

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: HAPPY AND OTHER STORIES

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The characters in “Happy,” “The Price of Independence,” “Itch,” and “Guillotine” all struggle with their loss of power and ability to successfully navigate their own lives. Though different genders, ages, and worlds are rendered each character must choose to either face their conflict head on or submit to the external pressure present. “The Price of Independence” and “Itch” highlight the precariousness of relationships and how one relationship, whether it be romantic or platonic, can change everything. “Happy” and “Guillotine” feature characters struggling from within, they are separated from the world around them and their failures force a spotlight on the misconceptions of mental health care.

HAPPY AND OTHER STORIES

by

Blaire Perel

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Dedication

For Dad, thanks for always keeping me safe from “the undertoad”

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Happy

Fred wakes up and reaches for his supplement on the bedside table. His eyes water and begin to slowly adjust to the bright colors of the bedroom. His wife, Natalie, is towards the end of her major project redecorating their house in accordance with the modern bright style. Fred has carefully agreed with Natalie's choices along the way, not wanting to cause tension. He grabs his glasses first, unable to locate the sunshine yellow bottle without them. He pops off the cap and chooses a bright red pill among the assorted colors. He stares at the circular tablet in his palm, remembering when his medications were a more innocuous shade. For Fred, Tuesdays are always red. Each color has exactly the same dose, but the routine relaxes him so he continues with it. He does so discretely, not wanting to draw attention to his quirky behavior. He swallows the tic-tac size pill with ease, a daily sacrament performed with muscle memory. A tingle spreads throughout his body, raising his neurons and synapses to a higher volume, and a smile spreads across his face.

Fred, like most people, never used to smile without provocation. He smiled at certain times, like when something was funny or if he was excited to see someone. His lips didn't curve upwards for every person he passed on the street, on the contrary, that action was reserved for warranted occasions. Now everyone, including Fred, smiles for the better part of the day. If you didn't smile it could negatively affect everyone around you, and happy people don't want that to happen.

Fred looks to the other side of the bed hoping to see Natalie, but instead finds a half made up bed. He hears the clanging of pans in the distance, she is already up making breakfast. Starting the day with a nutritious meal is important in establishing one's

happiness. Getting up early is a sign of mental stability so he quickly pulls back the covers, anxious to prove his own delight with the new day.

Fred stops to make up his side of the bed and is transfixed by the cobalt blue duvet, a new addition that has big bright poppies stamped at regular intervals. He doesn't like it. Natalie bought the bedding thinking he would love it knowing blue is his favorite color. She failed to realize that all of his pajamas are also blue, making Fred feel like he is disappearing every time he gets into bed. It's as if he is being erased, his existence suddenly put into question. It hardly spurs a good night's sleep. Fred brought this up with Natalie when she pulled the duvet out of its shiny crisp packaging, but was quick to point out that the red poppies made the comforter look starkly different so Fred dropped the issue. Marital discord is a sign of discontent, and he is eager to prove how far he has come.

Fred checks the bed several times, making sure every crease is smooth and all of the throw pillows are perfectly in place. He flexes his feet, spreading his toes on the velvety blue carpeting. He stretches his arms upwards, grabbing the air and imagining himself to be as substantial as a hundred-year-old elm. He walks casually into the kitchen noticeably snapping his fingers to a popular song as extra proof of his delight, careful not to walk too fast or too slow—both are distressful paces in their own way and should be avoided—and finds Natalie poking at a purple substance with a pink spatula.

“Are those eggs?” he asks. She looks up from the pan with a wide smile that makes Fred feel as if he has always been here in the kitchen with her; since the beginning of time it has just been her and him and the sizzling pan.

“Yeah, isn’t it great? I got the idea from a cooking show, it’s the latest thing. All you need is a little food coloring and —bam!—all of our meals can be as happy as we are.” She looks at Fred waiting for his inevitable excitement. He suddenly feels as if she is challenging him, daring him to not like the food coloring, he is delighted to prove her wrong.

“That’s amazing,” he says forcing an even bigger smile, “did you color the toast too?” He wants Natalie to see that he thinks the same way as she does, that he goes even further, thereby proving he is as happy as he is supposed to be on the supplements.

“I haven’t quite gotten the hang of it yet,” she says turning back to the stove so that Fred can’t see her smile sag ever so slightly. “I was just trying out the eggs for today, but tomorrow I’m sure I’ll have it down.” She scrambles the eggs more forcefully than before and Fred’s triumph passes, now all he wants is to put her at ease.

“I’ll search for some instructions on my lunch break,” he says placing a hand on her shoulder, he feels her relax at his touch, “it’s my turn to make breakfast tomorrow.” Before the supplements he never helped with the cooking duties, but sharing all chores equally was one of the first mandates for good mental health that came along with the new happier way of life.

Fred removes his hand from Natalie’s shoulder and gently strokes her messy bun of bright pink hair. He feels a twinge of pain; for Fred, Natalie’s dark hair was her most beautiful feature. He still sees her jet black mane every time he looks at her, but it’s been nearly five months since she came home with the new look expecting Fred to love it as much as she does.

“But you have the most beautiful hair I’ve ever seen,” he said visibly distraught. “Why would you do this to yourself? Your dark hair made your eyes pop, it’s what drew me to you in the first place. I love that you’ve never cared much about hair dye or makeup. Every time I look at you I just see, well, you.”

Fred had seen the new trend emerging with people at work and actors on TV, bright colors were in and it was bleeding over into every aspect of life, but he never thought Natalie would feel the need to change that part about herself. She was never one to conform, but the supplements were changing everything so why wouldn’t it change her as well? Surely he had changed too, wasn’t that the whole point?

“Why would you want me to look so dark in such a colorful world?” Natalie’s smile faded and her eyes became sharp and accusatory. “Maybe you need to ask Dr. Waters about increasing your dose. This is how everyone is wearing their hair now. Why be a boring blonde or brunette when you can have any color of the rainbow you want? Even the First Lady has lilac hair now. You’re safe with me of course, but I really hope you aren’t saying things like this in public or at work, people may get the wrong idea and think you aren’t taking your supplements.”

