“Yeah,” I say. “But you play your guitar like every day.”

“It’s a bass, first of all,” he says, pausing and meeting my eyes with his, which I haven’t had very many people do lately. I look away. “And how many times do I have to tell you playing a real guitar and playing Guitar Hero are two different things?” he says.

I don’t even bother.

“Whatever,” I say. “Grab the other controller. See how much shit you talk when I whoop your ass.”

Derek stares me up and down.

“You look like crap, Sean,” he says.

“Thanks,” I respond.

“I’m serious,” he says. “I’m worried about you. Kristina is too.”*

“Really?” I say incredulously. “Kristina?”

He scratches his chin and avoids my eyes.

“Well, I’m worried at least,” he says, then points at my underwear. “Sean, can you put some fucking clothes on? Seriously. At least while I’m around.”

“I didn’t ask you to come in here,” I say.

“I don’t understand why you can’t wear pants like a normal person.”

“Quit changing the subject and pick up the damn controller,” I say, my face growing hot.

I don’t know why the thought of Derek being better than me at *Guitar Hero* bothers me so much right now, but there’s a part of me that refuses to let it go. I want to prove myself so badly right now, but prove what I don’t know. Or who I want to prove it to. Not Derek, that doesn’t feel

* Kristina was Derek’s girlfriend, which would have made her an ally if it wasn’t for the fact that she was all “good for you” and “you’re doing the right thing” to Maria when me and her broke up, which just contributed to my belief that Kristina was a complete, raging, controlling bitch. Obviously a subjective opinion, but you get the point.

right. Maybe to myself. Which would mean I want to prove myself to myself, which sounds like a huge personal problem. Whatever, all I know is there's a twelve pack of Bud Light beneath my feet that isn't open yet, and it's been in my presence for almost four hours now. That's not something to be taken lightly.

"Shouldn't you be out or something?" I ask Derek as he gets up to grab the second guitar controller.

"Why?" he asks. "I live here."

"I know that, dumbass," I say. "But you and Kristina are usually out at this time."

"No we're not," he says. He smiles, though his eyes seem confused. "Kristina and I never go out during the week. We both have class in the morning. You know that."

I think back and vaguely remember Derek mentioning his first semester in law school.

"Oh," I say.

"You see what I'm talking about?" he asks.

"Shut up and play," I say.

I select Avenged Sevenfold's "Beast and the Harlot" and there ensues about five minutes of grinding rock music blasting from my television, the rhythmic tapping of our fingers on the guitars faint beneath the bass. Things get intense near the end; we're neck to neck in points totals and the color coded notes are flying across the screen. Then we get to the final riff—a finger mashing combo that uses pretty much every single button on the controller in quick succession—and I murder it. The game lets out a tremble of bass, the words "You Rock" popping up on my side of the screen, and I jump up, letting out a growl. Derek kisses his teeth and tosses the guitar

controller onto the ground. And I don't know what happens in that second. Rather, I know what happens, I just can't really figure out why. I just snap.

"Don't throw my fucking guitar like that, bro!" I yell.

Derek turns his head up slowly toward me with a smile that drops when he sees my face, then he drops his eyes back down to the guitar then back up to me with his bullshit look once again.

"What?" he asks.

"I didn't stutter," I say, taking a step toward him. I feel my face contorting with this rage that's hopped into my blood stream like a hostile passenger on a steadily accelerating train.

"Don't. Throw. My. Guitar. You know how much those things cost?"

"Sean," Derek says, chuckling. "Calm down."

"No, man! Respect my property," I say, and before I can stop myself I'm lunging at him. Derek, however, is actually in shape, as opposed to my alcohol-fueled-and-therefore-malnourished body. I'm almost on top of him when he jumps up and does this twisting thing where he moves to the side quick as hell and I'm suddenly behind him and he's got a hand on the back of my head, using my own momentum against me and I slam into the wall next to my closet. There's a bang from upstairs as someone stomps on the ground and I hear muffled yelling.

"What the fuck is your problem, Sean," Derek yells. I turn and his face has changed, his annoyance coming through in his eyes and mouth, his ears turning a deeper shade of tan. Derek doesn't get enraged easily, and I feel my own anger subside a little. "It's a fucking video game, man. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

I want to retort but I suddenly come to my senses, like something short-circuited in my head, burst into flames, and emergency response teams just now responded. I reach for the guitar controller, which Derek didn't throw down so much as drop on the carpet. The thing is fine, and even if it wasn't, it's a fake guitar. A fake fucking video game guitar controller. The end did not justify the means in this situation. I walk over to my bed and plop down, the pulsing letters on the television screen still telling me that I Rock.

"Sorry," I say, quietly, so that I don't even know if he really hears me.

Derek doesn't say anything for a minute, standing there breathing hard, and I can tell he's wondering if this is over or if I'm going to up and snap again. Derek isn't the confrontational type. He's usually amicable, though he can be uptight when it comes to certain aspects of his life, especially since he and Kristina started dating and he got accepted to UM Law. This is as close as he and I have come to a full blown conflict since he first got pissed at me a few months ago for walking around in my dirty underwear in front of a shocked and disgusted Kristina. It hasn't always been harmonious between us, though, so there's a vague familiarity to this current altercation.

"Seriously, man," I say, finally meeting his fierce glare. "I don't know—I'm sorry. I've just been—you know."

"Yeah, I know," he says, spitting the words out. He glares at me for another few seconds then sits down slowly, surveying my room once again, pausing on me and my underwear, directly on my crotch which is not in the least comfortable for me. "Sean, you're driving yourself crazy here."

A defensive prick touches the base of my spine.

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“This shit isn’t healthy.”

“What shit isn’t healthy?” I say, and now I’m the one surveying the room, as if everything is right where it’s supposed to be. “I’m fine.”

“Really?” he says, practically yelling. “Did you see yourself a minute ago?”

I turn away, scratch my ass absently.

“Whatever,” I say. “It’s just a little stress. I’m fine.”

He opens his mouth and I know he wants to comment on everything, my lack of clothes and my little outburst and the smell of old cheese in the air. I’m waiting for it actually, but instead he stands and heads towards the bedroom door.

“Put on some fucking clothes, Sean,” he says. “And get yourself together. You can’t live like this forever.”

I open my mouth then force it closed and sit there as he walks out of the room, closing the door behind him so I can see the Hooters calendar hanging from a nail on the back of the door. * I reach over and turn the Xbox 360 off, put the channel back onto TNT so I catch the final seconds of the Spurs/Lakers game then switch to *Sportscenter* to watch highlights. When I glance down at the carpet an hour later, the twelve pack of Bud Light is open next to me, half the bottles empty and strewn across the room like expended bullet cartridges. I blink a few times and feel the familiar haze of drunkenness.

I sigh, reach down and grab another.

* A failed attempt to feel like a deserving bachelor. Instead it just seemed to remind me even more how pathetic I’d become.

-Lauren-

Rick and I met at Florida International University our freshman year. There wasn't anything magical about it. Not to say that our first meeting wasn't fun. I had just gotten out of a serious relationship (or, as serious as high school relationships can be) during the summer after my senior year, so at the time I wasn't really thinking along the lines of getting into another one. I wanted to have fun in college, to be free to mingle and explore. Rick didn't do anything to change my mind right off the bat either, which is why I say there wasn't anything magical at first. There was something though, planted in that first eye lock.

We both had the same orientation coordinator that morning, an FIU senior who was an exercise science major and had a neck thicker than my thigh. He divided us up into groups for our tour of the campus, and Rick's parents got paired with me, my sister Caitlyn, and my mom. It was barely 9 am and I was still tired and aggravated because my mother and Caitlyn—who was then still a sophomore in high school—had decided to join me for the orientation. Being with those two at the same time is enough to ruin anybody's morning.

Rick's parents were amicable divorcees who still kept in touch and in whom you could kind of see the dormant seeds of lost love, remnants of the reasons why they ever got together in the first place. I always envied Rick that. The fact that his parents aren't together never seemed to bother him. Every Christmas at Rick's mother's house, his father came over with his girlfriend and ate with Rick, his mother, and his stepfather. I didn't believe him when he told me these get-togethers weren't hostile, until my first Christmas dinner with them after he and I became a couple. It was like a meeting of old friends, any arguments between them of the friendly-banter-

type. I fell in love with the notion then, though I always told Rick I'd rather stay together and avoid all the complication. He agreed.

At orientation, Rick's parents started a conversation with my mom, which went pretty well, considering it was my mom. She only questioned them a little bit about their divorce (uncomfortable, probing questions, standard for my mother) before she noticed my glares and confined herself to commenting on the various buildings and class choices our tour guide showed us. Rick's parents joined her in the commentary and Caitlyn wandered off into the student union, which left Rick and me alone.

"You excited?" he asked, strolling next to me. The air had that sticky quality summer air in Miami tends to have, and I used the orientation pamphlet to fan my forehead.

"Pretty excited," I answered, even though excitement wasn't exactly the word I would have used to *really* describe how I felt. Trepidation, maybe. A little disappointment. I'd wanted to leave Miami for school, but my mother had guilt-tripped me into staying near and going to FIU. She cried to me during my application process as I filled out applications from USC and NYU and Duke, telling me that I couldn't abandon her. Her tone implied that I would be following in my father's footsteps if I did. So I stayed. I didn't tell all of this to Rick though. I just smiled and nodded.

"Me too," he said, then frowned. I'd just met him, so I didn't want to start probing around. But there was something about him then, something that invited kindness.

"You ok?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I just—" He stopped and scratched his head absently. "FIU was my bottom choice for school. I only came here because they didn't want me to leave." He motioned

to his parents, then shook his head. “If it was up to me, I’d be in California right now. UCLA.” He sighed. “It was too expensive anyways.”

Something clicked in me then. It wasn’t like I knew then that we were going to start dating, have a kid, drop out of college, and get married. There’s no possible way a person could know any of that in a moment so fresh, though it would be interesting to see how many people would still go through with it all if they did. I felt something like trust then, not complete but more than I normally have for somebody I’ve known for five minutes. I knew then that I could pretty much tell Rick anything. Not to say that I could trust him to keep my deepest, darkest secrets (though I had an inkling of that feeling too) but that I could literally tell him anything, and it would be easy to do so. Rick had the kind of face and engaging tone of voice that made people want to tell him things. I didn’t even try to resist the urge, and an hour later we had walked through the campus and barely glanced at a single building. I told Rick about my plans to be an English teacher, about how much I loved children and about my dad and the love of reading I inherited from him, even about my dad’s death. I even told him the specific circumstances surrounding his demise, and about the aftermath that was (is) my mother. Rick listened patiently, interjected with his own thoughts and laughed at all the parts I would have felt the urge to laugh at if I were hearing the story from somebody else, even the parts that normal people would consider it bad taste to laugh at. He wasn’t mean about it either. Responsive. It was refreshing, mature even. I truly felt that first day like Rick was the type of guy I could become true friends with, whether or not there was anything romantic present.

Rick told me things too, about his love of cars and how he had already put his major down on his application as engineering. He wanted to be a mechanic and open his own car shop.

In a moment of wittiness, I commented on the fact that Miami had enough mechanics and whether or not we needed another one, drawing a smile from him which gave me a twinge in my gut. I didn't realize then that I was already into him. I just knew that it felt good to talk to somebody who wasn't my family about things I didn't normally talk about with friends. It felt good to talk about something—to somebody—new too. I'd spent most of high school jumping from relationship to relationship and never really connecting with any of the boys I was with. I didn't feel I had to rush things with Rick though. There didn't even feel like there was anything to be rushed, it was just fun.

We walked and talked and, after the orientation that day, we hung out a little more on campus, in the cafeteria while my mom and Caitlyn argued about something and Rick's parents left all of us alone to go talk to people about their son's education, which is what I'm assuming normal parents do.

And there's really not much else to how we first met. We exchanged numbers that day, texted each other a couple of times after that, and pretty soon we were hanging out around campus regularly. We didn't date right away either. There was nothing but the slightest romantic tension for almost a year. It turned out that Rick had a girlfriend when we met, and by time they broke up, I'd met another guy who I embarked on a six month tryst with, one which ended abruptly when I woke up one day and realized the last thing I wanted to do was eat lunch with the guy again and listen to him talk about his batting average.

Rick and I were just friends for the most part, though I do vaguely remember getting really drunk at a party one time and kissing him on the patio of his friend's house, to which Rick responded by laughing, telling me I was drunk, then giving me a ride home and never

mentioning it again (I know, I was disappointed then too). I think deep down we knew what would eventually end up happening, though I do remember still being surprised after breaking up with the batting-average boyfriend and realizing that I wanted nothing more than to see Rick. Not talk to him, but *see* him. And when I did, I knew. That day, we met up at the Pollo Tropical on campus and, as he approached, I felt something twist itself into a totally new shape in my chest. He'd been single for a couple of weeks then, and I realized it was the first time both of us had been single at the same time since we'd met. I also realized that, at some point during our year long friendship, I'd fallen in love with him.

There wasn't one of those drawn out scenarios after the realization. Rick really was the easiest person to talk to, and he kind of drew information out of people without even trying. So the moment he got close to me that day, I had no choice but to tell him.

"I think I'm in love with you," I blurted, then covered my mouth. I felt my face turn instantly red.

Rick stared at me for a long moment—a *very* long moment—then laughed. Not a *that's ridiculous* laugh though, thank God. More of a *get out of here, are you for real* laugh. We stood a foot away from each other and I remember his brows were raised, surprised and disbelieving. I kept his eye contact and nodded, and he leaned in and kissed me. Then we went back to his place and had sex.

Two years later I woke up and threw up into the garbage can next to my bed. I had a part time job back then, in the same CVS pharmacy I work at full time right now. I had to work that morning and I've never been the type to randomly throw up. Even after nights of heavy drinking, the most I usually have is a headache and a sore throat from screaming at every song that comes

on. So, as soon as I arrived, I walked down the family planning aisle and scanned the place for anybody who might see me then picked up a pregnancy test and practically ran to the bathroom. Sitting in the stall with the test between my legs, toilet water splashing up from me peeing, I remember feeling so young, like when little girl's play with dolls and pretend the stuffed thing is an actual child, her child. I didn't know when I'd gotten old enough to be able to seriously take a pregnancy test. Right there in the store, in the handicapped stall, I took the test and put it on the corner of the sink to sit for the full two minutes the instructions said it required, then peeked above it to see the result. Then I stole six more boxes and took them all before I was fully convinced that it was true. I was pregnant. It was Rick's.

I remember not being able to think clearly. I had pondered the situation prior to that day (which girl in love doesn't) but had never thought it would actually happen. I always thought marriage was inevitable and, therefore, so were the children. I loved—love—Rick and wanted to be with him, so it wasn't like me being pregnant was a tragedy. Yet still, I thought I had time. I had plans. Graduate school, some traveling, a whole slew of things I wanted to do with my life and with Rick before we settled down into the married-with-children lifestyle. But now that part of my future had suddenly become very immediate, right there in my face. Though I didn't know that explicitly right away, I admit. I wasn't sitting there thinking about all the things I couldn't do. Sitting in the bathroom at my job that day, all I saw were lines, blue and red lines (and one test with a little happy face on it) strewn around me. It was the only thing my mind could process, so I didn't immediately recognize exactly what was coming in the long term. Which is probably why I didn't cry or smile or do anything but stare at those pregnancy tests and the door of the stall until the pattern of the wood and the colors of the test results blurred together into a

swirl of brown and red and blue that made me feel like someone had flung feces all over an American flag. The thought drew a fresh lurch and I turned, dry heaving into the toilet.

I told Rick that night and he was supportive, or as supportive as an almost twenty-one year old college student who just found out he's about to be a father can be. Everything else that happened after—from the dropping out of school to the small family wedding to the apartment in West Kendall to Rick having sex with our babysitter—is, as they say, history.

-Sean-

Marcus calls my cell phone around one o'clock, which is good because I have to be at work at five and I have a feeling I wouldn't have gotten out of bed today if something didn't force me out. Marcus needs a ride home from school. It takes me a moment to figure out what's not right about this, a moment during which I lie back on my pillow, mouth pasty, breath horrid. I glance at my phone again, at the time, and something clicks and finally I say:

"It's one o'clock."

"I know," he says.

There's a long pause and then I say:

"Since when did they start letting you guys out at one o'clock?"

"They don't," he says. No elaboration. My little brother: the model of concision.

"Ok... am I missing something?"

"I got suspended," he says, exasperated, like I should've already known or something.

And, I guess I should have since this isn't the first time. In fact, by my count, it's the third time in the past year. I know I should say something to my little brother right now, explain that, no matter how insanely smart you are, schools usually only take so much bullshit from their students before expulsion becomes a very real possibility. But my head is fucking killing me and my mouth feels like somebody came in my room in the middle of the night, uprooted each and every one of my teeth then put them all back in the wrong order.

"I'll be there in twenty," I say.

"Thanks," he says.

“This is getting kind of ridiculous Marcus,” I say, but he’s already hung up. I toss the phone on my nightstand and it almost immediately rings again. I pick it back up and it’s my mother, and she’s livid. My mother doesn’t do livid. Perturbed, yes. Livid, though, goes against her “Rules to Healthy Living.” Therefore, I know she’s already heard about Marcus the moment she says:

“Sean! It’s your mother.”

As if I didn’t already know. Then, before I can respond, she hisses:

“I’m getting so bloody sick and tired of his crap.” I don’t even know how she knows I’m on the phone, since I haven’t said hi or anything. I pick it up, press talk, and there she is, in all her glory. And frankly, I don’t plan on saying anything for the next few minutes either. Situations like these, I know that anything I say will only further infuriate her, redirect her rage towards me, like I’m the one who put Marcus up to whatever shit he’s gotten himself into. Last time he called me to pick him up it was because he’d been caught piercing some freshman’s nose in an upstairs girl’s bathroom using a sewing needle anesthetized with rubbing alcohol and a lighter. He’d managed to convince her he knew what the fuck he was doing, even though he didn’t and admitted to me afterwards that he’d Googled “how to pierce someone’s nose” on his iPhone twenty minutes before doing the deed.* Every website had told him he shouldn’t go through with it, but he was trying to get laid and, when it comes to high school males, sex—even the slim chance of it—trumps absolutely, positively everything. It took a considerable amount of

* I used to tell my mom a seventeen year old high school student didn’t need a damn iPhone, but she and my dad turned around and told me they “don’t want Marcus to have as hard a time fitting in as you did in high school,” which just made me feel like shit so I left it alone.

persuasion from my parents to convince the girl's dad not beat the shit out of Marcus. My brother ended up screwing her a few weeks later though. Gotta give him credit for originality.

"He's really outdone himself this time," my mother says in a probing way. She wants to yell at somebody for what Marcus did, and since Marcus isn't on the phone right now she's trying to coax me into making a sufficiently enraging comment so she can vent on me. I stay quiet. "Wait until I tell your father about this," she says after a moment of silence, then sighs. "I'm sorry to bother you, baby, but can you please pick him up?"

"Already on it," I croak.

"He called you?"

"He called me," I say.

"Figures," she says. I have no idea what that's supposed to mean. I sit up and rub my forehead, suppressing a groan.

"Ma, have you ever thought that there may just be more to this than Marcus being an asshole?"

"Watch the language," she says, without conviction.

"He's a teenager. Teenagers are depressed. That's what they do. You should be happy he's not one of the suicidal ones." I don't know how I know all of this, seeing as how my brother's never said anything to me even remotely close to what I'm saying about him right now. All I know is that Marcus seems much calmer around me than he does at home, and the only difference I can see is that I don't argue with every word that comes out of his mouth. "He just needs somebody to listen to him."

“Don’t give me that rubbish,” my mother says. “Everybody’s depressed nowadays, Sean.” I don’t disagree. “Marcus isn’t some extraordinary case who deserves special treatment. Your father and I just had to postpone our anniversary cruise. Did you know that?”

“No,” I say, with sadness in my voice for her benefit, even though I have no idea how this could possibly relate to Marcus’s situation.

“I can’t get the time off at the hospital,” she continues. “I was really looking forward to the trip and yes, I’m extremely upset. You don’t see me getting suspended or fired or arrested or wherever else your brother’s heading. He’s *completely* destroying his future.”

“Aren’t we exaggerating just a little bit, Ma?”

“*We* are not exaggerating anything,” she says, and I can tell she’s saying it through pursed lips. Pursed lips are her equivalent of a tantrum, and like that I’ve been dragged into the same shit I was trying to avoid. “That’s exactly the mentality that gets him into these things in the first place, Sean. Leniency is not what your brother needs. He needs discipline. Discipline and a firm set of rules. How can you say I’m exaggerating? You don’t even know what he did!”

“Ok, God,” I say. “I’m sorry, Ma, alright? You’re absolutely correct.” I pause for effect, letting the apology sink in and hopefully appeasing the situation before I ask, “What did he do anyways?”

“Ask him yourself, I’m done with this. I’m much too busy and I don’t want to bother your father right now, so please, just pick him up and...tell him something.”

If I didn’t know my mother, I’d think she’d given up on my brother. What that last statement means, though, in her language, is that she wants me to make my brother feel sufficiently shitty about whatever he’s done so that when he comes home he’ll be putty in her

hands, and they can ground him and yell at him and do whatever they please to him without much resistance. Basically, as much shit as she's talking right now, she doesn't like to fight with Marcus and she doesn't want my dad to do it because that always turns into the Easton household's version of Pearl Harbor. So she wants me to pacify him for her instead. I don't want to fall into this game, but family is pretty hard to ignore. Most of the time unfortunately.

"I'll talk to him, Ma."

"Please," she says, and I know she's about to repeat the request in an effort to show its importance to her. "Just pick him up and talk to him." Exactly.

"I'm on it, Ma."

"Thank you, baby," she says, and her friendly nurse tone slips back into her voice. I was wondering how long that was going to take. Like I said, my mom doesn't do livid, and now that she has a vision of a near future in which my brother isn't being a pain in her ass, she's back to the sickeningly sweet air of condescension that I can't fucking stand. "Maybe he'll listen to your brand of reason," she says.

I don't ask her what the hell that's supposed to mean. Instead I say:

"Ok, Ma."

"How are you?" she says, switching gears. "I never know how you're doing anymore. You never call, never visit. You live five miles away and it's like you're in Alaska."

"Sorry, Ma," I say. "I've been busy."

There's a long pause and I brace myself for a probing conversation, but she surprises me by saying:

"Well, happy birthday anyways, baby."

My eyes shoot open and there's my Hooters calendar but it's on the wrong month so I take my phone away from my ear and see that, beneath the digital time display, yes, it is indeed October 15th. My birthday. Exactly a year since Maria woke me up, pleased me, then ripped my heart out. Exactly fifty-one weeks since my best friend died.

"Thanks Ma," I say, only my voice cracks near the beginning so all that comes out is "Than-" I hang up without clarifying and lie there for a minute, trying to put the birthday thing out of my head by concentrating on Marcus. Despite whatever circumstances and despite how much I still feel like not listening to my mother, I'm thinking I should have a talk with my little brother before he turns himself into a deadbeat. Then I remember who I'm thinking about—Marcus Easton—and realize how inane that sounds. My brother's a seventeen-year-old genius. He scored a 1450 on the SAT—including a near-perfect score on the math section—in the eighth grade. It was part of some study that Duke University was holding where they tested a random set of promising middle school students around the country in an effort to see the disparity between their scores and those of college-bound high school students. My brother blew ninety-six percent of high school seniors out of the water at the age of thirteen, and he didn't even study for the damn thing. He was taking AP Calculus by the 10th grade, and he's been getting private math lessons in Invariable Statistics or Quantum Something-Or-Other from this graduate student over at FIU ever since then because his high school doesn't offer courses that advanced. Coupling all of that with the string of A pluses he's received in almost every class he's ever taken, he's pretty much been guaranteed admission to any college in the country since he hit puberty. So I'm not too worried about whatever the hell he's done this time, or anytime. Knowing Marcus, it was probably something of relatively epic proportions, in the relatively epic

universe of high-school-dom. So I already know that whatever little “talk” I might start to have with him about this situation, it will inevitably turn into me internally congratulating him on his innovation, as usual, at which point I will feel like a huge tool for believing I could try to give advice to a pissed off teenage prodigy. Marcus can handle himself.

I get out of bed as there’s a knock at the door and Derek pokes his head in.

“Hey,” he says. “Birthday boy’s awake. Happy b-day, brother man.”

I stick my tongue out at him and he chuckles.

“Don’t know what’s so happy about it,” I say, wading through the pile of empty beer bottles on the carpet and stumbling into the bathroom.

“Can you stop being pessimistic for once in your life?” he calls out to me.

“No,” I yell back.

“What are you doing tonight?”

“Working.”

“I mean after, dick.”

I stare at myself in the mirror, my bloodshot eyes with bags the size of pants pockets beneath them, my cheek bones way too prominent to be healthy.

“Probably heading to Dill’s,” I say, though I should remove the “probably” from that statement.

“Hit me up when you get out,” he says. “I’ll join.”

I don’t respond and soon I hear the bedroom door close and I brush my teeth and wash my face and soon I’m in my car, putting my shades on to block out the hateful sun. I sit in the

positively *baking* driver's seat* and let my air conditioner blast the car with heated air that very slowly cools down, and for a second I can't remember if I got dressed or not and wonder if I came downstairs and got in my car wearing nothing but my underwear. Then I touch my chest and feel the top button on my work shirt, brush a piece of lint off my work pants. I sigh, turn on my car and pull out of the complex

* While people in other parts of the country were freezing their asses off, my balls were sticking to the side of my leg.

-Lauren-

All this retrospect is disorienting. Looking back on the past four or so years, I feel like I've pretty much floated through them. Somewhere along the line my dreams transformed from broad, pleasantly ambiguous ideas to very specific daily goals. I used to be able to wake up and spend a whole day fantasizing about becoming a well-learned, well-traveled individual with all types of accolades. I'd end up with a top-notch résumé and an extensive list of experiences: a PhD maybe, or a couple of years in the Peace Corp., a backpacking trip through Europe, maybe a couple years in Colombia being romanced by some hot scholar from Bogotá. I'd have this whole life mapped out in my head by the time I walked into Brit Lit, and each night I'd convince myself it was all not so much a possibility as a surety.

Now though, my goals go no further than forcing my eyes up to the rearview mirror. I have to face myself and make sure that when I walk into this preschool to pick up my son, he does not have any clue that his mother is seconds away from having a complete mental breakdown. On one level, it's kind of liberating to not have such lofty goals anymore. It feels good to have a clear cut, step by step process which I can do right here, right now, and get a result which will satisfactorily achieve the objective I set out to accomplish.

Right now I know that when I put my car in park and close my eyes, take a few deep breaths, turn down the radio, count to ten, open my eyes, pull my makeup kit and a napkin out from the glove compartment, use the napkin to wipe away the small lines of runny mascara, reapply the mascara and eyeliner, add a little foundation to effectively cover the redness of my nose, cheeks, and the puffiness around my eyes, pull out the bottle of Visine I keep in the car along with all sorts of other first aid artifacts, squeeze a few drops into my eyes to clear away the

bloodshot tint—completing all of these little tasks will yield a very specific result: I will walk into Children’s Fantasy Preschool, my son will happily greet me, and he will not ask any questions.

I never wanted to put Justin in preschool. There are so many stories in the news, neglect and abuse, parents warning you about things they’ve heard from other parents. But Rick and I both work. Natalie the Babysitter has a full time schedule at Miami Dade College too, so she can only watch Justin on the weekends and the occasional night she’s not in class. So Children’s Fantasy Preschool became a necessity, and for the most part the people who work there seem to be kind. Justin doesn’t complain. There have even been days he’s seemed disappointed when I show up (which never goes over well with me, though I try hard to hide the irrational feeling of hurt from him in these situations). I think about this as I head to the preschool but ignore any thoughts of letting him stay there. I want to see him now, see my son’s face and know that he’s real. I want to know that I haven’t completely wasted my time.

So inside Children’s Fantasy, I smile the customary smile at the little blonde girl manning the front desk as I sign Justin out and he runs up to me on wobbly legs. Soon, I’m driving aimlessly with him gurgling in the back seat. He says something which, to many people, would probably sound like gibberish but which I recognize as him commenting on me picking him up early.

“Yes, honey,” I say. “Mommy missed you and wanted to see you.”

“Miss you,” he says, and I smile.

“Daddy?” he adds, and my eyes well up.

“Daddy’s at work, honey,” I say, glancing in the rearview mirror. He turns and looks out the window and I can tell by the small furrow in his eyebrows that he’s disappointed. I picked him up from daycare early, which usually would necessitate some sort of special occasion involving both me and his dad. I feel a flicker of envy, that I have to witness Justin’s disappointment and Rick doesn’t.

“We see Daddy later?” Justin says finally.

“No, honey,” I say quickly, then immediately regret it when his eyebrows drop even further. “Daddy’s on...a business trip,” I add.

He looks at my face in the rearview mirror, confused. I open my mouth to explain what a business trip to him but my voice catches and I realize if I say anything else about Rick or this situation I’m going to start crying again, which I know would make things so much worse. The last time I cried in front of Justin (Rick and I had gotten into a fight and Justin had walked in right as I was in the middle of a sobbing/screaming fit) he started crying too and it took all of half an hour to calm him down. It had effectively ended the conflict between Rick and I, but I remember the feeling of seeing Justin both scared and hurt that we were so mad at each other, and Rick and I made a vow never to fight in front of him again. Rick’s not here now, but I still don’t want any of our problems to spill over into Justin’s life. I reach back and put a hand on his leg and squeeze gently.

“You’ll see Daddy later, honey,” I say. “It’s just you and Mommy for a little while though, ok?”

He nods and his eyebrows raise a little, though he still looks a little skeptical. I’ll take what I can get.

It seems like I drive for hours, but it's only thirty minutes later that I pull up to my mother's house. This is not where I want to be—it is in fact the second to last place I'd like to be, the last place being my own home, which I imagine is empty now but which I'm still physically sick at the thought of reentering. But I have nowhere else to go. Caitlyn didn't answer her phone and I haven't had anything resembling a good non-sibling friend since I dropped out of college and gave birth to Justin. I consider continuing to drive until Caitlyn calls me back or I end up anywhere else besides here, but Justin's getting restless in his car seat. I don't think I can handle a cranky two year old right now. So, mother's house it is.

Pulling up to my childhood home always brings with it both a sense of nostalgia and claustrophobia. Not to say I had a bad upbringing or anything. An interesting and tragic one, yes, but nothing I would call completely repulsive. My father was Italian-American, born in New York and raised in Miami where he grew to become a dedicated and successful businessman. He came into the stock market at the beginning of the initial dot-com boom and was one of the few smart ones that fled right before things started tanking. The move left him with a sizable portfolio and a lot of prestige in certain camps, utter infamy in others. He died when I was twelve, Caitlyn ten; a brain aneurysm that took him one late afternoon in his Downtown Miami condo. We—my mother, sister, and I—were unaware at the time of this condo's existence. We were also unaware that my father was using the condo as his regular rendezvous point to conduct his various extramarital affairs, the last of which took place between him and his recently hired Puerto Rican secretary, Rebecca. And it was Rebecca who was left with the responsibility of dialing emergency that day, hysterically screaming that my father had fallen limp during their lovemaking and she needed somebody to come get him off of her.

The aftermath was brutal. My mother completely forfeited her mourning phase, opting to spend the period of time following his death slandering my father's name, even at his own funeral. Ultimately, the ordeal left my sister disenchanted, me devastated, and my mother a multi-millionaire. Through it all, though, I still remember my dad as he was around me: loving, funny, warm, and handsome. It's an image my mother's tried to erase every day since.

As a result of her widow's inheritance, the property I pull into right now in the middle of Coral Gables is about six blocks from University of Miami, an area that is nothing if not high end living. The house itself is a two story monstrosity sitting on a few acres of land with a fountain out front and a driveway that's the same width as the building my apartment's in. There's a Range Rover parked out front (haven't seen that before) and as I pull up behind it I see my mother step out of the house with a purse as big as a picnic basket hanging from her wrist. There's a large sun hat sitting precariously on her head, wisps of curly blond hair fluttering beneath. She's cut it in the past few weeks since the last time I saw her, added some shades of brown streaks too. I park the car and step out right as she turns and notices I'm there, a broad smile breaking across her youthful face.

"Darling," she says, coming towards me with outstretched arms. My mother takes all her cues from old Audrey Hepburn movies, even though she's only forty-five, way too young to have been affected by them. She didn't always act like this though. I assume she saw something on TV sometime not too long after my father's death and subsequently created the persona she bombards me with right now. We embrace and she steps back, holding my shoulders so my profile is visible. "You've lost weight," she says. Not in a pleasant tone, but more like I'm anorexic.

“I started running again,” I say.

“Are you eating right?” she asks.

“Yes, Mom.”

“You look pale. Did Rick say something to you about your weight?” She cocks her head and purses her lips with determination. “You don’t have to do anything to your body you don’t want to, honey, remember that. Especially not for a man.”

“Mom,” I say. “You exercise more than I do.”

“I do it for myself,” she quips.

“I do too, Mom.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes, Mother.”

“Because in the end it’s your body and your mind and he owns neither.”

“Mom,” I say, clenching my teeth. “I started running because it’s healthy.”

She assesses me long and hard. My mother’s low opinion of men is quite understandable, given the circumstances. It makes her a difficult person to deal with for all parties involved in her life though. She refused to remarry after the funeral, and not for lack of attention. There were all types of interest those first few years, from various friends and acquaintances. And my mother—consciously or subconsciously, I’ll never know—used and abused nearly every one of them, then left them on the curb with the Monday morning trash. For a while there it seemed all she was doing was channeling the anger she couldn’t express towards my dead father. She’d roil herself into a whirlwind of resentment, directing the unbridled emotion at some poor, unsuspecting man, exacting brutal and occasionally violent retribution. Then, about five years ago, she stopped

seeing men altogether. I don't know which period of time is more upsetting. There's a picture of Queen Elizabeth the First hanging in her living room to serve as inspiration because (as she'll gladly tell you) Elizabeth was known back in the Middle Ages for having many suitors but no husband. Nobody tying her down or taking her power from her. I like to think of it all as her very long-term process for dealing with trauma.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" she asks.

"I just wanted to visit," I say.

"What did he do?" she asks, taking a step back, eyes wide.

"Nothing," I say reflexively.

"You're lying," she says, and I roll my eyes. This isn't some intuitive move on her part. She would think Rick did something even if I came over here grinning ear to ear and doing back flips.

"I don't want to talk about it," I say, walking over to the back door of my car. I open it and unbuckle Justin from his car seat, holding him as I close the door and head towards the front of the house.

"That is not acceptable," my mother says from behind me, and I can hear her quick, light footsteps following mine.

"I don't care, Mom," I say. "You don't have to accept it. I don't want to talk about it and I'm not going to."

"You can't bottle things up, they'll only get worse," she says. "It's like cancer. You have to catch it early or it'll spread."

“Thanks for the comparison, Mom,” I say, opening the front door and stepping inside.

“But I think I’ll be fine.”

“What did he do?”

“Nothing, Mother,” I say, turning and glaring at her. “Can you drop it?”

“Are you going to talk to him about it?”

“No, I—” I pause. “Wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“So there *is* something,” she says, smiling triumphantly.

“God,” I say, throwing my hands in the air. “Yes. Alright? Are you satisfied?”

She studies my face, burning a hole in my forehead with her eyes. I’m about to turn away and continue through the door and into the house when she points at me.

“He slept with somebody, didn’t he?”

My mouth opens to deny the charge. I can’t though, so I absently bounce Justin in my arms. My mother and I look alike in only the faintest manner. We’re both around the same height with the same light green almond-shaped eyes. Everything else—my dark hair and button nose and puffy cheeks—I got from my father, with my mother bestowing the rest of her bounty on my sister: the full blond hair, the effortlessly proportional figure, the pouty lips and attitude. I feel beautiful most days when I’m away from them and standing in front of my own mirror. I worked hard to get rid of the excess pregnancy fat after I had Justin, and I believe that the rest of my features combine to give me an attractive, girl-next-door air. It’s hard to hold that confidence around my mother and sister though, their beauty being of the more naturally stunning variety. Which only seems to further fuel their self-imposed hatred of masculinity. Go figure.

“I told you, I don’t want to talk about it,” I say finally, my voice wavering a little. I walk inside and put Justin down on the tile. He sits at first then stands on shaky legs, stumbling across the tile, around the corner, and into the living room.

“You being here right now is a good thing,” my mother says, nodding. “I can tell that look on your face, the look of betrayal. I’m glad you came to me for support.” She pauses, stepping inside and closing the door behind her. “He slept with somebody, didn’t he?” she repeats.

“Mom,” I say, my throat tightening. “Please. Don’t.”

“I knew it,” she says, in such a resigned tone that I’m actually convinced she foresaw this moment the day Rick and I got married. Like she’s been waiting impatiently for me to join her little one woman hate group. The Embittered Victims of Adultery Organization. “Who is it?” she asks.

“Does it matter?” I say.

Suddenly her face drops and she approaches me with her arms at her side, palms extended and facing me.

“Oh, honey” she says. “I’m so sorry.”

Her voice is so soft, catching me so off guard that my defenses don’t have a chance to barricade my emotions. The result is me involuntarily bursting into tears. My legs grow weak as she approaches, and when she holds me I don’t hug her back so much as fall into her embrace. She rubs my back and whispers inaudible words into my ear as I unload into her blouse, clutching the fabric in my fists and shuddering. We stand like that for a moment until my gasps begin to subside and I can finally breathe again. Then behind me something crashes and I hear

Justin giggle. I untangle myself from my mom's grip and dive towards the living room, eyes wide with fright and my nose running. I find Justin sitting on the tile rubbing his hands through a pile of dried rose petals he knocked out of a container lying on the coffee table. He looks up at me as I approach and points at the rose petals and giggles again then returns to rubbing his hands through them. Then he seems to notice my tears and his face drops.

"Mommy?" he says.

"Yes, baby," I say, dropping down next to him. I put my hand in the rose petals too and rub them around, trying to distract him. "These are roses, honey. Rose petals."

He looks down at them then back up at me and I can tell he's trying to figure out what's wrong with this situation. I turn my head and swipe quickly at my eyes with the sleeve of my shirt then look back at him and smile as wide as I can.

"How do you feel about staying with Grandma for a little?" I ask him.

He looks up as my mother approaches, stopping next to me and looking down at us. Justin giggles again and goes back to rubbing his hands through the flower petals and I sigh, relieved. My mom smiles at me, despite a deep sadness in her eyes.

"They're good at this age," she says, crossing her arms. "Manageable, loving." She pats my shoulder. "Then they grow up, and everything turns to shit."

I want to respond and tell her that she's wrong. Not all men are bad, and if I have any say in it, Justin is going to grow up to be one of the good ones. I still believe this too, despite the circumstances. But I don't feel like preaching to my mother right now, and my lunch break was over five minutes ago.

“Can you watch him tonight?” I ask, clearing my throat. “I have to get back to work then I’m going to hang out with Caitlyn, figure all this out.”

“Caitlyn?” she says skeptically.

“Yes, Mom,” I say. “Caitlyn. My sister.”

She obviously wants to give me her opinion but is obviously not sure whether it’s a good time. It’s not a good time.

“Of course, honey,” she says finally, rubbing my shoulder. It feels good and reminds me why it wasn’t such a horrible idea to come over here. No matter how frustrating they are, family is family. I hug her again. She walks me to the door a moment later and I open it, facing the Range Rover in the driveway.

“What’s up with that?” I ask, swiping a hand across my cheeks.

My mother peeks around me at the car.

“That thing?” she says, pointing at it and cocking her head to the side, as if it appeared out of nowhere. She sucks her teeth and waves it off. “The Benz was getting old.”

“You traded it in?”

“No, it’s in the garage.”

I roll my eyes and smile.

“What do you need with two cars, mom?”

“Honey,” she says, patting my back. “If all we ever got in life was what we needed, things would be pretty damn boring, don’t you think?”

I can’t really argue with that.

STEP 2: CONFRONT

-Sean-

I used to have goals. We all did: me, Leon, and Derek. They were all sort of interconnected for a while there too, from the moment we decided as a group to go to the same college all the way until our majors started sort of diverging, and even then we still had the same overarching themes to our goal systems. Leon was Biology, accepted to med school well before graduation. Derek was Political Science, which basically meant he majored in socializing and micromanaging. And I was the psych major, trying to figure out what the hell's going on in everybody's head but my own.

So yeah, I used to have goals. Or, to be more specific, I used to have goals that looked towards my distant future. I have goals now but they're pretty much limited to how much I need to drink tonight to get to sleep, or whether or not I can force myself to eat more than one meal before the day ends, or how much money I can squeeze out of the drunken bar guests at Shambles during my shift tonight. Not the most motivating lines of thought. When Maria and I were together, though, I had a whole list of hopes and dreams to aspire to. Literally, a list. Thumb tacked to the wall behind the front door of the apartment that, back then, was both of ours. There were two columns, one with my name above it and the other with hers. My side was admittedly shorter, but not by much. It consisted, more or less, of the following items:

- 1) Get a "real" job
- 2) Set a wedding date.
- 3) Get married.
- 4) Have a kid.

- 5) Start a gym membership.
- 6) Figure out the most efficient way to run a 401k.
- 7) Buy a house in a nice neighborhood with a dog and a big backyard.*

Basically, the overarching theme of it all was that I was okay with this hackneyed but secure future. And, when I think about it now, it all kind of seems funny to me. Because back then, when Maria and I were together, those goals seemed exactly that: secure. I'd come home from work at Shambles—a “temporary” position back then, one I kept to pay the bills while I looked for a “real” job—and I'd see that list and think that this was life. This was what men did in the 21st century after finding a woman and getting their college degree, a sure indicator that testosterone tanks were all topped off and ready to go. There wasn't very much to ponder. It was all mapped out already, everything preordained straight down to the way I should feel about it all. It was a feeling of “Fitting In,” so easily mistaken for a feeling of “Rightness.” And who knows, it might have had the potential to be right—if it was attainable. The problem my generation faces with these goals though—goals and dreams passed down to us from our parents, I might add—is that our version of “secure” is a lot less glamorous than it's been in the past. Take our parents' version and translate it into our generation, and what you've got is more along the lines of “in-debt.”

Maria's side of that list on the back of our door pretty much had all the same things as mine, only hers included even higher aspirations, like finishing med school and becoming chief cardiac surgeon at a major hospital by time she was thirty and having *two* kids and a house in

* These last two I had kind of thrown in there to be ironic at first. Then I realized I'll probably never have a job where a 401k is included in my employment and the whole house and dog and backyard thing will more than likely never happen. Then these last two items just got depressing.

Coral Gables and not just any dog but a fucking Yorkie. Crazy to think about, but we were motivating each other, at least for a little while. It made me warm to think I had a girlfriend capable of reaching her goals, with a good head on her shoulders. What I didn't know is that my head was barely on my own, sitting there but not really attached, kind of sewn on with thin lace. And all it needed was one little blow to fly off and go rolling around Miami aimlessly. Maria gave me that blow on my twenty-fourth birthday, literally and figuratively.*

There's nothing special to say about the break up, it was pretty standard issue. You've seen it a million times, in a million romantic comedies where the main character is all content with his life for years then wakes up one day to realize he hasn't actually done shit with his time so far and the girl he thinks he's in love with has moved eons past him, in every sense of the phrase. Only, in romantic comedies you know things are going to turn out alright for the main character, some marquee actor who's probably never had an actual woman problem in his life, unless you count having too many as a problem. I'm not a marquee fucking actor, and this isn't a romantic comedy.

Maria met somebody else, a pediatrician at Baptist Hospital where she was interning. Woke me up on my birthday with a pity fuck and a goodbye.† One week later, Leon—my best friend since the sixth grade—was driving home from a night out clubbing on South Beach when

* Yes, that's a sexual innuendo.

† It sounds like I was oversimplifying it, but that's basically exactly how it happened. We woke up that morning and I rolled over, touched the side of her face and she woke up, looked at me and I remember thinking that she looked so intense, so focused, so...sexy. So I started rubbing her back, then her thigh, then I pulled her on top of me and she never stopped me, never even said anything just went along with it and kissed me back when I put my lips on hers and arched her back when I entered her and moaned louder than I remember her ever moaning before. Then she rolled off of me, sat up and started crying, told me she was leaving. I used to think that last roll in the hay meant something, like she was confused about the decision she was making and would eventually realize it was all a big mistake and come back to me and apologize profusely then fuck me silly like she had that morning for the rest of our lives. But I eventually realized she wasn't confused about anything. She just simply had sex with me. Not because she's some kind of sexual deviant, or was trying to drive the stake deeper into my heart, but because it's honestly not that hard to just suck it up and have sex with somebody you've already been having sex with for the past three years. Also, I think she knew things would be easier if I was post-coital while she was packing her stuff. It's hard to go ballistic on somebody you've just had an orgasm in front of, regardless of the circumstances.

he crashed his car into a median on I-95. He was racing his Scion TC against a kid driving an Acura RSX with a spoiler and twenty inch rims and a Cuban flag decal on the back window. Leon's Scion had been a college graduation present from his parents, received a year earlier. He was coming around the bend that connects I-95 to US-1 when he hit a slick patch in the road, slammed on his brakes, lost control of the steering wheel and barreled headfirst into a foot of concrete at seventy miles an hour.

The initial reason for him being out that night was to attempt to cheer up one of his best friends who'd recently gone through a pretty heavy break up. Leon had always been that type of guy, the type to go completely out of his way for the people he cared about. Even—obviously—go so far as to convince a friend that life wasn't as important as people made it seem. I'm not saying he did this consciously; Leon would have never purposely killed himself. He was laughing right before the car spun out though, I'll always remember that. I was in the passenger seat when we hit that concrete wall. I was wearing my seatbelt. Leon wasn't. I wish to God he had been.

“Awesome fucking night,” was one of the last things he said to me, patting me on my shoulder, grinning then pushing me playfully, inadvertently slamming my drunken head into the car window. Then he heard the guy revving his engine next to him and pointed out the window.

“Look at this asshole,” he said. “Gassing up his little go kart.”

I remember the only thing I could muster was an echo of his sentiment:

“Awesome.”