Natalie walked out of the room, ending the conversation. Fred was hurt, for the first time in their marriage he felt as if she wasn’t on his side. He spent the next week trying to convince her how much he loved her hair, explaining he was just shocked and needed some time to see how great it was. She eventually came around, but she still holds a small suspicion that he was merely saying what she wanted to hear. Fred was never a great liar, especially when it comes to Natalie. In truth, he misses the old color a lot more

than he thought he would. Every time he sees her he feels an ounce of sorrow that he does his best to not acknowledge.

Fred takes two plates of dark violet scrambled eggs from Natalie and walks them to the dining room, trying not to gag and doing his best to hide his nausea for the new food regime. He sets their breakfast down on the canary yellow star-shaped table, making sure to pick places directly across from one another—eye contact is an important part of maintaining a deep connection in relationships. The table was the first piece of furniture they purchased after Natalie started taking the supplements. At the store Fred complained that the shape would make it awkward and uncomfortable to sit at, but he was immediately overruled when Natalie asked him if he had remembered to take his supplement that day. He places the shimmering cutlery next to each plate, with the fork on the left and knife on the right—following societal etiquette is vital to happiness—and grabs his usual spot between points. He sits down on the light blue cloud-shaped chair, relishing in its unbelievable comfort. For Fred, the chairs are the only redeeming feature of the table. They make him feel as if he’s Zeus, sitting on a piece of the heavens, overlooking his kingdom. That feeling makes it easy to overlook the strange shape and gaudy color he so hates.

The paper lays scattered across the table, Natalie was never good at organization and the supplements can only do so much. Fred digs out the “Births” section and places it in front of Natalie’s place setting. Before the supplements she read the “Obituaries” first every morning, but the paper stopped running that section over a year ago due to the lack of interest. The supplements created a strange culture of avoiding death; funerals slowly petered out until they finally stopped altogether. As a result, the mortuary business went

almost completely under. Of course people still die, not even the supplements can stop that, but since their invention people just don't feel the need to dwell on death like they used to. Bodies don't get buried, but donated to science where they can do some good. Fred himself went to a Body Donation Party the other week when his Great Aunt Martha passed away. It was the best celebration he had been to in years.

Fred pulls the front page towards him, the headline reads "Happy 4.2 To Be Released This Summer!" in bold letters.

In a press conference last night, Spokeswoman Patricia Knobs on behalf of GoodTimes Inc. announced the latest generation of supplement will be available for widespread use sometime early this summer.

"We expect for all Priority Ones to be switched over to Happy 4.2 by the end of July," she said. "By September 1st every U.S. citizen will have made the transition." Happy 4.2 is expected to last longer, ensuring a good night's rest so that everyone has the happiest of dreams.

As always, the older generations of Happy will be donated to charities spanning across developing countries throughout Africa and parts of South America.

Fred stops reading and pushes the paper away. Being a Priority One has never sat well with him. He feels as if his underbelly is exposed to the world and has always felt that statuses should be kept private. They of course were private at first, but when The Happy Act was passed by Congress in 2025—which made the use of supplements compulsory for U.S. citizenship—the general opinion that privacy was a sign of deviance took hold. The Transparency Act was passed the following year, which made all medical files a matter of public record though an online database set up through GoodTimes. Fred

carefully hid his contempt for the policy with the outside world, feeling that his Priority One status put a target on his back. He shared this worry with Natalie like he had always done so before.

Her eyes were big and seemed to hold a hundred questions. “You should be grateful you’re a Priority One, God knows I wish I was,” she said. Fred usually loved it when Natalie challenged him, she forced him to look at his life and his decisions in a way he wouldn’t usually think of, but he didn’t feel this way about his status. He felt that Natalie should understand where he was coming from.

“Why?” he asked, “So that everyone can watch you to see if you fall into a deep depression again? So that everyone can tip toe around you like you are on the verge of a psychotic break? It’s embarrassing Nat, anyone can look up my records now and know what I’ve been through.” Her eyes softened and she began stroking his arm, her touch never failed to relax him.

“You’re the first to get the latest generation of supplements as soon as it comes out. That doesn’t seem too shabby to me. I have to wait weeks before I can upgrade, you should look at it like you’re VIP! Who cares what your past is? The world is changing for the better, all that matters is your happiness. Isn’t that what this is all about? No one has to suffer anymore.” Natalie’s hands were now outstretched like two lifelines that Fred wanted to grab and hold onto, but some invisible force held him back.

“Everyone knowing my business makes me suffer, can’t you see that?”

“Well, if you really feel this way I think it’s time to make an appointment with the doctor and get you in today,” she reached for her phone and began to dial Dr. Waters. And just like that the lifelines were reeled in out of Fred’s reach.

“That’s probably a good idea,” he said. Fred knew by then that to argue would only make things worse. The more resistance he showed the more it seemed like the supplements weren’t working. He didn’t want to be the only person resistant to the supplements. He couldn’t be.

Fred shuffles through the other sections of the newspaper before finally settling on “Local News”. He skims through different articles highlighting the exciting new things taking place in their community: four new buses were going to be added to the already expanding route in town, Mayor Green’s dog gave birth to four puppies yesterday, and a famous pop star announced a surprise free concert for sometime next month.

Fred stares at the headlines trying to remember what the news used to be like. He hasn’t thought about it in awhile but it used to be different. There were a lot of stories that reported different crimes and various corruption, stories on natural disasters and foods that could be secretly killing you. Everything was sensationalized and all of it added to Fred’s stress and anxiety. It’s not as if the news changed overnight, it happened gradually with The Happy Act serving as the catalyst.

When the act passed Fred could feel an atmospheric transformation, of course things had been changing for awhile, but there was something palpable in the air that hadn’t been there before. Something he could almost touch with his fingertips. People simply didn’t want to dwell on the negative anymore, they were only interested in the satisfying and agreeable. Sometimes Fred wonders about all of the things going on that no one hears about, but he’s quick to force these thoughts out of his mind and into the

ether to disappear forever. He manages to finish his entire breakfast—under-eating is a sign of depression after all—then clears the table and heads to his closet to get dressed.

Fred picks out a suit in his favorite shade of royal blue and pairs with with a silver tie and matching shoes. He lays his outfit on the bed, staring at the combination for a moment. A couple years ago he would have looked flamboyant and out of place, but now he is considered a modest dresser. Natalie is always encouraging him to dress in wilder ways, but he still doesn't like to stand out too much. He feels awkward when strangers stare at him which makes the new fashion a hard adjustment.

He puts on his suit and fidgets with a silver pocket square for nearly ten minutes before finally deciding against it. He and Natalie finish getting dressed at the same time so they leave the house together, not bothering to lock the front door, it would be suspicious to in the current climate. They kiss quickly, it's bad to make a spectacle but worse to show no affection at all, and then walk off in separate directions. They both take the bus, as is required now, but Natalie's job takes her downtown whereas Fred's is uptown so their stops are on different streets.

Fred misses the private time he had when he drove to work, but since The Commuter Act passed unopposed in 2026, banning the use of all motorized private transportation, he had no choice but to get rid of his Toyota Corolla and his morning solitude along with it. Fred was one of the last people to give up driving in his town, most had stopped nearly a year prior. His commute to work takes nearly an hour longer than it used to due to the new culture that dictates a person greets everyone “hello” or “good morning” or “how do you do” whether he knows them or not. Driving is lonely and anti-social so why would anyone want to participate? Most people donated their cars to the

government, the parts were then used for public works projects. Many still sit rotting in junkyards, their parts rusting in their own uselessness. It's almost sad.

Fred waits at the bus stop taking his place in the orderly line behind a woman in an emerald green dress, sequins splattered across the fabric in calculated intervals. Like Fred, most of the people at the stop work for GoodTimes, the founder and manufacturer of the supplements. Though it is one of the largest employers in the world, Fred almost always finds someone he knows to talk to on his commute to work. This eases the slight anxiety he still feels, though he knows that with the supplements he shouldn't feel any. The magenta colored #16 bus pulls up to the curb opening its doors in welcome. Fred climbs the steps, the crisp air conditioning greeting him like an old friend, and spots an empty seat next to his co-worker George. Before the supplements Fred never talked to George, but after about a week of starting generation 1.3 Fred realized they lived within minutes of each other and found the nerve to strike up a conversation. He quickly learned that they both enjoy playing pool, and was excited to find out that George has a table at his house where they now play at least once a week.

Playing pool isn't exactly the same as it was before the supplements, all games have undergone major changes. At some point, Fred can't remember exactly when, everyone seemed to decide that being overly competitive was a sign of mental instability. The thought was if a person is happy they don't need to win, they simply enjoy playing the game. Before The Happy Act was ratified, the rules for every game had already been re-written and professional sports were no longer played. People not yet on the supplements formed groups who opposed this, but they eventually conceded once they were placed on Happy. Fred didn't lose any sleep over this, pool was the only game he

ever cared about, and though modified the game still existed. All of the balls are now the same color and number, making it impossible for anyone to win. The only game you can now play is a simple aim-and-shoot activity that is more relaxing than exciting.

Sometimes Fred fails to see the point in it, but he keeps on playing. If anything it gives him the opportunity to hang out and have a beer with George.

“Hey there Fred! How’s your morning?” George greets him with an awe-inspiring toothy smile. Fred wishes he could smile that big and bright, no one would ever think he was a Priority One with a grin like that. Although he is bald, George makes up for his lack of hair styling choices with his clothing. He is indeed a flashy dresser. Today he’s sporting a suit swirled in burnt orange, red, and dark purple, his tie created to match perfectly with the pattern. Fred loses himself in the blazing marble texture and stares a bit too long. “How do you like the new suit?” George asks, smoothing out one of his elongated flaming lapels. “Cost me a pretty penny but every time I look at it I’m happy, so, who cares!”

“Yeah, it’s really something,” Fred says taking the seat next to George. He can’t wait to see Natalie and tell her all about George’s ridiculous suit, but then he remembers the supplements and realizes that time is over. She would like George’s suit, she’d probably get the name of the designer and force Fred to the store. They used to have so much fun together; but, as everyone now says, there wasn’t true happiness before the supplements.

“Woah, where did you go Fred?”

Fred looks up and sees George’s hand waving back and forth in front of his face. He used to get lost in his thoughts at least once a day, but it has rarely happened since he

started taking the supplements. He hasn't spaced out like this since his last dosage adjustment six months ago.

"Sorry," he says shaking his head, "I was just thinking about going shopping with Natalie this weekend. Where did you get your suit? It really is great." Fred knows flattery is the quickest way to distract from his faux pas.

"It's a specialty tailor on the other side of town, I'll get you his number. He has the greatest fabrics and his cuts are amazing." George straightens his dizzying tie as if motioning for proof.

Fred smiles in reply, worrying that he may need a higher dose of Happy 4.2 when it comes out. He's always carried a secret worry that the supplements would wear off, as if his body could somehow burn up its allotted amount of happiness; but he's never heard of someone becoming resistant before, and surely he would know about it if it were possible.

Fred's struggle with depression started when he was a teenager. He tried every type of medication and therapy there was, but nothing ever seemed to work. It's not that he was catatonic by any means, but he went through periods where it was difficult to get out of bed and he always seemed to carry with him a certain sadness even in his happiest moments. Then, a little over four years ago he saw a commercial on TV advertising a new drug that was supposed to be different from any other medication on the market. He went to the website that flashed across the screen and found one of their suggested providers only ten minutes away. At the time, the drug was still in its early stages and only select physicians had access to prescribe it. That's how Fred found Dr. Waters.