Everything else happened pretty quickly after that.

Maria called me a couple of days later to give me her condolences, and again the day before the funeral, but hearing her voice made things worse so she stopped calling and moved on to her new life with Lowell. Lowell is thirty-two, has a brand new condo in Key Biscayne, and drives an SLK Benz. They're engaged now, last I heard from Derek, who heard it from Kristina. Derek says it's for the best though, that Maria and I weren't ourselves around each other. That she seems happier now, and I should try to be too. And I'm glad for her, really. Glad she found something worthwhile.*

* I most definitely was not.

-Lauren-

Getting any work done today would be most likely impossible for me given a different career. However, I happen to be a pharmacy technician in a local CVS. This essentially means that I count pills, put them in a bottle, put the bottle in a bag, affix a label to the bag then hand it to my boss, Steve the Pharmacist, for verification. Other than that, I type people's insurance card numbers into the computer if they've never been here before. If they have (most of them have) I press enter a few times and their insurance company gets a bill. Most days, trivial but pleasant conversations take place between Steve and me during all of this. However, there is a clause in the unwritten contract of our professional relationship stating that we can work in silence if the day calls for it. Today calls for it, and Steve must know something is up because he takes one look at me as I walk in then nods and goes right back to his work, refraining from commenting on my extended lunch break.

I put on my white lab coat and sit on a stool near one of the two computers housing the pharmaceutical database. Steve is fiddling away on the other one. The pharmacy is empty at midday, and we don't usually get our rush until a little after five o'clock when most people get out of work. I leave at six, so I only have to deal with it for an hour before Lynda, my relief, comes in. On the counter in front of me are a stack of prescription labels and a pile of white paper bags with the CVS logo printed across them. The first label calls for Yasmin, birth control. I grab the paper, fill the prescription, and then try to fill the next one but find myself unable to do it. I really don't want to be here right now. I know I have to be, but knowing that doesn't change my desire in the least. Actually, it makes me want to leave more. Funny thing is, I know that if this were a voluntary position—one that I wasn't counting on for financial support but was

taking part in simply out of genuine interest—I would feel different. I would possibly come here to get *away* from thoughts of Rick and Natalie and what just took place in my apartment. But because this is my *job*, this is the last place I want to be and the last thing I want to be doing right now.

There's a *US Weekly* on the magazine rack near the pharmacy's cash register. For some reason I always stare at this magazine when I'm here. I have each week's cover memorized within hours of it being on the shelf, though I've never actually bought an issue. Reese Witherspoon is on this week, smiling her jack-o-lantern smile with the headline "Reese is Pregnant" printed across her chest. I wonder if things are different for her and all the other actresses like her. The thought seems irrational, but it's there and I can't make it go away. I just wonder: does Reese Witherspoon see life as one big movie? Does she call up past films in her mind when she gets stuck in a rocky situation? When she and Ryan Phillippe got divorced in real life, did she think to herself *oh, I'll be fine, I already prepared for this when I shot Sweet Home Alabama?*

I wish my life had a personal screenwriter, and that I could peek over his shoulder every once in a while and offer some suggestions. The thought makes me feel odd, like I'm abnormal. Or I've gone completely insane. Rick's called me crazy during a few of our more uproarious fights. I don't blame him when he does, even though it upsets me like nothing else. I do act crazy occasionally. Not more than anybody else, I think, and it's not out of spite. It's just that, sometimes, I get really frazzled when I'm angry and I don't see things too clearly. So I'll start saying whatever comes to my mind, which is usually extremely hostile and vaguely coherent, with parts of the rants being largely contradictory to other parts. And what I'm saying when I get

like this is never what I actually mean. Like this one time, I accused Rick of hating my mom (and, by extension, me) because I was mad at him for forgetting to buy pasta on his way home. I don't know how one led to the other, and I knew as I was saying it that I wasn't making any sense. Rick's been nothing but cordial to my mother every time they've talked too, and has admitted to me on more than one occasion that he thinks she's intelligent and sexy (considering current events, this memory makes me nauseous).

"Lauren?"

I glance up and Steve's eyeing me curiously.

"You ok?" he asks.

I clear my throat, adjust my coat.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, fine. Why?"

"You've been standing there staring at the wall for like ten minutes now," he says.

The *US Weekly* catches my eye again, and I feel the urge to shudder. I push it away.

"Sorry," I say. "Just—a lot on my mind."

"No problem," he says. "Think you could watch the register for a sec, though? Gabe's taking a break."

Gabe is our cashier, an eighteen year old high school senior who is allowed to leave school early so he can come in here and do nothing but stare at the locked Controlled Substances cabinet in the back for unnaturally long periods of time. He also takes half an hour smoke breaks with seemingly no consequence. It aggravates me.

I nod and walk over to the register, poking at it as if it's an alien machine. I'm about to sit on a stool when a man walks up to the counter. He's attractive, older, mid-thirties.

“Pick up for last name Stetson,” he says. “Linus Stetson.”

“Linus?” I repeat. I try to keep the amusement out of my voice when I say this, but it’s there already.

“Yeah,” he says, raising an eyebrow. “Linus.”

“Sorry,” I say, my face heating up. “Just a sec.”

I spin around and search the shelves behind me for Linus Stetson’s prescription. It’s not there, so I walk over to the recently bagged prescriptions, lined up and waiting for Steve to sign. Linus’s is in the middle. I could pull it out of the queue and watch Steve roll his eyes and sign it reluctantly then listen to him tell me later that he doesn’t like to upset the order of things and that customers can wait their turn. Steve doesn’t get mad about pretty much anything, but he does get this look in his eyes that borders somewhere between annoyance and pity whenever something interrupts his routine. I can’t imagine what his home life must be like.

I could get Linus Stetson out of here in a jiffy. But I don’t want to. Part of me wants Linus to hang around for a little while. It’s not that he’s some super-attractive man (he’s okay) or that I have any plan right now really. I just—for some unknown reason that undoubtedly has to do with Rick—don’t want him to leave yet. So I walk back over to the register.

“Sorry Mr. Stetson,” I say. “It’s not ready yet. A few more minutes though, if you want to wait around.”

Linus surveys the area surrounding the pharmacy counter, stopping on the chair attached to the blood pressure machine near the back wall.

“I’ll just wait here?” he says, curling his voice at the end so it’s a question.

“Sure,” I say.

Linus takes a seat and I decide this is a perfect opportunity to pick up the issue of *US Weekly* and flip through it. Maybe it will stop me from staring at it every couple of seconds. It's only a moment after flipping to the table of contents though that I hear someone clear their throat. I glance up and Linus is watching me with a sly grin on his face.

"You were making fun of me," he says. "Weren't you?"

I have no idea what he's talking about, and I frown, to let him know this. He chuckles, embarrassed.

"My name," he says. "You were mocking my name."

"No I wasn't," I say, my face heating up a little. "Ok, maybe a little."

"I didn't name myself you know."

"I'm sure of it," I say. "Nothing wrong with it either way. Just made me think of Peanuts."

"Peanuts?" he asks, confused.

"The comic strip, not the food."

He nods and I study him for a second, taking in his strong jaw line and slicked back hair, before returning to the magazine.

"You been working here long?" he asks.

I notice the discomfort rising in me and want to push it down. I knew—consciously or subconsciously, I don't know which really, but I knew somewhere—that Linus was going to end up flirting with me. Most women know things like this, not so much when we're younger but definitely as age and experience start to accumulate. It's in the way guys walk when they see a girl they think is attractive. It's a changeup, a different little swagger that isn't exactly the same

in every man but is discernible from plain ordinary walking. Linus paused before approaching the counter, checked me out, then avoided my eyes from that point until now. Sure indicator that he's interested. This is, more specifically, the reason I got the urge to not push his prescription to the front of the pile. But the fact that I'm feeling the familiar discomfort associated with being hit on as a married woman—the feeling I've gotten quite used to over the past few years—is disconcerting. It's deeply ingrained in me, and I can't seem to bypass it by replaying Rick and Natalie's lovemaking in my mind. Which is exactly what I'm doing right now. The image isn't doing anything but turning my stomach in knots though, and making me want to talk to Linus even less. I realize right then that the prospect of being single—of recent events leading to a divorce and me being a single mother with child support checks and the like—scares me to death. Dating itself is such a frightening, vulnerable time period, no matter what the circumstances. I don't want to go through all of that again.

“I'm sorry?” I ask.

“I said, how long have you been working here?” he asks.

“Oh,” I say, shrugging. “A while. Not too long. Couple of—you know.”

He nods, giving me a sideways glance.

“That long, huh?” he asks.

I smile, though I suddenly want Gabe to finish his smoking break and come back to his post at the register so I can return to my background job of bagging pills and avoiding the general public.

“A while,” I say. “Since college.”

“College,” he says, nodding. “How long ago was that?”

“College?”

He nods and I shrug.

“Couple years now.”

“For a pharmacist you sure aren’t into specifics.”

“I’m not a pharmacist,” I say. “Pharmacy technician.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Not even close,” I say.

“Semantics,” he says.

I chuckle, feeling a little more relaxed but still a little uncomfortable. This is familiar also, I know. The flirtation, the breaking down of barriers layer by layer. Can I actually do *this* again though? Go through this process over and over until I meet another Rick? Because, really, what else is there? Rick and I were good friends who became lovers. If that doesn’t work out, what the hell else really is there? Getting to know a complete stranger? Being single for the rest of my life? Those both sound equally horrible.

“So,” Linus says, rubbing his hands together. “This what you went to school for? Pharmacy stuff?”

“No,” I say. “Actually, I was a literature major.”

His eyebrows raise.

“Really?” He motions around the pharmacy as if he just realized where he was. “How does a lit major end up here.”

“How?” I say, then chuckle, trying to hide the contempt popping into my voice. “She gets pregnant, withdraws from school and finds a job so that she can support herself and her son.” I

instantly notice how that statement came out completely structured to refrain from mentioning Rick's existence. Obviously there's a man in there somewhere, but the way I made it sound he could be in China right now. Or dead.

Linus's face drops.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"About what?" I ask.

He shrugs.

"I don't know. Sounds like a bad situation."

"Not really," I say, feeling of contempt gone as suddenly as it appeared. "I love my son to death. More than I loved college."

There's a brief moment of silence after this during which Linus goes back to avoiding my eyes.

"You going back?" he asks finally.

"Where?" I ask.

"College," he says. "You plan on going back?"

This throws me for a loop. It's a perfectly legitimate question. And it's one I haven't thought about in some time. My answer before—back when Justin was still all of ten adorable pounds, barely any hair on his head and sleeping eighteen hours a day—was always a very adamant *of course I'm going back to school. As soon as Justin's old enough.* And people would always smile, pat me on my back and say *good for you.* I knew what they were really thinking was *yeah, right,* though. And, eventually, it became obvious it was a *yeah, right* situation. Which actually took a lot of pressure off me because people quit asking all the time, which allowed me

to quit thinking about it and raise my son in peace. But now the question's resurfaced, like some unearthed body, and before I can think of a proper answer I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind.

"Why?"

Linus shrugs.

"To finish your degree."

"Yeah," I say. "But—why?"

"To get a better job?"

"I'm okay with this one," I say.

"Yeah," he says, nervous again. "But—I don't know. Can't you make more money?"

"Linus," I say, leveling my eyes at him. "I was an English major."

Another pause.

"Well," he says, putting his hands up. "I don't know then."

And suddenly, the whole situation is too much. I feel it rising and, before I can stop myself, I burst out laughing. Linus laughs a moment later, and soon we're both trying to stifle hysterics. And it feels good, all thirty seconds of it. It feels good to share a laugh with somebody about a subject I haven't really ever seen any humor in.

As the laughing dies down, Steve call out and says that Linus's prescription is ready. I grab it and ring him up for what turns out to be Nexium, which I know is used to treat gastroesophageal reflux disease, also known as GERD or acid-reflux disease. I know this because Rick takes the same medication. I pause for a second as I hand him the bag and his receipt, and in that moment Linus notices my wedding ring.

“Oh,” he says.

“What?” I ask, though I know exactly what he’s referring to and can’t help but be disappointed.

“That,” he says, pointing at my finger. “You’re married.”

I flex my finger and touch the ring as if it appeared on my finger out of nowhere.

“Yeah,” I say, unable to muster any sort of emotion into the response. Not anger, not affection, nothing.

Linus stands there for a moment then picks up his prescription bag, crumpling the corners in his palm.

“That’s too bad,” he says, smiling nervously.

I smile back, but I don’t say anything. I don’t know what there is to say. Linus pats the counter and turns, walking back towards the front of the store then out the door. Gabe comes back from his break and I head back to my stool next to Steve, who watches me intently.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he says, then stops fiddling with his computer and turns towards me fully.

“Are you *sure* you’re ok?”

“I’m fine, Steve,” I say, grabbing a prescription label and a bag. “Perfectly fine.”

-Sean-

Ten minutes after leaving my place I'm in front of Sideview High School, my alma mater, watching the teeming crowd of students on their way to what I'm assuming is the last period of the day. The school recently started this closed campus policy, building a six foot tall fence with jutting spikes every ten inches or so around the entirety of the school's property. Now, an institution that was already fairly intimidating seems downright prison-like. Officials say the fence is to keep unsavory people out, but I think that's a load of bullshit. The spikes on the fence point inward, towards the large buildings housing the classrooms. There will be no escapees at Sideview High.

I park my car illegally at a curb outside the front gate and walk inside and I'm immediately stopped by a security guard riding a golf cart. The man has to weigh at least 350 pounds, his expansive belly barely covered by a green t-shirt with the word "SECURITY" stretched to the limit across his back. He glares at me like I'm a terrorist, and I already knew he was going to give me a hard time. His name's Larry and he's been working here for-fucking-ever, since before I was a high school freshman which was over a decade ago. He walked on his own then, wasn't so big yet that his belly sat on his thighs and he needed a gallon bottle of Powerade to keep himself from passing out. It's obvious he doesn't remember me from when I was a student here, but I remember him and I know how this conversation's going to go even before it starts, which really makes things kind of boring even as they get progressively more hostile.

"What's your business here?" Larry.

"Just picking up my little brother." Me.

“You sure about that?”

“Yup. He’s in the office right now.”

“Yeah. Right.”

I chuckle because it sounds like he doesn’t believe me, which makes me wonder why the hell I would lie about something like that. It’s not like it can’t be proven.

“Alright,” I say. “Thanks for all that. Gonna go get him now, though, then I’ll be out of your way.”

I start to walk and the motor on Larry’s golf cart whirrs into action as he shoots forward and cuts me off.

“Just a minute,” Larry says, scowling at me. “I need to see some ID.”

I roll my eyes.

“I used to go here,” I say. “Not too long ago. You know that?”

“You and half the people within a twenty mile radius. ID please.”

Muttering under my breath, I reach into my back pocket for my wallet and realize that I’ve left it on my nightstand at my apartment. Cursing, I check all my pockets. I left my phone at home too, nothing but my keys in hand. I smile up at Larry, my interest renewed.

“Larry, listen—”

“You don’t get extra points for knowing my name, smart mouth. *Identification*, please.”

I can’t help it, I smile when he says “smart mouth.”

“Look,” I say, pulling up my sunglasses and instantly regretting it as the sunlight pierces my pupils and Larry vanishes in a flash of blindness. I try and squint through it, hoping I’m making eye contact with him as I speak. “Right now, my little brother’s in there, in an assistant

principal's office most likely, and he just called me to come pick him up because he's been suspended for...I don't know what, doesn't matter, but he's a good kid who's going through a bit of a rebellious stage right now and I'm his older brother who should and will be helping him get through it. Now, I don't know the details of this particular situation, but I would like to find out and it is my genetic right to do so, so if you'll excuse me I'm going to go find my brother and take him home."

In TV dramas, this is the part where Larry the fat security guard nods solemnly, cue the inspirational music as he backs up his golf cart and allows me to pass and I storm into the school like a raging savior. Marcus and I come out moments later and leave with fanfare, all the beautiful high school girls waving at him and telling him to tell me to call them in a year or two when they turn 18. But this isn't a TV drama, and I'm starting to wonder recently where the fuck people get the ideas for the shit they put in screenplays. Did some random freak triumph happen *one* time in real life—*one* fucking time to *one* fucking person—and the screenwriter decided he or she was going to stick that one time in an episode of *Happy Days* or some shit and convince everybody to keep the misrepresentation going throughout the years, convincing us it's an accurate depiction of everyday living? Because I think whoever did that should be arrested and charged with something. Some new law. The Misleading American Youth statute, maybe. M-A-Y. Hollywood does things like that then they've got people like me raised on uplifting films and TV shows, believing that a well-timed ten-second rant in the face of opposition will knock everybody's defenses down and allow the speaker their moment of glory. What really happens right now, though, is that I try to step around Larry after yelling at him and he shoots forward

again on his golf cart, running over my left foot and causing me to cry out in surprise.* Then Larry—unexpectedly quick for a man of his size—plants a hand on my chest and pushes me back. I stumble into the fence and he points at me and says:

“Get off this property before I call the authorities.” A quick, stern nod, then he adds “And don’t come back unless you have some ID.”

At this point I turn tail and head back to my car which, in the space of the two or three minutes since I got out of it, has managed to acquire an accompanying police officer who is slapping a ticket on my windshield as I approach. This has the potential to be another TV moment, one where I yell at her that I was only there for a minute and this is a huge injustice and she gives me one of those “I’ve heard ‘em all, son, so quit trying” looks. But knowing the eventual turnout and seeing as how I just failed on that end once—not to mention I don’t want to bring attention to the fact that I don’t have my wallet which, incidentally, has my driver’s license in it—my resolve is deadened and I forfeit the pleasantries, grab the ticket and get in my car.

* Which did wonders for my masculinity.

-Lauren-

I decide near the end of my shift that I'm going to confront Rick about everything. I clench my jaw as I climb into my car outside of CVS and don't relax it until I get to Kendall Toyota. Rick works here, in the maintenance bay doing body and engine work on pre-owned certified whatevers (and yes, it has been a source of contention that Rick's dropping out of college led to him doing, essentially, what he always wanted to do; I do take comfort, though, in the fact that he'll probably never be able to afford his own shop). I hop out of my car seconds after throwing it into park, storming into the main showroom. The receptionist frowns and purses her lips when I brusquely ask if she can page Rick. She does, and a moment later I'm heading back towards the maintenance bay.

Rick turns to me when I approach him, all smiles. The sight of him makes me queasy.

"Babe," he says, wiping his hands with a towel. They're greasy with oil and his face is streaked with sweat. His jumpsuit is taut against his slight paunch, and the way he's standing with his back arched so that his pelvis is thrust forward makes it look even worse. It's not so much that Rick has gained weight than he's become disproportionate. When we met he was broad-shouldered and lean. He had a rippling abdomen that was more the result of a high metabolism than any sort of exercise plan, which I thought was appealing in and of itself. Then, over the past five years, inactivity and a bad diet started catching up with him. While he's obviously still broad shouldered—and lanky, in a way—those six packs of Budweiser are starting to show around his midsection.

When I first lost the extra pregnancy weight after having Justin, I pushed Rick to join me at the gym. Not just for physical reasons but because, at twenty-one, he was already so unhealthy

I couldn't imagine what he'd be like when he hit forty. His own father has high blood pressure and his grandfather had a heart attack a few years ago. I know things like those are hereditary. But Rick loves his steaks, his burgers, his red meat overall. His beer and his junk food. And that stuff adds up. He exercised with me for all of two weeks before falling into that popular trend of *not today, I don't feel good, but I'll definitely go with you tomorrow*. I stopped trying after that.

"Hi, Rick," I say, emphasizing the clucking sound at the end of his name. He raises an eyebrow.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"We need to talk," I say. A few of the mechanics are chuckling and joking around with each other. Others peer into the engines of various Toyotas and Lexuses and Scions. None of them seem to notice how upset I am. "Right now."

"Yeah, but." He pauses, glancing back at the car he was at when I came in. "I'm kind of busy. Can it wait until I get home?"

"No."

He opens his mouth as if to protest but must see something in my face that stops him. His pupils dilate and I wonder if he's thinking about Natalie at this moment.

"Okay," he says. "Give me a minute." He points at a door near the side of the garage, a window next to it looking into a small room with a desk and another door on the other side leading out to the main dealership floor. "Go in Mike's office. He's gone for the day so we can talk in there."

Mike is Rick's boss. He's a sixty year old head mechanic who is over six feet tall, has pitch black skin, talks like he always has food in his mouth, and shows me pictures of his

grandchildren every time I come to visit. I like Mike and wish I didn't have to confront Rick in his office. I walk in anyway and sit in a chair across from the desk, fiddling with my purse. Seconds later I notice that my foot is shaking so badly it seems as if my leg is having a seizure. I readjust myself and wait. Rick comes in five minutes later and pulls a rolling chair around the desk, sitting in it backwards and facing me.

“Okay,” he says, then pauses. “What happened?”

I don't know if it's the five minutes I was in here by myself or what, but I'm lost for words. I know what I came over here to confront Rick about. I was all set to do it when I saw him out in the maintenance bay, with the other mechanics standing around and the knowledge that accusing Rick of adultery in front of them would embarrass him immensely. But here, by ourselves, it's more of a personal issue. It's something between me and him. Honestly, I don't really want anything personal with Rick right now.

“I'm leaving,” I blurt out. “For a little while,” I add quickly, then turn away and shake my head.

Rick's mouth drops open, his eyelids fluttering. His forehead is greasy with oil which actually brings out the color in his blue eyes. Noticing this does nothing to help my conviction, and I continue to shake my head as if it will give me strength.

“I'm going to stay with my mother for a couple of days,” I continue. “Or weeks, or Caitlyn maybe, I don't know yet, I don't know what I'm do—I'm just leaving.”

I'm breathing hard now, the only sound in the room for a moment.

“You're,” he says, pausing. “Leaving?”

“Yes, Rick.”

“Like, *leaving* leaving?”

I groan.

“But,” he says, the confusion in his voice giving way to fear. “But, why?”

“You know why, Rick,” I say, heat rising in my face.

This elicits a contemptuous chuckle from him.

“No, actually, Lauren. I have no fucking clue what the hell is going on right now.”

He’s good, I have to admit. For a second I wonder if I’m making a mistake. Maybe I walked in on somebody else earlier this afternoon. Maybe somebody else was having sex on a bed that looked like my son’s. The thought flusters me and I squeeze my eyes shut until all the cloudiness goes away. I’m not crazy. I know what I saw. And when I open my eyes again, everything’s clear. I smile at Rick and my heart quickens its pace in my chest, my stomach, nose, and lips going numb. Anger. Pure, unadulterated anger. It’s the first time the emotion’s hit me since I witnessed Rick and Natalie together and it sure beats being sad. I forgot how empowering anger like this can be.

“You’re telling me you have no clue why your wife would come to your job and tell you that she’s leaving you?” I cock my head to the side. “No clue at all? I’ll give you three guesses.”

“Does this have anything to do with me not fixing the garbage disposal?” he asks. I want to punch him in the face. Right between the eyes. I want to aim for the bridge of his nose and punch him there with every ounce of strength in my body, so it hurts him for weeks afterwards.

“Because I told you I’d be on it as soon as I have some free time. I can get on it soon though. Tonight.”

I open my mouth with the intention of lying to him and telling him I had sex with somebody else. I want to see how he likes it. That is my *full* intention when I open my mouth, some instinctual urge to hurt him like he's hurting me. But the anger fueling that immature impulse suddenly loses steam and all that comes out of my mouth is a slight whimper. I drop my head and my eyes well up, my throat getting that lump in it. I bite my tongue, swallow violently, and it goes away.

"I saw you," I whisper.

"What?" he says. Then, noticing my despair, he gets up from his chair and kneels in front of me. This is a bad move on his part. "Babe," he says. "Saw me what?"

"Don't 'babe' me," I yell. I stand up and move away from him, approaching the window overlooking the showroom floor, where a young couple are talking to a car dealer standing next to a Camry. The girl is pointing at it excitedly and the guy with her is smiling and rolling his eyes. "I saw you," I repeat.

"Saw me *what*?"

"With Natalie!" I snap, still watching the couple. "What the hell else, Rick?"

There's silence for a minute and finally I turn, but instead of focusing on Rick, I look out the opposite window of the office. A few mechanics' crane their necks to see me and Rick in the office, and suddenly I have the audience I realize I'd been hoping for ever since I came in.

"She's eighteen," I spit. "*Barely* even eighteen. And she's our son's fucking *babysitter*."

His mouth hanging open again, there's this little clicking noise coming from the back of his throat as I can see his mind working for an excuse, like his whole body's had a system crash and is rebooting to try this all again.

“I—” he starts, but I cut him off, pointing at him.

“I trusted her with Justin,” I say. “But I guess for you that included trusting her with your dick, huh?”

“Lauren—”

“How long?” I ask.

“What?”

“How long, Rick?”

He stutters and shrugs and I laugh.

“Don’t act like you don’t know,” I say. “You’re the numbers guy, remember? Never forgets a date? Always know how much money’s in your pocket? So goddamn sweet with all your anniversaries and mother’s days and all that *crap!*” I laugh again—cackle, actually—and even I have to admit I sound crazy. “How fucking long?”

“Two months,” he says quietly, to the floor. He raises his head slowly until his eyes meet mine, then his face sort of deteriorates into this grotesque contortion. “Babe, I’m so sorry. I don’t know how it even started, and I’ve been trying to end it for a while now.”

“Two months,” I say, nodding. “Two months. Natalie turned eighteen a month ago.”

“I know,” he whispers.

“I could have you arrested,” I say.

“What?” he says, his mouth dropping open.

“Ar-rest-ed,” I repeat, pronouncing each syllable slowly. “For statutory rape. Natalie’s parents could press charges and have you thrown in jail. And for what? For an affair with a girl barely out of high school? Was it worth it?”

“Come on Lauren—”

“Don’t come on Lauren, me,” I say. “You’re a pervert. You’re disgusting. She’s a child. She’s your son’s babysitter and she’s like six years younger than you.”

“She’s eighteen,” he says, and I’m surprised to see that he’s actually getting angry. I’ve known him for so long that I can tell the warning signs of him getting upset. His cheeks redden and he squints. I can’t believe he could possibly find anything to keep that going though, and I drop my jaw, scoffing.

“Are you actually getting *mad* at me?” I say.

“I know this is fucked up, Lauren,” he says, holding up his hand. “But threatening to have me arrested isn’t going to fix anything. We need to talk about this rationally.”

“Rationally?” I scream. “You cheated on me! With a minor, with somebody I let be alone with my son. Last time I checked, that’s grounds for divorce *and* felony charges.”

“I didn’t do anything illegal,” he yells. “Stop saying that.”

“How the hell do you figure?” I yell back at him.

It’s pretty weird to watch somebody talking when you can see in their eyes this little light, a small thought process that you know is a voice screaming for them to shut up, to stop digging a deeper and deeper hole for themselves, to close their mouth before things get worse, even as the mouth keeps opening and closing and the tongue keeps forming syllable after syllable. This is what happens to Rick right now. I can see it in his face. And seeing it does nothing to lessen the effect.

“It’s not illegal,” he says. “Not in Florida. If both people are over sixteen and under twenty-four it’s consensual and not illegal.” He pauses for only a second before continuing, with

markedly less anger and a definite hint of embarrassment. “I didn’t look it up. I mean, I did, but not because of Natalie. It was back at FIU. Mel—you remember Mel, right? Gel Mel, with that hair thing and the sister, Patty—you used to hang with her sometimes, right? Yeah, um, he messed around with some high school girl on his twenty-first and was freaking out so we all looked up the law and found out that there’s this age of consent thing. It’s the only reason I know, I swear.”

He finally shuts up long enough see my face and drops his eyes to the floor, playing with his fingers like a reprimanded child. He’s still on his knees with me standing in front of him. From my peripheral I can see about five mechanics whispering to each other and pointing through the window. I turn to each and every one of them, meeting their eyes one by one. Then I take a step towards Rick, cock my hand back and strike my open palm against his face as hard as I can. The blow rocks him, knocking him into the desk, his head bouncing off the wood frame. He curses loudly but doesn’t make any move to get up, his hand rushing up to his cheek which is already starting to show an angry red palm print.

“Fuck you,” I say, spitting. I want to add something else but can’t think of anything so I storm out of the office and into the maintenance garage, past Rick’s stunned coworkers. I’m almost outside when I realize that I parked on the other end of the dealership and make my way back into the office where Rick is still holding his cheek. He flinches as I walk in and past him, out the door, into the dealership’s main floor room and towards my car.

-Sean-

“I’m so fucking tired of all this,” Marcus says.

“Tell me about it,” I respond absently.

There’s a moment of silence and I peek over at him and he’s watching me oddly.

“Uh, yeah,” I say, shrugging. “You know, um, it’s not so bad, though.”

We turn onto Galloway, the main road leading to my parents’ house in Pinecrest. I study him, sitting in the passenger seat, book bag lying across his lap like a blanket, t-shirt sticking to his skinny-but-muscular frame. On the shirt, Bob Marley’s smoking a joint the size of my arm. It doesn’t surprise me in the least.. Sometime in the past year or two, Marcus managed to become a prototypical angry teenage fuckhead, straight out of a Hot Topic catalog complete with the chain-link hanging from his skinny jeans’ waist,^{*} a closet full of band t-shirts, and a collection of angry multi-genre music that puts my own iTunes library to shame. He caught my parents on one of their more “I’ll try to understand the youth” days and convinced them to give him permission to gauge his ear[†]. She told him to get the smallest one he could, which he did, then promptly moved up two sizes and got one of his friends at school to add in two studs on the top of each earlobe and an eyebrow ring. I still think my mom and dad didn’t actually know what Marcus was doing or what trend they’d allowed him to start following. To their credit, he probably would have figured out a way to do it with or without their consent. Every once in a while, on the very few occasions I come over to the house to hang out, I catch my mom glaring at him like she wants to remove the piercings violently with my dad’s pliers. It all gives him this sort of crazy,

^{*} Which sat about six inches below his actual waist.

[†] For the uninitiated, gauging is basically the same thing as getting earrings, only replace the earring itself with a cork-like apparatus that stretches the hole in your ear to the point that you can stick a finger through it. Or two, or three. They smell like shit too.

S&M look, but Marcus pulls it off. I can't judge regardless. I pierced my own ears my senior year of high school after my girlfriend at the time convinced me it would be sexy. My left ear healed fine but my right one turned purple a day later. Mom wasn't too happy about that.

I search for something to say to Marcus to get him talking, but he looks positively murderous right now. I swear, if he scowls any harder his eyebrows and lips are going to touch.

"You seem pretty pissed," I say.

"Fuck 'em. Fuck everybody. Everything. I'm tired of this shit. I just want to get out of here."

I drive silently for a moment, letting that sink in a little.

"Out of where?"

He motions around.

"Here."

"The car?" I ask, smirking.

"No asshole," he says. "Miami."

"Going to be kind of hard if you keep messing up."

"I didn't do anything," he says.

"I think they stopped punishing people for not doing anything," I say. "For a while now. Been a couple hundred years, at least."

"All I did," he starts, turning towards me, "was expose the huge flaws in their system. If they don't want things like this to happen, they need to look at themselves and realize their inner workings are supremely defective. These fucking schools aren't preparing us for shit but disappointment with their lackadaisical approach to security and freedom."

A pause.

“Preach on, brother,” I say.

“Fuck you,” he says. “Fuck them, fuck it all to fucking fuckville.”

My brother in a nutshell. A raging bag of hormones with the tendency to spout off his own version of patented revolutionary ideology, interlacing it with sporadic bouts of profanity. Che Guevara with Tourette’s.

“I’m still pretty lost as to why you’re even here right now,” I say.

“I just told you.”

“Really?” I ask. “I’m sorry, I guess I wasn’t paying attention then. I missed the part where you told me why you just got suspended for the umpteenth time this year.”

“God,” he says, turning even further towards the window. “You sound just like Mom and Dad now. Nobody fucking understands.”

The thought makes me shudder. Even after Maria convinced me I wanted kids,^{*} I was still iffy on the idea of having them, simply because of the inevitable fact that I will raise my kid exactly the way my parents raised me. And it’s not that my parents were bad. As far as parents go I’d put them in the upper echelon, definitely, or at least the middle one. It’s just that *any* set of parents will unavoidably do at least a handful of things throughout the eighteen-plus years they’re raising their kid that is going to completely fuck that kid’s head up. Ask anybody who has any sort of issue with anything at all and its origin will always come back to mommy and/or daddy. It’s like an occupational hazard or something, one which I’d like to avoid at all costs. And

^{*} I have no clue how she did this, because I most certainly did *not* want kids. Sometimes it seems that women really are born with this innate power to hypnotize men, whether it be with the promise of sex or just some mystical mind-control method handed down from mother to daughter through the generations. And not the enchanting kind of mystical either. It’s actually kind of creepy.

yet, here's my kid brother telling me now that I'm already exactly like my parents, like I already have a kid even though I haven't gotten laid in forever. Kind of feels like I should at least be getting some perks.

"Well, then," I say. "I won't judge you. I'm just saying, if you want out of 'fuckville,' you might want to straighten up."

"This is all bullshit."

"I have a feeling Mom and Dad aren't going to agree with that."

"Mom will be over it by time I get home," he says, then sighs the world weary sigh only teenagers and old people can get away with. "Dad's another story." He rubs his forehead. "He's going to throw a shit fit."

"Which prompts me to ask again: what the hell did you do?"

"Took some blank hall passes," he mumbles.

"You took blank hall passes?"

He nods.

"And how long did they suspend you for that?"

"Two weeks."

"You got two weeks suspension for stealing blank hall passes?"

"From the storage closet. And a signature stamp from Mr. Cohen."

I remember Mr. Cohen, the football coach; a tall, perpetually sunburned man in his early fifties who walked permanently hunched over, like somebody had shoved a metal rod up his ass then bent the shit out of it. I thought he'd retired already, but obviously he hasn't lost his

enthusiasm for scaring the shit out of people's children. He's not a man I'd like to piss off, even now, several years after escaping the damn school.

"You stole hall passes and a signature stamp?"

"Can you stop repeating everything I'm saying in the form of a question?" he says, giving me a shot of his scowl. "It's really annoying."

"I'm sorry, I'm just trying to get this straight. You stole some blank hall passes and a stamp to validate them. I understand the appeal, and I understand why the principal would be mad, but two weeks outdoor suspension seems kind of..."

"Overkill?" he says.

I nod. Marcus rubs his palms against his legs.

"I stole them three months ago," he says.

And I should have known it would unravel like this. Getting Marcus to confess something is like the proverbial bread crumbs in the forest. Pick them up one at a time, you've really got no choice in the matter.

"Ok," I say. "You stole them three months ago. Why the punishment now?"

"I've been selling them," he says.

"You've been selling stamped hall passes?"

"You're doing it again," he says.

"Marcus, can you just come out and fucking say it then? Why'd they suspend you?"

"I stole a bunch of hall passes, stamped them, and sold them for five bucks apiece, okay?" he yells. He twitches around in his seat angrily for a moment before settling back down with his arms crossed.

“How much is ‘a bunch’?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” he grumbles. “A box of them. Like three hundred or something.”

“Three hundred of them?” I ask, then quickly add, “How many did you actually sell?”

“I don’t know,” he says, shrugging. “Most of them. People came by my locker between classes to put in orders.” There’s no doubt a note of pride in his tone. Marcus, the young entrepreneur. The math on that says he’s made nearly a thousand dollars from this scheme. I can’t help but be proud of the little bastard.

“You’re right,” I say, shaking my head. “Dad is going to throw a shit fit.”

We drive in silence for a while through the back streets near the high school, passing upper-middle-class-house after upper-middle-class-house, all of which fill the area of Pinecrest. Miami is sectioned like that: mini-cities within the larger city itself. When people who aren’t from Miami ask me where I’m from, I say Miami and leave it at that. But people from Miami always follow up that initial inquiry with “which part.” Anybody from this city knows that “which part” tells a lot about you. People from Little Havana* are worlds different than people from Homestead†, who are different from people in Little Haiti‡ and Kendall§ and even *West* Kendall.** Essentially, living in Miami is like living in a mini-continent. I thought this was all normal until I left for FSU, got to Tallahassee and realized America is America and Miami is...something else.

* Northern Cuba.

† Nascar’s got a track down there, and up until a couple of years ago it was mostly farmland. You get the picture.

‡ Self-explanatory

§ People who want to look like they have money even though they probably don’t.

** People who want to live in Miami but came into the housing market too late to get anything near the main part of the city.

My parents and Marcus reside in Pinecrest, which is considered a semi-luxurious area even though it comes at the expense of leniency. Pinecrest has its own private police department, complete with gray cars as opposed to the white and green vehicles issued to Miami-Dade PD. From what I can garner, these Pinecrest cops' jobs are essentially to hide behind corners and trees and bushes with radar guns and pull people over for going even half a mile over the speed limit. I set my cruise control at exactly thirty-miles-per-hour and lean back, watching the trees that shade each front yard pass lazily by.

I'm about five blocks away from my parents' house when I realize that dropping my brother at home at two o'clock so he can wait the three hours for my parents to come home and bitch him out seems kind of coldhearted. I slow down and make a U-turn and head back south to Cutler Bay, towards my job and my apartment complex. Marcus doesn't say anything, but the tension in the car lifts a little, his shoulders loosening up as he leans back into the passenger seat. I feel a momentary pang of affection for him in my gut. I know exactly what this recent act of misconduct meant to him, exactly what the point of it was. For a high school student, positive notoriety is an enigma, while the negative kind is ever-present. In that way, seeking popularity in high school is kind of like trying to pay off the national debt with a summer job at Wal-Mart. You're not going to get anywhere unless you start stealing some shit and screwing some people over. My brother's a cool kid, but just being cool in high school doesn't cut it. You need an upper hand if you want to sit with the big dogs. Athletes are given an automatic free pass, but for people like my brother who have never been very much into sports, status is hard to come by. I completely understand every move my brother's made. Part of me even envies him for having the balls to go through with it all.

I try to remember what it was like for me in high school, if I ever pushed for my own upper hand. It wasn't that long ago that I was there, so I should find it easy to conjure up some sort of memory that I can relate to my little brother and make him feel all better, like a verbal band-aid for the emotional cuts and bruises that seem to be a byproduct of adolescence. But I can't. All I keep imagining is me lying on my bed in my old bedroom at my parents' house, staring at the ceiling and wondering if I'd survive long enough to get the fuck out of here, the same "here" my brother just told me he can't wait to be rid of. I don't think this line of thought is good to share with him right now though, him being all young and impressionable and shit. We come to a red light and I clear my throat.

"You know," I say, searching for something inspirational. I come up blank so I say, "It doesn't have to be like this."

"What doesn't?" he asks, eyes closed.

"High school," I say. "It can actually be more fun than not."

Marcus turns his piercing brown eyes on me and I find it hard to make contact with them. His jaw line has a fine stubble of hair sprouting across it and his hair is buzz cut. It's weird to see him up close, because we look almost exactly like each other, a weird amalgamation of our mother's thin nose and our father's wide mouth and pretty much right in between their polar opposite skin tones.

"Was it more fun than not for you?" he asks.

The way he says it I can't tell if he's being sarcastic or not, and that little bit of indecision makes me hesitate for a second, a pause which Marcus catches instantly.

"Thought so," he says.

I want to say something but the light turns green and I use driving as an excuse to drop the subject, weaving aimlessly through the back streets on the edge of Pinecrest, into Cutler Bay and out to US-1 towards Southland Mall.

STEP 3: SEEK SUPPORT

-Lauren-

Whenever I'm around friends and family everybody's always trying not to talk about my son. Not him physically, but the hypothetical lost hopes and dreams his existence alludes to. It gets really annoying, actually. There's this unspoken assumption that the state of my life right now is a result of Justin's conception. And my life right now is usually considered to be in a *state* when it comes to others. People who know me and know how young I am seem skeptical when I describe my typical day: up at seven-thirty, make breakfast for everybody, eat, get ready, get Justin ready, take him to daycare, get to CVS by 10, work, eat lunch, work some more, leave at 6, pick up Justin, make dinner for everybody, eat, put Justin to bed, get an hour alone with Rick (during which he's usually watching TV with a beer in his hand and I'm reading something with a glass of wine), then pass out. It sounds exhaustingly mundane when you lay it out like that. But it's not when you're experiencing it. Not all the time at least. And just because I'm only twenty-four doesn't mean I can't be happy doing these things. It doesn't necessarily mean I *am*, but that's beside the point.

I think it's pretty interesting how much society's changed in the past few decades. My grandmother was twenty when she had my mom, one year younger than I was when I had Justin. Nobody ever insinuated she'd messed up her life. People in my grandmother's time did things early and that was normal. Nowadays, if you have a baby before you're thirty people say things like *Well, I hope it works out for you*. And sometimes I understand the sentiment. It's hard to make it in today's society, and twice as hard if you're trying to make it with a child in tow. That doesn't matter when it's already happened. I would never turn around and say anything like *If I*

didn't have Justin then I could have [insert goal]. I love my son to death. His father's a liar and a cheat, but who isn't nowadays? And besides, I find it kind of hard to regret Justin when, before I had him, I pretty much had no idea what I was doing anyway. Justin is a beautiful boy. He has a full head of thick, curly, dirty blond hair, button nose, gorgeous smile, really sociable, decent vocabulary for his age and strong legs. He adores me and Rick and is one of the most well-behaved kids I've ever seen. As of now, I've avoided the terrible twos, at least in comparison to some of the horror stories I've heard. For the most part, the only things that come to mind when people ask about his behavior is his penchant for not wanting to go to sleep and his newfound fascination with running full speed with his head down straight into walls, grunting loudly like he thinks he's a locomotive or something. I'm hoping it means I've avoided the super-destructive stage altogether, though I do fear sometimes that the phase has changed monikers and become something ominous like the *troublesome threes*, or the *frightful fours*.

I see all that I love when I'm around my son. Then I look back at my time in college and, honestly, I can't tell if things could have possibly been all that much better under different circumstances. Ok, yes, I'm twenty-four and, yes, I'm not all too happy with my life at the moment, considering all that's going on. But I'm not completely destroyed over it all either. And let's look at the alternatives: if I hadn't had Justin and had stayed in school then, yes, I probably would have finished up my degree. At that point I would have most likely gotten a job teaching high school students *Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Great Gatsby* every year until I retired because, let's be realistic, that's all you can really do with a degree in literature. I would have been making roughly thirty-five grand a year starting out (if I was lucky; this is only about five grand more than I'm making right now as a pharmacy technician also, and

teaching entails so much more responsibility) and more than likely spent half of that salary the first couple of years paying back my student loans, which I thankfully avoided during the three years I was in school but was starting to see floating on the horizon of probability right before I dropped out.

Either way, the chances I would have had Justin eventually remain the same. As do the chances I would have gotten married and witnessed my husband cheating on me. Therefore, if I had finished my degree and waited to get married and have a kid, the odds that, at some point in my life, I'd be in exactly the same position I'm in right now (behind the steering wheel of my car listening to Alanis Morrissette's *Jagged Little Pill* with tears streaming down my face, driving down US-1 towards some restaurant to meet up with my sister and discuss the rest of my life, my phone ringing off the hook as Rick calls and leaves voicemail after voicemail and text message after text message in all caps with no punctuation "IM SORRY BABE I LOVE YOU PLEASE LETS TALK ABOUT THIS") remain relatively the same. Only then there would've been a lot more disappointment because I would have gotten my hopes all up for nothing.

-Sean-

Sitting in a Starbucks inside Southland Mall sipping twin Grande Caramel Frappuccinos and watching all the people walking by, mostly older men and women in business casual outfits on their lunch breaks and a group of kids weaving in and out of the crowd, younger than Marcus and sporting huge grins on their faces which, along with the early time, make it obvious they're skipping school right now, Marcus says to me:

“I'm just starting to wonder what's the point of all this.”

The statement hangs in the air and I decide that this is a perfect jump off point to launch a cool-big-brother-with-veteran-advice-about-life speech.

“Look,” I say, turning to face him fully. “I understand why you stole the hall passes and all that. Probably way more than you think, and *way* more than Mom and Dad are going to understand. But still, Marcus, you can't go around doing shit like that. I know it's hard to fit in sometimes, but you can make it work without committing theft and fraud.” I pause. “They could have arrested you, you know that?” Pause again, and I regret saying it almost immediately. “I mean, they wouldn't, that would be dumb for something like that. Actually, they probably couldn't, really. Hall passes are just pieces of paper, and you're a high school student, and I don't think that's actually a crime from a legal—whatever, if it was something else you took, something bigger, they could have arrested you. And things like that build up, you know? From small things to big things, gateway drugs and all that.”

“Sean,” he says quietly. He's hunched down in his chair, chewing on the straw in his cup and studying a painting of an elephant on the wall with “Kenya” written above it. “That is definitely not what I was talking about.”

“Oh,” I say, my face getting hot. “I mean, I know. I’m just saying.”

“I was talking about everything, the point of it all,” he says, and I realize right then that there is a depression in my brother’s eyes that I’ve never noticed before. I know I told my mother a couple of hours ago that he’s depressed, but I didn’t know it was true. It just sounded like the right thing to say. But watching him now, I’m thinking that it felt like the right thing to say because some part of me knew that I was hitting close to home. His eyes are tired and there are bags under them that make him seem much older than seventeen. His posture is slouchy and, come to think of it, I wonder how I couldn’t tell before that my brother seems to be going through some serious internal shit. It’s obvious right now. Maybe I’m not far enough removed from his age group yet so I didn’t notice because I still remember how screwed up I was back then, so Marcus has seemed normal this whole time.

Marcus doesn’t seem to want to expand on his statement, and I have no idea how to broach the subject of his mental status without him taking it as a confrontation. That’s the thing about talking to teenagers. Defensiveness is their first and usually final weapon, used in conjunction with withdrawal.

“You’ve got a really bright future, Marcus,” I say, putting a hand on his shoulder. “You know you do, I don’t have to tell you that. You’re going places, if you act right. Hell, if you don’t act right, you’ll probably still go places. But it’s going to be a pretty hard run if you don’t cut the shit. And getting into a good college and getting out of Miami properly’s going to be a problem if you keep getting suspended every few months. They’re going to expel you if you don’t calm down, and then what?”

“Exactly,” he says. “Then what? What does it matter?”

“Didn’t you just hear me?”

“Yeah, but, what I’m saying is, who cares?”

“Well,” I say, going back to watching the people walking through the mall. “I do. Mom and Dad do, even though I know you think they don’t.”

“That’s still not what I’m talking about,” he says, sitting forward. “I mean, who *out there* cares?” He indicates the people in the mall with a sweep of his hand.

I raise an eyebrow and he puts his drink down.

“What about after all of this?” he says. “I mean, I’m supposed to bust my ass here to go to college, right? Then bust my ass in college to get a job and then bust my ass at work until I retire and bust my ass to stay alive, and—I never really had a choice when I was born, did I? That’s just, like, what I’m *supposed* to do. And I just want to know, who fucking cares? No disrespect, dude, but you did the whole college thing and got your degree and now you’re a fucking bartender and hate your life. Is that what I’m supposed to do?”

“I don’t hate my life,” I say weakly. He presses his lips tight together and I glance at the floor.

“Mom and Dad did the college and career thing,” he says quietly. “And they act like they’re happy. But they’re just, I don’t know, going through the motions or something. And even if they are actually happy, I don’t see myself going that route. It’s just so...boring.” I look up at him in time to see his eyes glaze over a little. “And Leon, he did it all and now he’s dead. So I just want to know, seriously, what’s the fucking point?”

And like that I’m stunned into silence. I try to think of a response, but I can’t because he’s right—which pisses me off—and also because I now know the origin of his depression, the

core that I couldn't pinpoint before. And it hurts me so fucking much. I grew up with Leon; he was a regular installment at our house, closer to me than Derek, who didn't turn our duo into a trio until we met him in ninth grade. Leon even lived with us for a few months back in our junior year, after his mom died and before his uncle moved from Chicago to Miami to stay with him. Marcus was obviously really young back then so Leon and I never paid much attention to him. But Marcus was there, a presence through most of our time in high school, in the background wide eyed as we talked about girls and music and video games and parties and all our plans for the future. And when he got older, middle school age, Leon and Derek and I started giving him advice about things, hanging out with him sometimes when we'd come home to visit on break from FSU. It never occurred to me that Leon's death might have affected Marcus too. Now, listening to him, I can't seem to think of any way that it *couldn't* have. I seem to vaguely remember him teary-eyed and withdrawn at the funeral. Then again so was everybody else. My memory survives beneath a cloud of Xanax and alcohol anyways, which may be why I couldn't see that Leon's death probably hurt my brother as much as it hurt me.

There's a long moment where we both sit there. I desperately want to find something to alleviate the tension, but feel like anything that comes out of my mouth right now will sound unbelievably lame, and I do *not* want to be lame in front of my little brother, right now or ever. So, instead, I pat him on the back and stand, hoping he'll follow. He does and we walk through the mall in silence, randomly pointing at things in store windows then grunting to indicate we wish we could get them, weaving in and out of the crowd of people flowing in both directions. The closer it gets to Christmas, the more packed the mall gets, people ducking in and out of the various clothes and electronic stores with the anxiety on their faces more and more defined as

each day passes. I dread the progression, only because I know Shambles will get the spill-off of hungry, cranky shoppers who I'll have to deal with behind the bar with a smile and an understanding nod. Bullshit.

Eventually we pass by GameStop and I pause to watch a group of kids playing tennis on a Nintendo Wii. They're jumping around with the action-based controller, swinging their arms around as if the tennis racquets are actually there. They look ridiculous. They look like they're having fun. Marcus puts a hand on my shoulder.

"It's your birthday," he says.

"That it is," I say. There's an ad for *Rock Band Three* on display, showing the variety of fake instruments the game comes with: guitar, bass, drums, keyboard, microphone. I think back to playing *Guitar Hero* last night and how refreshing it was, and a smile almost crosses my face. Almost. Then I remember attacking Derek, and like that I'm depressed again.

"I didn't get you anything," Marcus says.

"Don't worry about it."

"Didn't say I wasn't going to," he says, smiling.

"Seriously, you don't have to," I say. "I'm too old for birthday presents."

"Dude, you're twenty-five."

"Thought that was old for you people," I say.

"Nice," he says. "'You people.'"

"Teenagers are people too," I say and he chuckles, a melodic sound that lifts me up a little bit. I put a hand on top of his head, ruffling his hair. We keep walking through the mall, stopping for a moment in the food court because the conglomeration of smells reminds me that I

haven't eaten anything since I woke up. I buy a slice of pizza from Sbarro and get Marcus an ice cream cone from Orange Julius, feeling very much like a good older brother for a second.

"Seriously, man," Marcus says as we continue walking. "What do you want for your birthday?"

"Nothing," I say. "What do I look like taking my seventeen year old brother's measly allowance? I don't need anything."

"You forget," he says, and I do believe my brother is leering at me. He licks his ice cream cone then reaches in his back pocket and pulls out a wad of bills, secured in a money clip. "I'm the provider of Sideview High's legalized truancy."

I have to laugh at that one.

"Is that a money clip?" I ask.

"Gotta keep the cash secure," he says, nodding.

"Never thought I'd see the day you turned into a genuine hustler," I say, shaking my head.

"You know it."

"I still don't want anything."

"I saw you eyeing *Rock Band* back there," he says. "I could get it for you."

"It's like two hundred dollars," I say.

"You're my brother," he says.

I study his face and see that he's serious, and feel that pang of genuine affection for him again that I felt in the car when I decided to bring him here, that I felt in Starbucks when I

realized Leon's death fucked him up too. That's three times in the space of two hours. Don't know if my stomach can handle this shit.

"You're not spending two hundred dollars on me," I say, pushing him lightly.

"You suck," he says, genuinely disappointed. And I understand; it's not simply the thought of buying me a birthday present that has Marcus all excited, rather the act of spending money. It's a teenage thing it seems. I remember my dad shaking his head at me when I was younger, whenever I got money for my birthday or Christmas and started begging him and my mom to take me to the store. "You act like the money's burning a hole in your pocket," he used to say, which always pissed me off for some inane reason. That's what Marcus is doing right now. I laugh at him, irrationally proud that my genius brother can still act like a kid sometimes and I can then laugh at him condescendingly.

At that moment we walk by Guitar Center and I turn my head at precisely the instant that we're passing the display window, and one of my feet completely freezes in midair, backpedaling behind me as I reverse direction and come to a halt in front of the glass.

There are very few things on this planet I consider genuinely beautiful: the sky during a Miami summer afternoon right before it storms, when it's gray and cool and windy and not yet like God just sneezed on the entire city; the feeling I get after I've seen a movie that I've managed to not roll my eyes at even once; and taking a really good, clean, shit, the type where you barely have to wipe afterwards. And, now, this guitar in the window of Guitar Center. This thing is the embodiment of beauty. With a dark blue coat that seems as if it were meant for a car, the guitar sits on its rack and stares out at the mall with a smugness only an inanimate object can

possess. At least that's how I see it. The strings running up the front are like lanes on a superhighway and I involuntarily whisper:

“I could drive my fingers all over that thing.”

“What?” Marcus says, and I shrug and grimace and stutter out “nothing” before walking inside the store to see the guitar from a different angle.

The name on the sign in front says it's an Ibanez GRX-20, and it's on sale for \$150. I have no idea if this is a good price or not, don't know anything about guitars actually, other than what I've learned from *Guitar Hero*.^{*} All I really know for sure right now though is that I want it. I turn to Marcus and ask him what he thinks, pointing at the instrument. Marcus licks his ice cream cone and eyes the instrument.

“You know.” He shrugs. “Shit.”

I then proceed to make a total ass of myself in front of a gothic chick named Wendy who is actually pretty hot considering the pitch black hair and makeup and the vampire marks in the side of her neck. I pretend I know what the fuck I'm talking about until she eyes me knowingly, at which point I pretty much break down and confess to her how clueless I am, then gush over the Ibanez GRX-20 like a schoolgirl and completely open myself up for Wendy to take advantage of me in every way possible, convincing me I need a bunch of shit I probably don't:

- *Boss DS-1 distortion pedal*[†]
- *Guitar string cleaner*
- *Two boxes of medium guitar picks*

^{*} Which, in retrospect, was absolutely nothing.

[†] The thing that makes electric guitars sound really crazy and angry. I had to ask Wendy about that, since I had no clue at the time.

- *Box of hard guitar picks*^{*}
- *Guitar strap*
- *Three rolls of plugs and cords*
- *Actual Guitar-Hero-like whammy bar*[†] and
- *Marshall MG10 Guitar Amplifier*[‡]

In the end my total comes to a little under \$600,[§] which is pretty much all my half of the rent, which is due in like a week. I try to justify the purchases by saying that, once I get all this shit up and running, I'll probably make such a racket that Derek will refuse to be my roommate anymore, at which point it wouldn't have mattered whether or not I had the rent money anyways because he'll move out and I'll have to leave the apartment and move back in with my parents. Then I think about actually being that guy—the guy who moves back in with his parents at twenty-five—and realize how much I do *not* want to do that, so I decide that I'll figure something out, pick up a few extra shifts at Shambles or whatever. Then I swiftly shove all that important crap to the back of my mind as I lovingly place my brand new guitar in the backseat of my car like a baby. As I slip into the front seat, Marcus inhales the last bite of his ice cream cone and hops in the passenger seat, turning and touching all my new stuff, which I have to refrain from yelling at him not to do.

“You really going to play that thing?” he asks.

^{*} “For when you get a little better,” Wendy said. “Then you can choose your preference”—the way she made it sound, I got all excited and was about to ask her if there were any *expert* level guitar picks for when I got *really* good, but something in my mind caught me at the last second and I bit the shit out of my tongue.

[†] Sold separately, the thieving bastards

[‡] To be honest, I didn't know that an electric guitar needed an amp; honestly, I thought you just plugged the damn thing into a wall and started strumming.

[§] I let Marcus pay \$100 of it just so he'd get off my back about the birthday thing.

And I can't help it, this feeling of supreme coolness that comes over me right then. I put on my sunglasses, * turn to Marcus and shrug, trying not to smile.

“Whatever,” I say.

Marcus laughs and I take him home, opting not to get out of the car when I pull into my parent's driveway. Marcus sits in the car for a moment, holding his book bag and hesitating to get out of the car as my mother comes outside and approaches my side with her arms crossed. I roll the window down and she bends down, glaring at Marcus before smiling at me.

“Hi, baby,” she says, putting a hand to the side of my face. “Sorry about this,” she adds, nodding in Marcus's direction. I see from the corner of my eye Marcus opening his mouth and I flick my head around and stare daggers at him until he closes it.

“No problem, Ma,” I say. “We had a little talk. Try and go easy on him, he didn't do it on purpose.”

“Uh huh,” she says and glances back at the house where my dad is standing with his arms crossed tightly across his chest, his eyes closed to slits. My father's a dark man, not just in skin tone but features. Everything on him is rugged looking, and though he's nothing if not a model citizen right now, I can't help but think that he used to be a bit of a bad boy and that my mom was one of those chicks who's attracted to that. I don't want to think about it further than that. I glance at Marcus and motion for him to get out and whisper “Good luck” before turning back to my mom who's staring in the backseat of my car.

“What's that?” she asks.

I glance back at the guitar and smile.

* Which I'd bought at a gas station for five dollars on a whim a few weeks earlier.

“Hopefully something good,” I say.

She smiles and touches my cheek again.

“You need to come by more often,” she says. “We don’t get to see you enough. You’re neglecting your family.”

“Ok, Ma,” I say. “Gotta go to work now though.”

She pouts but steps back from the car and waves as I reverse out of the driveway. I wave to her and my dad and watch Marcus skulk into the house before speeding off. I want to drop my guitar off at home, but I’m going to be late so I drive to Shambles, stopping at every yellow light to turn and admire the sheen of my new guitar. When I arrive, I lock all my doors and survey the parking lot skeptically before walking inside to face yet another shift of acting like your friendly neighborhood bartender.

-Lauren-

I feel like an outcast, which is justifiable. I'm sipping a Long Island at Shambles Barbeque and Grill and watching the flat screen TV on the back wall of the bar. The place is bustling with happy hour guests, here to unwind after work. Technically I'm in the same boat as all of them: I just got off work, and I'm here for the happy hour specials. I'm not in the slightest bit happy though. So I can't help feeling like I don't belong here right now.

The TV is on sports highlights, which I hate. Not a strong hatred but a general disdain that is part of a much larger group of disdainful feelings I have for a lot of things right now. And I admit, it's not just Rick that's caused it. I've been feeling like this for a while now. Dissatisfied, jaded, cynical. All of the above. It's only today, though, that I'm consciously aware of it all. It's like a tint on the windshield of my world perception, casting a surreal haze on my vision. Kind of like when you can actually see rays of sunlight through a dirty window, floating in the air before you, golden and piercing.

Yet here I am anyway, watching the television and flicking the straw of my drink around in my mouth, occasionally taking a swallow. Here is a fact: I now have an excuse to openly express my hatred for sports highlights—to turn away and make a face in disgust even. I have every right to do this, yet I'm still sitting here watching the TV. It's one of the many things I *don't* have to do right now that I've spent the past three years (five if you include the years we were dating before we got married) forcing myself to do regularly for the benefit of my once-boyfriend-turned-cheating-husband. Yet I still feel no compulsion to stop myself. I watch football players in green and yellow jerseys run into others with purple jerseys and fall on the ground, and I want to look away. But I can't stop wondering whether or not Rick is a fan of

either one of these teams. Part of me realizes there's something wrong with this and is actively seeking out a solution. The problem is, that part of me is shutting down my other mental functions in the process, which is sort of the reason why I'm sitting here staring aimlessly at the TV to begin with. Funny how things always come around like that. Circle of life, *Lion King*, all that philosophical and sentimental mumbo jumbo.

I'm on the verge of getting impatient with Caitlyn when she walks in and sits on the bar stool next to me. Caitlyn has this tendency to kind of breeze in and out of rooms, like a vampire or a gust of wind through an open door. She's already kissed me on the cheek and ordered a Cosmo before I even really notice she's there. By then I've finished my Long Island and signaled the bartender for another. I'm feeling a little buzz and this is Caitlyn, the girl who grew into a woman beside me, under the same roof. The woman who I trust with my life and my deepest, darkest secrets. So I see no problem in forfeiting all initial pleasantries and jumping right into it.

"I walked in on Rick and Natalie having sex this afternoon," I say, quietly.

A spurt of Cosmopolitan flies in a perfect arc from Caitlyn's lips back into her glass and she chokes. I pat her on her back until her coughs subside. She turns to me, her upper lip curled, eyes wide, face red, eyebrows raised comically.

"Excuse me?" she asks.

"Please don't make me say it again."

"Who the fuck is Natalie?"

"Our babysitter." I take a long sip of my drink. "In Justin's bedroom."

Her lip curls a little higher, which shouldn't be physically possible.

"He was *fucking* her?" she says.

“To put it bluntly,” I say, nodding. “Yes.”

“Hold on,” she says, turning and picking up her martini glass. She throws her head back and downs the drink in one gulp, her wavy blond hair tossing back over her shoulders. A few men’s heads turn towards her, the closest of which automatically scans my sister up and down with desire sparking through his eyes like lightning. He subsequently receives a punch in the arm from the woman sitting next to him. Caitlyn closes her eyes and points at me. “Let me get this straight. You came home—from work?”

“It was my lunch break.”

“You come home for lunch to find Rick who is—was he supposed to be there?”

“No,” I say. “At work. I stopped by the apartment on my way to his job.” I close my eyes and see them there in the bedroom again. “I thought I’d surprise him.”

“I’d say you did,” she says, then shakes her head and squints. “So you’re saying you stopped home on your lunch break, walked inside and found Rick fucking your babysitter?”

“Yes.”

“In your three year old son’s bedroom?”

“The facts aren’t that complicated, Caitlyn,” I say, then chuckle at the absurdity of it all. “At least they weren’t on the bed.”

“Wait,” Caitlyn says, holding up her hand and closing her eyes dramatically. “How old is this girl?”

“Eighteen,” I say. I know where this is going. “Just turned eighteen last month. They’ve been going at it since September.”

“Got him,” she says, snapping her fingers. “Fucking sexual predator.”

I think back to Rick's little confession in his boss's office.

"It's not illegal," I say, trying and failing to hide the contempt in my voice.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" she yells. A few older couples scowl at us, and I can't say I didn't expect that to happen at some point. Caitlyn's adept at causing commotion even when there isn't a legitimate reason. She's got one now, so there's no stopping her. "His balls," she continues, cupping her hands as if she's actually holding a pair of testicles. "Should be handcuffed to a fucking wall right now. Are you smoking crack? Why isn't the SWAT team storming your place at this moment?"

"It's not illegal, Caitlyn" I repeat.

"I heard you the first time, Lauren," she says, patting my leg as if I'm a child. "But, you see, honey, it *is*. It is *very* illegal, actually. Last time I checked: under eighteen girl plus over eighteen guy equals guy getting prison raped."

"According to Rick, not in Florida," I say, taking a sip of my drink which tastes even better than the last one. "Sixteen is age of consent."

"He *told* you that?" she says, then bursts out laughing.

"Glad this all is amusing you," I say, scowling at her.

"I'm sorry," she says, shaking her head. "It's just...fucking hillbilly state we live in." She shakes her head. "He's got balls." Her face turns dark. "Exactly why we need to rip them off."

"You've got a real thing with that, don't you?"

"Seriously," she says. "What the hell are you going to do about all this? This can't just be brushed under the rug. He needs to be punished." Caitlyn's eyes light up. "Does he have any

money? I thought you told me his family was loaded. Get a *really* good lawyer. Take him for everything.”

“Caitlyn,” I say. “Rick’s a mechanic at a Toyota dealership and I’m a pharmacy technician, and we have a kid. Neither one of us has money for a ‘really good lawyer.’” I sigh. “Or a really bad one. And Rick’s parents haven’t given him more than a birthday card since he left college.”

“Well,” Caitlyn says, slumping her shoulders. “You’ve gotta do something.”

“I am,” I say, pointing at my drink.

“More than that,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“I’m leaving,” I say. “With Justin. Staying with Mom for a while.”

“Out of the question,” she says. “You can stay with me.”

“Which would be so much better, right?” I ask.

“You’re goddamn right. Mom is a freaking psychopath.” She says this as if it’s a matter of fact. For two people who are so much alike, my mother and sister find it very hard to get along. “You don’t need to be around her crap right now Lauren, let me tell you. You can stay with me until you’re ready to take action against this asshole.”

“Thank you, Caitlyn,” I say. “But—no offense—I don’t want to stay with either one of you for any extended period of time.” I run a hand through my hair and touch my other hand to the side of my sweating Long Island Tea glass. “I just need to figure out what I’m doing in the long run.”

“The ball-cutting thing is still an option,” she mutters.

Right then my phone rings again and I pull it out of my purse and Caitlyn snatches it out of my hand, staring at the ID. It's Rick. I reach over and snatch it back before she has a chance to press the TALK button.

"Let me talk to him," she hisses.

"No," I say, pressing cancel then turning the phone off and tossing it back in my purse. "You are not allowed to talk to him right now." I point at her. "Matter of fact, you are forbidden to talk to my husband for at least a week."

I can hear her grinding her teeth, something we both do whenever we get angry. It's been a habit of both of ours for some time now, ever since we were young. Not forever though, not for her at least. Caitlyn never used to be this way. In fact, anybody who knew her as a little girl would see the current version of my sister and find it pretty hard to put the two together. I was the tomboy growing up, my sister the prototypical girl's girl throughout elementary school: giggly and dreamy, taken to wearing flowery dresses no matter what the occasion and trying on our mother's makeup in her bedroom en route to her faux bedroom wedding ceremonies. Then my father died and my mom started in with her man-bashing. At first my sister seemed kind of upset about it, not wanting my mom to tarnish my dad's image. Then she started changing. At first it was the clothes. She stopped wearing dresses, then makeup, and at one point in her senior year of high school she chopped off all her hair (though she did cry about it for like an hour afterwards and grew it right back out). And all the while her beauty was impossible to hide, which did nothing but make her even more intense. Guys would approach her from every direction throughout high school and in the years afterwards, and most of them would get an earful before scampering away, chastised. Occasionally, one would get through and Caitlyn

would start dating him. Most were short-lived relationships though, always ending badly: a couple of shattered car windows, a completely broken down bedroom door, and one particular incident that resulted in the guy in a hospital room with a concussion and twelve stitches in his leg. She says she's the way she is because complete independence is her life goal. Even her current situation—living on her own in Kendall, working as a waitress at Hooters (the disparity between her job choice and her overall mentality towards men doesn't seem to bother her; she thinks it's fitting that she gets to use men's "stupid fascination with tits and ass" to "steal" their money from them, as she puts it) while she finishes up her nursing degree—was fueled by this fierceness in her. Caitlyn doesn't have to work. She could be living at my mother's house and have everything paid for, no questions asked. If she wanted, she could even keep the apartment she has right now and have my mom pay for that. But living at home wasn't good for either of them after she graduated from high school. There were times during her freshman year at UM, when she still lived at home with our mother, that I'd pass by and you'd swear the Cold War never ended. And having my mother pay for her apartment wasn't an option. Mom offered once, and things got ugly real quick. I tried to talk to Caitlyn about her attitude, tell her that I think she might want to get some help with her anger. I told her that it isn't healthy to be this pissed off all the time. Caitlyn responded by saying therapy was created by men to make women look crazy.

Caitlyn downs her second Cosmo and waves rudely at the bartender who comes over, smiling. The expression is reflected everywhere on his face but his eyes, which are undoubtedly sad. At first glance it seems to be a sadness borne from this job, the tired creases at the corner of his eyelids lending to that theory. But there's something more in them, and I have a feeling this guy is sad about a lot more than not liking his job. He's cute though, in a grungy sort of way.

He's wearing the same Shambles uniform as everybody else in here, but he manages to make his seem like it was lazily thrown on from the floor of his bedroom. Tall and skinny with almost boyish facial features. Creamy skin, like the color of a mocha frappuccino. I can't believe I'm noticing all this about him and I wonder what it means.

"Another cosmo?" he asks. I'm not aware that I'm waiting for another situation where a guy makes the mistake of flirting with Caitlyn until the bartender barely gives her a once over and winks at me. It's a corny move but cute, especially considering Caitlyn's sitting right in front of him and he can't possibly know about the feelings of inferiority I try so very hard to hide.

"Yeah, another," Caitlyn says. "Keep 'em coming. My sister's too."

He raises an eyebrow in my direction, as if asking for affirmation. I shrug.

"No problem," he says and walks away. Caitlyn turns to me.

"What'd Rick do when you caught him?" she asks.

"Nothing," I say.

Her head snaps around and I can hear it crack a little.

"What do you mean?"

"Technically," I say, avoiding her eyes. "I didn't catch them."

"You *just* said-

"I said I saw them doing it," I say. I can feel the immediate tension resulting from this statement.

"You *saw* them doing it?" Caitlyn repeats.

"Yes," I say. "As in 'saw,' not 'caught.'"

Caitlyn's confusion turns to shock, then red-faced embarrassment and she surveys the restaurant as if she's suddenly ashamed to be here with me.

"You mean," she says, whispering now, which I think is hilarious. "You *saw* them fucking and you didn't *say* anything?"

"I did say something," I say. "Just not right then. After I calmed down and went by his job."

She bursts out laughing and pats me on the back.

"You're adopted."

"Caitlyn, stop it."

"No," she says. "There's no way you're my sister. *No* fucking way."

"What was I supposed to do then?" I ask.

"You, quote, unquote, 'saw' your husband having sex in your two year old son's bedroom with the babysitter and didn't confront him right then and there?" She grinds a hand through her hair. "What, did you not want to *interrupt* them?" she adds, mockingly.

I almost tell her yes, but decide against it. Caitlyn gets herself so wound up sometimes that it's almost impossible to reason with her.

"I slapped him," I say, trying to appease the situation.

"What?"

"At his job, when I confronted him about it. After he told me about the statutory rape law, I just kind of...lost control and slapped him as hard as I could." I brush a piece of lint off my pants' leg. "It felt good."

A smile slowly creeps across her face.

“Ok, not adopted,” she says. “Just dumb.”

I chuckle even though I’m feeling anything but humorous right now. I turn and grab the straw in my glass and down the rest of my Long Island, sliding the empty glass away from me as the bartender returns with another round.

“Where’s Justin now?” Caitlyn says as he puts the glasses in front of us. Our eyes meet for a second as he’s walking away and he smiles, his teeth showing a little, and my face gets hot all of a sudden. I can’t tell if it’s him or the alcohol.

“At Mom’s,” I say.

“Good,” she says standing and grabbing her cosmo. “Let’s go find the son of a bitch so I can hit him too.”

“Caitlyn,” I say, exasperated. “This isn’t about you. Stop trying to turn it into your personal vendetta session. It’s my marriage. Let me handle it.”

She throws her hands up in the air.

“Why the hell’d you *tell* me then?” she whines.

“Because you’re my sister,” I say quietly.

I hope this will pacify her, and it does for a second. She sits back down, pouting.

“You know,” she says. “I warned you.”

“Don’t start, Caitlyn,” I say.

“No,” she says. “I did. I warned you. I told you the day he asked you to marry him. I said, don’t be with him because of the baby. It won’t work. But no. You didn’t want to listen.”

“I wasn’t with him because of Justin,” I say, though I’m not sure whether or not that’s true. “I loved him.” I pause. “I love him.”

“Really?” she says. “What does that even *mean*, Lauren?”

“Are we really going to get started on this?” I say tiredly. “This ‘what’s the meaning of love’ crap? I get it. You don’t believe in love. You don’t believe in relationships, blah blah blah, Caitlyn. I do though. Please, don’t start with me.”

There’s a long pause as she sips at her drink some more.

“I’m just saying that I think you sold yourself short. You never needed a man to live your life and you still don’t. Look at me.”

“Yes, look at you,” I mutter.

“I’m single and perfectly fine. I’m young, successful, and happy, and I didn’t need a man to achieve any of it.”

“Yes,” I say. “But don’t you ever get lonely?”

“Sure,” she says. “That’s what vibrators are for.”

“Ridiculous,” I say, shaking my head. “You know that’s not normal, right?”

“And what you’re going through right now is?”

She has a point.

“You cannot tell me there’s not some part of you that wants to settle down,” I say.

“Yes, there is,” she says. I level my eyes at her and she shrugs. “There is. I want to settle down. I’m just not *settling* for anything less than exactly what I want.”

“And what is that?”

“Sensitivity, drive to succeed, assertive enough to call me on my shit but also willing to do anything and everything to keep me around, understanding of the hardship that is being a woman—”

“Spare me,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“—impeccable style, conversational, six foot or above, a little darker—Hispanic, maybe—short hair, nice eyes, athletic, and happy to spend hours in the bedroom keeping me satisfied.”

I let all that hang in the air for a moment.

“And the fact that you even have that list so readily available is in no way narcissistic?”

“I know what I want,” she says, shrugging. “And unlike everybody else, I’m not willing to compromise.”

“If this is supposed to be making me feel better, you’re failing miserably.”

“I offered to go over there and help you hurt him,” she says, gulping down her drink. The bartender sees this and comes over and I’m compelled to ask him his name.

“Sean,” he says. “And you?”

I tell him and he smiles, then raises an eyebrow at my sister who is now watching TV with a blatantly disgusted scowl on her face. Sean the Bartender has my attention now, and I seem to have his. I’m surprised that I want to keep it too. Before I know it, I’m twirling my hair around my finger, smiling at him and blinking my eyes way more than I normally do.

“How you two doing over here?” he asks.

“Fine,” I say. “Thank you, Sean.”

He smiles at me and I giggle. I can feel my sister’s eyes burning into me. Sean frowns at her.

“Everything ok on your end?” he asks.

“No,” Caitlyn says. She’s about to do that thing she does sometimes where she brings people into situations that have nothing to do with them, so I kick her in the leg before she can say anything. Caitlyn sucks in a pained breath and Sean frowns at her. I keep smiling and twirling my hair.

“My sister’s upset,” I say. I lean in towards him and whisper. “Man troubles.”

“Oh, got it,” he says, nodding sympathetically towards Caitlyn. He puts his hand on top of hers and pats. Caitlyn scowls at it as if it’s a snake. “Don’t worry,” Sean says, “Everything will turn out okay. It usually does.”

There’s this awkward moment where everybody kind of waits for somebody to say something, then Sean laughs, a quick blast of amusement that stops as abruptly as it started.

“Let me stop bullshitting you,” he says, moving his hand from hers and shrugging. “Life sucks. Drink up.”

Caitlyn’s mouth hangs open and I laugh at her and Sean as he grabs her glass and walks away, leaving her seemingly shocked into silence (a definite accomplishment on Sean the Bartender’s part).

“What the fuck was that about?” she says. I shrug, noticing that Sean’s butt does not seem at all flabby.

-Sean-

I'm thinking about Marcus and Leon and *Guitar Hero* and Lauren the hot brunette with the hot blonde sister at the end of the bar when I'm thrown into one of those situations where it seems like people are psychic, even though it's really a coincidence that they mentioned something vaguely related to one of the twenty things that are on my mind. It happens as I'm sliding a couple of beers to Rob and Steve. I turn away from them, but not before I overhear Steve say:

“I remember when I was in high school, man. Always used to wonder, like, what was the point?””

Rob, adding his two cents, says:

“So righteous, brother. Scary, man. But righteous.”

I stop, turn back to them. They're both wearing Heat jerseys, Rob a number three Dwyane Wade and Steve a number six LeBron James. Both of them need a shave and I can almost smell that ever-present sweaty beer stench I know is there, the one that alcoholics always have whether or not they're drinking or just showered or whatever, only I'm not close enough to Rob and Steve to actually smell it so I know it's a sensory memory or something. The two stop talking for a second when they notice me watching them, and I kind of want to jump in to the conversation but Rob and Steve have a tendency to be long winded. Behind me I can hear the ticket printer at the service bar sending out a drink order I have to make for one of the server's tables, so I nod towards their beers and turn away.

I walk up to the service bar and one of the servers—a mid-thirties guy named Gabe who's been working here forever—steps around the corner, the collar on his Shambles Bar and

Grill t-shirt popped up, which would make him look like some weird, Puerto Rican version of Fonzie from *Happy Days* if it weren't for the fact that his arms are the size of my head and his hair has like a pound of gel in it and is spiked up about three inches. Instead he looks like he fell off the set of *Jersey Shore* and landed here.

“Sup, bro,” he says.

I nod towards him as I grab the ticket from the printer and see the order is for a Pina Colada for one of his tables.

“Can you not spend all night pushing frozen drinks again, Gabe?” I say. “They’re fucking annoying to make.”

“Just trying to keep you on your toes, bro,” Gabe says. I scowl at him and he grins back at me, his big white teeth gleaming against his tanned skin. I make his drink and I’ve barely placed it on the service bar before he snatches it from my hand, still grinning as he turns and saunters over to the table that ordered it. A kid runs screaming in front of him and he almost falls and I laugh, louder than necessary so he can hear me. He shoots me a glare and continues walking and another kid speeds behind him like it’s a fucking Manhattan intersection.

It’s kid’s night here right now and the Heat are playing the Orlando Magic on the TV so the restaurant’s pretty busy. A couple of people have already ingested enough alcohol to have gotten belligerent and, subsequently, kicked out. The place sounds like a zoo and beneath the façade of pleased service, pretty much everybody’s pissed off.* You can tell the difference between genuine and fake happiness after working here for a while. In other words, it’s business as usual. I hate working kid’s nights, with a passion. People jump at any opportunity that has the

* By everybody, I meant all the other employees of Shambles. I didn’t actually consider the patrons of the restaurant people while I was working.

word free in it, and since “Kids Eat Free on Kid’s Night!” the restaurant is crowded to the brim with stressed out parents and children jacked up on soda and French fries. I always end up spending the first few hours of kid’s nights making child-sized milkshakes and there’s always the one kid who’s standing at the goddamn service bar staring in my face. And when I look down at him/her and then up at his/her parents and make it obvious that I want their kid to sit the fuck down, the parents smile at me and say things like “Aw, she wants to see how you’re making her milkshake. Isn’t that cute?” And what I want to say to them is “No, your fucking kid is not cute, she’s fucking annoying. Now tell her to stop asking me questions and sit the fuck down before I spray soda water in her face,” but I can’t say all that because Shambles has corporate managers coming through like every couple of days and they’re always itching to fire somebody.*

Today, though, as another drink order comes through the ticket printer, I’m just distracted enough to not care about the chubby Asian kid that appears in front of the bar, mouth hanging open, eyes wide as I make his Oreo milkshake. I’m thinking about my brother and high school and college and the conversation Rob and Steve are still having a few feet away from me. Rob and Steve are regulars, which is to say they are regularly present Mondays through Thursdays, regularly sitting right behind the beer taps, and regularly drunk by seven o’clock. Rob sits behind the Miller Lite, Steve behind the Michelob Ultra. I finish the kid’s shake and chuckle when the girl who’s serving his table comes over to get it and very subtly pushes the chubby Asian kid out

* I swore it got them off, like it was a sport for them. Like they came up to each other every couple of days and said “I’m bored. How ‘bout a round of golf and then we’ll go fire off a couple at Shamble’s?”

of the way. There's a guy sitting near the TV who needs another Miller Light so I head over to the taps and get caught in the spider web that is Rob and Steve.*

"Don't you miss it?" Rob blurts out at me. Like I said though, he's drunk already, so the words slur and sound kind of like "Dawn you mix it?"

"Miss what?" I ask. I'm pretty well versed in drunk-speak, so I can decipher most sentences.

"High school, man," Steve chimes in. "No worries, man. High school was cool, no worries, no problems."

I instantly picture my brother's downtrodden face.

"Yeah, I don't know," I say. "Depends on what you mean by problems."

They nod like I just said something profound and I use the pause to break away, drop the Miller Light off in front of the guy near the TV, make sure Lauren and her sister—who are still engrossed in whatever heated discussion they've been having for the past hour—are ok then hit it to the back storage room where the ice machine is.

The ice machine. My refuge. The one place I can hide from the chaos out front. It's in the most remote of locations: the storage area behind the kitchen. I come back here sometimes to think, on the nights when the drunken bar chatter gets a little too loud and overwhelming and my craving for a drink of my own has me ready to strangle some innocent bystander. A few minutes back here with the restaurant noise a distant background hum, the ice machine chugging along and the cooks yelling at each other on the grill and deep fryers always calms me down. And I do

* Remember when I mentioned the guests who talked to me because they couldn't find anybody else as drunk as them and they know I was obligated to respond? Here were two of them, only they had each other which made it even more annoying when they decided I needed to hear what the fuck they had to say.

get riled up often, I admit, so I'm back here pretty frequently throughout my shifts. Right now, I'm less perturbed and more surprised at the deep hit of despair that slammed into my chest while I was standing in front of Rob and Steve. Talking about high school with those two depresses the shit out of me. Talking about high school at all, actually, is never a pleasant experience, as evidenced by my interaction with Marcus today.

I grab a bucket and start scooping ice into it and zone out, thinking about how Rob and Steve have got it all wrong. In my opinion, high school may have been about the most depressing time of my life, and always will be.^{*} To make things worse, I don't really remember why. Seriously, I completely agree with what seems to be the rhetorical question of the day: what the fuck *is* the point? I wonder sometimes. Maybe it's different for other people, but I find that my memories of high school are extremely useless to me. Granted, the years themselves had their highs and lows. I mean, Leon and I met Derek and had a few girlfriends and watched movies and played video games and eventually lost our virginities,[†] whatever, but my memory of school itself is largely a big blurry mass of directionless anger and unwarranted depression. Which is why Marcus's little rant today hit home with a vengeance, because, really, what *is* the point? I mean, to me it seems the sole function of my high school memories is so I can have a conversation jumping point for right now, while I'm in my mid-twenties. Something to talk about to make the drunken schmucks like Rob and Steve laugh a little and give me a twenty percent-or-higher tip on their check. Or maybe the purpose of high school is simply to give me an excuse for every little twitch and annoying habit I've got. Like, if I met a girl right now and

^{*} Obviously I was ignoring my present circumstances.

[†] Mine was a 1980's cliché pop film event: I lost it on homecoming night my senior year to the girl I'd been trying to get with for about four months, in the back bedroom of an after party at a mutual friend's house. Turned out to be nowhere near the girl's first time though, or her last for that night...aaaaand we're back in the new millennium.

she and I were having those probing conversations about our pasts that all new couples have, and she asked me what my most memorable experience was in college, I'd tell her about the first keg party I went to or the first football game or the night during my freshman year when me and Leon and Derek got hammered in our dorm room and I threw up in the garbage can in the hallway and Leon pissed his bed and Derek woke up in a bathroom in the Biology building. She asks me about the lighter side of high school though, I'd be hard pressed to find one that wasn't tainted by the overall hopelessness of teenage-dom. And yet, on the flip side, if that same imaginary-girlfriend asked me why, when we're having sex and I'm about to come, I always tuck my lips inside my mouth and quietly go "nngghh," I'd immediately experience a neck-snapping moment of time travel in which I relive the day in ninth grade that my parents caught me jerking off to Showtime's *Red Shoe Diaries* in my bedroom because I was unable to contain my pleasure moans or stop my hand motions even as they opened the door and stood there with their arms crossed, a messy ordeal that resulted in this whole shmeal with my parents discussing whether they really needed to watch *Forrest Gump* forty fucking times a day and, no, my dad didn't really care if he missed the new episodes of *The Outer Limits* so they could live without Showtime if it was causing such "behavioral issues" in me.

Talking about school in general depresses me though. High school because I was miserable during it, college because I wasn't. College *was* great during the experience, the exact opposite of high school actually; a blur of colors and emotions and smells all wrapped up in a nice tortilla of artificially sweetened "free will" with a side of imitation "pursuit of happiness." All of which, of course, scurried into some deep, dark place in my bowels a few months after I graduated. And how could it not? College administrators tell us during Freshman orientation at

campuses across the nation that the next four years are going to be the best years of our lives, which does wonders for our outlook on the future once we graduate. Who the hell thought that up? And they try to cover it up once we get closer to our senior year by talking about all the opportunities we've got now, but they're not fooling anybody. They told me I could do whatever I wanted afterwards and, I mean, the illusion was great while it lasted but now, after the fact—working at a place where I regularly put people in a very college-esque drunken state of mind, a place that does not need or want to know about my degree in psychology—college reminds me of one of those scenes in movies where the main character is sitting in a chair spaced out, completely blitzed off ecstasy or acid or something else that's left him barely functional while around him everything zips by at high speed. It's supposed to indicate a lengthy passage of time that everybody else has been out accomplishing shit while that main character's been sitting in that same goddamn chair, chilling. Scenes like those are supposed to convey the quirkiness of youth. They never show people my age now in those moments, though. Never a twenty-five year old dude sitting on a couch doing nothing and absolutely loving it. And if they do show that, it's some movie like *Requiem for a Dream* or something and the guy's two seconds away from a heroin overdose. I'm guessing movie producers think if you're in your mid-twenties and you're still sitting in that chair, you probably don't give a damn what they think about you. But I do.*

I've filled the ice bucket so high the ice is falling over the sides. I try to pick it up, not noticing I'm standing in water that's pooled half an inch deep in a concave part of the tiled floor, and I slip and spill the entire goddamn thing everywhere and have to spend the next ten minutes cleaning up and refilling the bucket again. Finally, I grab the refilled bucket and head back to the

* I genuinely did.

front, dumping the ice in the various coolers surrounding the bar then return the bucket and check to see that everybody's drinks are filled and there are, surprisingly, no drink orders in the ticket printer at the service bar. All the guests seem to be lost in their own conversations or watching the Heat game, so I stand at the end of the bar closest to the kitchen, peering out the window across the restaurant for a moment and get this image of myself standing shirtless in front of the mirror in my old bedroom at my parents' house, listening to music and nodding my head, flexing my arms and chest and trying to catch the light peeking through the blinds at a certain angle so that the shadows would make it seem like I had rippling muscles that weren't actually there. That's the memory, and I try to unravel it, try to see if maybe I can remember what day it was, what year, what I was feeling, what song I was listening to, anything.*

In the end, though, my memory switches from something real to something not, which seems to happen to me a lot: this time it's that scene from the first *Spiderman* where Tobey Maguire is standing in the mirror admiring his newly acquired arm and chest and ab muscles after getting bit by a radioactive spider, and *that* scene reminds me of the summer before my freshman year in college when *Spiderman 2* came out and I worked at AMC Theaters over at the mall on US-1 and 67th Avenue, the one they closed down like a year ago, and how, after work when we were all exhausted from cleaning out the pounds of paper towels in both the men's and women's bathrooms and picking up half-empty Skittles and M&M's boxes from sticky theater floors,[†] I sometimes shared a fifth of Absolut with my manager out by the dumpsters. These occasional nights of giddy laughter and shit-talking about other employees were pretty routine

* I had a vague remembrance of *Eminem's* "Role Model," which, coupled with the staring-in-the-mirror-faking-muscles detail, dated the memory to any single day in my high school career.

[†] Those were only the more frequently found items; you'll find all types of shit in a movie theater when the lights are on: shoes, condom wrappers, condoms (used, unused, fifty-fifty chance either way...yeah, now you know why they always look so pissed off when you give them your ticket), Starbucks coffee cups, chicken wings in carryout boxes from the restaurant next door, etc.

until, two months after getting hired, I spent an entire Friday and Saturday night at home blowing up cop cars and prostitutes with rocket launchers in GTA3* and, as a result, woke up late and missed both of my weekend day shifts and that same “buddy” manager fired me.

I’m brought abruptly back to reality when drunken Rob of the Rob-and-Steve duo accidentally-on-purpose drops his beer mug on the tile surrounding the bar stools and it shatters. Everybody in the restaurant goes quiet for two seconds then Rob laughs, a loud, barking sound, and a majority of the guests in the restaurant let out a harmonious “ooooohhhh” and start clapping. I grimace at the sound of breaking glass, knowing I’m going to be the one who has to clean it up. The service bar printer goes off and I see that, while in my reverie, six ticket orders have come through. I grab them and they’re all for kid chocolate milkshakes and I look up in time to catch another little fucking chubby kid—this one red-haired with freckles—standing on the other side of the service bar and looking me in my eyes as he reaches over and pulls lemons out of the garnish tray, drops them on the floor then steps on them. I have no fucking clue why he’s doing this. All I know is that I’m suddenly struck with an extremely strong urge to walk out of here, go home, do my strip-down-to-boxers routine and learn how to play the brand new guitar sitting in the backseat of my car. At this moment I hate everything about what I’m doing and where my life is going. It sort of hits me—*really* hits me—that I’ve spent the past three years since graduating college zoning out behind this bar and reminiscing about things I’m not old enough to be reminiscing about yet while serving people drinks as they drunkenly yell play calls at sports games showing on a TV that can’t respond to them. Up until now I’ve thought all of this was semantics. A pause for good cheer. The prelude to my *real* life. It’s not though. If I

* Grand Theft Auto 3 or, simply, “The Game.”

don't do something, I'll be fifty and still standing here, sliding beers to retired cops and janitors and going home to drink my liver dead and stare at the yellowing degree hanging crooked on my wall.

My thought process is interrupted by a lemon hitting me in the side of the head. I turn angrily and search for the chubby red-haired or Asian kid but they've both gone back to their seats, so I spin back towards the end of the bar and see that Lauren is holding her hands up in the air as if she's just scored a touchdown. I make my way over to her, my anger slowly subsiding.

"Did you just throw a lemon at me?" I ask.

"Awesome throw," she says. Her eyes have that glazed look I know so well from working here every day and looking in the faces of so many people who've been drinking for hours.* "You have to admit, that was an awesome throw."

"Why would you want to throw a lemon at me?" I ask.

"Seemed the only way to get your attention," she says. "You were in the zone over there."

Her sister, the hot blonde, is rifling through her purse and obviously drunk her damn self.

"I'm guessing you two need another drink then," I say.

"Well, yes," Lauren says, smiling and twirling her hair in this way that is making me horny for some reason. "But that's not why I called you over here."

"Ok," I say. "What then?"

Lauren gives me a mischievous grin which makes me completely forget that a moment ago I hated everybody and everything and was pretty pissed off that she threw a lemon at me.

* Also from looking in the mirror at home after a night at Dill's. Let's be real.

“I wanted to know,” she says, then pauses, turning to her sister who is done rummaging through her purse and squinting at me as if she doesn’t know where I came from. She turns to Lauren, then shrugs. Lauren nods and smiles at me. “I just wanted to know what time you get off work.”

STEP 4: CHANGE

-Lauren-

Making out with Sean the Bartender is something of a wonder, though I can't really tell if it's him, the alcohol, or just the newness that he represents. I can't say I knew we'd end up back at his apartment when I asked him to hang out after work, but I can't say I was completely oblivious to the possibility either. I can't really say anything other than we drank together at some bar named Dill's Tavern and it was fun. His roommate tagged along and kept Caitlyn occupied while Sean and I talked about whatever, I don't remember. Then suddenly we weren't talking anymore, weren't even there anymore. It just sort of transitioned, from the liveliness of the bar to me pushing him against the front door of his apartment and pressing myself as tightly against him as I could. Now, I can't seem to get enough of him, his smell, his taste, the general feel of his arms grasping me like he's in need. Like we're both in need. Of what, I don't know, but it feels good, the sweat and heat of it all, the feel of his skin against mine as we fall into his bedroom and take each other's clothes off.