At his first appointment Dr. Waters recommended the new drug for Fred and explained that there were no side effects. It wasn't an SSRI or a stimulant, it was an entirely new breed of pharmaceutical. A pill that could make you relax and feel happy without the jittery side effects of an upper or the sluggish hangover of a downer. Back then Fred was hitting rock bottom. He barely made it out of bed every day and he could feel Natalie giving up on him. He would have tried anything at that point. So he took home the free samples, popping his first pill before he made it back to his car.

The bottle and pills were the regular bland colors reserved for most pharmaceuticals back then, it would take another few generations before they started to experiment with the psychedelic hues they now use. Fred didn't tell Natalie he had switched medications, he was sick of getting her hopes up with the promise of a new Fred, a happier Fred, a Fred who was going to get up and live life to the fullest. He decided to tell her about the switch if and only if the medication actually did anything, and to his surprise within two days he felt like an entirely new person. So he sat Natalie down at their old square wooden kitchen table to tell her about his new medication.

"I don't know Fred," she said burying her face in her hands, "it just doesn't seem right. Shouldn't you be seeing a therapist as well as a psychiatrist? To work through your problems as well as treating the chemical imbalances? I don't like how many medications you've gone through or any of the adverse reactions you've had. It's starting to feel like a dependency." She looked up at Fred with her almond shaped brown eyes he so loved, and knew that her worries came from fear and concern. Natalie was the one person who had never judged him.

“But that’s what’s so great about Happy,” he said grabbing her hand and squeezing it slightly. “It’s not like the other meds, those were poison. Happy doesn’t cause dependencies and it has no side effects. What’s the harm in trying it? Look at me,” he pulled his hand away and gestured towards himself for verification. “I’m the happiest I’ve been in a long time. It’s like the fog has cleared.” Natalie’s shoulders relaxed and her eyebrows fell; Fred knew he had her.

“I suppose, but how does it work then if it’s so different from these other medications? What’s in these magical pills?”

“I’m not sure exactly,” he said looking away, “you’ve seen the commercials. It just targets a different part of the brain. I’m not a scientist, why would I care how it works? I mean I guess I did care before I tried one, but Dr. Waters suggested that I just take one to see how I feel so I did and now I just don’t care.” By the end of the sentence Fred felt worry free again. He had forgotten about that part of the appointment until Natalie had pressed him, but he was too elated for it to truly bother him.

“How do you not see that as a problem? What if there’s something in there to brainwash you? Or control your thoughts or something?” Natalie’s eyes widened as her hands flailed wildly with concern.

“Nat, that’s ridiculous. What is this *The Matrix*? You can see for yourself that I’m still me, just happier. No one is controlling my thoughts I just don’t sweat the small stuff anymore. Who cares how it’s working as long as it does? This is the wave of the future, I’m telling you eventually everyone will be on some form of Happy, mark my words.” Fred didn’t realize it would only take a few years for that to be true.

“So you must be excited to get started on Happy 4.2, eh?” George said plucking a stray thread from his suit. “Man, I wish I was a Priority One sometimes.” George smiles and quickly realizes his mistake, “Not that I’m sad or anything, I haven’t felt a moment of sadness since I started the supplements of course. I just can’t wait to see what some of those new perks of Happy 4.2 are.” Fred nods and smiles along with him, he wouldn’t have held his friend’s slip against him but there was no way to communicate that here.

“Yeah, I just read in the paper that it’s coming out this summer. That should be interesting,” Fred says this to appease his friend, he hates status talk. It’s as if his greatest weakness is constantly exposed, everyone gawking in curiosity. Fred let’s George steer the conversation about Happy 4.2 for the rest of the bus ride, relieved to finally reach their stop and sit down at his desk. Though his cubicle is small and brightly colored Fred likes it because it is the one space that is entirely his.

Due to Fred’s Priority One status he doesn’t qualify to work for certain positions at GoodTimes. Before the supplements he was a librarian, but since the changes no one reads for pleasure anymore, causing all libraries to close and his position eliminated. Reading was classified as an antisocial activity; sitting alone with a book would cause all kinds of allegations about your mental health and wellbeing so people no longer do it. The newspaper is still valued, it’s important to stay connected with current events, but any other type of reading just isn’t done now. GoodTimes, being the beneficent company that they are, offered jobs to all of those who were displaced. Fred gave up his books and took the new job, it seemed a very small price to pay in exchange for his happiness. Without the supplements this might have depressed and angered Fred, but with Happy it was only a mild irritation.

Though Fred's position at the company is very low he makes more than he did at the library and receives all of his and Natalie's supplements free of charge. Depending on health coverage people can end up paying a few hundred dollars a month on supplements, and because the taking of supplements is now involuntary the poor have to forgo certain luxuries such as electricity in order to afford their monthly prescription. There has been very little resistance thanks to the supplements, they wouldn't want to seem as if they weren't happy after all.

Fred turns his computer on and drags a fresh stack of paperwork towards him. His job is to input the numbers on the papers into a spreadsheet that is then sent to "the higher ups". He doesn't know what the numbers signify and thanks to Happy he's never thought to ask. This is his job, and doing it right makes him feel accomplished. Everyday he inputs the numbers correctly into the spreadsheet and then shreds the hard copy. He is one of the fastest Numerical Analysts at GoodTimes and this brings him a great amount of pride. Just last week he was given a raise for his record inputting times.

Fred went into his second appointment with Dr. Waters feeling good. He was going to gather some more information on Happy to pacify Natalie and ask to up his dose.

Dr. Waters walked into the exam room staring at his metal clipboard. Fred didn't care that his chart seemed rather thick, a detail that bothered him a great deal at his previous visit. Dr. Waters was an extremely charismatic man, he didn't look a day over 40, was at least 6 feet tall, and had the thickest head of black hair Fred had ever seen on a man. His eyes were cerulean blue and his smile produced two dimples that were strangely

intoxicating. His good looks didn't set up an impenetrable barrier like it does with some people, but instead gave him an inviting warmth. Fred may not have been so quick to agree to begin taking Happy from another physician, but when Dr. Waters suggested it he couldn't say no.

“So how are we feeling today Mr. Benton?” he asked.