Ever since it stopped being painful, sex has been like a dream for me. I'm sure it is for most people, but since I'm not most people it's impossible for me to feel like there's not something unique about my experience. Even now, at twenty-four with a child and a husband who—up until a few weeks ago—I was regularly having sex with, I'm still in awe at how singular the experience is. Sean isn't the hottest guy I've ever seen, but he looks good naked, a bit on the skinny side. And there's strength in his hands, coupled with a tenderness in his fingers as they touch me. By time we get down to it, almost every part of me is tingling and that mixed with the alcohol puts me into this reverie where I don't really know what I'm doing. I assume

I'm pretty loud because at one point Sean puts a hand over my mouth and laughs, looking me in the eye, and I bite his hand then his bottom lip and grind even harder on top of him until it feels like I'm about to explode. Then I do, falling flat on his chest, breathing hard and suddenly so tired. I know I should get up and figure out how to get home, but I close my eyes for a moment and when I open them I'm lying next to Sean on his bed, the early morning sun peeking through the blinds covering his window. And I don't feel particularly good about myself, I'll admit that. And yet, at the same time, I don't feel particularly bad either. So I wouldn't go so far as to say this was a huge mistake. Sean's snoring lightly and I'm actually still a little drunk. I'm sober enough to remember my car is back at Shambles though. Therefore, I'm going to have to bite the bullet and go through the awkward experience of waking Sean up and watching his face as he slowly remembers who I am and what we did a few hours ago. Then I'll have to smile and ask him for a ride back to the bar. All of that screams awkward.

I poke him and he groans then rolls away from me, a fresh spot of drool gleaming up at me from his pillow. I rub my temples, a dull pulse forming in my forehead. Sean's alarm clock reads eight AM. I have to be at work in two hours.

I'm in my bra, no underwear. Self-conscious, I hop out of bed and grab my clothes off the floor, pulling on my pants quickly before Sean can get the chance to wake up and see sober what he's already seen drunk. I head quietly out of his bedroom and down the hall, past the living room where Sean's roommate and some woman are whispering fiercely to each other, the woman pointing in the direction of Sean's room. As I pass, she sees me and rolls her eyes.

"That right there," she says, pointing at me and glaring at Sean's roommate. "That needs to not be happening anymore."

I feel a prick of defensiveness and the resultant anger and almost say something to this woman I've never met before. I don't want to get involved though, so I step out of their line of sight, stopping to listen to the back end of their argument.

"Babe," Sean's roommate says. "Calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down," she hisses. "This shit needs to stop. You two aren't children."

"Hanging out with my friend makes me a child?"

"Hanging out with Sean makes you one," she says. "He needs to grow up, and so do you. We have no future if you're going to be pulling this all night bullshit and gallivanting around with him."

I get self-conscious about listening in on their argument, so I head toward the front door. I continue on and lock myself in the bathroom where I take off my pants, put on my underwear, then put my pants back on. I throw on my shirt and study my reflection in the mirror, which very much reflects the night I had. I scowl at myself. My mascara is smeared around my eyes and my hair is sticking out in eighteen different directions. I search my pockets and find a tie and throw the mop of hair on my head back into a frizzy pony tail then wash all the make-up off my face. Eventually I look as presentable as is possible under the circumstances and I rummage through Sean's medicine cabinet for some aspirin. Instead I find an empty box of tampons and an empty prescription bottle of Zoloft for someone named Maria. I close the cabinet and head back down the hallway to Sean's room, where he's still passed out. I'd kind of hoped he'd wake up on his own and be ready to leave by the time I came back in, but, then again, that would have been too easy.

There's a frame hanging on the wall in the far corner of the room, and as I approach it I see that Sean has a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology from FSU. I wonder briefly why Sean the Bartender has a degree in Psychology. Beneath the frame there's a desk against the wall with a laptop and sound system. Below that, a guitar and amp sitting next to a Guitar Center bag. On the walls are posters, lots of them: Puddle of Mudd, Blink 182, Eminem, Lil Wayne. A lot of variety, which is good, I guess. Though it's kind of odd for a man Sean's age to have music posters all over the wall. I briefly wonder how old he is and have a short moment of panic where I think he might be as young as Natalie or something. Then I remember his degree and calm down. Behind the bedroom door there's a Hooters calendar, turned to September. Figures.

I turn back to Sean, intent now on waking him up, only to see that he's already awake. His eyes are wide and confused and I suddenly feel like I'm naked all over again. The bed sheet covers half his bare butt, which is a lighter brown than the rest of his dark skin. He sits up a little and looks down at himself then back up at me.

"Did I fall asleep like this?"

I raise an eyebrow, because this is not the first question I expected to hear from him. There are a lot of questions that wouldn't have surprised me, but that definitely was not one of them.

I shrug, which I realize isn't really an answer.

"Hold on," Sean says, his eyes twinkling suddenly. I cringe a little inside, because I have a feeling he's going to say something that's going to take the awkwardness I'm already feeling and explode it to unbearable proportions.

"I need a ride back to my car," I say quickly.

Sean opens his mouth as if about to say something, then stops and bites his lip.

“Okay,” he says finally. He hops out of the bed and I catch a glimpse of his flaccid penis. I’m hit with a vivid flashback of the night, the sweat and movement and release, me on top then him on top, from the floor to the chair to the bed. The memory’s not unpleasant, and my skin prickles a little. It’s odd, though, like seeing a picture of myself five years later and realizing I’ve changed so much more than I actually thought. Sean notices his exposure and quickly pulls his pants on without putting on any underwear, tucking himself away before pulling his zipper up. I point at his degree.

“So,” I say. “Psychology, huh?”

At that second, the door opens and Sean’s roommate appears in the frame. He clears his throat and glares at Sean (who is lacing up his sneakers and acting like he doesn’t notice somebody just walked into his bedroom) before noticing me.

“Hey Lauren,” he says, flashing a smile. I don’t remember his name, only know him as Sean’s roommate, the guy who showed up at some point last night when I’d already made the drunken decision that I was going to come back here with Sean. He ended up keeping Caitlyn occupied while Sean and I drank ourselves into this position. I wonder for a second what happened to Caitlyn, then smile and wave at Sean’s friend. He goes back to glaring at Sean.

“Sean, we need to talk.”

“Yeah,” Sean says still intently focused on his shoes. The guy walks out and Sean stands up, staying quiet as he walks out of the room. I follow him outside and a moment later we’re in his car making our way through rush hour traffic back to Shambles Barbeque and Grill. The parking lot outside is empty except for my car, looking lonely and oddly sinful there all by itself.

As if anybody driving by would see it and know exactly what its owner was doing the night before.

It's already been uncomfortable the whole way here since Sean and I haven't said a word to each other. Now, however, the awkwardness is palpable as we both sit outside the restaurant where our night began. We both know that at some point I have to get out of his car and into mine, but neither of us is doing anything to make that happen. I really want to leave, go see my son and explain to my mother why I didn't make it back last night. I checked my cell phone on the way here; twenty missed calls and eleven different voicemails. Four of the calls were from Rick, none of the voicemails. Everything else was my mother, the first couple telling me Justin's fine but he misses me and I should call and let her know what's going on with Rick. And that I should reconsider getting my sister involved. The last few were her telling me she's disappointed in me. She has no idea.

I can't leave right now though. I can tell Sean's waiting for me to say something encouraging, so I smile.

"I had fun," I say.

"Me too," he says. There's another moment of silence before he speaks again. "We should meet up again sometime, grab a cup of coffee or something."

"That'd be nice," I say. And, honestly—seeing him in the daylight, his morning stubble and sadly intelligent eyes—it does sound pretty nice. Which makes me feel even worse.

"Let me get your number," he says. "I'll give you a call."

I hesitate and Sean is quick. He catches it immediately and clenches his jaw, trying to hide the hurt that touches the corner of his eyes. I feel bad because I don't want him to get the

wrong idea. I just really don't want him calling me at an inopportune moment. I don't know when that inopportune moment could be, but current circumstances seem to indicate my future is going to be rife with them.

"Actually, don't worry about it," he says. "I'll just see you around here."

"No," I say. "It's not like that. It's just..." I pause, run my hand through my ponytail.

"Things are complicated right now."

"I bet."

"Give me your number," I say, pulling out my cell phone again. "I'll call you instead."

I can tell he doesn't believe me, but he gives me his number anyway. I'm about to save it under Sean, but change my mind and save it under Shambles. Just in case. I don't know if I ever will call him (and I'm thinking that after months of sober contemplation, I probably won't). I just know there's way too much tension in his car right now. I want to get to mine and be alone for a little while.

"I had fun," I say again. I don't know why.

Sean chooses not to verbally respond this time, just nods, dejected. It's cute, actually, that he doesn't want this to be a one night stand. I really do feel bad but I don't know what else to say, so I get out of his car and walk over to mine. I turn to wave at him but he's already driven off, so watch his car fade into the distance and feel a pang of something in my gut. Guilt, maybe, or doubt about how I handled this situation. Sean didn't do anything wrong. In his mind though, he's probably wondering what horrible thing happened between us having sex and now. I want to call him and tell him the answer to that question is nothing. Or me. All me. Instead, I get in my car, turn it on, and let it idle for a moment, pulling my phone out and dialing my mother. She

answers on the first ring, which points immediately to the fact that this is going to be an annoying conversation.

“Where are you?” she asks.

“I’m on my way.”

“Where are you?” she repeats.

“I’m in my car. I just got in. I’m coming right now.”

“Rick called,” she says. She’s resorted to the form of communication where she lets her thoughts out in two to three word bursts; it’s a really aggravating form of verbal abuse she likes to use when she’s disappointed in someone. Disappointed, though, not angry. If she’s angry, she either yells or gives you the silent treatment. Ironic, I know. Talking to her when she’s like this is like trying to reason with Justin when he’s having one of his tantrums. Only he’s two and a half. My mother’s forty-five.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I say. “I lost track of the time. It was a long night. I’ll be there soon.”

“Justin’s upset,” she says.

I rub my forehead and wish there had been aspirin in Sean’s medicine cabinet.

“Put him on the phone,” I say.

There’s a muffled voice and some fumbling around and then I hear a light breath on the line.

“Mommy?”

The sound of his voice strikes a chord and my throat catches. I clear it.

“Hi, honey,” I say.

“Where’s Daddy?” he asks, and I feel that envy all over again.

“Daddy’s at work, honey,” I say.

“Oh,” he says, pausing. “I miss you.”

That’s a little more than I can handle right now. I pull the phone away for a moment then put it back to my ear.

“I miss you too, honey,” I say. “I’ll be home soon. Put Grandma back on.”

More fumbling and then my mom is back on the line. She doesn’t say anything, just gives a little grunt.

“Was he good?” I ask.

“An angel,” she says. “As usual.” She pauses. “Where are you?” she asks again.

“Mom,” I say, slowly and evenly. “I’m. On. My. Way.”

“Don’t get upset with me,” she says, sounding hurt. I grind my teeth.

“I’m not, Mom. I’m just a little agitated right now and I don’t need to be interrogated.”

“Maybe you can explain it to your son then,” she says.

I groan.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I say. “Sorry I left Justin overnight without telling you. I didn’t mean to inconvenience you.”

“It’s no inconvenience,” she says, her tone shifting. “I just want to know what the plan is. What are you going to do about Rick? This could be detrimental to Justin’s development. He’s already got such an impediment, what with his penis and all.”

“That’s not funny,” I say.

“It wasn’t a joke. He needs to know what’s going to happen with you two.”

“Justin will be fine, Mom. He’s two, he doesn’t need to know anything about anything.” I push at my temples with my free hand, my headache starting to pulse which I know means it’s not going away anytime soon. “I don’t really feel like talking about this over the phone.”

“Well you have to talk about it sometime. If not with me then with Rick. Arrangements need to be made.”

“I know, Mom,” I say. “You have no idea how much I know that. But right now I’m pretty late for work and I just want to go home, change, say hi to Justin, and be on my way. Can he stay with you again today? I don’t have time to drop him at the preschool.”

“Anything you need, honey,” she says. The way she says it gives me a bad taste in my mouth.

I hang up and am about to put the car in gear when everything sort of rushes up on me all at once: Rick, Natalie, Caitlyn, Sean, Justin, my mother, this hangover. And I can’t help it, I drop my head on the steering wheel and suck in one deep breath then unleash a scream that reverberates in my ear drums, turning the pulse in my head into more of a bang. It’s not until my voice cracks and I stop screaming that I realize, at some point, tears started pouring down my cheeks, stinging my eyes like crazy. My tongue is thick in my mouth and my nose is running. I wait with my head against the steering wheel, breathing deeply until the urge to scream again recedes back to that place where those types of outbursts lie dormant. Then I wipe my eyes and my nose with the back of my hand. I pull down the visor, frown at my flushed face in the mirror for a moment then reach in the glove compartment and pull out the little make up kit I keep in there. I apply some mascara and blush then toss it all back in the glove compartment, turn the car on, and make my way slowly back to my childhood home.

-Sean-

One of the first things they teach you in any intro to psychology class in college is that your subconscious is pretty much like the Wizard of Oz, running things in the background without showing his face, fearing what people will think when they see he's actually this fragile, mortal, completely fucked up dude harboring a serious power complex. When I imagine my subconscious, though, I like to think of it more along the lines of a covert black ops CIA agent, like Matt Damon playing Jason Bourne in *Bourne Identity*, going through my brain and stealthily causing havoc that can never actually be traced back to him, even though it's always kind of hinted at that he had something to do with it. My subconscious, he's doing all this damage methodically, not really knowing why or who the fuck he really is, but he's operating under the assumption that disarray is the way to go. This is how I explain the reason why my framed Psychology degree from Florida State University is hanging on the wall right above my desk, across from the doorway, so that it is the first thing I see whenever I walk into my bedroom.

Most people would think that seeing something like that every day would do wonders as far as motivation goes. You're told an uplifting story with a guy in the same position I'm in, and what you hear is that this guy who lost his fiancée and best friend in the same week and is stuck in a shitty bartending gig comes home every day and finds solace in this degree hanging on his wall, this confirmation that, at one point, he had goals and was doing something to achieve those goals and, therefore, can still do more things to achieve a new set of similar goals since his old set got taken out back and put down like a sick dog. Then the uplifting guy would go out, do some research, find out that it's almost impossible to get a job with a Bachelor's degree in Psychology because most positions in psychological fields require at least a Master's degree, if

not a PhD, and said Uplifting Guy would suck it up and start sending out transcripts to graduate schools, quit the bartending gig and continue his education for another five years to become Dr. Uplifting Guy. That's the Hallmark version of my life.

The reality of it, though, is that hands down the best day of my college career was the day I graduated. I was not a standout student at Florida State. I graduated a semester late after failing Spanish I—twice^{*}—and when I finally did graduate it was with a GPA that barely surpassed the minimum effort needed for the school to give me the okay. And it wasn't that I hated it up there, because I didn't. College was a blast, and the classes were fun, at first. What got me was, by my junior year, it finally started to sink in that I'd been in school for over seventy-five percent of my life. And all that I was going to show for it was a piece of paper. Sure there was the impending job search and the bragging rights[†] and the class rings and the two million pictures my mother took that weekend, but after all of that what's left? Nothing but the degree. Twenty years, for a shitty apartment with bad memories, a depressing job, and a piece of paper hanging on my wall.

And sure, you have the people who do the practical things like engineering and all of that, the majors that will get them jobs right out of school because everybody needs somebody to fix their car or their air conditioner or whatever. And I even admire these people, like Leon with his Biology degree.[‡] But with most of the other technical degrees, what I always wonder is—does college actually help them or just validate them? I had a couple of engineering friends back at FSU, and most of those dudes were smart. I mean, really smart. They were busy fixing shit and

^{*} As taking a foreign language was a requirement to get your psychology degree, a stipulation that I will never understand. The irony of me being born and raised in a predominantly Hispanic city and twice failing Elementary Spanish is not lost on me either.

[†] Which, admittedly, were not very lucrative seeing as how the majority of the people I knew had a degree, and a lot of the ones who didn't were in better positions than me and the ones who didn't have a degree and weren't in better positions than me would probably have kicked my ass if I bragged anyways.

[‡] And I gave exception to his professional choice, because nobody really wants a guy who didn't go to med school to get anywhere near them with any sort of medical instrument.

building shit and designing shit way before they came to college. And sure they learned how to do all those things better while they were at FSU, but from what I could see, they improved mostly by reading insanely high-priced textbooks filled with information they could have gotten off the internet for free. Everybody knows Bill Gates' story—multi-billionaire college dropout. I hear things like that and deduce that this whole notion of “attending college” being better than “not attending college” comes down to that frame on the wall; that 10 by 12 frame holding the thick, grainy paper with the watermarks and college president's signature and the seal of approval with your school's symbol on it. That paper is what twenty years of schooling and tens of thousands of dollars gets you. And back in the day, that piece of paper was worth every penny of it. In 2011 though, things are different. In 2011, you can very easily find yourself having received that piece of paper and still be working as a bartender at a rundown corporate restaurant making a net profit below most of your coworkers who did *not* receive that same paper, simply because they don't have student loans to pay for. Thirty years ago, college was a secure investment. In 2011, going to college is on par with a visit to Vegas with your lifesavings in your back pocket.

... Today is an exception to the rule. Seeing my degree right now doesn't bother me. I'm thinking about everything that's transpired from last night to right now, all twelve or so supremely odd hours of it. I remember thinking while we were having sex that I'd probably never see Lauren again, that as beautiful and drunk as she was, this was all an aberration and I needed to enjoy it while I could and hope that I didn't fuck up my performance,^{*} but I'm still a little jarred by how blatant the dismissal was in the parking lot outside of Shambles. I stand in

^{*} I had no clue as far as that either. Still don't. Impossible to read women sometimes, especially when it comes to whether or not the sex was good. Most of them will tell you it was whether or not it actually was. Very confusing.

the doorway of my room in my apartment and brush my clothes gently with the back of my hand, my black work shorts and black button-down shirt, wondering if they were a deal breaker.

Running the encounter over in my head, I try to see if there was a moment where I could have done something different to change the outcome, post one-night-stand. I wanted to explain to her that we're in the same boat, that maybe we can fuel each other's annoyance with the opposite sex by bitching and having sex with each other whenever the emotional and/or physical need appears.* Friends with benefits. Depressing benefits but, still. Benefits. But then I realized how desperate that sounded, gave her my number and left.

I'm about to commence stripping when I remember that Derek said he had to talk to me about something. I wonder if it has to do with Lauren or her sister, who I saw him talking to for a while last night. Then I wonder when exactly Derek got home last night. I knock on his bedroom door, but in the fifteen minutes that I've been gone he's left. I return to my room and pull off my shirt, my shorts, my socks and shoes and toss it all into the corner. Back to basics.

I'm about to sit down and turn on the TV when my eye catches my new guitar lying next to my computer, the amp and all the accessories, and all thoughts of one night stands are swiftly shoved out of my mind. I slowly approach the beautiful blue instrument, pick it up gently. Five minutes later I'm standing with a pick in my right hand, the guitar strapped around my chest. I spread my legs a little, bend my knees and close my eyes, feeling the slickness of the neck in my hand, the taut strings beneath my tender fingers and knowing that they're probably going to hurt me at some point. I don't care. I take a deep breath, raise my arm, and swing it down in an arc. A

* The latter of which had presented itself, and then some. Now that I knew I probably wouldn't be getting another chance with Lauren, I wanted to have sex with her again more than I think I'd ever wanted to have sex with anybody in my life. Funny how things work that way.

high pitched *twang* emits from the strings, and I remember the amp and spend the next twenty minutes hooking it up then unhooking it all then hooking it back up the *right* way, and soon I'm back with the guitar strap around my chest, the guitar itself hanging in front of my pelvis, a pick in one hand and a plug in the other. Carefully, I shove the plug in the end of the guitar and the amp next to my foot lets out a loud *screeing* feedback sound and then sits humming quietly. And, like that, I'm scared. Of what? I have no fucking clue. I just know that this all seems pretty heavy to me right now. I have no idea how to play this thing. Furthermore, what's *really* scaring me isn't the fact that I don't know what I'm doing but that I'm now going to *have* to learn, simply to justify how much money I spent yesterday.

It baffles me, that I have no idea how to do something like play a guitar. That's what this is all about for me actually, not knowing how to do anything. It's like in that movie *The Fast and the Furious*. The film's a classic in the circles I grew up around, especially considering fast cars and half-naked chicks are considered to be a staple of the Miami entertainment scene.* There's this scene in it where Paul Walker and Vin Diesel and company go through one of those video montages where they're fixing this junkyard Toyota Supra up so it can be a viable threat for an upcoming race, winner take all. The scene's complete with a techno music soundtrack and they're having fun, drinking and fucking and fixing cars with their hands and tools, shit that most people can't do and would never even try to do—the fixing cars part at least. I want to have that feeling. I mean, I don't want to go around finding fucked up cars and trying to fix them—I don't know shit about cars, and don't really care about them all that much—but I want to do something

* Which, by the way, is not actually the way things are, at least not where I grew up. Maybe if you lived on South Beach. And you were a millionaire. And a car enthusiast. And had the number of a really good escort service. But we can't all be Shaqs and Lil Waynes.

that can make me feel like I made something happen. *Actually* made something happen. Basically, I want to learn how to *actually* do something. Reading books and passing tests isn't doing something, unless you count learning to read and write as an actual act of *doing*, which I don't because the majority of Americans can do those things and, therefore—in my opinion—those actions have become about as significant to us as walking, or breathing. And I know walking and breathing are actually very significant, but they're not things that you'd stop somebody and praise them for. You'd never see somebody go up to another person and say, "Dude, I didn't know you could breathe." That would be retarded, and would warrant a punch in the mouth. Which is basically all I'm saying. But now, faced with the opportunity to learn something that requires actual *doing*, I feel suddenly childish, nervous and frightened.

I hear the front door open and Derek's voice, followed by the distinct voice of Kristina. A moment later I hear his room door open and close, which I'm thankful for because I know he wanted to talk and I don't want to talk right now, don't want to explain anything right now, only want to pay attention to this. The feel of this. The look of this.

I step over and close my door then turn back towards the amp. Next to the TV in my room there's a large, cheap picture frame with a poster in it, transferred from my Tallahassee college apartment, the type of poster every group of college-aged guys gets in their apartment at some point. This one is of a middle-aged businessman-type dude, complete with a five-piece suit and Buddy Holly haircut. He's smiling and throwing up the crossed middle and ring finger gang sign indicating "Westside." Underneath him, the caption: "Keeping it Gangster." I still think it's hilarious. I can see my reflection in the poster and I look odd with the guitar strapped around my neck, almost self-conscious. The distorted reflection brings to light other features I haven't

noticed until now either: the shadows in the concaves of my cheek; the sinewy vein faintly pulsing on the right side of my neck; the stubble on my head.* Overall, I have to say that I look like a hot mess, especially standing here with a guitar around my neck wearing nothing but my underwear. I smile though, and the expression transforms my reflection into a halfway decent image that assures me I haven't completely gone to shit yet.

The image of me shirtless with the guitar reminds me of my thoughts at work the other day, reminiscing on being at my parents' house listening to music and using the sunlight to cast fake muscular shadows. There's not much a difference in my stature now from then, but I look good with this guitar sitting against my stomach. Not like the pretty-boy-rock-star-Lenny-Kravitz type of good, but more like that one guy from *System of a Down*, the lanky bass player with the braided beard and paunch above his waist line, only I don't have a beard and I'm not pasty white and I'm standing in my underwear. It's the kind of good where it's obvious you don't eat enough, though you're not yet at the point where somebody would say "dude, eat something" because there's always that paunch. The kind of good that's better when I'm holding a guitar, that would be even better with a tattoo or two in the general vicinity of my arms and chest. I consider the fact that I don't have a tattoo[†] and put getting one on my list of things to do, a list that recently came into existence and now carries a total of two items: get a tattoo, and master this instrument. More than I've looked forward to in a long time.

I take a step back and prepare myself, take a deep breath, hold it, raise my pick hand once again and bring it back down in the same arcing strum motion as before. I forgot to adjust the

* Instead of getting actual haircuts at a barber shop, the prior few months I'd taken to using a razor and giving myself a two minute once-over every couple of weeks.

[†] I missed out on that phase when my friends were out indulging themselves back in the day. Derek has a couple, and Leon had like thirty, and it's not that I never had the desire. I've just always been the type to not let people stick needles in me unless it's absolutely necessary. Same sentiments apply to hospitals.

volume level on the amp though, and as a result it lets loose an explosion of sound, cacophonous music notes that vibrate through both of my legs up to my pelvis. It sounds fucking beautiful.

About ten seconds later there's a bunch of hard foot-stepping coming down the hallway and I turn in time to catch Derek as he throws open my door then freezes, his face dropping from surprise, mixed with some fatigue. We have a ten second stalemate while Derek silently inventories everything, not just the guitar and amp and Guitar Center bag but the entire bedroom and me, from head to toe, as if he's just realized that he's living with me and that there's a lot more in this apartment than he thought there was and he's wondering where the fuck did all this furniture and stuff come from and how fast can he get it out.

"What the fuck is that?" he asks, focusing on the guitar.

I want to say something smartass, like "A dog," but he doesn't look like he's in the mood.

"Bought a guitar," I say. "You like?"

Instead of answering he catches my eye, glaring.

"You know rent's due in like a week, right?"

"Yeah," I say, shrugging. "Figured I'd just work a little extra at Shambles."

"You already work every day and you're still broke."

"Whatever," I say, my eye twitching a little. I can't tell if it's annoyance or embarrassment. Maybe a little of both. "I'll get it. I always do."

"We need to talk, Sean," he says.

"We are talking," I say, then scratch my head. "You said that earlier. What about?"

"I'm moving," he says abruptly, then closes his eyes. "Or you are. One of us has to. I'm moving in with Kristina."

There's a long moment of silence in which I become very self-conscious about the fact that I'm wearing only my underwear. Considering I've spent the past year up until now walking around the apartment in exactly this attire, this seems an odd time to be insecure.

"Excuse me?" I ask.

"I'm sorry, Sean," he says, clenching his fists. "It's just—you know the lease is up next month, right?"

I did not realize this.

"Yeah," I say. "So what?"

"Well," he says, scratching his elbow absently. "Kristina and I have been talking about it. And I know this was—is—your place and I'm not trying to push you out of it. I'm just saying, Kristina and I have decided to move in together. And we talked and figured with your, um—" he pauses and clearly avoids my eyes. "—with your finances not being so secure, you'd probably be better off finding someplace cheaper and letting Kristina and I take over the lease here."

"Really?" I say, my voice sounding not nearly as strong as I'd like it to. I can feel the sparking flint of anger inside me, and though it's only a spark now I have a feeling there's a whole shitload of wood and lighter fluid and fucking gasoline in there about to ignite. "You guys come to that decision all by yourselves then? Good for you."

"Come on, Sean," he says. "We didn't decide on anything but moving in together." He pauses and holds his hands up. "Ok, sorry. I probably went about this the wrong way. I didn't mean to bust in and throw it at you. It's been—a really long morning and I'm hungover as shit and I figured this might be the next best move for you."

“Oh,” I say, so quietly that it seems to barely register. My grip tightens on the neck of the guitar and I turn to fully face him. “Okay. This is for my benefit, then? Well, I guess you two deserve some recognition, don’t you? Thank you guys. Thank you so fucking much. You guys are in-fucking-credible human beings.”

“Sean, don’t be like that,” he says. “I’m sorry to spring it on you like this, but we’ve been talking about this for a while now.”

“Behind my back,” I say.

“Not behind your back,” he says, then shuffles around a little. “Just—not when you were around.”

I laugh and he squirms even more.

“Look, Sean,” he says. “This isn’t working out, and you know you need a change of scenery. I mean, look at you.” He sweeps his arm around, indicating the entire room, and I want to punch him in the face. “You’re a mess, have been since Maria and Leon. And I get it, I really do. It fucked me up too, man. But this is ridiculous. Staying in this apartment with all these memories and feelings, drinking all the time and now you’re bringing home random women.” He pauses, peeks back towards his room, then whispers with a slick smile on his face, “They were hot, though, weren’t they?”

“What’s your point, Derek?” I yell.

He stands up straight and crosses his arms, looking hurt.

“It’s kind of irresponsible,” he says. “None of this shit is good for you. What’s her name, Lauren—she and her sister, they’re not good to have around here, man.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“You still haven’t gotten over your ex and you’re going to start messing around with a chick who has a kid with a guy she’s recently divorced?” He cocks his head to the side. “Does that really sound like the solution for somebody in your situation?”

The kid and divorcee thing are news to me, and I pause to absorb the information then play it off like I already knew.

“Hold on,” I say. “What the hell is this really about Derek?” I lower my voice. “Is Kristina putting you up to this? This is her, isn’t it?”

“It’s not her, Sean. I want this.” He doesn’t sound convincing, and he’s avoiding my eyes again.

“No you don’t,” I say. “She’s forcing you into this, trying to take control. Just like fucking Maria.”* I point at him. “Don’t fall for it, dude.”

“Sean,” Derek says, tiredly. He meets my eyes with his for the first time since he came in the room. “You really should have moved the moment you two broke up.”

“Cut the bullshit, Derek!” I yell, and he flinches, taking a step back. I take a deep breath and steady my voice. “This is my apartment. It was mine before you moved in and I will not leave just because you and your bitch girlfriend say so.”

“Don’t call me a bitch, Sean,” Kristina yells from the room. “You dick,” she adds, and I’m suddenly embarrassed.

Derek’s face turns red.

“Don’t call her a bitch,” he echoes quietly.

* This was actually completely inaccurate, as Maria never was the controlling type. She, in fact, let me have all the freedom I wanted, trusting that I’d prove responsible enough to motivate myself and move in the right direction in all aspects of my life. She was obviously gravely mistaken.

“I just did,” I say, quietly. I know it’s childish but it feels good anyways.

Derek turns away from me for a moment, a tense moment in which I can imagine any number of things happening, half of them involving Derek launching himself at me in a fit of rage, both of us tumbling around in a pile of bloody limbs. Knowing that Kristina is in the bedroom listening to all of this—and that she is going to probably report every word of it to Maria next time she sees her—makes it even worse too.

“You’re right,” he says. “This was your apartment first. You and Maria’s, your fiancée.”

I cringe involuntarily.

“But then it wasn’t and you guys weren’t,” he says. “Then it became *our* apartment, and then, for the past nine months, it’s been pretty much mine. You don’t do anything around here, Sean. Everything you touch is filthy and Kristina and I have been the ones cleaning up after you forever now. Your room looks like a homeless person squatted here and you’re starting to look like an ex-convict or something. This apartment isn’t a hideout, Sean, it’s a residence. I live here. I study here, I’m trying to make a life for myself here. I’m tired of making excuses for you.”

“Excuses for what?”

“You, Sean,” he yells. “Just—you.”

I want to put some pants on, feel that pants would give me some leverage in this situation. But seeing as how I’m already standing here in my underwear and the argument’s already started with me in this condition, I think the act of me putting my pants on will more than likely make things worse.

“You’re trying to make a life for yourself here,” I say, and I hate myself for almost being on the verge of tears. “What the fuck do you think I’m trying to do, Derek?”

“I don’t know, Sean,” he says. “Look, I know things have been hard on you, but there’s a time when you have to move on.” His eyes drift away from mine and he runs a hand over his head. “Kristina and I are going to move in together, whether it’s here or somewhere else. I know you can’t afford this place on your own, and I seriously doubt you can find somebody to move in with you on such short notice.”

“I could find somebody,” I say sheepishly. “I know people.”

“Sure you do,” he says sarcastically. “Which group will you choose from, the retards you work with or the deadbeats you get wasted with at Dill’s every night? I bet any one of them will make the *perfect* roommate.”

I don’t tell him that those two groups of people are one and the same.

“I could get somebody random,” I say, refusing to give up.

“Sean, *I* can barely live with you,” he says. “And you’re like my brother.”

“Really?” I say sarcastically.

“Yes, really.” He throws his hands up. “Stop this, Sean. You’ve got to be practical. This isn’t an attack against you, bro. You need a change, something to jumpstart you and get you back on track. And I seriously doubt you can make anything of value happen while you’re living in this apartment. I mean, look at what you’re doing right now.”

He points an open hand in my general direction, at the Guitar Center bag and the amp and the guitar and me, and I’ve never had somebody, with one hand motion, take something I felt so strongly about and instantly bring its relevance crashing to the floor. I feel like such an idiot right then—standing there half naked still gripping a guitar I have no idea how to play, strapped around my neck like a noose—that for a second I feel like I might actually break down, fall to

my knees, sob, the whole nine. Or just kill him. I bite my lip and turn away, toward my reflection in the “Keeping It Gangster” poster. I don’t think I look nearly as good as I did before.

“Alright,” I say.

There’s a moment of silence.

“Sean,” Derek says. I can see behind me in the reflection, but only Derek’s arm is visible as he’s leaning on the wall outside my room. I raise my hand in his direction, holding up my index finger as if telling him to wait.

“Just,” I say, then pause. “Give me a couple of weeks. Then I’ll be gone. Go now, please.”

There’s another long moment of silence, my guitar rising and falling with my diaphragm as I breathe slowly. I’m thinking that Derek left when he whispers:

“I miss him too, man.”

I turn back towards the doorway, but he’s already gone.

-Lauren-

I have to go to the apartment and pick up some stuff, but I'm afraid Rick will be there. He's called me a total of twelve times in the past nine hours. In that time period, I've pretended to do my job at CVS while nursing my hangover and generally avoiding contact with anybody. Then, about two hours ago I came back to my mother's house and locked myself in my old bedroom with Justin, turning on Spongebob Squarepants for him and lying on the bed. I watch a flock of birds twist and turn in the air above a light pole before shooting off into the distance, and I think about everything that's happened in the past thirty-six or so hours. Justin falls asleep at one point and I turn off the TV, the sound of my mom downstairs doing her afternoon cardio drifting up to my room.

My bedroom looks exactly the way it did when I moved out four years ago, which is to say that the Usher Raymond poster from his *Confessions* album is still above my desk, the bulletin board next to my door is still plastered with pictures from my senior homecoming, prom and graduation, and the reproduction of van Gogh's "Starry Night" is still framed above my desk. My bookcase is still filled with all the books I read in high school, and my closet still holds all my pep-rally t-shirts, dresses and formal gowns. It's a regular blast from the past in here, only the past wasn't all that long ago. So what I feel in here isn't simple nostalgia. I *remember* these moments in my life, some of them so vividly that they still hurt or excite me almost as much as they did back then. This is the reason I've not set foot in this room more than I've had to ever since I had Justin. It's hard to imagine myself as a married mother when I'm in here. In here, I'm still eighteen, getting ready to start FIU and pissed off that I have to go to FIU because my

mother is so needy. Back then that was my main problem, feeling confined to one place by the emotional status of a family member. I had no idea.

Things are so much more complicated now and, as my phone rings once again and Rick's ringtone plays (Black Eyed Pea's "XOXOXO"—should really change that), I think that the complications are escalating by the hour.

I decide that I have to risk getting my things. I can only wear the same outfit for so long before I'll start looking and smelling like a homeless woman. I pick up Justin who grumbles in his sleep, then take him downstairs and put him in the playpen my mother bought and set up in the living room. Justin shuffles around a little until he's comfortable then falls back asleep, and I can't help but smile, then frown. It's a little manic depressive, this switch in my mood that keeps happening. I walk into the room my mother's designated as her gym. She's working out on an elliptical machine, her sports bra damp with sweat in the part covering the middle of her back.

"Mom, I'm going to get some things from the apartment," I say.

She doesn't answer me and I notice her earphones, so I walk around until I'm in her field of vision and wave my hands. She stops the machine and hops off, pulling her earphones out and grabbing a face towel from a chair near her. She dabs at her forehead, stretching from side to side as she does it. Her lean body is arguably in better shape than any normal woman her age, and my mother has no problem flaunting that fact during her workouts. Though, from what I can tell, there are never any witnesses other than her daughters, and even then only occasionally. Even now, at home with nobody but me and Justin, she's wearing a Victoria's Secret sports bra and spandex pants, her stomach flat and toned as she stretches.

"You ok, darling?" she asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m going to pick up some stuff from the apartment. Can you watch Justin? He’s in his playpen.”

“Sure.” she says, stopping her stretching and furrowing her eyebrows. “What stuff though?”

“Just—stuff.”

“Can’t you get new stuff?”

“I don’t have money for new stuff.”

She waves me off.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“No, Mom. I’ll be back in a minute, I’m just getting some things.”

“You’re going to try and make up with him, aren’t you?” she blurts out. She raises a finger slowly. “Bad idea, Lauren.”

“Mom,” I say, closing my eyes. “I need to get some clothes. Justin has no more diapers and I’ve been wearing the same outfit for two days. Can we not do this right now?”

Her arms are by her sides, out a little like she’s about to break into an aerobic routine, and for a moment I’m thinking she’s about to block me from leaving. Which would seriously upset me and cause an unnecessary dramatization of this situation. But instead she nods.

“Ok,” she says, then points at me again. “This isn’t going to be another one of your all night outings, is it?”

“No,” I say, and Sean pops into my mind. I shiver a little. “I’ll be back in an hour, tops.”

My estimation turns out to be a little longer than is necessary though. The expedition to my apartment goes surprisingly smoothly, at least when I first walk in. When I pull into the

complex and head up the elevator to our floor, I'm so tense my palms are sweating. Inside, though, the apartment is empty. I'm so grateful for this that I spend about half an hour actually enjoying packing my stuff. I pull out two suitcases from the closet, fill one with my stuff and the other with Justin's. I head downstairs with one of the bags and throw it in my car trunk then go back upstairs for the other, walking briskly but confidently, glad to be taking some initiative. I'm thinking I'm completely home free as I'm wheeling the other suitcase out of the bedroom when there's a clicking noise from the front door. The doorknob turns slowly and the door opens, and I'm stuck like a deer as Rick walks in. He seems surprised to see me at first, then not. His face drops, as do his keys. The sound startles me from my daze, frozen in place with one foot raised off the ground right outside our bedroom door.

"I'm getting some things," I say, reflexively.

He doesn't respond, stepping aside instead as I hurry towards and past him. I avoid his eyes, covertly surveying him out of the corner of mine. He looks extremely old at this moment and I admit, I feel sorry for him. Really sorry, to the point where I want to turn and hug him and tell him everything is going to be okay. I miss him a little too. Then I feel dumb for feeling sorry for him—for wanting to do *anything* for him, acutally—because, honestly, he brought this on himself. Then I feel dumb for feeling dumb because, obviously, he's a human being, somebody I care about. I'd have to be inhumane not to feel *something*. I stop in the doorway and turn to him, opening my mouth to say something, anything.

"Justin's been asking about you," I say finally. "I suggest you come pick him up when you get a chance." Pause. "And you can explain to him what's going on."

He nods and opens his mouth to respond, then closes it and nods some more. I leave him there in the doorway, still nodding, and the entire way downstairs I keep expecting him to follow. Part of me wants him to, but most of me just wants to get out of here. I get to my car without incident though. I throw the last suitcase in the trunk and get behind the wheel, then sit there for a moment, my hands shaking involuntarily. At one point I see Rick pull the venetian blinds to the side and peer down at me. There's a moment of eye contact between us which breaks the spell that's come over me. I put the car in gear, peel out of the parking lot, and don't try to stop my teeth from grinding. At least it's better than another crying fit.

STEP 5: REASSESS

-Sean-

I met Leon in eighth grade, on the basketball court behind our middle school. I was a loner then, a prototypical nerd, taken to sneaking my Game Boy outside in the waist band of my P.E. shorts and retreating behind the cafeteria spill-out area by myself to play video games while everybody else played sports. Leon came up to me that day, throwing a shadow over the screen and forcing me to look up at him, the sun creating a halo around his head so that I was momentarily—literally—blinded in his presence.

“What the hell are you doing?” Leon asked.

I pointed at the Game Boy, choosing not to answer what was clearly an idiotic question. Leon reached and snatched the Game Boy from my hand, and what I remember most about that initial contact was that it wasn't a hostile move. I don't really know how he managed to pull that off. I mean, I'd met up with bullies before that day. I was a scrawny kid, and though I could stick up for myself in some form or fashion, there's only so much a person can do or say against somebody who's three times the size of them. Leon wasn't that much bigger than me, but he was athletic, which should have automatically made him snatching my Game Boy a hostile act. There were things he did though, like keeping a totally non-hostile expression of curiosity on his face, like not jerking towards me when he took it so I would have to flinch and therefore feel emasculated, like reaching out his other hand right afterwards and helping me to my feet then saying:

“You're never going to get laid like this, bro.”

Safe to say that, from that point forward, we were inseparable.

Derek came into the picture a year and a half later, as freshmen at Sideview High. By then I'd come out of my shell and Leon and I had gained a reputation for causing trouble together. I don't really remember exactly when Derek became part of the group, other than the fact that he, Leon and I all had English together and soon what started out as me and Leon getting yelled at for talking turned into me, Leon, and Derek getting regularly kicked out of class.

After that, we were a trio, and in a typical move for high school students steeped in male testosterone, we agreed one night during the summer after our Junior year—over yells of triumph and shots of illegally-acquired tequila—to go to the same college come graduation. Couple months later we'd all been accepted to Florida State and the summer after high school saw us working to save for moving money and frantically preparing for the eight hour trip to Tallahassee to check into our dorm rooms. Leon and I got lucky and ended up roomed with each other. Derek got roomed with some random guy who spent all his time over at his girlfriend's dorm, which essentially meant that Derek lived alone. Which essentially meant that he lived with us. Derek was still seventeen for most of that first fall semester, lanky and pale as moonlight. He quickly settled into his major though, rushing Lambda Epsilon Omega Law Fraternity that first semester and spending all three and a half years afterwards planning for law school. He had it all mapped out then, his entire life, and I don't know how he fit in with me and Leon—who for the most part hadn't planned anything past moving to Tallahassee. But Derek did fit in, mostly because of Leon. Leon told me one night in our dorm room—when I expressed my annoyance of Derek's occasional bouts of stick-up-his-ass-ness—that we needed somebody with a head on his shoulders to keep us from losing ours.

“You know where we’d be without him?” he asked.

“Having fun,” I muttered. Derek and I had gotten into an argument after he told me to turn my music down so he could study and I’d replied that the library was downstairs for a reason.

“No,” Leon said. “We’d probably be kicked out by now.”

“It’s not even the end of our first semester,” I said.

“Exactly.”

That was the type of guy Leon was, a fun dude who still always managed to have the greater good somewhere in his mind, even if that mind was wasted or high beyond belief. When he switched his major from accounting to biology and told us he was going to go to med school, he told us it was because he wanted to actually do something worthwhile, that he wanted to be able to look back at his college years and say that he’d gotten something out of it other than active knowledge of how to do ten keg stands in a row. He was an effortlessly straight A student, no matter how much partying he did. So many nights after we moved out of our dorm and into the three bedroom apartment that me, him, and Derek shared, Leon would pull all-nighters with us at The Strip,^{*} get more fucked up than all of us combined and still manage to wake up—hungover and running on two hours of sleep—and make it to an eight am quiz or exam and come back only to pass out, wake up later and do it all over again. When we’d ask him later that week how the exam went, he’d shrug and say he got something like a 98% on the damn thing. After a while we stopped being surprised.

^{*} The Strip is a row of clubs and bars across the street from FSU frequented by FSU students.

At the end of the second semester of our sophomore year, Leon started dating this sorority girl named Pamela, and as a result we suddenly had a lot more chicks hanging around our apartment on the weekends.* One night, during a party Pamela threw at our place for Leon's birthday, two of her sorority sisters were in attendance. One's name was Maria, a Puerto Rican pre-med student with a bright smile and beautiful hazel eyes. The other's name was Kristina, a cute Asian lit major who grabbed Derek practically the moment she came in and still hasn't let him go.

Everything else that happened after is pretty self explanatory. Maria and I started dating, Kristina and Derek started dating, and we were all one big happy fucking family for a while. I proposed to Maria the night before our graduation and she accepted and there was partying and sex and happiness. Then we all graduated, made a mass exodus to Miami, Maria and I broke up, Leon died, and everything pretty much went to shit.

* If this sounds like a complaint, it's not meant to. Derek and I were perfectly fine with it.

-Lauren-

I open my eyes and see the vaulted ceiling in my bedroom, waiting for reality to sink in. Justin lies next to me, on the inside so that the wall blocks him from rolling off the bed. His foot twitches a little against my thigh and I want to touch his face, feel his hair, but I'm afraid I'll wake him up. I'm not yet ready to be a mother right now. Right now—7 am—is my time. My time to think and ponder everything. This is how it's been for the past four weeks since I left Rick alone in the apartment. I wake up and, for the first few seconds, I think I'm back in high school, that I have to get ready soon and that at any second my mother or sister will come bursting through the door yelling for me to hurry up and get dressed. Then I feel Justin next to me and remember. Only then do the past few weeks actually come back into my head, and it's jarring every single time.

It's been a week since Rick stopped calling. Two days ago he came to pick up Justin for the night and I got Justin ready, packing his bag and giving him food and getting him dressed. Then, when Rick showed up, I had my mom take care of getting him out to Rick for me while I hid in my room, feeling like a teenager all over again. And at the same time not. I don't know what my mother said to Rick, but there was a bit of yelling from what I could hear and then suddenly she was in my room.

“You shouldn't be letting your son leave with him,” she said.

“It's his son too, Mom,” I replied, peeking out the window and watching Rick's Mustang pull out of the driveway. “I can't not let him see his son.”

“Like hell you can't,” she said. “He can't be a good husband, what makes you think he can be a good father?”

I turned to her, crossing my arms and studying her flushed face.

“I kind of think those two roles are exclusive of each other, Mom,” I said.

“They are one and the same,” she said, and now I know she’s not talking about me and Rick anymore.

“Dad was an amazing father, Mom,” I said, a lot louder than I meant. I immediately regretted it when my mother looked at me like I’d just spit in her face and stormed out of the room. I spent the rest of the night and most of the next morning waiting for Rick to drop Justin back here, partly because I missed him, partly because I knew Justin’s presence would be the easiest way to get my mom talking to me again.

I felt bad about bringing my father up at first, but part of me felt like my mom deserved it for making such an inane suggestion. No matter what’s going on between me and Rick, I would never deny Justin his father. I don’t see why this should affect him at all actually, other than the fact that he’ll more than likely be growing up in a separate-parent household (which already seems like enough for him to deal with without there being custody battles and the like).