“Really great actually,” Fred said beaming. He sat on the exam table kicking his legs like an excited child. “You were right, Happy is amazing. I feel so, well for lack of a better word, happy!”

“Very good,” he said finally looking up from the chart, leaving the door open behind him.

“Are you going to close that?” Fred asked, freezing his legs mid-kick.

“Would you like me to close the door?” Dr. Waters asked, his pen hovering over the file. “Is there something you need to hide?”

Fred felt accused of a crime he hadn't committed. He had an overwhelming need to prove his comfort with the door being open.

“No not at all!” Fred made sure his smile was extra wide. “I was just curious.” Dr. Waters put his pen back in the front pocket of his white coat and took a seat.

“So then, not feeling any side effects are we?” he asked.

“Side effects? I thought you said there weren't any side effects with Happy?” It was the biggest reason Fred had decided to try the new medication. He had insisted there weren't any side effects when he fought with Natalie.

“Well nothing to be worried about, that’s why I didn’t want to concern you with it on our last visit. I could tell you were feeling nervous. Does that bother you?” Dr. Waters grabbed his pen again, steadying it over Fred’s open chart.

“You know, it actually doesn’t. Isn’t that strange? I’m usually such a worrier. Two weeks ago I probably would have gone through the roof over you telling me that, but now I don’t mind. I mean, look at me I’m fine.” In truth Fred did find it strange that his doctor had seemingly lied to him, but something in his gut told him not to divulge that information. Dr. Waters seemed too apt to take notes.

“Indeed you are Mr. Benton,” Dr. Waters said writing something down. “So as I am a GoodTimes employee—“

“Wait, what? You work for GoodTimes? As in the company that makes Happy? Why didn’t you tell me that before?” During this time Fred didn’t know much about GoodTimes, no one did, but it seemed strange that Dr. Waters wouldn’t mention that he worked for the company that made the medication. Wasn’t that some kind of conflict of interest?

“I didn’t find it relevant,” Dr. Waters said. “Happy is the best new drug on the market and you were in need of a medication change. It’s simple really. Does it bother you that I didn’t tell you?” Dr. Waters had his pen ready to unleash untold fury to his chart so he bit his lip and let Happy take over.

“No not really,” he lied, “I feel fine, no I feel good. Really good.” Fred smiled trying to show some sort of proof.

“Good,” Dr. Waters wrote a small notation and looked back up at Fred. “Now, as I was saying, as an employee of GoodTimes I find it important to suggest that you put

your family members on Happy too. Even if they don't have your history of depression and anxiety we've seen that it can be extremely beneficial for everyone to be placed on some sort of dosage. Think of it as more of a supplement really, like a vitamin."

"Well my wife has seemed more anxious lately, but that's just because we've been under more stress than usual. She'll be fine when everything settles down." Fred waited for the furious scribble of Dr. Waters' pen, but instead he looked at him in silence.

"And when does life ever really settle down Mr. Benton? If this could make your wife relaxed and content, even in times of great stress, why would you want to keep that from her? Look, I'm going to give you some free samples for the smallest dose we have. Take it home and have her try it out, see how she feels and then have her book an appointment."

"Well I guess there's no harm in taking some samples." Fred wanted to end the conversation about Natalie, he didn't feel comfortable discussing her mental health behind her back. It felt like he was conspiring against her. Dr. Waters upped his dose and scheduled Fred for a follow up the following month.

The first two hours of work goes smoothly, everything is in order as Fred rips through 100 sheets of numbers, but around 11am he finds something he's never seen before: a piece of paper without numbers. He stares at the page for a few minutes, unable to read it, and then stands up, ready to give the paper to his supervisor. But instead of walking into Ms. Gutten's office he sits back down. He wants to know what the paper says, he suddenly has an incredible thirst only the contents of the document can quench.

He knows he shouldn't read it. He knows that if anyone finds out he will most likely be fired. But his desire overcomes him and he gives in to his desire.

“For Upper Management Only!

As you are all already aware, some individuals have started to show signs of an unusual tolerance to the supplements. These individuals are known as Variants. In response, our physicians have been instructed to give these Variants higher doses of Happy to continue the desired effect. All of these Variants seem to be Priority One cases but not much else is known. We do know that there is a subset of these Variants whose bodies continually fight the supplements even at the higher doses.

In the past, we have instructed our physicians to increase the patients' dosages by 10mg at each follow up appointment as a stop-gap measure. With the release of Happy 4.2 at the end of July a new policy will come into effect. These Variants will be referred to our medical centers directly. It is here that we can better evaluate them as well as separate them from the population indefinitely. We cannot allow them to poison the well, as they say, and must protect the innocent people who could possibly be affected by their negative outlooks. It will also provide us with the opportunity to better study their cases and locate the root cause of their resistance. Be advised, as with all of our memos, the contents cannot be shared outside of upper management.

Remember to be Happy and have a great day!

Sincerely,

Henry GoodTimes

Fred re-reads the memo hoping to find more clarity. After the fifth time he realizes that he is drawing attention to himself. He hasn't touched his keyboard for at

least five minutes, something he has never done before. He quickly folds the piece of paper three times and then slips it into his front pant pocket. He looks up and is startled by the presence of Ms. Gutten at his desk.

“Is everything ok Fred?” she asks with a concerned look.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just not feeling too well today.” Fred puts a palm to his forehead, pretending to check for a fever. He’s unsure whether or not she saw him put the memo in his pocket, his heart beats a little faster as a cold sweat breaks out across the back of his neck.

“You don’t look well. You should go home, you have all of your sick days to take advantage of.” She smiles at him and he relaxes. Fred has always liked Ms. Gutten, she makes sure all of her employees are comfortable and taken care of unlike other managers at GoodTimes who just expect their employees to be happy.

“You know I think I will,” he says. “Thanks Ms. Gutten, should I get someone to cover my work for the day before I go?” He picks up the stacks of papers closest to his computer but Ms. Gutten stops him.

“Nonsense, I’ll take care of this. You go home and get some rest. It wouldn’t make anyone happy to catch your germs.”