With all the commotion going on during that time, though, it’s only these early morning moments that have allowed me to do any serious pondering on the subject of me and Rick’s estrangement. And I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m not actually mad at him. Not anymore at least. It’s almost like—with that slap I gave him in his boss’s office and the subsequent encounter at the apartment while picking up my clothes—I released all my anger towards him in one blast of emotion, then walked out on my sympathy. Truth be told, even when I hit him the only thing I was really mad about was the humiliation of being cheated on. It hurt to know that there was something not satisfactory about a relationship I was fifty percent of. It seemed then, in

some deep part of my psyche, that there was something in *us* that had allowed my husband to be alright with the notion of infidelity. Not just him. I'm not delusional though; I don't think for a second that this is my fault. But I also know Rick, and he's not a bad guy. Dim, but overall normal. Which means, as I've figured out over the past couple of weeks of introspection, that Rick probably feels the same way about his life right now as I do: like three years ago we both fell into something neither one of us particularly knew how to handle. And now we're both suffering the consequences of inexperience.

These thoughts consume me every morning, and today is no exception. I watch Justin sleep, then I stare at the ceiling, then it's back to Justin again, all the time wondering where this is all going. I can't stay living in my childhood bedroom at my mother's house. Not with my son and no plan for the future. I want to figure this out. I *have* to figure this out.

At that thought, my stomach turns. I suddenly feel like I'm in a rollercoaster drop, everything inside me turning into gravity-less mush. It's an oddly familiar sensation, and before I realize what's going on I'm in the bathroom, bent over the toilet and hacking up the remains of the grilled chicken and mashed potato dinner my mother cooked last night. I lie on the bathroom floor moaning for another five minutes before, as abruptly as it came, the nausea disappears, replaced by an icy stone of recognition in my gut, which I put in a very tightly sealed box of denial.

I return to my bedroom, careful not to wake Justin, and lie in the bed again. The nausea returns a few minutes later, but I close my eyes and will it away. I will it all away, the feeling and the thoughts, focusing on the fact that I have to start getting ready for work in a few minutes. Which I do. I make a mental list of all the little things I have to do before I leave. Then I get up,

get dressed, wake Justin, get him dressed, go downstairs and say good morning to my mother, pretend to eat a bagel (but really I take one bite, gag, then discretely toss it in the trash), feed Justin, then say goodbye to my mother and my son and walk out of the front door. I do all of this without letting on that there's anything wrong. Which there isn't, I tell myself. I drive to work on US-1, listening to Power 96 and nodding my head to the songs, turning the radio up when my thoughts try to intrude. When I reach work, I walk inside and back to the pharmacy—smile and wave at Steve and Janice, the morning cashier—then put on my coat and sit in front of the fresh stack of prescriptions. I don't indicate that there's anything different about me, because there is nothing different, aside from the estranged husband. And I've got that under control.

About an hour after sitting on my stool, a wave of nausea hits me again and I leave a pill bottle half-full on the counter, speed walking into the bathroom and barely making it to the toilet before I'm dry heaving. Only then does my padlocked box of denial get blasted open. Without a word to anybody—not even so much as eye contact—I walk out of the bathroom, up to the family planning aisle, grab the first pregnancy test I see and lock myself back inside the same stall I just threw up in. The same stall I took this same pregnancy test in three and a half years ago.

Ten minutes later the stick in my hand is sporting two blue lines, and I can't help but think how it's the indicators in our lives that affect us the most. When I reminisce on the upheaval that was my first pregnancy, the most emotional moment that comes to mind isn't the nine months of expanding belly, or the swollen ankles, or the mood swings (though the labor itself—for which I gladly opted for the epidural and it still hurt like hell—was an emotional moment that sort of trumped everything else). When I look back on that time period, it's those

two lines on the pregnancy tests that pop into my mind. I remember sitting in the bathroom then, my hand shaking faintly, the white tiled floor a stark contrast to the bright blue lines glaring up at me and telling me so many things I didn't want to hear. I remember thinking back then that it seemed so unnatural for two simple lines—mere geometric symbols—to be able to do so many things at once.

And here I am in this position again, sitting in the bathroom at my job staring at lines that are effectively screaming at me *you did it again!* I think about getting another test, to be sure. But I'm suddenly so tired. There's no point. I know it's true. I knew it from the moment I first threw up earlier. In fact, I think I've known for days now. My breasts have been sore, and there've been cravings: chocolate covered peanuts, rum and raisin ice cream, and "Everybody Loves Raymond" reruns (I normally hate that show, but lately I've been near hysterical with laughter within the first five minutes of each episode).

I walk slowly back out to the counter where the prescription I was filling sits waiting. Ironically (to me, at least) it's for Cialis, the main competitor of Viagra. I brush the tan tablets with the index finger of my latex gloved right hand. At the register, there's an old woman purchasing her prescription. I watch her go, wondering what she sees when she looks back at the landscape of her life. If she can even see the landscape, if it's even that organized in retrospect or if life always remains this cluster of images and emotions with no order or meaning other than the moment at hand. I don't know which thought is more depressing.

The obvious issue here sounds so simple and yet has been the motive for murders, the cause of extensive, historic legal wars, and the frequent topic of TV talk show series.

Whose baby am I pregnant with right now?

I can't believe I have to ask myself that. I'm one of those people now. The woman who has to ask, who has to potentially get a paternity test. You hear about it all the time, to the point where I don't even think it's that big a deal in public. It's not like if one of my friends were to come to me and tell me they have to ask who the father of their kid is, I'd ostracize them. But being familiar with a situation and actually *being* the situation are two different things.

I can't know who the father is for sure unless I visit a doctor and find out how far along I am. Considering the timing of the morning sickness and cravings, though, I'm leaning toward Sean. Which baffles me, because 1) I'm on birth control and have been ever since I had Justin; and 2) I don't think I would have had unprotected sex with a man I just met. I don't exactly remember if I did or not—the details are hazy from all the alcohol I consumed that night—but I'd like to think that the combination of alcohol and despondence wouldn't have overridden my basic safety instincts. Granted, sleeping with Sean in the first place was already completely against character. And birth control is only 99.7% effective. I find it hard to believe that I fall into that 0.3% bracket, but the thought leads to a set of conclusions: 1) I *am* pregnant, this I'm sure of, which renders the birth control argument ineffective, regardless of who the father is; and 2) in thinking about my encounter with Sean, I suddenly have a distinct image of Sean's flaccid, unprotected penis being tucked away in his pants the morning after.

And above everything else is the lingering thought, flashing back and forth through my mind like a pendulum: regardless of what I think about anything, I'm still pregnant. I'm pregnant.

"I'm pregnant," I whisper.

"You say something?"

I'm startled by Steve, then by the whiteness of the walls and counters and tile all around me in the pharmacy, the bleached cleanliness of it all.

"Nothing," I say. "Nothing."

Steve raises an eyebrow and turns back to his computer. By the register, Janice is flipping through the latest issue of *US Weekly* and I'm struck with a huge sense of déjà vu. Just days ago—hours ago, even—I was staring at that same magazine and worrying about what was going to happen between me and Rick, how Justin would take it in the long run if he and I remained separated. Now I'm wondering who the father of my unborn baby is, and all thoughts of Rick's unfaithfulness seem like distant memories. Almost like an unrelated joke made in the moments after a tragedy. It's all irrelevant now. It never really was to begin with, actually. All that matters is what's growing inside of me, again. And who is half-responsible for its existence.

God, I'm so confused. And the truth of the matter is that I can't be too upset about whose it is either way, seeing as how I don't actually want to have a baby with either one of these men.

Which brings to light a second major issue:

What am I going to do about it?

I wasn't raised in a religious household. I've never really had any specific feelings about abortions; always sort of felt that what other people do with their bodies is their choice. In the end, though, I know I won't go that route, simply because of Justin. To get an abortion now would be almost like a subconscious admission that I made a mistake by keeping him. Almost as if I'd be saying to Justin, *This is what I should've done with you from the beginning*. I know it's a ridiculous thought, but everybody has to justify things in their own way. It's how we humans work. I've come to terms with that.

And in that moment I realize that—on some level—I made the decision to have this baby and keep it from the moment I saw the positive results on the pregnancy. And with that decision made, the most glaring next question for me seems to be who to break the news to first. I drift through the rest of my work day and before I know it I'm back at my mother's house. I stand in the kitchen with my purse slung over my shoulder, watching her as she sits with Justin at the dining table and tries to get him to eat cut up pieces of barbecue chicken without smearing sauce all over his face and hair. Which I've already told her is impossible. If she doesn't want to have to clean barbecue sauce out of a toddler's hair, she shouldn't put barbecue sauce on the toddler's food. But my mother likes, for some reason, to act like she didn't give birth to and raise two kids of her own.

Seeing her in this position, I can't break the news to her. The scene is too lovely, almost heartbreaking in a way. She loves being a grandmother to Justin, and I love being his mother. And I don't want to take that attention away from him or her right now. Instead I smile.

"I'm going for a quick shower," I say.

"Ok, honey," my mother says, smiling up at me with a plastic spoon wavering in front of Justin's face. "Everything okay?"

Justin giggles and I smile at him.

"Fine," I say. "Everything's awesome."

"That's good, hun," she says absently, turning back to Justin. "Relax a little, I'll finish up with him down here."

I nod and head upstairs to the bathroom, stripping down to nothing and standing under the showerhead. I turn the faucet on, then keep twisting it until the water is piping hot, my skin

turning red, steam rising up and filling the bathroom like smoke. Eventually I can't tell if I'm crying or if it's the heat irritating my eyes. Either way, it hurts. Either way, I don't want to get out of here. I want to let the hot water get hotter and the bathroom get steamier until I'm enveloped in a comfortable cloud of nothingness. But things don't happen like that in real life. Soon, I hear Justin wailing outside the bathroom door and I know that it's Mommy time now. I towel off and get dressed, grab my son and sit with him in front of the TV to watch "Spongebob." After a few minutes, I lean towards him and touch the side of his head. He looks up at me with sleepy eyes and a smile. I smile back, deciding the first person I should tell is the only person I know for a fact won't judge me.

"Honey," I say to him, caressing the back of his head. "I'm pregnant again."

Justin keeps smiling, reaches up and touches my cheek. I close my eyes and feel his tiny fingers brush my skin, willing back the tears I know will only scare him away.

-Sean-

Things haven't really changed all that much around the Easton residence. Eight AM Saturday morning, I'm jarred awake by the sound of Yellowman* singing at ear-busting decibels from the living room. I roll out of bed and walk into the living room in my underwear and there's my dad, hairy belly out with his heavy mustache twitching every few seconds as he chews on a toothpick in his underwear, TV on mute, baseball highlights flashing across the screen.† He ignores me for a minute and I can tell he's trying hard not to smile.

"Morning," he says finally, gruffly, never diverting his attention from the TV. I turn away, but not before catching the back end of a smirk. This is my dad's idea of giving attention to the family as a whole, and I grumble.‡ My mother is most likely in her room right now, cutting coupons before her weekly expedition to the supermarket, and Marcus will be passed out until at least noon, able to sleep through a fucking hurricane. This is the weekend ritual, always has been. It still has the uncanny ability to annoy the shit out of me.

I rub my stinging face and want to say something to my dad about turning down the music, but I know that's pointless so I suck it up and brush my teeth, wash my face and throw on some clothes, then head into my mom's room where she has last week's Sunday newspaper in one hand, a pair of scissors in the other.

"Mom," I say. "Does he have to do this every weekend?"

She scans me from head to foot then returns to her paper.

"You shouldn't be sleeping this late anyway," she says.

* Reggae artist.

† Makes you wonder whether or not this was all hereditary.

‡ Secretly, I've always thought the way he went about it all was endearing in its own, screwed up way. Me and Dad have never been the "I love you, son, I love you, dad" type. More of a pat on the back and a stealthy smile. My mom says it's a Caribbean male thing, that British men are the same way. Works for us.

No surprise there. I lie back on the bed and sigh.

“You sure it’s okay that I’m here right now?” I ask.

“Where?” she asks.

“Here,” I say, motioning around me. “Back home.”

“Exactly,” she says dismissively. “This is your home.”

“Yeah,” I say, scratching my head. “I’m twenty-five, though. And I haven’t lived at home for like six years.”

My mom shrugs.

“Doesn’t that bother you even a little?” I ask.

“No,” she says, then smiles. “We’re glad to have you back, honey.”

“You might be,” I say. “I doubt Dad is.”

She shakes her head.

“No, actually, your father’s thrilled.”

“Yeah, right.”

“He is.”

I let the silence marinate for a minute, though inside I’m seething and have no idea why.

“So you’re trying to tell me you both are glad that I moved back in here?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

She smiles again.

“We missed you, baby.”

“Yeah, but I’m your oldest son who had to move back in because he couldn’t afford his apartment anymore on his shitty bartender’s salary.”

“Watch the language,” she says, snipping away a slice of paper.

“I just don’t know how you guys could actually be happy to have me back,” I say.

“I just told you,” she says, and I can tell she’s getting aggravated. “We missed you. What’s your problem?”

“I just,” I say, then groan. “It shouldn’t be okay. You guys shouldn’t be happy. I should be hearing about how this isn’t right and I’m irresponsible or something. But I’ve been here for weeks now and you guys haven’t said anything to me about it. You’re making it too easy.”

“Well,” my mom says. “You’re responsible enough as far as I see it. You went to school, got your degree, and now times are hard so you need our help.” She shrugs. “So we’re helping, and we’re happy to.”

And right then it hits me, why it is my skin is prickling and my hands are clammy and my heart is racing in my chest. This aggravates me because the only reason my parents are okay with me being back home is because I have a degree. And once again I’m being defined by my college career. Once again that damn paper hanging on the wall is what everybody cares about, not what I’m actually doing with my life. I hop up and return to the living room, where I turn down the music and approach my dad.

“You’re pissed that I had to move back, aren’t you?”

“What?” he asks, glancing up at me lazily.

I wait. I know he heard me.

“No,” he says finally. “Who said you could touch my music?”

“Yes you are,” I say, pointing at him. “You’re irritated that I don’t have my shit together.”

“Who has their shit together? Economy’s bad, government’s not helping it. I feel sorry for your generation.” He clears his throat. “Anything we can do to help, I’m fine with.”

“You should be pissed though,” I say. “It’s not the economy. I’ve been slacking, spending money where I shouldn’t have been and not even attempting to find a better job than the one I have.”

“No options anyway,” he mutters. “Damn government trying to convince everybody things are ok when they’re not.”

“Dad, I’m not talking about the government. I’m talking about me.”

“Affects us all,” he says. “Damn Congress, can’t do anything right.”

A couple of years ago my Dad got TiVo and proceeded to start taping hours upon hours of C-SPAN and CNN. He’s always been into political news, but now trying to have a serious conversation with him about anything else is fucking impossible.

“Does anybody see how screwed up I am right now?” I say, mostly to myself.

“Everybody is,” my dad says. Then he picks up a remote beside him on the couch—not the TV remote—and presses a button and the music is blasting again. I groan and am about to storm back over to my mother when Marcus pops up in front of me from the hallway bathroom, his face puffy from sleep.

“Dude, stop.”

“No,” I say. “This is ridiculous.”

“I know what you’re doing,” he says. “Stop it, man. Before they come to their senses.”

His eyes are level with mine, and he raises a brow and nods towards my bedroom. I grunt and turn, walking in and slamming the door. I pick up my guitar, sit back on the bed with it lying across my chest and start strumming out Green Day's "When I Come Around," muttering to myself until the music lulls me into a pacified mind-state.

My room's been transformed from my dad's office back to almost exactly the way it was before I left for college, complete with bed, desk, dresser and TV stand, and I know the restoration is part of what's aggravating me so much about my parent's acceptance of my situation. They accept it, but I don't. This is regression at its finest, like in even attempting to take one step forward with my life I somehow ended up getting sucked a thousand steps backward in time. For a couple of days now the guitar's kept complete despondence at bay, as I've obsessively scoured Google for tips, learning about tabs and power chords and strumming techniques and generally playing until my fingers are repeatedly raw and blistered, healed then raw and blistered again. But I can already tell even that will eventually start losing momentum. I still love it right now, at the moment, and I've gotten so used to the feel of the polished wood against my stomach that without it I feel naked, and not the type of naked I always was back at the Palm Springs apartment but *soul-naked*.^{*} But I'm getting restless. There's something brewing in me, something that was seeded over a year ago when Leon died and Maria left, something that's been steadily growing ever since. A desire for something more than the norm, something that could very possibly make me feel like I actually accomplished something with my life.

I can tell simply learning guitar isn't going to be enough though. Every douche at FSU with a bag of weed and a pair of sandals had a guitar back when I was an undergraduate. There's

^{*} Whatever soul-naked means. It just sounded right at the time.

nothing unique about that. And with that thought I feel the epiphany I've been on the verge of for days coming to fruition, like a constipated person seconds away from his first shit in days.

I jump up from the bed and hop over to my computer, opening up iTunes and checking through the massive number of playlists I've assembled on there. There are over 200 rock bands' music on my computer, everything from Alien Ant Farm to Flobots to Foo Fighters to Yellowcard. And I've listened to them all, practically studied them. With this much background in music, there's no reason I can't do anything I want to.

And what I want to do is start a band. So I will.

I'm going to learn how to play this guitar properly, then I'm going to start a band.

I stand in front of my mirror, shirtless and gripping my guitar, and strum down hard, smiling when my dad yells from the living room for me to turn that shit down.

-Lauren-

I decide that the best course of action is also the hardest—I'm going to tell my mother about the pregnancy, then my sister, then Rick. I then realize I can't do any of that, so I scrap the idea and decide to tell Sean. I can figure it out from there. This should be an easier route, simply because Sean's a stranger to me still. I don't really know him and, therefore, have much less invested in his opinion on the subject. I need to tell somebody besides my son, but I'm too scared to tell the people who are a much more ingrained part of my life.

Telling Sean is by far the easiest choice, but it is not easy in any sense of the word to pick up my cell phone and dial his number knowing what I know. The number has been lying dormant in my contacts for over a month now, a time span which seems to compact itself into the three rings it takes him to answer. That month is there in my mind when he says hello, stopping me from responding at first. I'm lying on my bed at my mother's house, listening to her downstairs making baby noises at Justin, who laughs loud and high-pitched every few seconds. When Sean picks up, it's all I can do not to hang up and forget about it all.

"Hi-Sean-it's-Lauren-how-are-you?" I say, finally. It comes out in a panting, rushed voice, and I realize that I've been holding my breath ever since I picked up the phone.

"Lauren," he says, skeptically. For a second I'm humiliated by the fact that he might very well not remember anything about me. It *was* a one night stand after all. I wouldn't blame him. Then recognition enters his voice. "*Lauren*. Hi, hello. What's up? Wow, how are you?"

There's an obvious nervous energy in his voice which calms me for some reason.

"Fine," I say. "Listen, I was wondering if we could meet up some time. Soon. To talk."

"Talk?" he repeats.

“Yes,” I say, choosing not to elaborate over the phone. It’s already an awkward situation without it having to take place on an electronic device. Only thing I think could be worse than revealing my news to Sean on the phone would be if I texted it to him. That would be a hell of a thing to find out from a tiny electronic screen.

“Talk about what?” he asks, which throws me off.

“Uh,” I stutter. “Nothing. In particular, I mean. I mean, just talk. Hang out. Catch up.”

There’s a long moment of silence on the phone, and I’m actually scared that he’s going to turn me down. I can’t really tell, either, if I’m scared because I need to tell him I’m pregnant or I’m scared because I don’t want to be rejected. It’s odd, almost exhilarating.

“Ok,” he says finally. “When?”

“Are you free tonight?” I ask.

“Uh, well.” He makes a sound like clucking his tongue. “Yeah, I guess. I mean, yeah. I’m free.”

“Ok. Where do you want to meet?” I ask.

He chuckles.

“You called me,” he says. “Don’t you have somewhere you want to go?”

“No, not particularly.” I pause. “Wherever’s most convenient for you.”

“Ok. You know the T.G.I.Fridays in the Falls?”

“Yeah.”

“There.”

“Ok,” I say. “Eight o’clock ok with you?”

“Yeah,” he says. He sounds very tired. I wonder what’s been going on in his life recently. I wonder if there are any developments he’s had to deal with in the past month since our little tryst that would maybe rival mine. I doubt it, but it would be interesting to know either way. I almost ask him, and imagine circumstances where I wasn’t going to T.G.I.Friday’s to tell this stranger I might be pregnant with his baby. In the imagined situation I’m meeting up with him to tell him about who I am, who I want to be and who I think he can be to me, hoping to hear the same things back from him. The thought is pleasantly depressing, a melancholy consideration I brush away like crumbs found from a really good meal eaten a long time ago. I don’t know Sean, but I realize now what his initial appeal was: the newness and freeness he represented. Sean has his own problems, undoubtedly, but he isn’t beleaguered by the same issues I am. Which automatically made—makes—him interesting. But, now, he’s about to be beleaguered by what I have to tell him. A whole heap of beleaguered.

We hang up and I lie in the bed for what seems like forever, clouds drifting across my vision in the otherwise flawless Miami sky. Eventually Justin toddles into the room and tries to climb on the bed—a feat which very well could end in disaster—and I stand, pick him up then go downstairs to act like the decent, heartbroken daughter I’m supposed to be.

-Sean-

I hang up the phone and pick up the paper in front of me, covered in words and scratch outs. I've spent most of the day trying to figure out a name for my new band. I know that a band, by definition, consists of more than one person and this "band's" only member is still me. I know this, I'm not retarded. I should be out finding other people to make this thing proper. I'm just so goddamn excited, and making up a name is a lot more instant than going out and recruiting, as far as immediate results go at least. The list of band names is extensive at first, steadily getting cut down until I'm left with four:

1. Last Call
2. Already Dead
3. Life Remembered
4. Final Destination*

Then Lauren calls. After I hang up with her, my chain of thought is completely thrown, and now all four of the names seem stupid. Supremely stupid. Like what-the-hell-was-I-thinking type of stupid. It was weird to hear from her, even weirder that she wants to meet up. I don't know what to make of it. She sounded really odd on the phone, almost like somebody had forced her to pick up and call. Which is ridiculous, but still gives me this edge of insecure apprehension about tonight.

I wonder—for a second—if I'll get laid again.

* This almost didn't make the list, due to the fact that I thought I'd get sued for copyright infringement or something if the band ever took off, and yes I was thinking about the distant possibility that it could. Then I remembered something one of my professors told me in an undergrad English class about how titles can't be copyrighted, and decided the name would sound much cooler on my band than those progressively-stupid movies. On a side note, it wasn't until much later that I realized how fucking morbid all these initial name possibilities were.

The paper flutters beneath my breath and I keep thinking about Lauren and keep getting images of her naked and grinding on top of me then I get fed up and toss the paper aside. It annoys me, sometimes, how much women can consume guys' minds. I don't know if it's the same for women as far as men go, but it's like the very presence of even a *thought* about a woman we find even *remotely* attractive has the potential to completely devour our psyche. Or mine, at least. I mean, I want to concentrate on *this* right now, my band, something I'm passionate about that I'm completely in control of, at least in this initial stage when it's only me doing all the planning. But now I *can't* think of only this because Lauren's face and smile and naked body have entered my thoughts, pushing everything else to the back of my mind like some stage-hogging showoff and rendering me almost comatose with indecision. It's like my IQ's dropped a hundred points in five minutes.

The band name comes to me then. It's a simple one that swims up from the depths of my stupor and attaches itself behind my eyes, running like a marquee across my vision and immediately taking hold of my enthusiasm. My other four names are immediately doomed to the garbage can. I grab another sheet of paper and write the name out:

Fools of Man.

I roll it around on my tongue and it feels right. *Fools of Man.* The sight of it gives me a strong sense of triumph, pride, confidence. A sense of legitimacy. I'm going to do this. I'm actually going to start a band. Whether or not it goes anywhere is another thing, but I'm not going to get too far ahead of myself. The main objective now is to find the other pieces of the puzzle. I'm so excited though that I want to tell somebody about it all now. But who, I don't

know. Derek and I aren't on speaking terms, and I've spent enough time trying to convince my parents I've got my head stuck up my ass. I don't want to push it.

I stand up and walk out of my bedroom, go down the hall to my brother's room and knock on his door. He yells above his music for me to come in and I step into a room that's dark as night with a black light on, even though it's four o'clock in the afternoon and bright as hell outside. My brother's on his computer on dictionary.com, techno music blaring from his speakers. I'm guessing these are his obsessions of the day, or week. Last Tuesday I came in here to chat and he was blasting Kid Cudi and downloading pictures of Megan Fox in a bikini.

He turns the music down, swiveling around in his chair.

"What's up?"

"Nothing," I say. I don't want to jump in to my band idea. I kind of want it to come up fluidly. I don't know how to do that, but I'm actively seeking an opportunity. "What you doing?"

"Nothing," he answers. "You know what my favorite word in the English language is?"

"No."

"Inebriated. It makes being drunk sound classy."

"You know I'm your older brother right?" I say. "I'm not supposed to be okay with that."

He turns to me, shrugs.

"Whatever," I say. "Guess what? I'm starting a band." Screw seeking the right moment.

Marcus raises an eyebrow.

"A band?"

"Yeah," I say. "A rock band."

"I get the concept," he says. "With who?"

“Haven’t figured that out yet. But I’ve got a name. Fools of Man.”

He taps his lip, thoughtful.

“I like it,” he says, then rolls his eyes. “Fine. I’m in.”

I laugh, snort, say “Yeah, right.”

Marcus gives me a hurt frown, and I don’t know if he’s serious or not.

“You can’t play anything,” I say.

“Yeah I can.”

“Really?” I say. “News to me. What?”

He points at his computer.

“Your computer,” I say. “You can play your computer. Is that supposed to make sense?”

“Sean,” he says, laughing. “You do realize this is 2011, right?”

I let my mouth hang open a little.

“Yeah,” I say, raising an eyebrow. “So?”

“You ever heard of dubstep?”

“Is that what this crap is?” I say, pointing at his speakers.

“You are such an old fuck,” he says.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at.”

“Dubstep,” he says. “Drum and bass. House music. Half of the rock albums you listen to all the time. Trent Reznor made like an entire Nine Inch Nails album in his freaking basement by himself.” He motions towards his computer speakers, the techno music still playing on low volume. “You think the guys that make this shit know how to play any actual instruments? Dude, it’s *all* electronic today.”

“I have no idea how to do any of that,” I say.

“Hence the reason I’m agreeing to join your band.”

He turns to his computer, clicks his mouse and the music shuts off then he clicks it a couple more times and, within moments, a program opens up on his screen with a bunch of lights and switches and a sound wave monitor on top. My brother smiles then presses more buttons and soon there’s the booming of a bass drum. He nods his head to the beat, presses another button and a snare drum pops in, then a cymbal, and soon he’s got a whole slew of noise coming out of the speakers. He adds in some other sounds, piano music and all that and I hold my hand up.

“Ok, ok,” I yell. “I get the point.” He turns off the music and I put my hand down. “You teach yourself to do that?”

“It’s a computer program,” he says. “Not much teaching involved. You press a button and it makes a sound. Cut the middle man out, you know?”

“The middle man being the actual playing of an actual instrument.”

He shrugs.

“It’s official,” I say. “We are not in the same generation.”

“Fuck you,” he says.

“You can actually play that thing?” I ask.

“Hook it up to your amp and I don’t see why not.”

I sit back, crack my knuckles. The thought is intriguing. I mean, I don’t know any local musicians off the top of my head,* and I’m not Trent Reznor. I can’t do this alone. Marcus is my brother. If I can’t trust him to help me out with taking this seriously, then I can’t trust anybody.

* Other than Derek, of course. Who was estranged at that moment.

“Just seems like a cop out,” I say.

“To you,” he says. “Not to me. Same shit, the way I look at it. Besides.” He smiles.

“You’ll still be able to fumble around with that ax you’ve got in there.”

“Sounds obscene,” I say.

“It is.”

I laugh and stand.

“Ok,” I say. “You’re in, but you’re only allowed to play one instrument. The drums, or something. I need to find somebody else who can play another real one. I’m not going to be the one idiot in a two man band playing guitar while you’re back there sounding like a regular fucking symphony orchestra.”

“What about Derek?” he asks.

I frown, turn away. Of course the thought occurred to me, like five seconds after my initial idea to start the band in the first place. I’ve been steadily pushing the notion away, though part of me recognizes that this is my only other option. Derek is the only actual musician I know, and I’m not about to hold open auditions for a band that doesn’t yet exist and might never leave my parents’ garage. Derek has been calling me every other day since I moved out, trying to reconcile and keep our friendship from entering further into the realm of nonexistence. I’m still pissed off about the banishment I received from my own apartment, but the longer I’m in my parents’ house, the less I care. I thought the vibe and circumstances of living with them again would be the same as they used to be, but they’re not. I moved out of here when I was 18, barely graduated from high school. I’m 25 now, my parents older and less likely to give a shit whether

or not I stay out 'til six in the morning, or come home plastered, or start a garage band. But the thought of calling Derek and asking him to do anything for me makes me sick to my stomach.

“I don't know about that,” I say to Marcus.

“Dude,” he says, leaning back in his computer chair. “You can't still be mad about that.”

“I most certainly can be,” I say.

“I'm glad he did it,” he says.

“Really?” I say, sarcastically.

“Yeah. You *were* screwed up, man. Everybody saw it, we just didn't want to say anything.”

“Everybody like who?” I ask.

“Me, Mom, Dad. Every time you came over to visit you looked worse. Derek's just the only one who had the balls to say something.”

“So you all were talking behind my back too then,” I say.

“Bro, who *doesn't* have people talking behind their back?” He leans forward in his chair. “You think I don't know Mom talks to you about me whenever I'm not around?”

I open my mouth to say something but he never breaks eye contact. I finally turn away and shake my head.

“Sometimes,” I say. “You are too fucking smart for your own good.”

“Impossible,” he says, grinning and turning back to his computer. “Call Derek, bro. And let me know when we start practicing.”

I head back to my room, pick up my guitar and put it around my neck. I'm about to play when I decide, instead, to call Derek and get it all over with. I pick up my phone, scroll to his

number in my contacts, pause. I'm more nervous than I've been in a very long time, more nervous even than I was moments ago when I was on the phone with Lauren. I press talk before I can change my mind and a moment later Derek answers the phone, sounding cautious.

"Hello?" he says.

"Hey," I say. "You want to play bass in my band?" No sense in beating around the bush.

The Derek I'm expecting to come in contact with would laugh, ask me if I've lost my mind, suck his teeth and tell me to grow up, possibly even hang up on me.* This Derek on the phone right now must still be in some form of remorse though, or just missing what I'm assuming is the only true friend he's had since he got with Kristina and fell into the unavoidable realm of "boyfriend who doesn't hang out with his buddies anymore." Either way, Derek doesn't ask any questions, doesn't make any negative comments, just says:

"Sure."

I hear something fall in the background and the phone makes a little noise like he's fumbling around with it then he gets back on the line.

"When do we start?" he asks.

I pause for a moment, taken aback by his swift acceptance. I recover quickly though and say:

"Tomorrow. Ten am, my parents' garage."

"Cool," he says. "I'll be there."

"Thanks."

"Sean," he says.

* Or all of the above.

“Yeah?”

There’s a long pause on the other end, then:

“Good to hear from you, man.”

I nod, but I’m on a phone so I have to say:

“Yeah. You too, bro.”

We hang up and my thoughts return to the previous phone call I had from Lauren.

Prospects for the future, bringing with them the initial inklings of a sentiment that has eluded me for some time now: hope. I turn to the large mirror above my dresser, flex my arms and smile. One positive outcome of moving back in with my parents is I’m not comfortable walking around the house in my underwear anymore. As a result, I’m currently wearing a pair of FSU basketball shorts and a plain white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off. The skin on my legs is ashy, like there’s a layer of chalk dust on them from my knees to my ankles. My shirt has a stain on the bottom right—pizza sauce, I think—and I need a shave. For one, brief second, I consider showing up to Friday’s like this, to see Lauren’s reaction. See if maybe I could be one of those “I don’t give a shit” rock star guys that pops in on dates twenty minutes late looking like he rolled out of bed and, yet, still manages to woo the girl with a dazzling arsenal of charisma, wit, and nonchalance and eventually end up back in her bedroom, watching as she does unimaginable things to him with every part of her body. Then I tell myself that most men don’t turn into that guy at twenty-five. Becoming that guy more than likely is on par with what it takes to become a professional athlete: you’re either born with it or not, and either way it takes years of practice to perfect.

In other words, I’m stuck with me. My shoulders slouch a little as I head into the bathroom for a shower.

-Lauren-

I pull onto US-1, then immediately cut across traffic to the left turning lane for a u-turn to go back and hide in my mother's house. Just drive back home and sit in my bedroom with Justin lying next to me with a box of Cheez-It watching cartoons for the rest of the night. My leg jitters against the brake, my fingers involuntarily tapping against the steering wheel. I close my eyes and tell myself that this will not kill me. I will be fine. Sean is another human being, a man who has every right to know he might be a father. Only then am I able to put my right blinker on, get out of the turning lane, and continue down US-1 towards my rendezvous with him. Despite the pep talk, I almost turn back two more times on the way. In the end, it takes me about forty-five minutes to get from Coral Gables to The Falls Shopping Mall where the T.G.I.Friday's in question is located, normally a fifteen minute drive. The closer I get to the restaurant the more scared I am, and the more I berate myself for thinking I could go through with something like this. I can't tell a complete stranger I *might* be pregnant with his baby. Shouldn't I have at least found out for sure first? What if I tell Sean and he laughs and tells me he's infertile? I honestly cannot think of anything that would be more embarrassing.

But, then again, there's no way I can find out for sure *without* telling him. DNA tests, from what I know, usually need two different sets of DNA to test against each other. Which means I would have had to get something from Sean regardless. But I could have gone to Rick and done a test with him, which would have revealed one way or the other. But can you even do DNA tests on an embryo? I have no idea. Which brings my mind full circle to the abortion thoughts I was having earlier.

By time I pull into the parking lot outside of Friday's I'm a wreck. I sit in the car for a couple of minutes, taking deep breaths to ward off the panic attack I feel is about to take me over. It takes a moment, but I finally calm down enough to open my car door and walk towards the restaurant. I immediately spot Sean sitting by the entrance, where there's a small crowd of people milling around waiting for tables. I didn't consider that on a Saturday night the restaurant would be packed. Which means Sean and I are going to have to sit out here and make small talk until we get called inside. The thought makes me want to go sit back in the car and hyperventilate again.

Sean turns towards me and smiles as I approach, a disarming move which momentarily alleviates my nervousness. I forgot how cute he was, his skinny frame and strong jaw line. He's wearing sandals and jeans shorts with a polo shirt, a casual outfit I'd usually balk at (I can actually remember moments where I have balked at other guys who approached me wearing almost exactly the same thing) but which works on him. There's a moment during which the surreal nature of the meeting gets to me and all my inhibitions suddenly melt away. I completely forget Rick, my mother, even my unborn baby and imagine that we really are here to innocently probe each other's minds. I stop a few feet in front of him and try to offset the awkwardness of it all by throwing out my hand to shake his just as he's leaning in to give me a kiss on the cheek. He pauses and his face drops a little. I open my mouth to tell him it was a mistake, that I wasn't trying to be impersonal. But it's already happened and he takes my hand lightly in his own, shakes, then drops it.

"Nice to see you again," he says.

“You too.” I pull a piece of hair back behind my ear and study a couple across the walkway. “How long’s the wait?”

“I put us down twenty minutes ago,” he says. “They said twenty-five, so it should be any moment now.”

“You’ve been here for twenty minutes?” I ask, my eyes widening.

He shrugs, smiles.

“No big deal.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, my face getting hotter. “I—there was a lot of traffic on the way here.”

“It’s okay,” he says.

“This is embarrassing,” I say. “I’m never late. I hate when people make me wait. I’m sorry. Seriously, I’m not that—”

“Lauren,” he says, putting a hand on my shoulder. “It’s okay.”

He lets his hand linger for a moment before moving it and shuffling his feet. The spot tingles for a moment.

“So,” I say. “How have you been?”

“Fine,” he says. “You?”

“Good.”

We both nod and are silent for a moment. I wonder if I should tell him now, get it over with so we can move out of this realm of awkwardness and into the territory of serious conversation. I open my mouth to say something as the intercom comes on, a speaker right above our head letting out a high pitched whine before settling into a hum.

“Easton, party of two,” the hostess announces tiredly.

“That’s us,” he says, walking towards the door. I follow him inside where the hostess puts us at a table near a window overlooking the walkway leading from the entrance of the mall to the restaurant. Sean opens his menu immediately, biting his lip with determination. After a while the mood at the table gets that oppressive quality bad dates have when neither person has anything to say. I remind myself this isn’t a date, and I have a lot to say. I need to do it before I lose my nerve.

“So,” I say. Pause. “How have you been?” I already asked him that.

“Good,” he says again.

“Good,” I repeat. For some reason, I repeat it again. “Good.”

“You ever had the Jack Daniel’s chicken strips here?” he asks.

“Uh.” I open the menu. “Can’t say I have.”

He whistles and shakes his head, turning a page on the menu, which I take to mean I’ve been missing out on something grand. I decide, again, to dive right in and tell him. I open my mouth with every intention of doing so, but he beats me to the punch.

“I have to admit, you surprised the hell out of me by calling.”

I make a little grunting noise in the back of my throat that I don’t think I’ve ever made before and close my mouth. I open it again, close it again, and smile nervously.

“Really?” I say, finally. “Why’s that?”

Sean shrugs.

“It’s just.” He shrugs again. “It’s been awhile since…” He trails off into silence and I nod.

“Yeah,” I say. “It has. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

His eyes glaze over, his mouth open a little.

“Yeah. Pretty awkward, actually,” I say, feeling this rising lump in my throat that I try and talk through. “I know. But there’s something I think I should tell you, not a sure thing, but still something I wouldn’t feel right not—um—divulging. Granted, it could all be a mistake, which would be really embarrassing so I’m hoping it’s not a mistake because then I’d look like a real idiot. Not that I want this or anything, that’s not what I mean—or that I don’t want it, it’s not that either, it’s just that, I don’t know, I have to tell somebody and considering the circumstances, you seemed the best first bet.”

Sean’s mouth’s still open a little, and I wait a moment for any sign of recognition. Then I realize that Sean is not actually looking at me but behind me. I turn and see a woman and man standing at the hostess stand. The young hostess who sat us at our table grabs a couple of menus and brings the couple towards us. She sits them down at a table about five feet away and when I look back at Sean, his head is buried in his menu. The woman crosses her legs and exposes her thigh. She’s attractive, Hispanic, long curly black hair and dark features. Her lips are plump and her back arches a little as she opens her menu. The woman, noticing the attention, glances from me to Sean, her eyes immediately lighting up with recognition.

“Sean?” she says.

Sean raises his head and does the worst fake look of surprise I think I’ve ever seen and, for a second, I wish I hadn’t called him. I wish to God I hadn’t called him.

“Maria?” he says.

“Wow,” the woman I assume is named Maria says. “Funny seeing you here.”

“Yeah,” Sean says, then laughs much too loud for the occasion. There’s a long pause after, during which he nods with a half-smile on his face, switching his gaze from Maria to her date and back. I clear my throat and Sean jumps, like he just realized he’s sitting with somebody. Maria touches the hand of the man she’s with.

“You know Lowell,” she says.

“Yes, hi, Lowell,” Sean says, barely giving Lowell a nod. “How have you been, Maria?”

Maria looks at me and smiles.

“Fine,” she says. “I’m over at Baptist now, doing my residency.”

“Really?” Sean says with genuine surprise. “That’s awesome. Baptist. That’s major.”

“Yeah,” she says, holding a hand out in my direction. “I’m sorry, this is kind of awkward. I’m Maria.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say, touching her hand and moving away, continuing to watch Sean squirm and wondering more and more what I’m doing sitting here right now.

“And you are…” Maria says.

Sean’s eyes flit towards me for a second, and I realize this is all a joke. I don’t know what I thought I’d accomplish by coming out here. I know absolutely nothing about this man, and I don’t know at all if the baby that’s growing inside of me is his. Even if it is, he’s obviously got enough going on in his life. I don’t want to get involved in his business. I have too much business of my own to deal with.

“Leaving,” I say abruptly.

“Excuse me?” Maria says, surprised. I pick up my purse and stand.

“I’m leaving,” I say. “I’m sorry. I’m...” I shake my head. “Sorry. This was a mistake, Sean. I have to go.”

I speed away, step outside and make my way back to my car where I sit for five minutes before finally starting the car and driving towards Coral Gables and my mother’s house. Only I never make it to my mother’s house. Instead, I take a left at Kendall Drive and head west until I’m sitting in front of my sister’s place in West Kendall. I watch the bedroom window in her third floor apartment and want to go up and talk to her, but I don’t know if it’s such a good idea. I know my sister, know how she’ll react.

“You slept with the bartender that night?” she’ll ask, making it sound like a felony.

“And you let yourself get pregnant?” she’ll add.

Then she’ll rant and rave about how I should come to her first whenever I have something big happen. She’s family, she’ll say, and she’s the first person I should trust with anything. Then she’ll calm down and start scheming. She’ll start trying to figure out the potential financial and emotional advantages of my current situation, and I’ll turn every idea down no matter how tempting it sounds because, in all honesty, I don’t want to turn into my sister or my mother. I actually *like* to forgive, to forget, to move on. The alternative is just so tiresome.

So, instead of getting out of the car and going upstairs to talk to my sister, I pull out of her apartment complex and head down Kendall Drive until I’m outside of my apartment, the same apartment I’ve lived in with my husband and son for the past three years.

When I knock on the door, Rick answers and, for a moment, seems to have no idea who I am. It’s only a second before recognition courses through them, but in that moment of doubt I feel so vulnerable that I don’t really care if what I’m doing is right or wrong. I don’t want to be

alone in this. I can't deal with it all by myself. Rick's my best friend, has been for years now, and he's not okay right now. His eyes are sunken and he needs a shave. It's been a month since I left him holding his reddening cheek at his job, and it seems as if he's lost ten pounds and all his energy in that time. It never occurred to me that this whole thing could be taking as much a toll on him as it's taking on me. The thought upsets me a little. He brought this on himself. I didn't ask for any of this, so why does he look worse for the wear than I do? There's a taint of pure red rage tickling the back of my consciousness which, surprisingly, makes it a lot easier for me to take a step towards him and meet his eyes.

"I'm pregnant," I say.

Rick's eyes slowly widen. I can't really take the rawness in them, so I focus on a dried, blackened gum stain on the concrete, poking at it with the toe of my shoe.

"You're pregnant?" he asks.

I nod and feel an instant weight lift from me. It's been such a burden to keep this thing to myself, nobody to tell but my toddler son. My eyes well up and I will the tears to back away. I'm doing a pretty good job of it too until I see Rick's bare feet step up to the gum stain and feel his arms surround me.

"It's okay," he says. "I got you. Everything's going to be okay."

I sink into him and let go and it just feels so good—*so* very, very good—that I have no problem shoving aside the rush of guilt that momentarily threatens to consume me as I step inside the apartment and close the door.

-Sean-

Here's a fucked up situation. There's this guy and this girl who meet in college, at a party the guy throws at the apartment he shares with his two best friends. This guy and this girl are drunk when they meet and, while they don't hook up that same night, they do talk extensively and drunkenly make-out before the party is broken up by a local cop for noise violations.

These two, they don't see each other for days after this party, but they do exchange numbers and text and call each other a lot over the next week or so until they meet again and the seeds are planted for what will bloom into a full blown relationship. However, this relationship will always be based on the foundation of social atmosphere. They will have their first few conversations with beers in hand and other people conversing around them. Majority of their initial sexual encounters will take place while they're drunk either during or right after similar social occasions, or both. Later, after the honeymoon phase is over, seventy-five percent of their fights will go down after one or both of them has recently been out and about and come home sufficiently plastered to start bitching about something fucking mundane. The drunken party in question will, majority of the time, be the woman, who doesn't know the meaning of casual drinking. This woman—out of what the man believes is a sheer subconscious hatred for the existence she's resigned herself to by dating this inert individual—will nine times out of ten get completely shitfaced whenever she and her boyfriend go out for a night at a bar, or a restaurant, or a friend's house, or anywhere at all where alcohol is present. This will result in the man cutting down on his own social alcohol consumption so he can babysit the woman and make sure she doesn't hurt herself or him, eventually turning the ordeal of drinking-as-a-couple into a ritual where the man spends the night sober and on a mission to keep his drunken girlfriend from

getting lost or puking on herself or peeing in public or falling on the sidewalk and cracking her head open. Or all of the above.

This man and woman will graduate college together and move back to the city they both came from, into a two bedroom apartment where the woman will get her med school acceptance letter, despite her penchant for binge drinking. She will use the acceptance letter as motivation to straighten out this dark aspect of her life. Then she will realize that she wants to change other aspects as well, at which point she will meet a pediatrician and proceed to dump the man who wasted some of his best drinking years keeping her from killing herself. The man will then utilize his newfound emancipation by going out and getting completely shitfaced-falling-down-drunk almost every night. And he will justify it all by saying he's making up for lost time.

I see Maria at Friday's with Lowell, sitting there looking better than she did when we were a couple, put together and radiant, like being engaged to a man with a steady income actually made her physically healthier. I see her face, her high cheek bones and sea-green eyes with specks of hazel, her dark hair seeming to shine from within. I see it all and don't feel a longing for her so much as a longing for what being with her meant about me, about who I was. I was somebody if I could keep a girl that beautiful. At least I used to think so.

Something happens to me then, like the past month of attempted escapes from the wasteland that has been my mind suddenly becomes useless and I'm reverted right back to my pre-*Guitar Hero*, pre-actual-guitar, pre-band-starting days where all I want is music, sports highlights, and epic amounts of alcohol. When Lauren runs out of the building, I get up and act like I'm going after her, but when I reach outside I watch her go to her car without making any move to follow. When she pulls out of her parking spot and speeds off, I turn away from Fridays,

away from the parking lot, and start walking. Before long I'm across the street from the mall, sitting on a stool at a hole-in-the-wall bar I've never been to before, ordering a shot of Jager. This is followed by five more shots of Jager, then darkness, then me waking up on the floor of my old bedroom in what is now Derek and Kristina's apartment. The room has been converted into an office, complete with two desks and two computers and two of pretty much everything. My jaw is fucking killing me and I feel like somebody's hit me in the back of the head with a blunt object. I turn towards the door and there's a dress shoe about a foot away from me. Correction: somebody *has* hit me with a blunt object. Derek's standing in the doorway, looking both angry and confused as shit.

"Did you throw a shoe at me?" I croak.

"Sean?" he says.

"Stop screaming," I whisper, closing my eyes.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I don't know" I say, then groan and roll over. "I don't fucking know."

"Why are you on the floor?"

I open my eyes a little.

"I just said I don't know why I'm here," I say. "Why the fuck would I know why I'm on the floor?"

He steps into the room, peeking down the hall towards his bedroom.

"Come on, man," he says. "You gotta get up, act like you just got here."

"Why?" I ask.

“Dude, if Kristina knows you came here in the middle of the night, she’s going to be pissed.”

“It’s only been like three weeks since I moved, you know that, right?”

“Don’t start, Sean,” he says. He helps me up and I wince, my head feeling like my brain is rolling around in my skull, disconnected from all its synapses and connective tissues. I stumble into the living room and fall onto the couch, grab the TV remote and turn it on as Kristina walks out of the bedroom, still groggy. She takes one look at me, gives Derek a shot of her annoyed glare, and walks back into the bedroom.

“Sean,” Derek hisses. “You can’t do this shit.”

“I told you,” I say. “I don’t know what shit I did.”

“You drove last night?” he said.

“Derek,” I say. “What part of ‘I don’t remember’ do you not understand?”

He walks over to the window and pulls the blinds aside then chuckles, which, I assume means my car is parked in its usual two-parking-spot position in the parking lot. He walks over to me with his hand out.

“Give me your keys,” he says.

I reach into my pocket and toss them towards him. He searches the key ring until he finds the spare key to what is now his and Kristina’s apartment, takes it off and puts it in his pocket and tosses me back the rest of them.

“Are you ever going to stop this shit?” he asks.

“I hope so,” I say, closing my eyes. “Don’t think my liver’ll survive too much more.”

“I thought you said you were chilling out on the drinking. Playing your guitar and straightening things out.” He pauses. “Starting a band.”

“I am,” I say.

“What happened last night?” I shoot a glare at him and he puts his hands up a little.

“What’s the last thing you remember, I mean.”

“I saw Maria,” I say. “With Lowell.”

What follows is a long moment of silence fraught with tension and anticipation. I flip through TV channels and stop on ESPN, put the TV on mute and I’m suddenly thirsty.

“Where?” Derek says finally.

“Fridays,” I say. “I was there with Lauren.”

“Caitlyn’s sister?”

“Yeah,” I say, eyeing him. “Surprised you remember them.”

“Yeah, well,” he says, shrugging and turning away from me. “They were interesting. Hard to forget.”

“She called me,” I say. “Said she wanted to meet up, so we went there and we were talking when Maria and Lowell came in and—I don’t know what happened. I froze up. Then Lauren got up and left and I left and went to some bar and next thing I know you’re throwing a shoe at me.”

Derek shakes his head and walks over, sitting next to me on the couch. We watch the TV in silence for a few minutes until I hear Kristina call for Derek to come help her with something. Derek stands.

“Guess we’re not having band practice anymore?” he asks.

“Hell yeah we are,” I say. “I need to take my mind off this. What time is it?”

“Eleven. You work today?”

“I was supposed to. Don’t think I’m going to make it though.”

“I don’t know how they haven’t fired you yet,” he says.

“Because most days I’m their slave,” I say, putting my head back and wincing at the pain that shoots across my forehead. “I never call out anyways.”

“Alright,” he says, nodding. “You serious about this band thing?”

“Might be the only thing I’m serious about right now,” I say.

Four hours later we’re in front of my parents’ house watching as Marcus’s school bus pulls up at the end of the block. He comes down the street and stops in front of the open garage, pointing at the two amps hooked up to my guitar and Derek’s bass.

“You’re serious about this,” Marcus says to me, shaking his head.

“Why do you guys keep asking me that?” I say. “Is it that hard to believe?”

“A little,” Marcus says, and Derek laughs.

“Go get your shit, asshole,” I say, getting him in a momentary headlock before pushing him towards the door. Marcus grins and runs inside. Soon, he comes out with an armful of equipment: the speaker system from his room, his computer, and a small TV dinner stand my parents keep next to the refrigerator. He sets the computer on the TV stand and everything else up on the floor around him while Derek tunes his guitar and I pretend to tune mine, though I haven’t changed its tuning since the time a few weeks ago when I tried to put it in Drop C,* failed

* Terminology and methodology learned courtesy of the internet.

at that, and ended up spending over an hour trying to get it back to standard. Soon, Marcus's tinkering stops and he claps.

"All set," he says.

"Cool," I say, straightening my guitar strap around my neck. Derek strums a note on his bass and we all turn to face each other. I grab my pick, raise my hand and pause. After a moment Marcus drops his head, shaking it.

"Am I going to have to be the asshole," he says slowly, "who asks what the hell we're playing?"

Derek raises an eyebrow and I poke a string on my guitar, the amp letting out a loud twang.

"Shit," I say. "Should've thought of that."

"What songs do you know?" Derek asks.

"Only learned a couple good enough to play fluidly," I say. My eyes get wide. "'Song 2' by Blur?"

"Never heard of it," Marcus says.

"Yeah you have," Derek says, then nods towards me. "Play."

I set up and turn away from them to gather some confidence, take a deep breath and start playing. I get through the intro with only one screwed up note then I pounce on the distortion pedal and the amp does that screeing thing I love and I'm rocking. Head-nodding-foot-tapping sort of rocking.

I hear Marcus yell something behind me and I stop.

"I got it," he says. "*Guitar Hero 5*, love that song. Let me get the drums right though."

“You got it?” I say to Derek.

“Dude,” Derek says, leveling his eyes at me. “I knew how to play that song before I knew *you*.”

I chuckle and Marcus fools around with his computer a little and then the intro bass drum and snares pulse from his speakers. I nod my head to the beat and let it sound for a minute, feeling the rhythm through the floor, rising from the concrete through my feet up to my head before I raise my strumming hand and start slamming through the intro power chords. Derek joins in soon, his bass adding to the drums and hitting me in the chest, right in the middle, not on top of my heart but right next to it so I can feel it there but it’s not painful, just sweet and innocent and at the same time wicked and fucking erotic and almost like justice, like the music itself is the reward for being alive and, right on cue, I slam on the distortion pedal again and my guitar almost hops in my hand, like it’s fucking possessed, heating up as I strum through the chorus and close my eyes, feeling the beat now in my bones, my undeveloped blood cells even, straight through to my core where the very essence of who I am—the primal individual that is at the root of my persona—raises his head and lets out a reverberating howl in my stomach.*

We get through the song without a glitch and I come up for air, closing the last guitar riff and letting it ring through the amp for a moment before turning to Marcus and Derek. The door that leads back into the house slams open and my dad steps into the garage, wearing a Polo shirt, jeans shorts, and a scowl.

“What the hell was all that?” he asks.

“We’re starting a band,” I say proudly.

* Yes this meant it was howling up from my crotch. Everything always comes down to sex, about that Foucault was dead-on.

“Started a band,” Marcus adds, grinning.

“In my garage,” my dad says.

“Where else?” I ask.

“I was in the bathroom,” he says. “It sounded like you were playing in there with me.

This going to be happening often?”

I shrug and my dad kisses his teeth, storming back into the house.

“Might have to relocate,” Derek says.

Marcus scoffs and brushes a hand in the direction of the garage door.

“He’ll get over it,” he says. “He doesn’t actually give a shit.”

“About this,” I add, eyeing Marcus. “Is what Marcus means. He doesn’t give a shit about us playing.”

“Whatever,” Marcus says.

“That didn’t actually sound half bad,” Derek says, changing the subject.

“You ask me,” I say, nodding. “Sounded pretty damn good.”

“Only one thing,” Marcus says, scratching his head.

“What?” I ask.

“I don’t plan on being in an instrumental band,” he says. “That’s uber-gay. We need a voice.”

Silence.

“I’m not fucking doing it,” Marcus adds.

Derek shrugs.

“Your band, bro,” he says to me.

I sigh.

“Guess I should start practicing in the shower more often,” I say, and we all laugh.

STEP 6: RESTRUCTURE

-Lauren-

I'm in the living room and Rick's in the kitchen, cooking a birthday dinner for me even though my birthday isn't until tomorrow. Justin's lying on the floor near me, rolling around and laughing and I can't help but smile at how amused he is at absolutely nothing. I wish I could still get like that. I sigh. Twenty-five years old already. And yet I've managed to accomplish so much (sarcastic inner thoughts).

I'm still getting used to Rick acting the part of concerned husband and loving father. Actually, not so much the loving father part; he never really had trouble there. The attentiveness on the husband end is surreal though. He clatters around and then pokes his head out of the kitchen and I crane my neck to look at him.

"Everything ok, Babe?" he asks.

"Yes, Rick," I say, looking back at Justin. "You know that's like the fifth time you've asked me that in the past hour?"

"Just making sure," he says, disappearing back into the kitchen, where the clattering resumes.

Ever since I came back, it's like he's become a new person, but at the same time not. He's still the same old Rick (which is both disappointing and not) but he does things that The-Same-Old-Rick didn't do. The result is the cacophony in the kitchen right now: banging pots and pans, grunts, and sporadic bouts of cursing. About twenty minutes ago something broke and there was a long moment of silence where the air itself seemed to stop circulating before grumbling and the distinct sound of a sweeping broom broke the tension. Part of me wants to go

in there and help him, but only a small part of me. The majority consensus in my head is that Rick, on some level, deserves this. Besides, it's my birthday. And I'm pregnant. I shouldn't have to do anything.

I can't tell if it's the prospect of fathering a second child or his general remorse for cheating on me with Natalie that's making him act like this. But I can't say I'm displeased by it all. I can't say I'm pleased either. I don't know what I am. Skeptical, I guess. And confused, vastly confused. Like, the other day I had an appointment with my OB/GYN and Rick came along. He took the day off for it and everything, even though I didn't take the day off and I told him that he didn't have to, that we'd only be hanging out for the half hour before the appointment and the appointment itself. He insisted, though. In the room they set us up in, Rick wouldn't move more than a foot away from me at any given moment, and he touched my stomach so much that I actually had to tell him to stop at one point.

"Why?" he asked.

"You're being weird," I said.

"It's weird for me to want to be close to my child?" he asked, and he managed to even ask that without sounding hostile. A little hurt though. It creeped me out.

"No," I said. "But you are close to him. Or her. Just chill out."

"That reminds me," he said, his eyes lighting up. "Are you sure you don't want to know what it is?"

"Yes," I said, firmly.

"But I want to paint the room," he said, actually pouting.

“It’s Justin’s room right now,” I said. “And it’ll be both of theirs when the baby’s born. Besides, if it’s another boy the room is fine the way it is. And what are you going to do if it’s a girl? Paint Justin’s room pink?”

“No,” he said. “Yellow maybe. Yellow’s androgynous.”

Every once in a while Rick surprises me by pulling out words like *androgynous* from his otherwise limited vocabulary. Rick’s a technical guy, not the most literate of the lot. He’s much better with his hands, tinkering with motors and electronics and anything that can be taken apart and put back together. He used to make fun of me all the time back in college whenever I had my nose buried in a book, gently ribbing me and calling me bookworm.

I patted him on the arm.

“The baby will be fine in the room the way it is,” I said. Right then Dr. Medstein walked in and started doing his checks. Dr. Medstein’s a short, older man with a full head of gray hair and a speckled beard, almost one hundred percent like what I always imagined a doctor was supposed to look like, except for his one defining characteristic: a tattoo of a hawk climbing up his neck. It’s odd and I can’t help but stare at it whenever I’m in there, wondering how many others he has underneath his long sleeve dress shirt and slacks. He was rubbing that jelly stuff on my stomach and moving the little ultrasound device around when Rick decided to turn into my mother.

“Everything’s fine, right?” he asked.

“Looks in order so far,” Dr. Medstein replied.

“So far. So there could be something wrong.”

“I’m sure everything’s okay.”

“You don’t sound very sure.”

Doctor Medstein glanced at Rick and then at me.

“Rick,” I said. “Let him do his job.”

“I want to make sure you’re getting the best care you can.”

“Doctor Medstein’s been my doctor forever, Rick,” I said. “He took care of me when I had Justin. You’ve met him like a million times. Stop acting like this is the first time you’ve done this.”

He leaned in towards me, near my ear.

“It’s different this time,” he whispered, raising his eyebrows and nodding conspiratorially.

“No it’s not,” I said. “It’s exactly the same. Now can you sit down? You’re making me anxious, and last I checked I shouldn’t be anxious. Right Doctor?”

Doctor Medstein smiled, nodded, vaguely annoyed and relieved when Rick took a seat in the corner, sulking.

And that’s pretty much how things have been ever since I came back.

Justin lies on the floor near me in the living room now, bouncing miniature race cars into each other and making explosion noises. I’m leaning back in the recliner Rick bought secondhand at a garage sale down the street about a week after I came back. That was three months ago, and not a day has gone by that I haven’t thought about the moves I made and pondered the distinct possibility that I could burn in hell for what I’m doing. Most hours of the day I can effectively ignore the alarms blaring in my conscience. Every once in a while, though, I

can't help but think about the two things I've done that would probably be considered sinful by any higher being that may or may not exist:

- 1) I've lied (by omission) to Rick, my mother, and Caitlyn about my pregnancy. I let them all assume my unborn child is Rick's, though I'm pretty sure that he or she is not and that it will be fairly obvious when my baby comes out half-black.
- 2) I lied (again, by omission) to my mother and sister about the *real* reason I'm back with Rick.

That reason—as I've come to realize over the course of many sleepless nights watching the alarm clock change minute by minute, hour by hour, Rick snoring next to me—is actually fairly simple: I wasn't heartbroken by his cheating, and was therefore freed by it. This seems to be the dichotomous result of infidelity. At least, for me and Rick's relationship it is. I could have very well been unbelievably devastated forever by what Rick did. I could have become my mother (who I'm starting to believe now was truly, hopelessly in love with my father). But that isn't what happened. Instead, Rick's move effectively liberated me. It opened me up to the possibility of a life without Rick, without expectations, without the future I had resigned myself to prior to him cheating. And that freedom is, ironically, what made it possible for me to come back. I basically can't—or, to phrase it better, don't want to—do this alone. Rick was an untapped source of support that I knew (subconsciously or consciously, I have no idea anymore) I could exploit without any unnecessarily long term consequences. The fact is that, regardless of what happens between us in the future, he is still Justin's father. He is going to be in my life for as long as Justin is a part of mine, which I'm going to allow myself to believe will be as long as I'm alive.

That's essentially the reason why I'm sitting here right now while Rick's in the kitchen resigning himself to making the three of us spaghetti and meatballs.

My mother and sister had a conniption when they heard about my decision to move back in with Rick. But I expected that, so I wasn't so much surprised as tolerant of the ensuing turmoil. I arrived at my sister's apartment the day after my first night back at the apartment, right after work. Caitlyn took one look at my face and started yelling. No preemptive hello or questioning to make sure her assumption was correct. Just red-faced anger. Twenty minutes later, when she was calming down a little, I got her all riled up again by telling her I was pregnant.

"Why the fuck would you let that cheating douchebag touch you after what he did?" she screamed.

"I didn't," I said, sitting in her living room.

"You didn't?" she asked.

"Not after Natalie," I said, avoiding her eyes. "Maybe before."

"So that's what it is then?" Caitlyn said, glaring at me. "You found out you were pregnant and went running back to him, huh? Like that?" She nodded and dropped the corners of her mouth so that she looked *exactly* like our mother when she's giving me *exactly* the same look of contempt.

"I didn't go 'running' back to him," I said, shaking my head. I stood and paced the room, agitated, running my hand through my hair and chuckling. "You wouldn't understand, Caitlyn. You have no idea, God, how could you understand?" I stopped and glared at her. "I don't know why I thought this was a good idea. You've never even been pregnant."

The moment the words came out, I knew I should have kept them reined in. Caitlyn crossed her arms. I closed my eyes.

“Caitlyn,” I said. “I didn’t mean it like—”

“So,” she said. “I don’t understand what it’s like to be a woman because I haven’t let some—some *prick* stick *his* prick in me and inject me with baby batter? Is that what you’re saying?”

I’d never heard anybody describe the act of conception as if it were shooting heroine. Any momentary remorse I felt was gone in an instant.

“You really need to get over yourself,” I said.

“You need to get over *this*,” she said, standing and pointing at me. “You don’t need him. You don’t need anybody. You keep selling yourself short Lauren, and I hate to see it. You should have come to me if you really wanted support. I would have helped you.”

I laughed.

“Like you’re helping now?”

“No,” she said quietly. “I’m obviously not. But I want to. I’m trying Lauren.”

“Yeah, well,” I said, but I was too surprised to come up with anything witty. She wasn’t yelling anymore, which was uncharacteristic and something I hadn’t prepared for. “You’re doing a great fucking job,” I said, avoiding her eyes. The statement worked, and she threw her hands up, yelling about how impossible I was. It pretty much went on like that for another twenty minutes until I stormed out of the apartment. I wanted to go home then. I got in my car with the full intention of heading home to see Justin and Rick. But part of me knew that I was going to

have to face my mother at some point. I figured since I'd already had one family confrontation that day, I might as well get it all over with.

On the way to my mother's house, I talked myself into a calm state of mind. By time I pulled into her driveway and parked behind her Range Rover, I'd actually convinced myself that the conversation with her would be a little less hostile than the one I'd just had with Caitlyn. Until my mother opened her front door. She stood there with her hand on her hip, enough disappointment in her face to make it obvious she'd just hung up the phone with my sister.

"Caitlyn called," I said, closing my eyes and leaning against the doorway.

"He betrayed your trust," she said. "Gave what was rightfully yours away to another woman. And you're going to go back to him?" She made a sound with her mouth, something between a suck and a grunt. "Are you willfully being stupid?" she asked, then paused, as if I were actually supposed to answer.

"Mom, I know what I'm doing."

"I'll tell you why you're going back," she said. "Because he's got you brainwashed with the only tool of persuasion he and every other man on this planet know how to utilize." She paused again and crossed her arms. "His penis."

I swear, it was like déjà vu.

"Mom," I said. "I just left Caitlyn's apartment. Consider that, please."

"Why'd you do it?" she asked.

I opened my mouth to answer, and that could have been the moment I confided in her. I could have told her everything. I could have told her about Sean, about my desire to have somebody there for me. But I couldn't. I knew that, no matter what I said, she'd have disagreed

with my decision and made me feel horrible. And I was already having an easy enough time doing that on my own. All I wanted was for somebody to tell me what I was doing wasn't wrong. But I knew I wouldn't get that from her, or anybody. So I shrugged. That didn't seem to satisfy her so I groaned and leaned against the wall next to the door, the heat and humidity from the clear, sunny sky pelting my skin. I wished it would start thundering and lightning or something. Anything to provide a distraction.

"I didn't want to be alone," I said quietly. Part of the truth.

The disappointment on her face dissolved into motherly concern at my words.

"You're never alone," she said. "I thought you knew that."

I nodded and she moved out of the way, letting me into the house. From there the conversation was a little more amicable, deviating from Rick and honing in on the pregnancy itself. My mother gave advice and I remembered how annoying she'd been when I was pregnant with Justin. It gave me a pleasant feeling though, the easy nature of the conversation. I sensed my mother censored her true thoughts simply because she could see that I was almost completely drained of energy. I also got the sense, as I left her house and headed back to my apartment, that I was going to get the remainder of her hostility at a later date. Which is why I pretty much avoid her and Caitlyn as much as I can nowadays. As my stomach expands, bladder shrinks, and everything else falls into the familiarly foreign territory of pregnancy, I find myself more and more content being alone for extended periods of time. But I honestly don't think it would be like this if I didn't have the insurance policy that is Rick.

Which brings me back to why I'm here right now. I'm back here now because I remember what my last pregnancy was like. I remember the last few weeks of immobility, the

cravings and wavering emotions, the uncertainty about *everything*. I remember those feelings and know that I'd go completely insane if I didn't have somebody around who at least *thought* they had an obligation to help me survive through labor. I don't know what I plan on doing once the baby is born. I don't even have a plan for how I'm going to continue to fake interest in a man who I've been growing apart from for a while now, much longer than these recent issues indicate.

But I do know that I'd rather be here—at this apartment with my son and his father—than back at my mother's house. And, with that thought, I get comfortable in my new recliner in my living room and listen to the TV tell me about tsunamis in Japan, Justin laughing at imaginary blown-up cars and Rick cursing at pots and pans in the kitchen like a regular Martha Stewart.

-Sean-

I almost never go to Coconut Grove. It's too far of a drive from my parents' house, the bars are crazy expensive, and it's really hard to get a big enough group together to join me. And Coconut Grove is one of those places where it's only fun with a big group. Going there by myself is out of the question and going with one or two other people is boring and pointless and needlessly expensive, a situation where I might as well have gone to Dill's or hung out at my place. Tonight though, I do have a big group, and seeing as how I was already at work anyways and I don't actually have a place of my own anymore it wasn't that difficult a decision to come out here and sit in the dim lighting, watching a live band with ten or so of my coworkers drinking around me. As opposed to sitting at home and doing nothing.

Coconut Grove is a tourist attraction and I don't consider myself a tourist in the city I grew up in. The oddest part about this section of town is the split, though. Driving towards Coconut Grove, a visitor from another state who isn't familiar with Miami might think they made a wrong turn somewhere. They'd head down Grand Avenue from US-1 and pass through urban life at its finest, complete with crackheads, liquor stores, twenty-six inch rims, and that old guy riding a child's bicycle around in a circle in the middle of the street, in the middle of the night.* I used to know this guy named Terry who lived in The Grove for a while, a cook at Shambles who quit a few months ago to move to California with his girlfriend. He told me that living in The Grove wasn't as bad as it seemed. You have to know where to go and where not to go. When I asked him to elaborate, he told me that, basically, the only places he ever went were houses or establishments in the neighborhood where he was familiar enough with one or more

* I never fucking understood this, *still* don't. Who the fuck is that guy? Who's bike is that? Why does every single ghetto have one, if not two of these assholes?

people present, to the point that everybody else hanging around with those people wouldn't think he was an outsider and, therefore, worthy of getting jacked. Other than that, he left the neighborhood to socialize. I avoid it altogether.

The Grove is not to be mistaken for “Coconut Grove.”* Drive through The Grove for a minute—right up to the point where you assume you made a wrong turn somewhere and get the strong urge to speed back to US-1—and you'll notice a sudden shift in the overall mood of the place. There'll be an art store first, out of place it seems. Then a very colorful bank. Then a sex toy shop,[†] another art store and, soon, you'll run into about twenty bars and a lot of people walking around drunk in the middle of the street. This is Coconut Grove, one of the many places in Miami that I've grown tired of hearing snooty people talk about on TV travelogues.[‡]

This is where I've found myself tonight, at a bar called Shell's right across from Fat Tuesday's in Cocowalk—Coconut Grove's mall—with my coworkers. I don't necessarily want to be here, still haven't gotten completely used to the idea of being out and *not* being blackout plastered. I'm much too self-aware right now, which is making me nervous. I usually have no problem socializing with people when I'm out, though I have no clue how coherent I am during these various drunken encounters. I've had a shot or two tonight, and I'm stirring a rum and coke with a straw and I know that, for some people, this would all be enough to give them the boost of “liquid confidence” they need to join the various conversations taking place around them. This amount of alcohol is nowhere near enough to boost my social skills though. The way I've been drinking the past year, this is like a very slim appetizer.

* The dropping of “Coconut” should signify the lack of anything saccharine.

† Not just any sex toy shop though. An *artsy* sex toy shop.

‡ I don't watch the Travel Channel specifically because I assume people living in other touristy areas have the same amount of disdain for foreign people who act like the statue they pass by on the way to work everyday is the eighth wonder of the world.

I'm watching the live band play up on the stage and they sound good, better than me, Derek and Marcus. This doesn't discourage me in the least, though. The fact that I'm even part of something that I can compare to this band still gives me enough of a giddy feeling to overshadow the knowledge that we've still got a shitload of work to do before we're at performance standards ourselves.

Our next practice is tomorrow afternoon, our fifteenth overall in the past three months.* It's almost three AM and the crowd at Shell's is just now swelling to entertaining proportions. One of the advantages of going to college in Tallahassee was that everything closed up by two AM.† So, as a college student, I either had to go home and continue getting plastered with whoever or—more likely—go home with the *intention* of continuing to get plastered and instead pass out on my bed, or my floor, or my couch, or wherever.

Sitting next to me right now at Shell's is Randy. Randy's a part of my group of coworkers. He's been working at Shambles for all of a month so he's a newbie; Fresh Meat, the other servers call him, though I think the term is played out and disturbing in its imagery, like Shambles is on par with a maximum security prison or something.‡ I haven't said a word to Randy before tonight, but he seems like a pretty cool guy—meaning he's not half-retarded like some of the other servers. He's drinking draft Miller Lite, pounding them back like a pro. Randy is a skinny guy, tall and lean. I don't know exactly how old he is, but I know he goes to Florida International University and is legally drinking right now, which probably puts him at either twenty-one or twenty-two. I also know that he's drawn the eye of another female server at

* Yes, I kept count. Written descriptions too. Like a blog, only old school: an actual journal, private and unedited.

† Though I did not see this as an advantage when I lived there.

‡ Come to think of it...

Shambles named Shelly. Shelly has a reputation for “breaking in” new servers. With “breaking in” being a euphemism for “fucking.”*

Randy gets up and heads to the bar then comes back with another beer and two shot glasses. He sets one of the shots in front of me wordlessly and raises the other one up in the air. I study the clear liquid in the glass and decide that I’m not even going to try and fight the urge. I pick mine up and we clink our glasses together and knock them back, slamming the shot glasses down after.

Our other coworkers surround the tables around us, yelling at each other drunkenly over the music. I chase the shot—tequila, I’d recognize tequila anywhere—with my rum and coke, close my eyes and shake my head and when I open them again I realize I’m on the verge of being drunk, in that little middle area where my forehead is beginning to buzz but hasn’t gone full-on numb yet. I also realize I’m in a bad mood. Not a self-destructive bad mood,[†] but rather a general, cynical, disdainful temper. I lean in towards Randy and clear my throat.

“Why’d you start working at Shambles?” I yell at him.

“What?” he yells back.

“Why Shambles?” I say louder.

A pause as he contemplates.

“I needed a job?” he says, like he’s questioning his own motivation.

“Yeah, but why? Aren’t you getting financial aid.”

“Yeah, Bright Futures, but they’re stingy now.”

* In case you didn’t catch the hint right away. She almost broke me in when we started working there, but I was with Maria at the time and not susceptible to fucking that up by cheating. And I’m not going to be the dickhead that says I wish I did. I don’t wish I cheated on Maria. I do, however, wish I’d broken up with her ass before she cheated on me. Funny how that little power shift could have changed all types of long term outcomes.

[†] Which was an improvement.

“What?” I yell.

“Bright Futures!”

“Oh,” I say.

“I don’t want to take out any loans,” he adds.

I tell myself when he says this that I should just nod, agree with him, keep my personal feelings and experiences to myself. But, then, I wouldn’t be Sean on alcohol if I listened to that advice, would I? I’d be the sober, calm, semi-collected dude I always intended to be; the type of guy who doesn’t need alcohol and a guitar to stay sane. Instead, I let all the simmering resentment I have in me bubble up to the surface and spit it out in Randy’s direction.

“You’re smart,” I say, the words coming out like an accusation as I point at him.

“Thanks,” Randy says.

“No, really,” I say, slapping my hand against the back of his neck a little too hard and shaking him. It’s supposed to be a gesture of masculine affection, but it just comes off as violent. “You’re a smart motherfucker. A truly smart, son of a bitch, genius cocksucker.” Another side effect of my alcoholism. My brother pops into my head. “I wish I’d had your head when I was in school.”

“You’ve got loans?” he asks.

“Matter of fact,” I say, and at this point, my mouth becomes a car and my brain the driver in the throes of a seizure with his foot pressed involuntarily down on the gas. “I wish I just hadn’t gone. Wish I’d just messed up from the get go, like a lot of other people, you know? At least it’s normal, not *completely* socially unacceptable. I could have been, like, your regular, average fuck up instead of this... educated broke fuck up.” I laugh at that, long and loud, crazy-

sounding. “Twenty-five grand for a piece of shit paper. Most expensive piece of paper on the fucking planet, Randy. Let me tell you.”

Randy chuckles and I turn to him, give him a stony glare. My heart quickens pace and I see a tint of red in my vision.

“You think this shit is funny?”

His smile slowly falls away.

“Yeah—uh, no?” he says. “I mean—” He scratches his head. “Yeah, it sucks, I guess.”

“It’s not funny, Randy,” I say, wiping condensation off the side of my glass with one hand, clenching a fist with the other. “It’s sad. It’s fucking tragic. A tragedy, man. I’m telling you, if you don’t have a plan, get one. If not, get the fuck out while you still can.”

“Get out of what?” he asks, but I’m not even listening anymore.

“Everything our parents told us is bullshit,” I say then take a large swig of my drink. “All of it. And it’s not their faults. It wasn’t bullshit when they were our age, so they had no way of knowing. But it’s bullshit now, and I have a feeling when our kids get to our age, things are going to be one hundred percent different. I just wish we’d known. We’re like the in-between generation. The one who gets shitted on so that future generations can learn lessons from our misery, but I didn’t ask for this shit, you know?” Again I think of my brother and a tiny voice in the back of my head tells me to shut the fuck up because Randy actually seems scared next to me, like genuinely fearful, but I keep going instead because I’m on a roll now, throwing up thoughts that have been internalized for some time now. I shake my head. “I didn’t want this. I don’t know what the hell I wanted but it wasn’t this, Randy. I don’t think any of us actually want

this, but we do it anyways. And why? Why the *fuck*, Randy?" I glare at him like it's his fault. He sips his beer, avoiding my eyes. "Get out while you can," I say again, pointing at him.

Right then the band stops playing and the lead singer approaches the stage and says they're going on break. Puddle of Mudd's "Spaceship" starts up through the speakers set up around the restaurant and I notice my drink is empty.

"Gotta re-up, bro," I say, grinning, nodding towards Randy's beer. "You need another one?"

He shakes his head and I squeeze his shoulder, jump up and head to the bar. I watch the band on the way, all three of them in a huddle, talking and patting each other on the back and I suddenly miss my brother and Derek immensely. I put my cup down and turn back towards the tables where Randy and the rest of my coworkers are sitting. I think about going over to at least say goodbye, but realize it doesn't really matter either way. These people don't really care about me, and I don't really care about them. We're all expendable in the restaurant business, forced into a situation for monetary benefits. The people that really do care about me are at home sleeping, expecting me to show up tomorrow. I turn away then, walk out of Shell's towards the parking garage and my car, drive back to my parents' house and fall asleep in my bed, tipsy but far from drunk.

-Lauren-

I've reached the shuffling stage, which is what I'm doing right now through Dadeland Mall. At eight months, my stomach has expanded to the point where taking full-on footsteps is nearly impossible, so I have to slide my feet across the ground to move, barely lifting my heels to give the illusion that I'm actually walking.

Though I know what to expect this time around, it's still only marginally easier than it was with Justin. Keeping active seems to make things run smoother. Up until a couple of weeks ago I walked a mile every morning, and today's the first day I've taken off from work in months. Physically, I'm fine. Mentally, though, what I'm doing to Rick is starting to get to me. I don't think he suspects any deceit though, which actually makes me feel even worse.

I'm with Justin and Caitlyn shopping for baby clothes. Rick is at work. I decided to take today off not because it's a Friday, but because Caitlyn called last night and asked if I wanted to go shopping and I couldn't turn her down. I've seen her only occasionally over the past few months and I admit, I miss my sister. We clash when we're with each other, but being around her is better than not talking to her at all. She seems to have gotten over me getting back with Rick, which makes her easier to handle. Amicable and energetic, she walks next to me, commenting on each display window we pass by and stating the exact reasons why she would never purchase ninety percent of the items being advertised.

"You know," I say, "for someone who loves shopping, you seem to be very much against actually buying anything."

"Shoes are not in the same category as this stuff," she says, then points at the Victoria's Secret up ahead. "Neither is lingerie. There's an art to women's clothing, a calculation that

makes it *far* superior to—” She turns towards Sharper Image, pointing at a machine sitting in the front window with at least twenty buttons and all sorts of lights on it. “—That. There’s nothing beautiful about that. It doesn’t make me feel anything special. It’s just—depressing.”

“It’s a coffee machine,” I say.

“Exactly,” she says. Her shoulder jerks a little, Justin yanking on her hand and pointing towards the Auntie Anne’s booth in the middle of the mall’s walkway. About two months ago, the three of us were here for another afternoon hang-out and—without my consent—Caitlyn bought Justin a giant M&M cookie. Ever since, Justin has associated the large Auntie Anne’s sign with cookies, oohing and aahing and—eventually—crying whenever we pass by anything even resembling a pretzel.

“This is your fault,” I say, pointing at Caitlyn.

“What?” she says, shrugging and smiling mischievously. It’s so odd to see her interact with Justin. She’s even worse than my mother with spoiling him. It’s revealing, I think, of a deep-seated sentiment that she hides behind this barrier of female chauvinism. I don’t bring it up to her, though. I feel like she’d start acting different towards Justin if I did, and he loves his Aunt Caitlyn. I ruffle his hair and he gives me a pleading pout, pointing at the sign. I roll my eyes.

“Fine,” I say, scowling at Caitlyn. “You’re buying though.”

“It’s a cookie,” she says.

“He’s a three year old,” I say. “I don’t need him to be more hyper than he already is. Plus, that stuff leads to diabetes and obesity and all that.”

“You can’t shelter him,” she says, moving in the direction of Auntie Anne’s. “It’ll backfire in the long run.”

“Says the Mother of the Year,” I say.

She shoots me a glare and lets Justin drag her towards the stand. I’m following behind them when somebody bumps into me and I drop the JCPenney bag of baby clothes I’m carrying. The girl bends over and apologizes profusely, and something about her hair—flowing to the floor and covering her face—and her voice prick my attention. I feel a flush of heat that I know shows in my face as the girl slowly stands with my bag outstretched in her hand. She flicks her head a little and her hair hops back, revealing young, fine features: carefully plucked brows and shiny pink fingernails and dark brown eyes laced with recognition.

“Mrs. Ellis,” Natalie says. There’s a long pause, during which her facial muscles twitch a lot so she looks like she’s on the verge of tears. I take the bag and her hand shoots back to her side, as if she’s afraid I’m going to slice it off. “Hi,” she says.

“Hello, Natalie,” I say exhaustedly. I don’t want to have this conversation right now—this encounter, actually. I know what’s coming, and part of me wants to close my eyes, stick my fingers in my ears and hum until Natalie goes away. It’s an immature impulse that I don’t act on, but which makes me wonder: do other people feel like that when faced with a similar situation? How many people have actually been here before? What do *they* do?

Then there’s another part of me—the polar opposite of my immature-avoidance-side—that seems to have been waiting around for this opportunity. I didn’t know this other part of me existed until now, this strangely conniving woman. It makes sense, though, now that I think about it. I’ve vaguely felt the presence for a while now, peeking from behind my eyes, sneakily scanning every populated area I’ve visited in Miami (i.e. shopping malls) ever since Rick and I quasi-reconciled. She’s like a sadistic voyeur who’s been waiting for the chance to give Natalie

the condescending look I'm giving her now, the type of look only someone in my position can justify.

"How have you been?" I ask.

"Fine," she says. She shifts subtly from leg to leg, itching to get away. I notice the other girls standing next to us turned towards the Victoria's Secret as if they have no idea what's going on behind them. I'm guessing these are Natalie's friends. I'm surprised that I'm embarrassed to be this close to a lingerie store while standing in front of the girl who had sex with my husband. The last person to have sex with him, period, actually, from what I know. Because I haven't. He tried once, a couple of weeks after I moved back. The pregnancy and his cheating combined to create a pretty effective excuse. I feel like it would be overboard with the moral upheaval to go into that territory. For the most part, Rick's been pretty understanding.

"Haven't seen you around in a while," I say, directing my attention back at her.

"Uh, yeah," she says.

"Let me be blunt," I say. I don't know what I'm doing. "I know what happened between you and Rick. And I've come to terms with it." I pause. "Actually, I don't think there really ever were any terms to come to. I guess it's one of those things that just happen to people." I chuckle.

"Mrs. Ellis, I'm so—"

"Don't, Natalie," I say, holding up the arm with the JCPenney bag hanging from it. "I just forgave you. I won't forgive fake remorse. It's cliché." I give her a sickly sweet smile and think of my mother. "Save it for when you fuck somebody else's husband, somebody who cares more than I do. That's not a free pass, either. I just want you to know there's no conflict between us."

Her eyes glaze over, blank, as if she can't comprehend what's happening so her brain shuts off.

"I—" she says, shaking her head, then dropping it. "I don't know what to say."

"There is one thing I want to know," I say. "How long?"

"How long?" she repeats.

"Yes, Natalie," I say, exasperated. "How long were you and Rick having sex before I caught you?"

Her eyes are wide now and she's doing this thing where she keeps opening her mouth like she's about to say something, then closing it, then opening it again. Her eyes kind of roll around, focusing on anything but me. Caitlyn's standing in line at the Auntie Anne's, watching me as Justin points emphatically at a picture of an M&M cookie on the menu. I hold up my index finger towards her then set my eyes back on Natalie, expectantly. She's silently pleading with her friends for help, and they're offering none.

"It's a simple question Natalie," I say. "I'm not trying to trick you into anything, I just want to know."

"I-I don't know," she stammers. "It all just kind of...happened."

"That's usually the case," I say. "But a girl like you, you must know how long."

"Like me," she repeats, and there's a flicker of anger in her eyes. I keep mine focused on her and she returns to her submissive, head down stance.

"I guess," she says, letting out a heavy breath. Her eyes roll up as she thinks. "A few months. Six, seven maybe."

I nod, my teeth grinding a little.

“And when exactly did you stop?” I ask.

“I haven’t seen Rick—” she pauses. “—Mr. Ellis, I mean. I haven’t seen Mr. Ellis in at least three months. No, four.” She shakes her head and holds up her hand. “I swear, it’s been a while. He told me you two were trying to work things out and what we were doing was wrong. And it was, I know, I really do. I don’t even know how it started, it just did and then it was so hard to stop it. He always said he wanted to though.” She pauses. “Stop, he said. He always said he wanted to stop, not always said he wanted to be with me or—he always said he felt terrible about it. It was me, though. I pushed it.” Her eyes well up a little. “I’m really sorry, I never meant to cause problems for you two.”

I nod again.

“Thank you, Natalie,” I say. “For the honesty.” I reach a hand towards her and she flinches ever so slightly. I can’t say it doesn’t give me some pleasure. I pat her on the shoulder. “It’s good seeing you. Stay safe. Hope school’s going well.”

Relieved, she turns to walk away. I watch her for a second, let the gap between us grow until I have to speak louder for her to hear me, for everybody to hear.

“Natalie,” I say. She turns towards me, wide eyed. I smile, tilt my head a little. “Try not to fuck anybody else’s husband in the near future. It’s not very attractive.”

Her face flushes and she nods, hurrying away with her friends following, whispering. I can’t help but chuckle. I’ve never been the best at math, but I passed my classes in high school. College Algebra at FIU. Besides, the math problem I’m doing in my head right now is fairly simple. I’m eight months pregnant. I was a month pregnant when I moved back in with Rick.

Natalie just told me the last time she saw Rick was three, maybe four months ago. Not since then. She swears.

What answer did you get?

I'm still smiling when I finish shuffling over to where Caitlyn and Justin are waiting for me.

"What was that all about?" she asks me.

"Nothing," I say, standing close to her and Justin, laying my head on her shoulder. She seems surprised, and after a moment reaches a hand up to stroke my hair a little as we move forward in the line.

"Didn't look like nothing," she says, finally. "Who was that?"

I chuckle.

"Nobody, sis," I say. "Absolutely nobody."

STEP 7: RELEASE

-Sean-

I jump and land on the distortion pedal, shutting it off. My guitar tones down, ringing through the amp as I wiggle my fingers against the string to create this reverb effect, like the strings are crying.* The echo of snare drums trails off behind me and Marcus grins. Derek fiddles around with the tuning on his bass looking bored, which kind of irks me but I ignore it.

An hour straight. That's how long a set the three of us just played.

My fingers are on fire, my throat raw from screaming Limp Bizkit's "Faith" at the top of my lungs on that last track. It all feels amazing. Fourteen songs, one full hour, and I lasted the whole way through. I'm almost completely sure we're ready to venture out of my parents' garage.

"I know what you're thinking," Derek says continuing to fool around with his bass.

"Fuck what he's thinking," Marcus says. "I know what *I'm* thinking. That was awesome. We gotta let people hear this shit."

"Don't," Derek says. "Don't take it there. This is fun, but we're not doing that."

"Doing what?" I ask.

"It's different on stage," Derek says, shrugging. "We're not there yet, and I don't really know if I want to be."

"What are we talking about again?" Marcus asks.

* Learned this watching a video on Youtube of some guy playing Guns and Roses in his parents' basement.

“I just know you two,” Derek says. “You’re both going to start talking about all the shit we can do, when all we’re really doing is just having fun. Passing some time.” He stretches lazily. “Let’s just keep it at that.”

“I’m not getting you,” I say, though I am getting him and my heart rate is rising by at least five beats per minute with every word that comes out of his mouth.

Derek must see something in my eyes because his go wide.

“Seriously, Sean?” he says, turning his head to the side a little. “Really, were you actually serious about this?”

I open my mouth, but I’m too pissed off to say anything. Or not pissed off enough, I guess. I’m in that area between confusion and blind rage, that moment when you stand there with your mouth open in awe. Derek points outside, where the sun is in the process of setting and a few old people are walking around the block across the street.

“Did you really think we were going to go out there and strike it rich off of this hobby or something?” He shakes his head. “I knew it’d come to this eventually. I was just hoping you two would recognize this for what it was before I had to be the voice of reason.” He pauses. “As usual.”

“Dude,” Marcus says. “Buzz kill.”

“I’m being realistic,” Derek says. “I love you two, you’re like my brothers. I don’t want you to get all disappointed.”

The bubble of confined rage pops and I step closer to Derek.

“Derek,” I say. “What is your problem?”

“What?” he says, shrugging. “You know what I’m saying is—”

“Fuck you,” I say, venomously. Derek takes a step back, holding his hand up.

“Sean,” he says. “Bro, chill out.”

“No,” I say. “You are *not* doing this right now, Derek. You *always* do this. What the fuck is your problem? Do you have some issue with people being happy or something?”

“No,” he says.

“Then what is it?” I ask. “What is it that makes you always kill the vibe like this?”

“I’m not killing the vibe.”

“This is the third time this week you’ve called the band a ‘hobby,’” I say. “And that’s fine if you feel that way. But last time I checked you’ve been here damn near every day with us working on this ‘hobby.’ I think, at that point, it moves out of the realm of hobbiness and into some serious shit.”

“Hobbiness,” Marcus says, snickering.

“I know,” Derek says. “We have been spending a lot of time on it. And it’s fun, amazing. And we’ve come way farther than I thought we would, but—”

“But not far enough,” I say. “Not for your standards, huh?”

“That’s not what I’m saying, Sean.”

“Then what are you saying?” I ask.

“Sean,” he says in a pleading tone. My expression is unwavering, so he turns to Marcus, mouth open, obviously seeking support. Marcus is avoiding the situation, eyes on his computer as he presses buttons and pretends nothing is happening around him.

“Fine,” Derek yells. “Fine, we’ll keep dreaming. Matter of fact, I’ll withdraw from law school as soon as I get home, drop my classes and break the lease at the apartment so we can go

pursue this fucking dream of yours.” He stomps around, picking up his stuff. “I’ll break up with Kristina and we can hit the road, head to California and sleep in your car and dream and dream and fucking dream until we’re living the life of fucking rock stars.” He hops in the air and wiggles his arms and head around. “Whooooo, drugs, sex, and rock and roll for-fucking-ever.”

He stops, breathing hard and glaring at me. I glare back.

“Go home, Derek,” I say, my teeth grinding.

“Gladly,” he says. He picks up his guitar and amp and bag, then stops, pointing at me. “I’m sick of your shit, Sean. You need to grow the fuck up. Life isn’t this video game that you can just pause and unpause at will. We’re twenty-five years old. It’s time we stopped acting like teenagers and started acting like normal people.” He nods at Marcus. “No offense.”

Marcus shrugs.

“And what exactly is normal, Derek?” I ask, then close my eyes and shake my head.

“You know what, never mind. Just get the fuck out.”

He stands there clenching his fist, and I’m waiting for him to keep arguing when he turns on his heel and storms off towards his car. Seconds later he peels out of the driveway and I grab the closest thing to me—a box of old magazines—and throw it across the garage. It bangs off the washing machine and I hear my dad yell something from inside the house. Marcus has an eyebrow raised.

“You two should just get married already and get it over with,” he says.

“Fuck you,” I say, then groan. “God, he pisses me off sometimes. Fucking nerve, man.”

“He is kind of right, you know,” Marcus says.

“You’re going to start now too?”

“No, man,” he says, holding his hands up. “I’m not saying the band’s a bad idea. I’m just saying—what *are* we doing?”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “We’re in a band. We play music.”

“Yeah,” he says. “But for what? I mean, I’ve got a couple years of bullshitting time left before people start expecting me to do something with my life. But you, I know you hate living with Mom and Dad right now. All you’ve done since you moved back is work at Shambles and play in a garage band that—let’s be honest, we’re not getting a record deal anytime in the near future.” He pauses. “And by near future, I mean probably never.”

“I know that,” I say, without much conviction.

Marcus puts a finger to his lip then nods.

“I’m not delusional,” I say. “I didn’t start this so we could be all famous and shit.”

“Then why did you start it?”

“Because,” I say. I rub the guitar, still strapped around my neck, then raise my fingers up to see the calluses clearly, each one defined on the fingers of my left hand. “Because it’s something I’m doing. Actually doing, not studying or talking about, but doing. Something that I did myself, that nobody expected me to do.” I finger the strings on my guitar. “Because it gives me hope.”