Fred can feel the color drain from his face, his complexion threatening to disappear entirely. His stomach feels like it’s a wet towel being wrung out failing to release anything.

“Thanks Ms. Gutten. I promise I’ll be back tomorrow ready for work.” He manages a smile and collects his belongings at lightning speed. He takes his briefcase and

walks to the exit, making sure to keep a calm pace, hoping he won't be stopped by anyone he knows.

As predicted, Fred couldn't convince Natalie to try the samples of Happy after his second appointment with Dr. Waters.

"Now I know that medication has made you crazy," she said leaving Fred with the bag of samples. She didn't speak to him for an entire day. The higher dose of Happy was working its magic on Fred, and the more he took the more he realized how much Natalie needed it too. Though his next appointment with Dr. Waters wasn't for another couple of weeks he moved it up.

"How are we feeling today?" Dr. Waters asked his routine question staring at Fred's chart. But before Fred could answer he started talking again. "We weren't supposed to see you for another couple of weeks, but it seems you moved up your appointment. Is everything alright?" He looked up at Fred, pen at the ready.

"Oh everything is great with me, it's my wife Natalie who I'm concerned about," Fred said smiling to show his own progress. "I know you probably can't do anything for her if she's not here, but I was hoping you'd have some information I could pass on to her." Fred had written down his questions ahead of time, determined to be armed with answers for Natalie.

"What kind of information is that?" Dr. Waters had yet to sit down, his tall figure was towering and imposing making Fred feel small and insignificant.

“Well I was wondering if you had any pamphlets or literature on Happy and how it works. My wife, well she likes to be very informed before she makes any decisions and I just don’t see how I can change her mind without more detailed information.”

“Mhm,” Dr. Waters flipped through a few pages of Fred’s chart before finally sitting down. “I see that I gave you some samples to take home at your last appointment. She refused to even try it?”

“Yes. But I know she will come around if she could get her questions answered. That’s why I wrote them down.” Fred pulled out the small pad he brought, flipping to the page with his questions.

“This is a problem we’re seeing with a lot of Priority Twos and Threes.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Fred had yet to hear of the statuses, they were used primarily among doctors at this point.

“Pardon me, a Priority Two or Three is what we classify someone who has not had a history of mental illness. A Priority Two may have trouble sleeping but will be fine in her daily life whereas a Three would be someone with a particularly strong constitution. It gets very technical and boring, I won’t subject you to the tedious details.

“So what am I classified as then?” Fred asked.

“You are a Priority One, no question about it.”

“Is that bad?” Fred couldn’t believe he had been assessed and placed into a hierarchy he had no idea existed.

“No not at all. If anything you are at an advantage. Priority Ones will be the first to try any new medication as more generations of Happy are perfected. But this doesn’t worry you does it?” Dr. Waters reached for his pen waiting for Fred’s response.

“I mean, it does a little. But isn’t it normal to feel that way?” Fred spoke very slowly afraid to say the wrong thing.

“Normal is being redefined by Happy, Mr. Benton. Normal will now mean something entirely different than it once did. A resting equilibrium will no longer be content but happy, that’s a big difference.” He looked at Fred waiting for a response.

“So what does this mean then, does the medication not work for me?”

“Nonsense, the medication works for everybody. We have been advised to refer to Happy as a supplement now, medications are messy but Happy is full proof. We haven’t found the perfect dose for you yet, that’s all. I’m going to raise you from 75mg to 100, that should do the trick.” Dr. Waters wrote another notation on Fred’s chart and then looked back up. “Now, back to your wife. She has all of these questions because she is scared,” Dr. Waters took Fred’s notepad and looked through his writing. “I’ve seen this before and I can tell you with confidence that Happy is entirely risk free.” He threw the pad in the garbage. “We have an unofficial protocol in place for those who are hesitant about the supplements.”

“Protocol?” Fred was confused. Had his doctor thrown away his questions?

“Yes. It may seem a bit unorthodox but it has proven to be a great success. I’ve even tried it with my wife and we’ve never been happier. The supplements come in powder form, so what you would do is stir in a packet with her morning coffee or tea once a day and around day three she will start to feel a drastic improvement.”

“You want me to spike my wife’s drink? Isn’t that illegal?” Under the influence of Happy Fred was much more receptive to the idea than he would have been before, but even he still found the idea far-fetched.

“Do you enjoy seeing your wife in pain?” Dr. Waters’ face changed, his words seemed menacing.

“What? No! Of course not! I love Natalie.” Fred’s hands were up as if motioning for Dr. Waters to stop.

“As a doctor I am obligated to report any instances of abuse.”

“Abuse? Why would you say something like that? I would never hurt my wife, ask anyone who knows me.” Fred couldn’t believe what he was hearing, what had he said to deserve this?

“I don’t mean to upset you Mr. Benton, perhaps we should up your dose by another 20mg while we’re at it. I’ll have the nurse prepare the extra dose now.” Dr. Waters left the room leaving Fred with his head spinning. When he came back a moment later with a pill for Fred to take he swallowed it without question, he knew Happy would help clear his head. The supplement took immediate effect, all of Fred’s anxiety seemed to slip away and his chest felt light again. “So tell me Fred,” Dr. Waters said, “why do you want to keep true happiness all to yourself? Don’t you want your wife to experience this new way of life?”

“Well it’s not that I want to keep it from her. It’s just I don’t think she would agree to it. She already said no, and she’s never needed medication before.”

“Supplements, Mr. Benton, remember they are supplements. This is exactly what GoodTimes is trying to educate the public about now. We are launching a new campaign aimed to show that Happy is not just for those struggling with mental health problems but is actually for everyone. Happy is a new way of life.”

If Fred hadn't been on his new and improved dose of Happy he would have thought Dr. Waters was insane. He would have stormed out of the office and reported him to some sort of medical board that he would have gone home to Google that day. But under its influence Dr. Waters didn't seem like a cult member trying to lure in a new believer, he seemed like a godsend.

"You really think everyone will be taking Happy? Not just people who have struggled like me? I mean, I said something like that to my wife last week in a fight but I guess I didn't really think it was possible until you just said it."

"I believe that in no time at all every single American will be on some form of Happy. You will soon be living in a world where you and your wife won't have another fight. Every moment with her will be bliss. Every moment we all have will be bliss." Dr. Waters clicked the top of his pen and put it back in his pocket, satisfied he had proven his point.

"That sounds like Utopia," Fred said entranced.

"It will be as close to perfect as possible. The wonders of modern science. So what do you say Mr. Benton, should I give you some powder samples for your wife?"

Fred took the samples and left the office happier than he ever thought possible. Natalie was going to feel that same happiness, he would soon be able to share the incredible feeling with her. So, the next day he followed Dr. Waters' instructions and spooned the supplement powder in with her morning coffee. Around day three, just as Dr. Waters had said, he began to see a difference in her mood. Natalie was singing in the shower, something she hadn't done since they first started dating nearly fifteen years

before. Nothing seemed to bother her anymore, not when Fred left a dirty dish in the sink or when he left the toilet seat up. She was in a perpetual good mood.

Fred calls Natalie as he makes his way to the bus stop. He fights against every instinct to run so as not to draw attention to himself.

“Fred?” Natalie answers on the second ring. “You never call me when you’re at work, has something happened?” Fred looks to his left and right, making sure no one is there to listen in.

“Nat, I need you to come home immediately. Something happened at work. Well, I don’t know if it’s something yet that’s why I need you.”

“Slow down. You sound panicked. Maybe you should go see Dr. Waters for an emergency supplement adjustment.”

“That’s not what I need, trust me. Can you please just meet me at home? I can’t talk now, it has to be in person.”

“Fine, I’ll finish up here and I’ll see you in thirty minutes.”

“Thanks,” Fred relaxes as the bus pulls up. “Oh, and Nat?”

“Yes Fred?”

“Don’t tell anyone why you are leaving. Say you’re sick or something.”

“Why would I lie Fred? Besides this phone call, everything in life is great. I’ve never been happier.” Fred doesn’t want to waste time arguing over the phone, especially not as he boards the bus. It may be the middle of the day but it’s nearly three quarters full.

“Ok, fine, I’ll see you soon.”

It took Natalie a little over a week on the supplements before she confronted Fred. It was a Saturday afternoon when she walked into the living room after a morning of running tedious errands.

“Hey hon,” she said prompting Fred to pause his movie, “the strangest thing happened at the post office today.”

“What’s that?” Fred set the remote down and gave her his full attention. He knew this moment had been coming and he was terrified of the fight that was about to come.

“Well, I went to the post office to send that package for your mother’s birthday, and you know how much I hate going there, anyway I waited in line for over an hour and it was finally my turn when this lady comes out of nowhere and cuts in front of me.”

“Oh no. So what did you do?” Fred had become accustomed to hearing about Natalie’s post office fights. He was terrified Happy spurred some freak blow up.

“That’s the strange part, I did nothing!” She put her hands up as if to confirm her innocence. “I didn’t even care. I feel so relaxed lately that waiting an extra ten minutes didn’t feel like such a big deal. Do you think there’s something wrong with me? Could it be some type of aneurism?” She felt her forehead with the back of her hand, as if to confirm her diagnosis.

Fred started to laugh. “You don’t freak out over something meaningless and trivial and you think that there’s something wrong with you?” Natalie joined in and the two of them shook with laughter for several minutes.

“But really Fred!” she said lightly slapping his upper arm, “I don’t understand it. Nothing’s changed but I feel different.”

Fred knew it was time to come clean. “Well, I was going to wait a few more days to tell you but I think it’s time. I went to Dr. Waters and told him how worried you were about me on the supplements so he suggested that I get you started on a powdered form until you saw for yourself how harmless it is.” Fred was careful to use the word “supplement” rather than “medication.” Then he added, “Are you mad?” for good measure.

“You know, I think a week ago I would have been so angry with you for going behind my back but I just feel so good that I don’t really mind. I finally see what you were talking about, it just makes you feel relaxed and happy without being too up, you know?”

“I tried to tell you! And don’t worry it’s completely safe, apparently Happy is being given to everyone now. They don’t even call it a medication anymore. I made you a follow up appointment with Dr. Waters for next week, he can give you the pill form.” And just like that Natalie was in.

Fred feels as if the folded memo is burning through his pocket singing his thigh. He wants to read it again, but he doesn’t dare take it out on the bus. Could he really be one of these Variants? If he is, what will they do to him? When the bus finally arrives at his stop Fred feels as if he’s travelled a thousand miles. He gets off, forgetting to tell the driver to have a good day. He opens the front door and is relieved to find that Natalie is already there.

“Natalie, thank god.” He walks over to his wife and tries to embrace her, but she backs away.

“What is going on Fred? Why did I have to leave work? Tell me now before I ask Dr. Waters to make a house call.”

Fred doesn't know where to begin, his head is swimming with dozens of thoughts. Words escape him. He decides to take the stolen memo from his pocket and let it speak for itself.

“What is this?” Natalie asks taking the folded paper from Fred.

“Just read it.”

Natalie hasn't heard Fred talk to her so forcefully since before the supplements. She's taken aback but nonetheless unfolds the paper and begins to read. Fred watches closely, waiting for her to show some sign of fear or concern.

“I don't understand,” she says finally looking up from the memo, “where did this come from? How did you get this?”

“From work. It must have been a mistake. I found it when I was inputting numbers. Someone must have misplaced it in my stack of papers.”

“Why didn't you give this to Ms. Gutten or someone higher up?”

“Can't you see? I'm one of these Variants!” Fred yells at Natalie for the first time in four years. She is visibly shaken. He doesn't understand how she can be so calm when it is clear that his life, their life, is over.

“Even if that's true I don't see what's wrong with this,” her tone is low and even. “It says on the memo itself that they just want to study you. That means they want to help you. I didn't realize you were doing so poorly.”

“I'm not doing poorly! I'm the happiest I've ever been, you know that.”