“Hope for what?” Marcus asks.

“That someday I’ll actually know what the fuck I’m doing with my life.”

He sticks out his bottom lip a little, moves his head from side to side as if contemplating my answer.

“Works for me,” he says. “Might have gone over better with Derek if you’d said it like that though.”

“Derek’s a condescending prick,” I say.

“He’s Derek, dude,” Marcus says. “You’ve known him forever.”

“I know,” I say, shaking my head and watching the sky darken outside. I sigh. “Maybe he’s right.”

“About what?”

“This,” I say, pointing at the guitar and turning back to him. “What am I doing here? It sort of feels like I’m doing something, but now that I think about it I haven’t really done anything more than what I’ve been doing for the past like two years.”

“Seems to me that playing in a band is a lot more than doing nothing,” Marcus says, pauses, then adds, “which is exactly what you were doing before this.”

“Yeah, but is it worth it?” I ask. “I really am wasting so much time.”

“You’re letting what Derek said get in your head,” he says.

“No, I don’t think I am,” I say, feeling more dejected than I have in a while. “I don’t know, Marcus. Maybe we should give this up. I could be looking for a job right now.”

“Thought you tried that already,” he says.

“Not really,” I say. “Not with any enthusiasm.”

“That should tell you something,” he says, then groans. “Don’t do this, Sean. I’m just starting to have fun with this. You always give up on shit, God, I swear if I didn’t think you were just lazy I’d say you have ADHD.”

“Fuck you,” I say.

“Can you call Derek, please?” he pleads. “I hate when you guys fight.”

“Wasn’t a fight,” I grumble. “That’s gay.”

“Whatever, call him,” he says. “You guys are friends, and he’s only looking out for you. And must I mention he’s our bassist, and we’ve got a gig in two weeks so you shouldn’t be pissing him off right now?”

I shake my head, turn towards the street outside. Then my face drops abruptly. I turn back to Marcus and he’s grinning with his computer screen facing me.

“What did you—” I say.

“Two weeks from this Friday,” he says. “At that bar you always go to, Dill’s Tavern.”

“How—”

“Good question,” he says. “Guy I sold hall passes to, his older brother’s dating one of the bartenders there. Got him to pull a favor, gave him the rest of my stash.”

“Thought they made you give the hall passes back,” I ask.

Marcus chuckles.

“How long have you known me?” he asks.

“Point taken,” I say, walking over to the computer.

“We’ve got a Facebook event and everything,” he says. “You’d know about it if you actually went on Facebook ever. Like a normal person.”*

I don’t respond. There is indeed a Facebook event for the debut performance of *Fools of Man*, complete with a photoshopped picture of me, Derek, and Marcus standing on a stage with a

* He was right about that. I hadn’t been on Facebook in over a year at this point. I deactivated my account after spending a few months trying to act like I was still a normal person after Maria and I broke up and Leon died. Eventually I realized I couldn’t go on the site and be part of this huge community anymore, not when every one of my status updates or comments on people’s pictures or profiles or whatever were written while I was hammered and—consequently—extremely hostile. I have since rejoined the land of internet social networking though. Like a normal person. Add me sometime.

bunch of instruments behind us, which is hilarious considering that, from what I know, none of us has stood on a stage anytime in the recent past even individually, much less as a group.

Marcus obviously put it together, and it looks so much like an actual band photo that I have a hard time believing it's us in the picture. The guest list says twenty people are Attending, another fifteen Maybe Attending. I'd have been surprised if there were even five total between the two. The administrator of the event is Marcus, and there's comments all over the page from people I've never met, saying things like "sounds like fun" and "I'll try and make it out" and "Glad to hear your brother's doing better, Marcus." That last one kind of irks me but I ignore it.

"You did all this?" I ask, feeling a rush of emotion.

"Don't get all mushy on me," he says, smiling. "I did it for us. I knew you weren't going to ever get us out of this goddamn garage."

"I don't know, Marcus," I say.

"Don't start," he says. "Call Derek."

"But what if we fuck it up?" I ask. "I really am not up for making a fool of myself in front of a bunch of people." I pause. "Especially people I *know*, Marcus. No. I don't want to."

"Can you stop being a baby and call Derek?" he yells. There's a yell from inside the house, my dad telling us to keep it down.

I study Marcus's face, the desire in his eyes and think that, if anything, I should do this for him. Though I really don't want to all of a sudden. I reach over to rub his head and he slaps my hand away. We both laugh.

"Sometimes," I say. "Just sometimes, you people can actually be pretty cool."

"You people?" he says, grinning.

“Yeah, teenagers. Little brothers. All you people.”

“Thanks, asshole,” he says. “Now, can you call Derek and tell him to get his ass back over here?”

My phone’s sitting on top of my amp, and I’m reaching for it when it rings and I see Derek’s name on the caller ID. I pick it up and put the phone to my ear.

“Sean?” he says.

“Derek.”

There’s a short moment of silence.

“My bad, bro,” he says. “I don’t know what happened. I just—you know how I get sometimes.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Me too.”

“I just don’t want to go through all that again,” he says, then clears his throat.

“Again?” I ask.

There’s a long moment of silence before he says:

“Did I ever tell you and Leon I tried to join a band back at FSU?”

I didn’t know that. I stay quiet.

“Didn’t turn out good, man,” he says. “Tried out for them and the guys totally blasted me. Don’t even know if they actually were trying to start a band. I think they were just looking to fuck with people. Been sort of self-conscious about playing in public since.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask. “You played in front of me and Leon all the time.”

“You guys weren’t public.”

I feel a burst of warmth for Derek at the same moment my throat dries up at the thought of having to go through that humiliation. I let his words hang in the air for a moment.

“You got another half hour or so to practice?” I ask finally.

“Yeah,” he says. “Be back in five.”

I hang up the phone and Marcus clears his throat exaggeratedly. I shrug and he chuckles, shaking his head. I try to muster the same enthusiasm I’ve had for weeks now to pick up my guitar and practice, but two images keep popping into my head: the revelation of Derek’s embarrassing audition, and me standing on stage in front of a crowd of silent, angry people. I swallow thickly and slowly pick up the guitar, smile at Marcus when he gives me a thumbs up, though smiling is the last thing I feel like doing right now.

-Lauren-

I have no plan. It just occurred to me, sitting here in the waiting room of Dr. Medstein's office by myself, waiting for one of my final checkups before they induce my labor in a couple of weeks, that I have no plan. I know what will probably eventually happen. Rick will find out when this baby comes out and it looks nothing like him that something is up. At which point I will have to confess to him, and the table of remorse that's been set up in my favor for the past eight months will be violently tossed upside down. This thought doesn't upset me as much as it should, but what does upset me is that I will have to see the hurt in Rick's eyes when it happens, and that I know I won't feel anything in the way of pleasure. This may seem like something insignificant (who willfully *wants* to hurt somebody like that, unless you're just sadistic) but it actually indicates something in me I didn't know was actually there. Sometime in the past months since I moved back in with Rick, the idea of him and Natalie together stopped bothering me, and in the process my anger subsided to a point where it ceased to be malicious. I'm still mad at Rick about Natalie, but I'm not hurt by it anymore. And with the loss of pain came the loss of a desire for vengeance. So, because of that, the thought of seeing him hurt by something that started out as a spiteful move and literally grew within me into something I care about more than my own life right now is more than I can bear.

I wait for Dr. Medstein and, as usual, they take forever to call me in so I have all the time in the world to ponder this stuff. Which is probably the reason I'm sweating right now (though I'm sure being pregnant has something to do with it). The only part of the inevitable aftermath of this birth that I want to deal with is my child, but the fact that I know I will eventually have to deal with Rick as well is throwing my physical and mental well-being off.

I've been holding Rick's infidelity over his head, using it as leverage for the past seven and a half months to keep this apathetic approach to our relationship while still having him help me out around the house and with Justin. And in a way, without realizing it, I've done exactly what I vowed I wouldn't do: become my mother and my sister. And because of this realization, and the knowledge that Rick *is* going to find out eventually that this child isn't his, I've started gearing my mind towards the possibility that things will be drastically different for me in the coming weeks. There is going to be a complete rearrangement of my life, my future, my hopes and dreams...and part of me is anticipating it with this sort of scared excitement. A drastic paradigm shift to put myself in a position to maybe be happy in the long run? Why not. There's no possible way I can know for sure that things will end up ok. But all I do really know is that, whatever the result, it's got to be better than where I was headed before all this drama started.

I know that, through all of this, I should be telling Rick the truth right now. But I can't. For both selfless and selfish reasons. And that's pretty much how it's always been.

I've been thinking about school too. I had two semesters left to get my Bachelor's at FIU, and from what I know my grades and transcripts are still good. It's a possibility, one of the many things that is making me nervous and thrilled at the same time about my future.

Overall, I know this isn't the most noble or thought-out way to go about things, but everything I'm doing right now is instinctual. Which means it's all what feels natural to me. It's a good feeling to have, control over myself and my life. And right now, control is the biggest craving I've had throughout this entire pregnancy.

-Sean-

I'm in a bar again. The same bar I went to after my failed dinner date with Lauren, after seeing Maria again and deciding to drink myself into darkness. I'm the only one there, and the jukebox in the corner's playing *Guns N' Roses* "Welcome to the Jungle." The bartender's wiping the same glass over and over again with a dirty dish rag and, though he doesn't seem to be making any progress, he doesn't really look like he gives a shit. There's a beer in front of me and I don't remember ordering it, don't even remember coming here. Suddenly, somebody's next to me and I almost fall out of my chair when I turn and it's Leon sitting with a vodka tonic in front of him, materializing right there. Leon, sitting next to me. He's wearing exactly what he was wearing the night he died, dress shirt and slacks from Express Men, top two buttons on the shirt undone so his bare chest and the silver chain around his neck are visible, and he's got his sunglasses on even though there's like one light on in this place.* Leon's head hangs towards his drink as he rubs his fingers through the condensation settling on the glass. Then he jerks towards me and I jump.

"Aaaaaah," he says, laughing and pointing at me. "Got you."

My mouth hangs open and I reach out to touch his shirt sleeve. He jerks away from me, frowning and brushing his hand across the material.

"Threads, dude," he says.

"Leon," I whisper and he smiles again.

* Yes, Leon was one of those dudes that wore sunglasses at night, and even though I made fun of him endlessly for it, he remained that dude for the entirety of his life.

“Dude,” he says. “You look like you just saw a ghost.” Then he laughs, long and loud and very Leon-like. “I got plenty more of those,” he says, patting me on my shoulder and I nearly shit myself. “So get used to it.”

“Leon,” I say again. I’m finding it hard to say anything else.

“Alright,” he says, sipping his drink. “I guess I’m going to have to get this started then. Hi, Sean. Hi, Leon. How are things, Sean? Oh, good, Leon, very good. You’re lying to me, Sean. No, I’m not Leon. Sean, I’m dead. I know when you’re lying to me.”

“Wha-at,” I say, so slow that it has two syllables. “The fuck.”

Leon tilts his head to the side.

“I expected you to be a little happier than this.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

“Having a drink with my friend,” he says, a little hurt.

“Leon,” I say, holding my hands up in the air. “You’re fucking my head up, man. I can’t really deal with this shit right now.”

“Tell me about it,” he says. “Hence the reason I’m here.” He puts his hand on my shoulder again. I almost shit myself, again. “I’ll get straight to it. You’re doing the right thing right now, but I know you. I know you and I know how you are. You’ve really got something here, something you genuinely love that can be the catalyst, bring you out of this shitbox you’ve been calling existence and into some other shitbox that isn’t nearly as shitty as this one is right now. Not fame and fortune or anything like that but happiness, at least. You just have to resist the urge to give up. And, like I said, I know you. You will get the urge. You’re getting it right now, actually. Which is why I’m here to tell you to stop being a pussy.”

“Leon,” I say, then because I can’t really put what I’m feeling into words, I say again, “what the fuck.”

“Sean,” he says. “Get over it. I’m here right now, yes. I’m here, and no I’m not real. I am a manifestation of your subconscious, part of a bunch of other manifestations and the only one you will remember when you wake up later. I’m not trying to fuck with you, you’re fucking with yourself.”

I can’t seem to hold my mouth closed, my bottom jaw hanging uselessly.

“What?” I ask.

Leon motions towards my chest.

“At least look down.”

I do and notice two things right off the bat: 1) I’m in pajamas; 2) from what I can tell by the size of my hands and the pattern of race cars on my pajamas, I’m 8 years old again. I raise my arms and Leon shrugs.

“Don’t ask me, dude,” he says. “This is all your baggage.”

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“Nothing to understand,” he says. “I only came here to tell you one thing: don’t give up on this.”

“Give up on what?”

“This music thing,” he says. “We can be honest here. What you, Derek, and Marcus are doing isn’t groundbreaking. But there’s other things. Things you love, things I *know* you love because I’m a part of you that knows things like that even when you don’t. This can help you,

man. It can help you out of this situation you put yourself into. You disappointed me, by the way. Thought you'd handle things a little better than this."

I scoff.

"Disappoint *you*?" I say, my voice elevating. "What the hell did you expect, Leon? Do you know what the past two years have been like? Do you know how bad things got after you died? After you fucking *died* Leon. You're dead!"

Leon nods solemnly.

"I know, dude," he says. "Sucks. Being alive was fun too. Imagine how many more times I would've gotten laid if I hadn't kicked so early."

"I'm serious," I say.

"Me too."

I suck my teeth and turn back to my beer, reaching up and holding the mug with my two young, tiny hands. I sip it and Leon chuckles.

"You look funny."

"Fuck you," I say.

"You do understand that by getting annoyed with me right now you're actually annoyed with yourself, right?"

"No," I grumble. "I'm annoyed with you. Dick."

"Ok," he says. "I'm sorry for dying, Sean. But that's besides the point. All I'm saying is I know how you are, and if this turns into something that seems like it's going to be too much work, you're going to quit. And I'm here to tell you don't." He pauses for a long time, until I turn towards him and see that he's sipping his drink, eyes closed. He sees me watching and

continues. “I’m not Leon. Leon’s dead. But if he were here, he’d be disappointed at how you took things, and proud of you for bringing yourself out of it right now. If you don’t continue it for yourself, continue it for him. It’s what he would’ve wanted, and you know it.”

My eyes well up and I swipe at them with the back of my hand.

“I miss you, man,” I whisper. “I don’t know how to be okay with it. It’s hard.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Life is never easy, bro.” He gives me a weak smile. “But I’d live it again in a second if I could. Don’t waste yours.”

We watch each other’s facial expressions go through the transformation from somber to pleased, then I pat his hand and reach for my beer again. I’m about to sip it when Leon takes it out of my hand and slides it down the bar, away from me. I watch it move away, irritated.

“Fuck did you do that for?”

“Enough of that shit, man,” he says.

“I thought we were going to have a drink together.”

“Change of plans,” he says, standing and opening his arms. “You’re about two seconds from falling out of your bed, and I want to say bye before you go.”

I stand shakily and we embrace, then something hits me and I open my eyes and see nothing but carpet. My left arm is asleep and I’m tangled up in my bed sheets and feel like I’m going to puke. I turn over, lying on my back and concentrating on keeping the urge to vomit in the realm of an urge and not reality. It’s a unique feeling, because it’s the first time I’ve woken up this nauseated and *not* been hungover. It’s the dream that’s making me feel like this. It’s Leon. It’s because it wasn’t Leon, it was me. It’s because of what not-Leon said and because I

know it's Friday right now and tonight is *Fools of Man*'s debut performance and not-Leon was right. I am scared, I am reluctant. Part of me wants to not do this. Live my life the way I've been, work at Shambles and stay at my parent's house until they get annoyed and kick me out.* But there's obviously another part of me that won't let that happen. I'm nervous about tonight, yes. But, as I breathe away the nausea, I'm also confident that I'll do it. For Leon. For myself.

* Which, in all honesty, probably would've never happened. Which would have inevitably led to me being one of those dudes, fifty years old, balding and overweight with some insane amount of electronic equipment in my bedroom complete with a specialized video game chair, old pizza boxes and empty bottles of Mountain Dew Code Red.

STEP 8: SELF-ASSURE

-Lauren-

Two things happen on the evening of Friday, August 2nd.

- 1) My water breaks, and
- 2) I'm one hundred percent sure that Sean needs to know about his child.

I don't know why this thought jumps into my mind so suddenly and securely, but once it's there, it's firmly entrenched. The conviction sends a sharp seed of terror through my spine that, for a second, completely distracts me from the warm, wet sensation in my pants.

Caitlyn's sitting on the living room couch watching "Law and Order" and sucking on a popsicle with Justin sleeping on her lap. She's taken to spending the afternoons with us these past few weeks, waiting until Rick comes home before pretending to like him for five minutes then going back to her apartment.

During this period of time, she's insisted that I ask her to get me stuff when I need it. Every time I protest she points out that she is in nursing school and therefore qualified to take care of a pregnant women. I've had to keep pointing out to her that I don't actually need a nurse right now, as I'm not actually having the baby yet. I admit that my stomach's expanded enough now to where it takes an effort to stand up and actually do things for myself. But I don't want to sit around like a beached whale all day. The weight gain during this pregnancy has been less than the last, which essentially means that I look like my same old self with a beach ball tucked under my shirt.

Caitlyn's been a blessing in her own way, but most of the time that she's been here asking me questions and getting me things, I've wanted her to leave me alone. Last time, with

Justin, Caitlyn was almost the exact opposite of what she is right now: unsupportive, unavailable, unbearable. She was a college freshman then, partying and occasionally studying and generally being as self-obsessed as most college freshman tend to be. I was the same way, so I didn't blame her much. This time around, she's been there for me, even when I haven't wanted her to be. It's one of the small signs that my sister is actually growing up. I'll take the signs when I can.

I've wanted everybody to leave me alone. So I can think in peace. I've done a lot of thinking the last few weeks. Months, actually. This pregnancy's been like one long meditation session.

I'm in the kitchen when it all happens, standing in front of the fridge and trying to maneuver around my belly to get a bottle of milk. The bottle has been placed annoyingly in the very back of the top shelf so I have to bend over to reach and get it. I'm in the motion of this when there's a sudden release, like my bladder's decided it's had enough and gives up and there it is, all over the front of my spandex pants and on the floor. It's warm and baffles me even as I recognize it for what it is. I open my mouth to say something, anything to notify Caitlyn that it's time, but I'm struck with an image of Sean. It's an older version of Sean being contacted by his eighteen or nineteen year old offspring and finding out that he missed the kid's entire childhood. I'm almost absolutely sure that my son or daughter will blame Sean for this, even though it wouldn't be his fault. I can't do that. I won't survive the next couple of decades with that floating over my head.

"Caitlyn," I finally squeak.

It comes out so soft that I doubt Caitlyn hears it, but she does. Instead of an answer, I hear the springs from the couch in the living room shift and seconds later the kitchen light is on. I

didn't realize that I've been standing in the dark this whole time. Caitlyn stands with her lips pressed tightly together, her eyebrows creased with confusion as she studies me—hunched over and holding my stomach—then notices the floor beneath me.

“Oh,” she says, realization hitting her. Her eyes widen. “*Oh*,” she says again. “Oh shit. Shit, ok. Ok.”

She's about to walk out then turns and takes a few steps towards me, turns to leave again, then stops with her hands waving around in front of her like a blind woman.

“I forgot what I'm supposed to do,” she says. I've never seen my sister look so vulnerable. Not since my father's death at least, when she was twelve.

“The bag,” I say, grimacing. There's a familiar prickle of pain below that I know will soon grow into gut-wrenching contractions. “Get the bag and bring the car near the elevator downstairs.”

“Right,” she says. “Right.” She turns to leave again then stops, looking me up and down. “Don't move, I'll help you in a little.”

“Caitlyn,” I say, breathing deeply, slowly.

“Yes?”

“Everything's going to be fine,” I say. “Your primary focus is to relax. I can't relax if you're not relaxed.”

She nods and I can't help but smile when she mimics my breathing method and shuffles out of the kitchen. I stand there and keep on breathing slowly. Then I decide I don't want to stand in my own bodily fluids anymore, so I make my way out of the kitchen to the front door and grab a coat, the longest one hanging in the closet. I put it on to cover the big wet stain on the

front of my pants which, regardless of the circumstances, still makes me uncomfortable with its visibility. I make my way to the living room and grab my cell off the counter and am about to call Rick when I bypass Rick's name in my contacts and move right on to the S's, stopping on Sean's number. I'm about to press TALK when a sharp pain rips through my stomach and I double over. I'm not aware I make a sound, but I must have involuntarily because suddenly Caitlyn is in the living room with her mouth open in an O.

"Ok," she says, arms up in a blind-woman stance again. "Ok, ok, ok, ok."

The pain recedes and I straighten up, approaching my sister as she seems to be falling into the grip of a panic attack.

"Caitlyn," I say.

"Ok, ok ok, ok."

"Caitlyn," I repeat.

"Mm hmm," she says, eyes closed, not speaking to me but seemingly to herself. I take another step towards her and grab her shoulders, shaking her a little and pulling her close to me.

"You're freaking me out," I say softly.

"Sorry," she whispers.

"We're fine," I say. "I've done this before."

"I haven't," she almost whimpers.

"Caitlyn," I say. "You're a nurse. Remember?"

"Not yet I'm not," she says. "I'm obviously not ready for this shit."

"Well, I obviously am," I say. "And lucky for you, all you've really got to do is get me to the hospital. And relax."

I smile after that and she smiles too and there's a noticeable release of tension, not all of it but enough to get this show on the road. Soon I'm in the elevator and moments later I'm standing on the sidewalk gritting my teeth through the increasing pain in my abdomen as Caitlyn pulls my car up to the handicapped parking spot and I waddle over to the passenger's side as she loads Justin into the car for me. I get in the car and look back at him and he smiles up at me groggily from his car seat.

"You okay, honey?" I ask.

He nods and I raise my hand, waving at him. He waves back then closes his eyes. Considering how long it usually takes me to get him to sleep, the fact that he's able to sleep through all this commotion is baffling. Kids. I turn back to the front and I'm just putting my seatbelt on when another searing pain rips through my stomach and I feel like something isn't right. I must make another involuntary sound because I hear Caitlyn moan beside me.

"Lauren," she says. "I know I'm supposed to be ok with all of this and helpful and all but—you're my sister and this is freaking me out, ok? I can't have anything bad happen to you or this baby. I won't be able to handle it. So you can't do that right now, seriously. I'm not ok over here, ok? I'm not ok unless you're ok, so—yeah, you gotta—you know, let me know you're ok."

"I'm," I start, pausing and trying not to let her see my teeth grinding. I grab my phone out of my pocket then take a deep breath, trying to calm myself. "I'm fine. Just get to the hospital. Quick. And do me a favor."

"Yes," she says, nodding as we peel out of the parking lot. "Anything."

“Call him,” I say, handing her the phone. “Call him and tell him to meet us at the hospital. Don’t tell him why, I want to tell him. Just tell him I’ve been admitted to the hospital and I want him to come.”

“Sure,” she says. “But why wouldn’t Rick know why we’re at the hospital?” She chuckles a little and sneers. “You forget to tell him you were pregnant, or does he think that’s a tumor under your shirt?” Funny how this is the one thing that can get her to relax.

“Not Rick,” I grunt. “Him.” I point at the phone. “And Rick. And Mom, after. Him first.”

“Ok,” she says. “No problem, but...who is—” she glances at the phone. “Sean?” Her eyes light up a little. “Sean the bartender? From Shambles?”

“Sean the father of my child,” I say without hesitation. I close my eyes, breathe in slow through my nose and out slow through my mouth. “He’s the father.”

There’s a good thirty seconds of silence as we drive down US-1 towards Baptist Hospital, then I hear my phone dialing next to me and am thankful that she didn’t ask any more questions right now.

-Sean-

My parents come home as we're packing our instruments in the car and Marcus immediately does what I asked him not to do and tells them about our performance tonight. I didn't think it was a good idea for us to invite them, seeing as how this ordeal could very well backfire in our faces resulting in everybody booing us off the stage, at which point we'd have to endure the pitying looks our parents would give us, the pats on the backs and statements like "at least you tried, that's what counts." But Marcus seems so damn eager for them to see us that I smile and nod when my mom asks me if Marcus is serious.

"Well, good for you," she says, turning to my Dad. "We can make it, can't we?"

Instead of answering, my dad points at the garage door.

"Is that what you've been causing all that racket doing in there the past few months?" he asks. "Preparing for this?"

"Yeah," I say, then, "no. Not for this. I didn't know about this until two weeks ago. I just wanted to start a band."

"It wasn't racket," Derek says, pouting.

"Sounded like racket to me," my Dad says.

"Are you coming or not?" I ask.

He grunts. Grunts mean yes.

Twenty minutes later, Derek, Marcus and I are at Dill's and my stomach is turning over on itself, twisting and grinding and generally causing me a lot of discomfort. I'm disoriented the moment I walk in to the bar. First of all, I'm sober. I'm never sober when I'm here. Not to mention I come in through the back door with my guitar and amp and wiring and stuff, as

opposed to the front door where I normally come in. The bartender on duty—an older woman who I know distinctly as the only bartender here who’s had to cut me off on multiple occasions*—is talking to me like I’m an actual person and not an annoying source of tip money. The bar is largely empty, hazy with smoke and dim lighting which actually helps me to relax a little. It seems more intimate with a few people and dim lighting, less like I’m performing on stage tonight for the first time ever and more like I’m playing my guitar for some friends, showing them what I’ve been up to in my free time over the past months and trying to impress them so they can smile and tell my parents how talented their son is. I realize how juvenile this sounds, but the thought does something to settle my nerves. Then, as I’m setting all my stuff up, the lights come on above the stage and people start walking in and my nerves are instantly unsettled again. People I recognize from I-don’t-know-where, people Marcus has introduced me to before while hanging out at the mall or Starbucks or McDonalds or wherever, a couple of Shambles employees on their night off grinning at me and flashing thumbs up, and my mom and dad standing in the back suddenly, as if they teleported here, my dad holding a Budweiser and smiling. He tilts the beer towards me, nods, and I swallow thickly. My mom isn’t even trying to hide her obvious excitement, grinning and waving and acting very much like a parent at her child’s elementary school play.

Marcus is fiddling around on his computer with his DJ headphones on, Derek tuning his bass. My guitar’s strapped, in my hand, and I’m holding the neck of it like I’m trying to strangle the damn thing. The clock in the back of the bar says it’s 7:55, five minutes until we’re supposed to start. I face the stool in front of the mic stand set up on the stage we’re standing on. Another

* Most of the other bartenders had only had the pleasure of doing it once.

mic is in front of Derek, and I notice it at the same moment it catches his eye, his eyebrows raising almost instantly. Two mics. One stage. The stage we're standing on. We're actually standing on a stage, doing all the same things we've been doing in the garage at my parent's house for the past six months, only with about thirty people filling this hole-in-the-wall bar waiting for us to do that thing we've only been doing in a garage up until now. I get the urge to puke all over again.

"You guys ready?" I say to Derek and Marcus.

"I'm ready," Derek says. "Are you?"

"I'm fine," I say, turning to Marcus. "You ready?"

"I was born ready," he says.

"Marcus," Derek groans. "Really? 'I was born ready'? What is this, like, *Back to the Future* or something?"

"Shutup," Marcus says.

"Same set as usual?" I say.

"Sean," Derek says, leveling his eyes at me. "We've only practiced like twelve songs ever. I wouldn't call this a set. I'd say it's our whole repertoire."

I recognize Derek's sarcastic hostility for what it actually is: nervousness. The realization that he's anxious too makes me feel not so bad about my own apprehension. I pat him on the shoulder.

"Kristina coming out?" I ask.

“No,” he says, like I’m crazy. And I guess it is crazy to ask if my best friend’s girlfriend will be watching him perform in a band for the first time, especially considering Derek revealed to me two weeks ago that he always wanted to be in a band. Douche.

“Cool,” I say.

“Let’s get this over with,” Derek says.

“Right,” I say, taking a deep breath.

I turn towards the mic, tap it and the sound of my finger against the metal reverberates from the speakers above our heads, set up on ceiling mounts. Thirty or so eyes are focused on me, waiting, and there’s a light shining right in my face so it makes all the other faces seem that much creepier in the glare. My parents yell something inaudible, nodding and clapping, prodding me forward, so I direct my attention back at the crowd and try to think how I can make my palms stop sweating, make the people sitting out there not freeze my heart, like icicles have entered my bloodstream. I tell myself to pretend they’re mannequins. Pretend they’re mannequins who have been set up in here to simulate real people, so that we—Derek, Marcus, and me—can get used to the idea of playing in front of actual people. I don’t know why this helps, but pretending that I’m about to play my guitar and sing some songs in front of a group of mannequins that I’m pretending are real people actually does this weird thing to my angst, twisting and turning its logic system until I think it gives up and I’m able to speak.

“Hello,” I say, and my voice sounds weird in the speaker, bouncing off the back wall in an echo so delayed that it seems like somebody else is repeating my words right after I am.

“We’re Fools of Man,” I say. I open my mouth to say something else, but can’t think of anything so I turn around to Marcus and Derek. I nod and Marcus nods back, presses a button

and the sound of drum sticks tapping against each other comes from the speakers. I take a deep breath and turn back to the crowd, raise my picking hand, arrange my fingers on the correct power chord and launch into *Bush's* "Machinehead." I expect to fuck up—almost fuck myself up on purpose actually, so I can get it over with, apologize to these people and go get properly shitfaced at the bar in the back, avoiding everybody's eyes for the rest of the night. My fingers seem to have higher aspirations though, and before I know it my mouth is half an inch from the microphone and I'm crooning into it, almost making love to the thing is what it feels like, breathing the song into the instrument, an act which fits with the lyrics "*breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, breathe in,*" and I let the chords ring, waggling my finger against the strings and closing my eyes so I don't have to see the people's reactions, can just feel the music coming through my mouth and fingers.

I take this energy into the guitar solo, stepping away from the mic and concentrating not just on getting every chord right, but on getting them out loud and clear, letting the ones that are supposed to expand ring through the room, jerking through the fluttery notes to create this hard yet somber flow, then close my eyes again to really feel the vibrations, really feel the tremor from Derek beating the bass out of his guitar, pounding me in my chest, then I'm back at the mic and now there's not just an echo but an amplified substance to my voice and it takes me a moment to realize Derek's mouth's pressed against his mic, eyes closed, singing along with me, and I close my eyes again and fill my lungs with air and let it all out.

By the end of the song, I've forgotten we were playing for other people. I'm back in my parents' garage, with my best friend and my little brother, making music and loving every moment of it. I open my eyes, my ears humming, and Marcus and Derek are doing their thing—

Marcus fiddling with his computer, Derek pretending to retune his guitar as usual, both of them grinning. It's then I hear a couple of claps from behind me and I turn back to the crowd and there are some people playing darts in the back, another couple playing pool, a group talking and drinking amongst themselves in a corner booth, and quite a few eyes directed at us, smiling, putting their hands together. It's not everybody, but it's enough. My parents seem relieved, and I imagine them asking themselves—and each other, most likely—on the way over here if their children were about to make fools of themselves up on stage. Confidence flowing through me, I walk up to the mic again.

“That was Bush’s ‘Machinehead,’” I say, then feel the urge to small talk. That’s what bands do, so I guess I should. “‘Machinehead’ is a song a lot of people are throwing in the category of old school now. I’m twenty-five though, which isn’t old, and I remember exactly the first time I saw Bush on MTV, back when MTV actually played music videos.” Couple of chuckles prod me forward. “It’s one of the many songs that formed my music interest. That formed much of my life interest, to be honest. Music’s got a way of doing that, putting things in perspective and giving me a reason to actually get out of bed.” Even more chuckles, and one guy who lets out a bellowing laugh. I wait for him to stop then point at Derek. “Influenced this guy too, my best friend, Derek Torres.” Derek smiles and waves. I point at Marcus. “This guy—he’s a baby so, I doubt it influences him that much.” There are more chuckles and Marcus manages to give me a scowl that is simultaneously embarrassed and content. “Marcus Easton, my little brother, is giving you the—” I pause. “Synthetic drums, I guess you’d call it. And Derek over here’s on bass. I’m Sean Easton on lead guitar and vocals and again, we are Fools of Man.”

A couple of hoots and claps* and I turn back to Derek, shrug. Marcus rolls his eyes and we launch into Radiohead's "Creep." Then it's everything else: Limp Bizkit "Break Stuff," Korn "A.D.I.D.A.S.," Chevelle "Point #1," Puddle of Mudd "She Hates Me," Offspring "Self Esteem," Green Day "Brainstew," System of a Down "Aerials," Sublime "Santeria," Marilyn Manson's "Sweet Dreams," and our culminating performance of the song that—in my opinion—started it all: Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit." There are highs and lows throughout the performance, and I fumble my strings a couple of times† and feel the heat of embarrassment threatening to rise up my neck to the top of my head and make me mess up a lot more than a couple of notes on a couple of songs, but then I imagine mannequins again and push through the haze and it's like I never fumbled to begin with. Like I added my own little twist to each track. I wonder if this is how it is for actual rock stars, then I stop caring whether or not it is and just enjoy my time up here. An hour later, I remove the guitar from around my neck and put it on the guitar stand then step back up to the microphone. I rub my fingers together and can feel the painful grooves where the strings ground into the tips. I cough a little, my throat raw, and smile at the people smiling back at me.

"Thank you," I say. "Again, we are *Fools of Man*."

There are sporadic bouts of applause from different sections of the room and, though I wouldn't say the house is brought down, it's loud enough and enthusiastic enough to warrant a few seconds where the three of us, me, Marcus and Derek, stand there and bask in the momentary glory. The applause tapers off soon and Marcus and Derek high-five each other then me. Marcus closes his computer and Derek turns to put his bass back in its case and we silently

* Mostly from people I already knew, I noticed. But I was taking what I could get.

† More than a couple of times, actually.

gather our things and put them in the car then hurry back inside, weaving through congratulatory handshakes towards the bar where my parents are still standing. My mother runs up to me and grabs me in a hug.

“That was amazing, honey,” she says. “I didn’t know you had such a voice.” She turns her head to the side a little, thoughtful. “A lot of screaming, and I didn’t really understand most of what you were saying, but it seemed to entertain your friends.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Thanks, Ma.”

“Was so damn nervous,” Derek says. “Screwed up that second verse on ‘Aerials’”

“Don’t do that, bro,” Marcus says. “It was our first time on stage, you can’t expect it to be perfect.”

“Didn’t expect it to be,” Derek says, grinning. “Don’t get me wrong, man. That was amazing.”

“I know,” I say.

“Though I didn’t realize it until we were almost done that half the songs we played came out when we were like seven years old.” He nods towards Marcus. “This guy wasn’t even alive.”

“You know, you guys were teenagers at one point too,” Marcus says, miffed. “Not too long ago.”

“Don’t remind me,” I say, then turn to Derek. “I’ve always been under the assumption that rock peaked in the nineties anyways.”

Derek shrugs and nods then we all chuckle and nod some more and my dad steps up next to my mother and puts a hand on my shoulder, squeezing gently and smiling.

“You know I used to play guitar,” he says. “Before I met her and she made me stop,” he adds, nodding his head in my mom’s direction. She slaps him lightly on the arm, and I know this is his way of saying he was impressed. And I realize then that this banter, this interaction with my loved ones and this acceptance of what I’ve done as something worthy of the time I’ve wasted is what I was searching for all along. There are a few more pats on the back from other people milling around the bar, people telling me it was fun, glad they came, things like that, some of them even buying me and Derek shots,* and though nobody says it I can tell that *Fools of Man*’s debut performance was no blockbuster event. There are no agents approaching us, no contracts for three album record deals or anything like that coming our way. But nobody booed us, and everybody looks happy, and as I stand here next to my parents and best friend and little brother and listen to the various compliments, I feel enough motivation to know that I won’t be giving up on this any time soon. I move my dad’s hand off my shoulder and reach over, grabbing him and pulling him closer.

“Glad you guys could come,” I say.

He pats me on the back and I pat him on the back and then there’s some grunts as we complete the man-version of an actual hug. I turn to the bar and ask the bartender for a shot of Patron and a beer and she smiles, puts the shot and a Bud in front of me and tells me it’s on the house, then tells me that *Fools of Man* sounded good. She uses our band name when she says it, and it occurs to me that we are officially a band. We have officially done everything that an actual band does. There’s a huge paradigm shift at the thought, and I didn’t realize that up until now I’d been thinking of *Fools of Man* as me, Derek, and Marcus *pretending* to be an actual rock

* Could never turn that down now, could I?

band. I always associated rock music with fame, success, platinum records and articles in *Rolling Stones*. But a band is exactly what its name indicates. A group of people playing music together. We are a band.

We are *Fools of Man*.

Derek, grinning ear to ear, throws me a thumbs up sign. I chug my beer and ask for another, elation settling into an unfamiliar part of my brain, one I haven't accessed in a while. Then my pocket vibrates and the mood of the night shifts perceptibly. I pull out my phone and see a number I don't recognize, press TALK and put it to my ear.

"Hello?" I say.

"Sean?" The voice is strong, gruff but undeniably feminine.

"Yeah," I say, and I realize I'm drunk. That's how it happens for me sometimes: I'll think I'm sober, borderline tipsy, until I have to speak coherently and all I can manage without delving into the realm of slurring are short statements like "Yeah."

"This is Caitlyn, Lauren's sister."

It takes me a second to locate the name Lauren in my memory banks, but Caitlyn seems to be particularly astute to pauses.

"Lauren," she says, exasperated. "The woman you fucked nine months ago. And if you say 'which one' I'm hanging up the fucking phone."*

* I know you're wondering if it registered here, what was happening, what with Caitlyn's use of "*nine months ago*", nine months being two words that, when put together, are very loaded in their meaning. No, it didn't register. I like to think it's because I was drunk, but I think there was just a part of my brain that took all trigger words directed at me during this period of time and deflected them, like some fucked up psychological version of Pong.

I hear somebody say something in the background and there's a rustling as I assume Caitlyn covers the phone to respond to the person. She comes back on and her voice sounds calmer. I'm extremely confused.

"Do you know who I'm talking about?" she asks.

"I know who Lauren is," I say. "What do you want?"

"We need you to come to the hospital," she says. "It's an emergency."

I feel a lot of conflicting emotions at this request, not the least of which is instant anger. This is not what I want to hear after I just did something that very well might define who I am for the rest of my life.*

"Why?" I ask.

"Because it's your duty as the—"

There's a commotion as whoever it is next to Caitlyn—Lauren, my educated guess—yells something. There's a beep on my end and the call disconnects. I pull the phone away from my ear, the blazing CALL ENDED display blinking out a moment later. Derek asks what's wrong and I shrug. My parents have moved to the other side of the bar where they're looking through the jukebox and shaking their head and frowning at all the songs showing up on the digital screen. Marcus is fiddling around on his iPhone. I'm irked, undeniably, and yet there's a rush in me, a feeling that isn't unpleasant. That little interaction certainly wasn't mundane, and it even seems to be amping up the adrenaline rush I already have from being on stage tonight. I'm about two seconds from calling them back to find out what the hell's going on when my phone rings again. I pick it up and put it to my ear without saying a word. Caitlyn doesn't hesitate, says:

* I was thinking epically at the moment.

“My sister would like me to ask you, kindly, if you’d please pass by Baptist hospital at your earliest convenience, as a favor to her.”

“Why?” I ask again, feeling like a prick though I have no idea why I should.

“Because—” she starts, hostility lacing her tone. Then she pauses. “Because it would be a generous thing to do, and because Lauren really wants you here.”

I’m taken aback by this, flustered. Why Lauren, a girl who I had one awkwardly intimate night with months ago then an awkwardly distant half-date a month later—which she walked out on I might add—would want me at the hospital while she’s being admitted for whatever reason is a question I can’t see there being a sane answer for.

“She wants me there?” I ask.

“Yes,” Caitlyn says, more talking in the background. “She says she’ll explain when you get here.”

I pause for only a second and Caitlyn speaks, whispering now.

“One more thing,” she says. Her voice gets a nervous quality and she clears her throat.

“You wouldn’t happen to be with—um, your friend, what was his name?”

“Derek?” I say, Derek’s eyebrow shoots up.

“Yeah, Derek, I guess,” she says. “I think that was him, was it? The one you were with that night at that bar with Lauren?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Why? You want to talk to him?”

“No,” she says quickly. “I just wanted to see—” She clears her throat and there’s another muffled conversation in the background.

“Caitlyn,” I interrupt, annoyed. “We’ll be there.”

There's silence on the other end, and I expect this girl I barely know to flip out on me, and I begin preparing myself to weakly defend myself.

"Right, whatever, see you here then," she says brusquely, then coughs. "Room 1298, in the maternity ward," she adds, then hangs up.*

"What the hell was that about?" Marcus asks.

"I don't know," I say. "That was Lauren's sister."

"Caitlyn?" Derek says, and his voice sounds so surprised and heavy with emotion that I'm thrown. I don't understand what's going on—the haze of alcohol is making understanding even harder—but I'm starting to feel like there's a lot of things happening here that I don't know about, and it's starting to piss me off.

"Yeah," I say. "She asked about you, said that Lauren wants us to come to Baptist hospital. She's admitted there. In the maternity ward." I pause. "I think she's having a kid."

"Oh," Derek says, and he's definitely avoiding my eyes, deep in thought. He doesn't say anything about her asking about him.

"She asked about you," I repeat.

"Oh," he says again. "That's weird." His tone makes it sound like that's anything but weird.

"What the hell's going on?" Marcus asks.

"We're going to the hospital," I say.

"Why?" he asks, concerned. "Everything ok?"

"Yeah," I say. "We're visiting Lauren."

* Nope. Nothing.

“Who the fuck is Lauren?”

“Somebody,” I say, still watching Derek. “Nobody. We’re just going.” I point at Derek.

“At some point you are going to tell me what the hell this is all about.”

“I don’t know what this is about,” Derek says.

“Either I’ve known you way too long,” I say. “Or you are the world’s worst liar.”

-Lauren-

I'm filling out the paperwork and lying back on a bed wearing a hospital gown when my mother comes storming into the room with Rick behind her, chuckling.

"I really wish you had called me before you let them admit you here," my mother says.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Nothing," Rick says. "One of the doctors told her you were in good hands and she should stop causing a commotion." He gives my mother a steely stare. "Said she was disturbing the other patients."

"He's a dimwitted fool who I'm sure got his MD from a mail-in brochure," my mother says flippantly.

"How's Justin?" I ask, ignoring her.

"He's watching some movie in the kid's area," he says. "They've got an attendant, but I don't want to leave him alone for long. How you doing?"

"I'm fine," I say.

"You'd be much more fine if they actually acted like a first rate medical center," my mother says, "and not some third world hole-in-the-wall abortion clinic."

"Mom," I groan. "Please don't start with this. Everything's fine. They're taking good care of me."

"Like hell they are," she grumbles. "You shouldn't be in this much pain right off the bat, they're not doing something."

"The doctor said the baby was in a weird position, Mom," I say. "That's all. They shifted it around and I'm fine now. Calm down."

She grumbles something but falls quiet afterwards, relenting. Caitlyn, standing in the corner of the room with her arms crossed, gets a look that's a mixture of awe and disgust on her face as she shakes her head at my mother. I chuckle in spite of myself. Rick chuckles too, pats my foot.

“So happy too, babe,” he says. My smile immediately drops. Rick takes a seat in the chair he set up earlier next to me, grabs hold of my hand and kisses it. His eyes are clearer than I ever remember them being. Over the past months, they adopted this perpetual remorseful tint whenever directed at me. Now he actually seems happy. I feel so bad for him in this moment that my eyes tear up. He doesn't deserve what I know is about to happen. He doesn't deserve anything but joy. None of us deserve anything less. I know that now. Actions made without expressly evil intentions don't deserve a lifetime of lamentation. Rick has obviously been kicking himself for what he did with Natalie, ever since it happened. Cursing himself for what he thinks he did to me. I want to release him, give him the freedom to go out and live the rest of his life without regret. He notices my emotion and obviously takes it as a sign of distress over the baby.

“So happy,” he says again, with less conviction. He knows something's up, but he thinks it has to do with the baby. Which, I guess, it does. Caitlyn hasn't said a word to him, not since she called him to come over here. Which would be fine if it wasn't for the fact that she won't even look him in the eye. I almost wish she would at least be her normal bitchy self. As it stands, she's like a statue in the corner, not speaking to anybody, really. After she got off the phone with Sean, then Rick, then our mother, she basically shut her mouth and has said all of two words to

me since. In this she is exactly like our mother, anger leading to either rants and raves or the silent treatment. She's obviously opted for the silent treatment.

I don't blame Caitlyn for being mad at me though, honestly. My sister's all about trust. Part of the reason she's so skeptical about masculinity is because she believes it's impossible to trust a *creature that thinks with its genitals; genitals have no sense of loyalty* (her words, not mine). So I know she feels betrayed. The idea that I would wait this long to tell her something as important as the father of my child not being who she believed it was this whole time doesn't sit well with her. I want to point out to her that Sean doesn't even know. Nobody does, which means technically that I confided in her first. All of this should indicate that this has been something I've been struggling with for some time now. But seeing as how I'm still not completely done struggling with it—and seeing as how I'm very close to having the child all the commotion is being caused over—I can't figure out how to put it all in words and get Caitlyn talking to me again. Not to mention my mother and Rick have been hovering around me ever since they showed up, making it almost impossible to reconcile with my sister without causing a whole other set of dramatic circumstances. My mother paces the room now, touching instruments she shouldn't be touching and tsking every few seconds. Other than that, Rick's got dreamy eyes and Caitlyn's standing in the corner fuming. It's eerily silent in here. *Awkwardly* silent, and depressing, like I'm seconds away from being euthanized rather than bringing new life into the world.

“Did you finish the paperwork?” Rick asks.

I pick up the clipboard in my lap. I filled out all the sections of the birth certificate but the lines asking for the father and the baby's name. The former I can't write because I don't want

Rick to find out like that; the latter I can't fill out because I don't know what to write. I've spent the better part of six months trying to figure out what I'll name this child, running over both boy's and girl's names in my head and coming up with nothing. I don't know what that means, if it means anything.

"I'm almost done," I say. "Just resting a little."

"I really can fill it out for you," he says.

"No, don't worry about it," I say.

Rick shrugs and smiles.

"You look so worried," he says. "Everything's going to be fine, babe. The doctor says all your vitals and the baby's look great."

"I know," I whisper. He fake pouts a little, sticking out his bottom lip and rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb in a gesture that is so mushy and sweet it makes my nose tingle. I push the tears back with a thick swallow and close my eyes. Suddenly I wish more than anything this baby was Rick's. Not out of love, but out of pity. This is going to kill him. Which is exactly, I realize, the real reason I never told him. The moment I told him I was pregnant, standing right outside the front door of our apartment, his face changed. He instantly aligned himself with the identity of fathering a second child.

"Everything *is* going to be fine," I say, echoing him. I pause for a long time, open my eyes and make sure I catch his. "Eventually," I add.

He smiles, not noticing my tone. I turn to Caitlyn for some sort of help, some reassurance, anything. Nothing from her, though. She won't even look at me. I close my eyes, feel the baby squirming around in my belly, anxious. I want to tell him or her not to rush it. You

can't go back in when it's all said and done, and it's a one way street to death once you're out. No choice but to weather the storm. This has got to be the most depressing childbirth ever.

I'm seconds away from not being able to hold in my tears anymore when a contraction hits me and I sit up, sucking in a deep breath and grabbing for Rick's hand, which I'm sure I squeeze to death. When it passes I lean back and a mist of sweat pops up on my forehead. I'm grateful when the hospital room door opens and the nurse comes in, walking briskly over to the beeping machines hooked up to my arm and belly.

"About time," my mother says, and I glare at her. The nurse ignores her, pokes at the beeping monitor next to me.

"Everything's in order," she says. "A little faster than I thought, to be honest. But that's fine. Your contractions are getting closer, so it shouldn't be long. When they reach about five minutes apart, we'll start prepping. Doctor Medstein will be with you in a moment. Until then, just press the button if you need anything."

"She presses that button and you respond immediately?" my mother says, less a question than an order. The nurse nods, raising an eyebrow. I think about that "five minutes apart" thing. What that means is that, in a little while, the pain I just felt will be occurring every five minutes, then every four minutes, then two then it will be a constant, pelvic-pounding hurt until my second child arrives. It almost seems fitting too, some sort of penance for the circumstances in which he or she was conceived.

No, I tell myself. Don't do that. Do not turn this pregnancy, the miracle of birth, into an act of penance. This isn't biblical times. I'm a woman who acted out of emotion, which most

human beings tend to do. It was perfectly normal what I did with Sean. A reaction and an action I need to stop beating myself up about.

And with that thought I not only forgive myself, but finally realize that I've done nothing wrong here. I realize that, up until now, I've been subconsciously berating myself for how I got pregnant when, in fact, it's nothing I could have controlled. And nothing I would have wanted to control even if I'd been able to. It was life, happening.

I touch Rick's shoulder. He smiles at me and I open my mouth, intending to tell him the truth. Then the room door opens again and in walks Sean with his friend from the bar that night and another teenage kid who resembles Sean a lot. Sean takes one look at me and Rick, then everybody else in the room. Sean's friend's eyes head straight to Caitlyn, as do the other kid's. Caitlyn rolls her eyes.

"This is going to be a long night," she says.

-Sean-

Me, Derek and Marcus get all types of odd looks from both employees and patients at Baptist as we stumble through the halls and giggle uncontrollably at absolutely everything, which essentially means we're laughing at absolutely nothing. At first we stop all the nurses that look even halfway decent* and ask them for directions then, when we're properly situated and know where we're going, stop them to ask random questions. Marcus manages to strike up a conversation with one and has her going for a while, even gets her to do that thing where women laugh and playfully slap a guy on their chest, until he says something that must indicate his age and you can actually see the nurse's eyes go dim and her body become almost robotic. I feel bad for him for all of a second until I remember that I wouldn't have had the balls to even try and hit on a nurse at Baptist Hospital when I was seventeen. Then I'm envious of my little brother all over again.

I find myself having fun though, despite the fact that I hate hospitals and I'm about to go visit a girl I barely know as she's having a baby. Derek seems to be properly intoxicated too, which has loosened him up a little so he's not yelling at us to stop making so much noise in a hospital.† All in all, it's about an hour from the time we park our car to the moment we enter the maternity ward, which I admit is not the most time-sensitive display of concern for Lauren's well-being. One advantage to our delayed arrival, though, is that by time I find Lauren's room, I've had enough of a time-lapse from my last shot of Patron to enter that hazy realm between drunk-as-hell and sober. I walk in and there Lauren is, lying on a bed with a man sitting on one

* Which, in my inebriated state, was pretty much every one of them.

† Though I do remember at one point him telling me if I opened another random room door and whispered "Bloody Mary" inside that he'd call hospital security and tell them I was going around showing my penis to everybody. I don't know if he was joking or not.

side of her, her sister standing against the wall near an older woman I'm assuming is her mother. I'm surprised by her mother's beauty at first, then again by her sister's—they're the spitting image of each other, and both of them are crazy hot—then I recover and notice how Lauren's sister and Derek are staring at each other like they're fresh out of *The-fucking-Notebook* or something* and once again get that mixture of annoyance and confusion. Caitlyn points at me after we've been standing in the room for a while and says:

“Took you fucking long enough.”

“Caitlyn!” her mother yells.

“What?” she says, shrugging. “I called them like an hour ago.”

“We couldn't find the maternity ward,” Derek says. “The signs in here are confusing.”

“The lack of direction in this place is staggering,” her mother says, then approaches Derek and Marcus. “I'm Katherine. Lauren and Caitlyn's mother.”

“Derek,” Derek says, taking her hand and nodding toward me. “Sean's friend.”

Marcus reaches his hand out, his eyes never leaving Caitlyn. And by Caitlyn, I mean Caitlyn's body. Teenagers.

“I'm Marcus,” Marcus says. “Sean's brother.”

Katherine turns to me and I wait for her to hold a hand out or something but she crosses her arms and eyes me suspiciously. I'm the reason these two are here, obviously, so she's wondering what brings *me* here. I stay quiet and direct my attention towards Lauren, who is definitely avoiding my eyes. The other guy in the room has his hands out, turning his head from

* Nicholas Sparks novel *The Notebook*—minus the “fucking” in my modified title—made into a movie starring Rachel McAdams and Ryan Gosling. You may have seen it. I know I have. Judge me all you want, it's a kick-ass film.

Lauren to me and back, and I want to offer an explanation as to why I'm here but I myself have no clue, so I think I'm going to keep staying quiet and acting like I belong.

“So I guess this has turned into a party,” Katherine says.

“Whoop dee fucking doo,” Caitlyn grumbles, then smiles tiredly at Derek. He smiles back and approaches her and I open my mouth to say something to them, then decide against it and walk over to the bed where Lauren is still avoiding my eyes and taking slow, deep breaths. As I approach, she finally acknowledges my presence, smiling sheepishly. I don't think I've ever seen anybody smile so sheepishly actually. Like, if a sheep were to smile, this would be exactly what it would look like. Sheepishly and, I notice, a bit fearfully too. Anxiety courses through her pupils like lightning, and I wonder if something's maybe wrong with her baby.

“Hi,” I say, waving, then feeling self-conscious about waving like a five year old. I realize this is only the third occasion I've seen Lauren face to face, and being that it's in such an intimate position—her wearing a hospital gown that I know she's naked under and that is stretched taut over her bulging stomach—I can't help feeling like an intruder. She invited me though. “How's it going?” I ask. “I mean—obviously that's what's going,” I add, pointing at her stomach.

“Yeah,” she says, chuckling. She touches her stomach gingerly. “Not too long now.”

“I didn't even know you were pregnant,” I say.

“I know,” she says, glancing cautiously at the guy next to her, who still seems confused as shit. “Kind of why I called you here.”

I hold out my hand towards the guy.

“Sean,” I say.

“Rick,” he says, taking my hand and dropping it all in one motion. “Um, sorry to be blunt, Sean, but, seeing as how nobody else is asking...who are you and why are you here?”

“Rick,” Lauren says. “Be nice.”

“What?” he says. “I’m just asking.”

I open my mouth to respond but I still have no clue what to say. As far as I know, as far as this situation goes, I’m nobody. So I shrug. Rick nods absently and pats Lauren on her hand. And there’s no mistaking it, there is a shitload of fear in her eyes.

“Rick,” she says.

He leans in, obviously concerned.

“What is it, babe?” he asks. *Babe*, he said. I feel a twinge of jealousy I can’t explain.

“You know,” Lauren says, speaking slowly, carefully. “I’m thankful for everything you’ve done to try and fix things these past few months.”

“I try,” he says, smiling and nodding.

“I know,” Lauren says, and as she does a tear slips down her cheek. “And that’s why it was so hard. Why it is so hard. I didn’t know how to tell you. Or Sean. I still don’t actually. I didn’t think he’d come if I told him over the phone and I didn’t think you’d understand if I told you before. I didn’t want to, don’t want to, even though I always knew I had to. And at first it was easy because I wanted to hurt you, wanted to save it for the right moment, for—” Lauren motions around the room. “—*This* moment. But then I wasn’t so angry anymore, and then I didn’t tell you because I was scared.” She nods at me. “You too. Either way, it was wrong and I want you both to know, before I say anything else, that I don’t mean to hurt you, either of you

right now. I really don't." She nods, absently picking at her fingers. "I know it's going to hurt." She nods towards Rick. "You particularly. But know that wasn't my intention."

"Babe," Rick says, his head cocked to the side a little. He seems to be doing this thing where his face is contorted into something between a smile and a grimace. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Yeah," I say, in spite of the fact that I told myself I'd shut the fuck up and act like I belonged. And once again the alcohol is in control. "What the fuck *are* you talking about?"

"Hey!" Rick yells, shooting to his feet. "All due respect, Sean," he clenches his fist and growls "don't fucking talk to my wife like that."

"Your *wife*?" I say, then at Lauren, "your *husband*? I thought you said you were divorced!"

"Divorced?" Rick yells, glaring at me then at her. "Lauren, who the fuck is this joker? I want him out of here."

"Please," Lauren says.

"Joker?" I say, then laugh and turn to Derek, who is standing next to Caitlyn and—are their hands brushing against each other?—watching this situation intently. Caitlyn is still standing against the wall, watching the action with rapt attention, Marcus smiling though his eyes are confused, which indicates his smile is involuntary. Lauren's mother has her hand against her forehead and is muttering something. I turn back to Rick. "Joker?" I repeat. "You have *no* idea buddy."

"What is that supposed to mean?" he asks.

"Rick," Lauren says.

“Ask her,” I say. “See what your trusty wife has to say.”

“Boys,” Katherine says from behind us.

“God,” Caitlyn says, and she steps towards Derek. “I can’t believe I actually thought there was a way for this *not* to get dramatic.”

“Sean,” Lauren says.

“Dude,” Marcus says. “It’s hella hostile in here right now.”

“You know what?” Rick says, planting a fist into his palm in a gesture I find oddly ancient in a comical way. He looks like a 1950’s *West Side Story* actor threatening a rival gang member. All he needs is a pair of tight pants and the ability to break into a random show tune. “I don’t care who told you to come here, I want you all out. Now.”

“My pleasure,” I spit out. “I didn’t fucking ask for this.” I turn towards the door.

“Fucking up my buzz, could’ve been celebrating right now.”

“Sean’s the father!” Lauren yells.

What follows seems like a cultivated silence, one that starts as a seed germinating in the words leaving Lauren’s mouth and steadily grows until the room is practically bursting with the awkward nothingness that inevitably accompanies big revelations like this. In my mind I think of absolutely nothing for about ten seconds. Literally, ten seconds of mind blankness. I don’t process the words or anything, they just sort of sit outside the house of my mind, knocking lightly at first then more violently until they’re finally banging on the front door with the full weight of their bodies like some mental FBI task force while I’m inside, pretending nobody’s out there. Derek’s finally stopped paying attention to Caitlyn, his eyes wider than should be possible. Marcus is still smiling with his mouth open like somebody just told him a joke that he’s

not sure he gets, but he's ready to laugh his ass off soon as he figures it out. I believe the synapses in my brain overload for this period, short circuit and shut down for these ten seconds before coming back online and setting off all type of alarms and bells and whistles and shit and sending me reeling. I take in Lauren's statement and automatically deny it, toss it into the trash, even as my clenched stomach, tightened throat, and time-calculating brain notify me that there is a very, very real possibility that what she's saying is true.

The silence is abruptly demolished as Rick bursts out laughing. I turn back to the hospital bed and he's bent towards Lauren and laughing, turns to me and laughs harder, looks over at Caitlyn and her mother and Marcus and his eyes water as his mouth opens wider and Derek looks at him and a tear threatens to burst from the threshold of Rick's eyes. And in this display I find myself noting how comical the situation actually is, how anticlimactic this all seems in the face of what's been going on with me the past two years and before I know it I'm laughing too, taking a few tentative steps toward the bed. Soon, Rick and I are both hysterical, Rick coughing between heaves, me swiping at my face like I've got pink eye or something. Nobody else in the room says a word throughout the display, and being that they're not laughing it's only a matter of time before Rick and I realize what we must look like and the madness tapers off. When it's gone, the silence comes back double time, setting up residence for all of a moment before Rick takes two steps towards me, leans back and delivers a blow to the side of my face that's accompanied by a distinct cracking sound and deep darkness.

-Lauren-

Everything happens kind of fast after that.

Sean hits the ground hard. I hear the slap of his skin against the floor as he drops and I can't help it, I scream. Then Sean's roommate takes one step towards Rick and punches him in almost exactly the same arcing downward strike Rick just punched Sean with. Then Rick's hitting the ground too, and I scream again. My mother stands next to me with a hand on her forehead, shaking her head.

“This is bad,” she says, over and over again.

Derek, Sean's friend, bends over after hitting Rick, groaning and holding the hand he just punched Rick with. Marcus, Sean's brother, screams something inaudible, this primitive warrior battle cry or something, and attempts to come over and finish Rick off, but Derek stands quickly and grabs him, restraining him, grimacing and holding his injured hand in the air while wrapping his good arm around Marcus.

“Derek,” Caitlyn yells, showing an uncharacteristic and confusingly intimate amount of concern for Derek as she jumps over to him. She gingerly checks his hand, elevating it and hugging him a little as she helps him and Marcus towards the door.

And while all of this goes on, I lie immobile on the bed, trying to slow my breathing because my contractions are coming with increasing frequency. Before the trio of Caitlyn, Derek and Marcus can leave though, the door opens and the nurse comes back in and sees Rick on the floor groaning, Sean out cold, and Caitlyn holding Derek's hand up as it slowly turns purple.

“What's going on in here?” the nurse says angrily.

“Forget the details,” my mother says loudly. She points at Sean then Rick then Derek. “These men all need medical attention.” She turns back to me. “And I believe my daughter is about to have her baby.”

“Ok,” the nurse says sternly, putting a hand on her hip. “I need everybody out before I call security.”

“No,” I say. Breathe in, out. “She stays,” I say, pointing at my mom. I reach over and grab her hand and the affection in her eyes is something only a mother can muster.

It soon becomes obvious that Sean is not going to get up. The nurse eventually has to call somebody to come in and help him out of the room. Derek follows behind him with Caitlyn and Marcus. Then I’m alone with the nurse and Rick, who is getting up slowly. He eventually is on his feet and faces us, the nurse and my mother glaring at him and me avoiding his eyes. The right side of his face is an angry red, and he keeps clenching and unclenching his fist. He opens his mouth, then closes it, then rubs his cheek.

“I’m going to check on Justin,” he says finally, then slinks out of the room.

Almost the moment he’s out, I’m hit with one final gut-wrenching contraction that seems to last an hour, and eventually it does last that long (or seems to), my mother next to me the whole time holding my hand. I swoon in and out, the pain alternating between bearable and unbearable and Doctor Medstein’s head keeps disappearing beneath my gown, popping up every few seconds, gently telling me to breathe.

“I *am* fucking breathing,” I yell at one point, squeezing my mom’s hand even harder and yelling at her, even louder, “Tell him to stop fucking telling me that,” before slipping back into a pain induced blackout.

And then there's a release and suddenly the pain's gone. A moment later Doctor Medstein hands me a beautiful, squirming, oily baby girl. My mother wipes my sweaty forehead with a cool towel and her eyes glisten.

"You've got a mouth on you," she says.

I look up at her tiredly.

"You won't remember it," she says. "But you were very inventive. I'm glad that Sean fellow wasn't here to hear it. I don't think that would be a good way to start a relationship." She pauses. "If that is in fact what you two plan on doing. Not necessary, of course." She crosses her arms and tsks. "You could have told me."

"I didn't tell anybody, Mom," I say, smiling at her. "In case you didn't notice the chaos."

Her eyes search mine and she brushes a lock of hair out of my face.

"Doesn't matter," she says, brushes a finger against the bundle in my arms. "She's beautiful."

I readjust her in my arms, try to imagine what I'm going to name her. Then I stop thinking and enjoy the feel of her gentle body in my arms, her legs involuntarily kicking beneath the blankets.

"Welcome to the world baby," I say, and I start crying and smiling at the same time.

"Hope your time here's less stressful than mine's been so far."

-Sean-

I wake up in darkness, so in all actuality I don't really know that I've woken up until a door opens and a light turns on, blinding me and bringing all my senses back in one swift burst of pain. The left side of my face is pulsing and I can't see anything but a hazy form in front of me. It takes me a moment to recognize that the form is speaking and I have to struggle to make out the words.

“Sean,” the voice says. “Sean, are you ok?”

I grunt and reach up to rub my eyes, wincing as my hand brushes my cheek, which by my estimation has swelled up to about double the size it normally is. When I bring my hand down, things are a little clearer and I see that Derek and Marcus are standing in the doorway, Derek's arm in a sling, his hand wrapped in gauze. Marcus stands next to him, chewing on his lip and shuffling his weight from foot to foot. They're worried and I'm still a little drunk, but not enough to avoid noticing that I'm lying on a hospital bed in a double occupancy room. The bed on the other side has a middle aged man in it, sleeping restlessly, twitching and muttering underneath the white blanket covering his bottom half. The other person standing next to the bed is wearing a doctor's coat and holding a clipboard, and my throat clenches as I recognize the voice and face at the same time.

“Maria,” I say.

She smiles but there's no warmth in the expression. She manages to make it look vaguely annoyed actually, a skill I remember her having mastered while we were dating.

“What happened?” I ask, even as the memory of the moments preceding Rick knocking me out hit me and I wince again, this time at the implications of it all. “Shit,” I say. Derek shrugs, as if to say “what can you do?”

“Had a little altercation in the maternity ward, did you?” Maria asks.

“Shit,” I say again. I can’t think of anything else that sums up the situation better.

“And you’re drunk,” Maria adds. “You stink.” She shakes her head and puts her hands on her hips. Witnessing these familiar gestures spins my reality into an even more surreal existence that leaves me dizzy. I lie back against the bed.

“How is she?” I ask.

“Who?” Maria says.

“Lauren.”

“She had the baby about an hour ago,” Derek says.

“How long have I been out?” I ask.

“About,” Maria says, checking her watch, “two hours now. Look, Sean, I managed to keep this little...whatever the hell this is on the hush-hush but, seriously, you can’t come into a hospital and start stuff like this.”

“I didn’t start anything,” I say, sitting up and wincing at the cracking pain that rushes through my head. “The guy decked me. Believe me, I didn’t ask for that.”

“You kind of did,” Marcus says. “When you got his wife pregnant.”

“He’s got a point,” Derek says.

“Shut up,” I say.

“What?” Maria says, her eyes wide.

“Thanks for telling me by the way, asshole,” Marcus says. “Thought brothers shared things like that.”

“I didn’t know she was married,” I say, to everybody I guess. “Didn’t know she was pregnant either.”

“Doesn’t really change anything though,” Derek says.

“You’re not helping,” I say, glaring at him. He shrugs and Marcus chuckles.

Maria looks from Derek to me to the ceiling.

“I don’t want to know anymore,” she asks. “Just keep it down. There are people trying to rest around here.”

As if on cue, the old guy in the other bed lets out a snort, grumbles something about pecan pie then quiets down again.

“I checked your vitals and everything seems fine,” Maria says, then points at my cheek. “Put some ice on that and take some Tylenol. And Sean,” she adds. I study her face and notice that she seems a little older. Not like old-woman old, just more experienced. It fits her. “Go home,” she says. “And stop drinking so much.”

I nod and she turns to walk out of the room.

“Nice seeing you again, Derek,” she says. “Sorry about you and Kristina.”

Derek glances at me then away.

“Don’t mention it,” he says.

“Things always happen for a reason,” she says.

“Yeah,” Derek says quietly.

“Marcus,” Maria says.

“Maria,” Marcus says, holding his chin higher than normal and meeting Maria’s eyes with wavering confidence. I feel some pride knowing that the gesture’s for my benefit, even though it’s unnecessary.

“You look good,” she says to Marcus. “Older than the last time I saw you.”

“I am older.”

“Must be beating the ladies off with a stick,” she says.

Marcus’s eyes falter and he smiles, though it’s obvious he doesn’t want to.

“I do alright.”

“Well,” she says, nodding in my direction. “Keep an eye on him.” She puts a hand on Marcus’s shoulder. “And please, try and set a good example.”

Marcus laughs. I glare at him and he shrugs. I watch Maria as she steps around Derek and Marcus, who opens the door for her, and it hits me in that moment that I’m not nearly as saddened to see her walking away as I would have been a year ago, or even a few months ago. Matter of fact, I feel nothing but a sense of relief, yet I can’t pinpoint what the relief is in relation to. All I know is that I’ve been pining and grieving this whole time without realizing that I was slowly being healed from it all. Maybe that’s what grief actually is, a sort of mask to cover up all the decent, hard work going on beneath the surface. One day you wake up and the grief is gone and there’s some scar tissue where it used to be, rough but fundamentally healed. Sometime in the past few months, I actually got over Maria and, to a lesser extent, Leon. I was just too stuck in my routine of self-destruction to notice.

For the first time I can remember in a long time, I don't want a drink. I would, however, like a massive dose of ibuprofen.

"Hey Doc," I say. Maria stops in the closing doorway, holding it open with one hand. "Thanks," I say. "For helping me out, I mean."

She smiles, and this time it's a gentler smile, a smile that both reminds me why I started dating her in the first place and also why we broke up: because smiles like that, on both our faces, became far too infrequent near the end of our relationship.

"No problem, Sean," she says. "Take care of yourself."

"You too," I say. "One more thing, is Lauren still in the same room?"

"I don't know," she says.

"I just left from there," Derek says. "I'll take you."

Maria nods and waves, walking out. I lay back for a moment as the door closes behind her and Derek and Marcus come over to the bed, standing over me.

"You look like shit," Marcus says.

"Yeah, well," I say, chuckling then wincing. "Can't say I looked too hot before he hit me anyways. Might be an improvement."

"Guy was a prick," Derek says.

I point at his bandaged right hand, his arm in the sling. He flexes the hand a little and grimaces, then shrugs, giving me a crooked smile.

"Like I said," he says. "Guy was a prick."

We both laugh at that, then groan in pain, then laugh again.

"You guys sound old," Marcus says.

“Fuck you,” Derek says.

“Guess you won’t be playing bass for a little while,” I say.

“I’ll recover,” Derek says, grabbing my shoulder with his good hand and shaking. “Now. Let’s go see your daughter.”

“It’s a girl?” I say, my throat tightening instantly, my balls feeling like they shrivel up so fast they’re jetting into my stomach. “I have a daughter?”

“Yup,” Derek says, nodding.

I let that sink in for a moment.

“I have a daughter,” I repeat.

“Yeah, dude,” Marcus says, hopping to the door. “Seriously. What’s up with that?”

I chuckle.

“Well, you see, Marcus,” I start. “Sometimes, when a man and a woman like each other, they do this thing where—”

“Screw you, man,” he says, punching my arm. I flinch and scowl at him, happy to know that it’s not backed by any real contemptuous feeling inside of me.

-Lauren-

I sleep for a long time. I dream I'm in a room with my daughter in my arms. The place is huge, one of those aquarium rooms surrounded with thick glass so you can look out into the body of water on the other side and see all the things swimming around. Only rather than animals, there are a sea of swimming faces. There's my mother, Caitlyn and Justin. My boss, Steve, and both the morning and night cashiers from CVS. Sean, his brother and Derek. My dad floats past and waves at me and I choke up. Even Rick is in there, looking surprisingly pleased. I'm surrounded by everybody I've ever cared about and my baby is peaceful in my arms. And I know babies can't see when they're first born, but I swear she's looking up at me with recognition in her eyes, and I want nothing more than for her to grow up with as normal a life as possible.

At the thought I look up and suddenly I'm back in the hospital room. My mother's sitting in the corner next to Caitlyn, fussing over my daughter swaddled in blankets. I clear my throat, wince a little at the soreness down below and move myself into a more upright position. Caitlyn comes over, smiling and brushing my hair out of my face.

"She's beautiful," she says, sitting in the chair next to the bed and rubbing my arm.

"You, her and Justin can stay with me for the first few months," my mother says. "At least until you get things back on track."

"Mom," Caitlyn says, leveling her eyes at her. "You are way too overbearing for a newborn child and mother."

"Overbearing?" my mother says. "Me?"

"No," Caitlyn says, rolling her eyes. "Not you. Not at all."

Normally this interaction would annoy me, but I'm so happy to have them here that I just smile. My mother sees me and smiles too and Caitlyn's hands feel good against my skin. I realize I still haven't named my daughter and suddenly I'm thinking about everything that led to her birth, everything that's happened in the past nine months, all the ups and downs, the self-doubt and dramatic situations. I think about the disarray and seemingly chaotic nature of it all, of the train wreck that is my family and life and everybody's lives in general, and how it still could come together to result in such a beautiful creation as the child my mother carries over to me right now.

"Harmony," I say.

"What?" my mother asks, getting up and coming over to me.

"Harmony," I repeat. "Her name's Harmony."

There's a moment of silence during which my mother and Caitlyn both seemingly roll the name around in their minds.

"Har-mo-ny," my mother says, slowly.

More silence and my mother's eyes well up a little.

"I love it," she says finally.

"Me too," Caitlyn whispers.

I look at my mother and I can't help it, I just have to mention it.

"I wish Dad was here too," I say.

My mother's face drops for a moment, as does Caitlyn's. I wait for the outburst, for somebody to say something that will indicate the tender moment's gone. Instead, though, my mother wipes her eyes and smiles again.

“He would have loved it too,” she says. “He would have loved her, the way he loved you both.” Her voice cracks on that note and she hands me Harmony, turning away. I settle the warm bundle in my arms as my mother walks towards the door, taking one look back at me before pushing it open and ramming into a startled and bruised Sean. Derek and Marcus are behind him and Caitlyn waves at Derek with her fingers lingering in the air, a move I know but rarely see from my sister outside of her job at Hooters, as it is so clearly a flirtatious gesture.

“Is that what I think it is?” I ask.

Caitlyn shrugs and smiles, and I chuckle.

“Can you give me and Sean a minute?” I ask.

Caitlyn nods and takes one last look at Harmony before walking towards the door.

-Sean-

I walk very hesitantly up to Lauren's hospital room, expecting an attack at any moment from her crazy husband. Instead I'm met with the door almost smacking me right in my injured cheek, courtesy of Lauren's mother. It's only her, Lauren and Caitlyn in the room though.* Caitlyn waves at Derek and he waves back and I've had enough of being kept in the fucking dark.

"Ok," I say. "That's it. How long?"

"How long what?" Derek asks.

"Derek," I say. "I've known you forever, don't play with me."

He opens his mouth, then closes it. Caitlyn appears from around her mother and approaches us, her mother seemingly intrigued by the interaction.

"Things are complicated enough right now," she says, and I'm surprised when she takes a step towards Derek and entwines her hand in his. She rubs a finger across his sling, then pats it gently. "We don't want to make it more complicated. So leave it alone for right now."

I hold my hands up.

"Seriously?" I say, then wave them off. "Never mind. None of my business anyways. Just one thing. Does Kristina know?" I shake my head. "Don't worry if she doesn't. I'm not going to say anything. I don't like her ass anyways."

"Kristina and I broke up two weeks ago," Derek says.

I scoff.

* To my admitted relief. I was *not* looking forward to another confrontation with Rick, though I had come down the hallway talking all this shit about how he had just caught me off guard and if he tried that shit again I'd lay him out. All bullshit, I probably would have just laid down on the floor to avoid it all. Let's just say I'm not the fighting type.

“And I’m finding out about this now?” I ask.

“It was two weeks ago,” he adds. “Not like it happened months ago or anything.”

“We’ve been together almost every day for the past two weeks,” I say. “You do understand the concept of best friends, right?”

“I wanted to tell you,” he says, motioning towards Caitlyn. “About all of this. But it all happened so fast and—like she said, things are already complicated enough.”

“Wait a minute,” I say, pointing at Lauren, who’s watching us intently. “So you knew about this?”

“I knew she was pregnant,” he says. “Not that the baby was yours though. Nobody did.”

The huge pile of blankets in Lauren’s arms catches my eye and my skin prickles. Lauren smiles and her eyes crinkle a little, and she looks beautiful.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi,” I say back.

This seems to be some sort of cue. Lauren’s mom eases past me and Caitlyn and Derek and Marcus, stopping to pat me on the shoulder and shake her head before moving towards the hospital lobby. Everybody else follows, Derek and Marcus flashing me thumbs ups and I want to punch them and hug them at the same time, and then I’m suddenly alone in the room with Lauren and the baby. I turn to them and swallow thickly, take one step inside the room, the door closing behind me. Lauren looks thin and pale underneath the hospital blanket, almost fragile if it weren’t for the strength in her gaze, her eyes set on me. A small hand flashes in and out of the little hole in the blankets in her arms and my heart skips a beat. I can’t bring myself to get any closer. It’s like I’m paralyzed not only by fear of what this situation means but fear that I might

actually be okay with it. I barely know this girl, have had nothing more intimate with her than one drunken night of sex and a physical altercation with her husband. Yet, according to her, I am now connected to her for this baby's entire life. Talk about rushing into things.

"How you feeling?" I ask, because it's the only thing that seems appropriate and it's way too quiet in here.

"A little sore," she says, her voice hoarse. I get a rush of relief that I wasn't here to witness the birth itself, then immediately feel guilty. "She did a number on me," she says.

"I bet," I say.

"You don't have to stand over there, you know," she says, adjusting the bundle in her arms. "I'm not going to bite you."

"You sure about that?" I ask, and she laughs. I finally break out of my paralysis and take a few steps towards the bed, then another few and sit in the chair next to her bed. I still can't see what's in the blankets and can't bring myself to make an effort.

"I'm really sorry about all of this, Sean," she says, her voice cracking. Her eyes water, and mine start to at the sight.

"Not your fault," I say, then smile nervously. "Takes two, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, but," she looks away. "I should have told you."

"I wish you had," I say.

"I tried, at T.G.I.Friday's that night."

"That's what you wanted to talk about?" I ask.

She nods and I immediately feel like the biggest douche on the planet, remembering the night, Maria showing up and me ignoring Lauren and Lauren storming out and me proceeding to get blackout drunk and break in to Derek's apartment.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm really, really sorry, Lauren. You caught me at a bad time." I pick at my fingernails, not knowing what to say. "I was...lost."

"No need to explain," she says, nodding. "I think everybody hits that point eventually." She adjusts the bundle onto one arm and moves her free hand towards me. I hesitate at first, then put mine on top of hers, and I don't know if it's the fact that we're in a hospital or that there's a baby in the room—a baby that is presumably mine—or the fact that this perfect stranger is giving me such a *knowing* look, but my eyes start to sting and within seconds a single tear slides down my bruised and battered cheek.

The moment passes soon and I lean back in the chair as Lauren adjusts the bundle back into both hands. The TV in the corner is playing a rerun of "Everybody Loves Raymond."

"You can get a test, you know," she says.

"What?" I ask.

"A paternity test. If you want to be sure. I won't be offended." She turns her head and meets my eyes with hers, a move that seems to me to always reveal how much people actually don't look each other in the eye when they're talking. "I'll completely understand if you're skeptical."

I take in all her features, all the parts of her that are foreign to me, which is pretty much every part of her. Her large green eyes, long brown hair, full, pouty lips. I remember thinking not too long ago that, while definitely attractive, Lauren was not the type of woman I'd go crazy

over. I remember that and think now that I must have been more than just drunk at that moment. I realize also what I've always known but never had a reason to apply to my personal life: there is no such thing as an ideal situation. To me, right now, Lauren looks more beautiful than any woman I've ever met. Soon after thinking this, I realize that it's partly because of the bundle she's holding, and I stand.

"Can I hold her?" I ask, before I even really know what I'm doing. For a second a hint of doubt creeps into Lauren's eyes, but it's gone in the next instant and she smiles, a wide warm smile, and nods. I move closer and she lifts up the bundle towards me. I take it, awkwardly at first, trying to find the right placement in the crook of my left arm with the right supporting it. When I'm steadied, I finally peer in the little opening near my elbow. My mouth drops open, a little gasp of air coming out. What's—*who's*—inside is beautiful beyond belief, a face barely bigger than my palm, eyes closed, mouth set in that way that makes babies look like old people sometimes. Her skin has a caramel cream tone, slightly lighter than my own, and her head is covered in a soft layer of hair that looks so delicate it's like I could gently brush it off with my pinky if I wanted to. As I watch her, her hand comes out from beneath the folds of blanket and grasps at the air as she opens her mouth and lets out a yawn, never opening her eyes. I study her—my daughter—for what seems to be forever.

"What's her name?" I whisper.

"Harmony," Lauren says.

I can barely see her, she's all blurry. Takes me a moment to notice I'm crying.

"Harmony?" I ask.

"Harmony," she repeats.

I don't like it. Hate it in fact.

"Harmony," I say again, then laugh one of those half-cough laughs that people do when they're crying out of joy. "Harmony."

I don't like the name, but I love her, my daughter, already.

"You like it?" she asks.

"I love her," I answer. I sit back down in the chair, holding Harmony tightly and firmly, determined not to let her go. It's twenty minutes before I relinquish my hold on her, placing her back in her mother's arms. We talk for those twenty minutes, about nothing in particular because I'm never really paying full attention to anything but Harmony. When I finally give her back, I do so reluctantly, and realize at that moment that I will never let anything bad happen to this little girl. I also realize, right then, that this has been the point all along. Through all my bitching and moaning about the state of my life, this has always been the fucking point.

Soon the door opens and in walks a doctor, followed by Derek, Marcus, Caitlyn, her mom, Rick and a little boy I assume is Lauren's son. I tense when Rick approaches but he seems to have calmed down and mutters something about how he's taking Justin home. The little boy rubs his sleepy eyes and hugs Lauren, who hugs him back lovingly. He pokes at Harmony and seems to briefly liven up when Lauren tells him it's his sister, but then Rick ushers him out of the room and they're both gone. I can see from how long she watches the door after they leave that she's deeply saddened for a moment, until Harmony cries and her attention's instantly back in the room. The doctor checks Lauren's vitals before informing us that visiting time will be over soon and only the father can stay.

The father. Me.

Derek pats my back and winks at me and everybody gathers around the bed oohing and ahing at Harmony for a few more minutes. In the midst of the commotion, I lean over towards Lauren and whisper in her ear.

“I don’t need a test.” I move back a little so I can see her eyes, and there’s something there, something I think has the potential grow. I smile. “Just help me make sure she grows up happy,” I say.

“Deal,” she says, laughing. “As long as you help too.”

“I promise,” I say, rubbing my daughter’s forehead gently.

STEP 9: SURVEY

-Lauren-

Well. At least we tried.

-Sean-

I swear, if she wasn't the fucking mother of my child...

STEP 10: LIVE

-Lauren-

Sean stands on the balcony outside his apartment, Harmony poking her small face through the metal bars towards me and sticking out her tongue, laughing. She reaches her tiny hand out, twitches her fingers around as she waves bye to me and I smile, wave back. My smile falters a little as I focus on Sean and wave at him too. He nods back. It's a little awkward, but not nearly as much as it was those first few months after he moved out of my apartment.

In the car, Justin talks endlessly about this and that as I head towards Kendall and Rick's apartment. He talks about what he plans on doing with his dad when I drop him off, the model cars he's been building over there and the different parts of the engine that Rick's been teaching him about. He talks like Rick sometimes, looks more and more like his dad every day. It's not unpleasant, but it's taken some getting used to. I assume it will only become more noticeable the older he gets. I'm trying to prepare myself. It's eerie sometimes.

This is my existence now. I'm not consciously aware of it most of the time, but when I do see it all in the vast panorama that is my life on a canvas, it's breathtaking. Jarring. Things didn't exactly turn out the way I expected. Not to say that's a bad thing. Nowadays the unexpected is still just as cliché as the expected, so you might say the fact that I never reconciled with Rick and Sean and I didn't work out was all a given. I'm starting to think it doesn't matter though, none of my previous expectations or inhibitions about moving forward. Going through the motions, knowing what's going to happen next, knowing that a million people have done it all before me and will be doing it for decades and centuries to come, none of that actually takes all that much

away from the experience. Because no matter how many movies I see or books I read, nothing compares to real life.

I turn onto Kendall and come to a stop at a red light, behind a line of cars blocking the intersection in front of us. Behind me the cars line up as far as I can see. Rush hour. I'm surprised Sean was able to take Harmony so early today. Usually, on the days I have class, I have to speed to his apartment right after he gets out of work—usually at around five—and back to Kendall so I can make it to Rick's in time to hop on the turnpike and get to FIU. I guess he got out early today, so I find myself taking my time, listening to my son and joining in on the conversation. Nobody told me the older he got the more fun he would be to talk to. It's a pleasant surprise.

Sean and I are amicable at least. The last time we had a conversation about what happened the past couple of years, we both came to the conclusion that we should have never dated. We're glad we didn't go and do anything stupid like get married or have another kid. He's a great guy and a wonderful father to Harmony, and he's still one of the most personable people I've ever met, even more so than Rick. (Sean managed to befriend my mother—actually befriend her, as in she still talks to him now even though we're not together anymore. Don't know how I feel about that yet.)

Rick, on the other hand, decided to snub me. As I pull into his apartment complex, he's sitting on a bench in the mini-park near the front gate, facing away from us, toward the jungle gym with his foot jiggling. He lost a lot of weight in the aftermath of our break up and he looks good. I won't lie and say it doesn't give me this faint sense of longing for what we once had. He watches Justin getting ready to exit the car, calculatedly avoiding my eyes. It makes me sad,

sure, that the father of one of my children (God, I still can't get used to saying that) has no room for me in his life anymore. But I've dealt with it. I've dealt with a lot of things and will continue to deal, and hopefully one day it will all make sense. Right now, though, I'm rolling with the punches, taking what's handed to me. I'm making a conscious effort to welcome the uncertainty of it, of being single for the first extended period in my life, the uncertainty of this second year of graduate school at FIU, of me wondering exactly what I'm going to do with my degree once I finally get it. It's the little uncertainties that make it all worthwhile. A planned life is so...boring.

My phone rings as Justin leans in to kiss me on the cheek. He hops out and runs towards his dad and I wave to him as I pick it up. Justin and his dad walk over to the swings, Justin talking a mile a minute as I reverse out of the parking lot with the phone to my ear. Caitlyn yells something at somebody on the other end then comes back on the line.

"Sorry," she says. "Derek's being a dick. As usual."

Oh yeah, they ended up together. Married, with a child on the way. Don't ask me how that's working out, because I honestly have no idea. It just is.

"I'm sure the feeling is mutual," I say.

"Screw you," she says. "What are you doing?"

"Going to class."

"Oh," she says. "Forgot you had class today. Wanted to see if you wanted to go grab a drink."

"You know you're pregnant, right?" I ask.

"So?" she says. "There are these things called virgin drinks, in case you hadn't heard. The innovation of the night life industry."

“Maybe after class,” I say. “I’ll let you know.”

“Cool,” she says. “I take it you just did your rounds then.”

“Yup,” I say. “Everybody’s been shipped to their various fathers.”

“You make it sound like you’re running a factory over there.”

“Starting to feel like it.”

There’s a long pause and my car comes to a standstill in the Miami afternoon rush hour traffic. It’s five o’clock, and I know it will take me at least half an hour to get the five blocks to the turnpike and the next four exits to campus. Luckily my class is at 6:30. Part of the ritual.

“How you holding up?” Caitlyn asks.

“Me?” I say. “Fine. I’m fine.”

“Mom doesn’t think so.”

“Mom never thinks so.”

“True.”

“How are you two doing?” I ask. “Seems to be a little less hostility in the battle of Ellis egos nowadays.”

“Well,” she says. “Derek and I talked about it and thought I should try and make everything kosher between us.”

“Good to know,” I say. “I don’t have to tell you again that stress is not good for a fetus.”

“I’m trying,” she says, in this way that makes it sound snarky.

“And Mom isn’t?” I ask.

“She’s Mom.”

We chuckle. There's a voice in the background and Caitlyn says something away from the phone.

"My husband is beckoning me," she says, sounding amused. "So demanding."

"God you sound different," I say.

Caitlyn laughs.

"Love will do that to you," she says.

"Like that right there," I say. "You would've never said anything like that before."

"Yeah, well," she says, then raises her voice for the benefit of Derek. "I've still got my edge, Lauren. Don't get me wrong. Somebody's got to keep this bastard in check."

Another muffled voice in the background, then laughter.

"I have to go," she says.

I feel a pinprick of longing. But Caitlyn surprises me.

"Just because I'm settling down doesn't mean my feelings have changed, Lauren," she says. "You can still do this on your own. You are doing this on your own. You don't need anybody. Remember that. Play my voice over in your head if you ever get discouraged. You are one of the strongest people I know."

This is not the first time she's said something like this to me, but today it hits hard and I feel my eyes well up.

"I know," I say.

"And remember," she says. "In the end it's all about having fun."

"Thanks, Caitlyn," I say, sniffing.

“Call me when you get out of class,” she says, then we hang up and I move forward a little bit in the traffic. Five feet here, five feet there, my car makes its way slowly towards my destination, and I admire the sunset the whole way.

-Sean-

There's a knock at the door and Harmony jumps up, running towards it.

"Harmony," I yell. "What'd I tell you about answering the door for strangers?"*

She stops and turns to me, momentarily frightened then sad and I fucking hate and love that she can do that in any given situation, make me feel completely like shit for raising my voice or smacking her on the butt when she's being a brat or even giving her a look that isn't completely happy. This little girl has got me so tightly wrapped around her finger it's like I've got marionette strings attached to every tendon in my body.

I stand, walk over to her and pick her up and she keeps the pout for a moment before smiling and hugging me.

"Sowwy, Daddy," she says.

I can't tell if she learned all this from her mom or she was born with it. Considering experiences, I'm going for the latter.

I check the peephole[†] and Derek's standing outside, holding his bass guitar and amp. I open the door and Derek completely ignores me, opening his arms wide towards my daughter.

"Unky Dewek!" she yells, squirming out of my arms and jumping towards Derek.

"Hey, beautiful," he says, picking her up. "Get the guitar, Sean," he adds.

"Dick," I grumble, low enough so Harmony doesn't hear as Derek walks past me into my apartment.

* Not so much right after Lauren and I broke up, when I had to move back in with my parent's for the *second* time. That sucked. But right now it's okay.

[†] I do that now, ever since she started staying with me three nights a week and every other weekend. Can't be too careful.

And, yeah, it's not the way I'd expect movie or TV shows to portray the final result of a major life conflict. But it's okay the way it is, now. And the way it is right now is like this: Derek and Marcus come over three nights a week and *Fools of Man* practices for whatever upcoming gig we've got*, I work at Shambles as the morning bartender Monday through Friday now, and I get to see my daughter on a regular basis. Other than that, there's not really very much different. And yet, at the same time, there's so, so fucking much.

The oddest thing about it all is where I ended up living again: here, Palm Springs Luxury Apartment complex, which made me feel at first like I was going full circle with all the B.S. until I realized I wasn't depressed anymore which kind of had a lot to do with the way things used to be. Everybody else in my life seems to have fallen into their groove too. Marcus is about a semester away from graduating with his Computer Science degree; Derek and Caitlyn are still together, him working in the D.A.'s office and her spending her days nursing people back to health in the most hostile way possible, though she's calmed down a little since she got pregnant; and Lauren's doing her school/teaching thing.

And me? I'm here, chilling as usual. In my apartment, listening to some Nirvana and watching *Sportscenter*, drinking a six pack while Harmony plays with her toys and Derek fiddles around in the foyer with his bass and amp, waiting for Marcus to show up. It's the same old routine on the surface, but it's got nowhere near the same vibe as before. It's Monday, and Harmony's sitting next to me wearing overalls and a Dora the Explorer t-shirt which you can't see due to the fact that, as soon as she got in here, she raided my closet and threw on my Dwyane Wade Miami Heat jersey that is five times too big for her so it covers her whole body in mesh

* And they've been increasing. Slowly, but definitely on the incline, which can't be a bad sign.

material. She's pressing buttons on a Fisher Price toy that moos and meows and shit every time you find an animal or something and she laughs at every sound, presses all the buttons again, then laughs some more, pointing at each one and yelling "Daddy," every single time. Marcus arrives and she yells for him to pick her up and Marcus does, looking so much older and so sure of himself and I'm happy for him in a way I didn't think would have ever been possible, especially not before. It's not an envious pleasure, I guess is the major difference. This is my life now, the life I didn't ask for and wouldn't give up for anything.

It's impossible to plan things past a certain point, and even before that point your plans aren't guaranteed. But if you can keep the car of your life steady, head down that road and get over those humps, chances are there'll be a nice stretch of paved concrete in between each one.

...Or there might not be, I don't fucking know. The whole goddamn road could look like the surface of the moon. The point is, keep driving. Just keep fucking driving, and eventually you'll get somewhere that doesn't completely piss you off. And there's really nothing more you can ask for in life but that.