“Do I? You may be the happiest you’ve ever been but compared to the rest of the population you are still struggling. You sleep in late, you haven’t embraced the new style, and your smile just isn’t as big or bright as everyone else’s. I just don’t understand why everything is so hard for you.”

“So you think I should report to one of these medical centers?” Fred didn’t expect Natalie to have this reaction. She has always been on his side, when did that change? Could he really be as unhappy as she says?

“Of course you should. What else can you do?”

Fred hadn’t thought that far ahead. What could he do? Run away? Where would he go? They had some money saved but that would run out eventually. Natalie obviously wouldn’t go with him. How long could he live as a fugitive? Happy really has made his life better, how could he live without access to it?

“I guess nothing. Maybe I’m overreacting. You really don’t think there’s anything to worry about?” Fred sits down on the couch and Natalie joins him.

“Happy 4.2 is coming out soon, how can there be anything to worry about? It seems to me that this medical center could be a great thing for you and for us.”

“I could be gone for months, maybe longer”

“Years probably. But you’ll be under the care of the best doctors GoodTimes has to offer. And I’m sure they’ll have visiting hours. I don’t see how you can be upset over something like this. It’s good news.” Natalie rubs her fingers through Fred’s hair and he relaxes.

“It is good news. You’re right. Wow, I must really need a supplement adjustment. I wonder if they’ll let me check in to a medical center early?”

“Well it doesn’t hurt to ask!” Natalie smiles and gives him a kiss. “For a moment there I was worried you had gone back to how it was in the old days.”

“No, I’ll never be like that again.” Fred takes the memo and rips it up. He’s never felt happier.

The Price of Independence

It was Rebecca's third week working in the fashion industry in Manhattan and she was already more jaded with the city than she had ever thought possible. She moved deftly through the crowd at Port Authority, as if it were something she had done every day for the last decade of her life. She weaved in between the slower commuters, successfully dodged merchants trying to sell her bottled water and other goods she didn't need and couldn't afford. Her turquoise headphones were placed firmly in her ears but no sound flowed through them, a habit she picked up as an undergrad at the University of Maryland nearly six years ago. The illusion prevented most people from trying to start a conversation with her while giving her the added ability to surreptitiously eavesdrop on various conversations. She delighted in hearing snippets of strangers' lives who she would never see or come into contact with again. She found it amazing what people would say in public when under the mistaken belief that no one was listening, that no one cared.

"And the guy just won't stop calling me," she overheard an attractive brunette telling her friend on the subway just moments before. "I don't understand why he doesn't take the hint. I haven't texted him back in nearly three days." Rebecca sized up her street style, the girl had paired a blush pencil skirt with a cream sheer blouse. The combination was hardly inspired, but the skirt's ruching paired with a layered gold chain belt gave her outfit the pop it needed, Rebecca approved.

"Don't you think you should tell him you're not interested?" Her heavier, less attractive friend asked. Rebecca cringed at her attempt to mix prints, her black and white polka-dot skirt clashed horribly with her orange and white pin-stripe shirt. She knew the

girl had read an article in Cosmo or spotted the trend on Pinterest and unsuccessfully tried to recreate the look. She couldn't help but think her more attractive friend reveled in her failure.

“Why would I do that?” The well dressed friend asked taking a sip of her Starbucks coffee. “You know how awkward that would be? I rather just ghost him.”

Rebecca walked to the other side of the subway car to find better conversation to listen to. Sometimes she couldn't stand her generation. Why were they all such cowards? By the time she made it to the other side of the car, they had reached her stop and she had to give up the search. She walked through Port Authority and made it to the street with relative ease and was relieved to find that she was right on time, rather than unbearably early as she usually was. The first few days she was early, Rebecca had some fun with it; she went through the design room running her fingers over the lush fabrics and flipping through the designers' sketchbooks with blissful anonymity. But once she had exhausted the fabric stock and obsessed over every sketch she became bored and had nothing to do but wait for everyone to start arriving. She didn't want to gain a reputation for being the strange lurker so for the first time since she was a child she forced herself to sleep in past six am, determined to not be the first one in the office. She was delighted to have succeeded the first time out.

Rebecca made her way up to the 30th floor, the penthouse of the office building, and watched as the elevator doors opened to reveal “Nancy Hoff” in large black letters against the pure white walls. Rebecca still couldn't believe she had landed an internship with the women's evening gown line, though it was unpaid and not in the design department as she had hoped she was elated to be working in the industry she had long

since coveted. The line was small but well-respected in the fashion community, Rebecca had admired Nancy Hoff's work since she was 12 and the designer herself had costumed one of the biggest teen-hit movies of all time. Rebecca didn't care that her fellow interns were 18-year-old doe eyed girls who jumped at the opportunity to run any errand no matter how small and insignificant, she was here in New York City and she was going after what she wanted. It had been a mild blow when she saw that her superior was several years younger than her and far less experienced, she knew she had to pay her dues all over again and she wasn't about to let the little things stop her.

Rebecca walked through the showroom, a white open-spaced area bordered by racks of clothing carefully spaced two inches apart by herself and the other interns, a job that had to be constantly redone throughout the day but one that she took very seriously. Presentation in this business is everything. The showroom was used for sales appointments and casting models whose eyes were sunken in and bodies malnourished. Rebecca had been startled at the state of the models used by "Nancy Hoff," but she tried to keep them out of her mind entirely. It was something she found nearly impossible to do as the walls of the showroom were decorated with blown up pictures of past models wearing Nancy Hoff's creations, their poses demure and uninterested. Rebecca pushed through the double doors and moved her way into the back room where the real work was done.

Everything was open at Nancy Hoff, the only person who had a real office with walls and a door that could be closed was the designer herself; Rebecca had been disappointed to find that Nancy Hoff had yet to make an appearance. She was dying to catch a glimpse of her. The rest of the office reminded her of a newspaper bullpen with

exquisitely dressed reporters. Everyone dressed to the nines daily, providing Rebecca with endless inspiration. Years in academia had kept her starved for fashion in her everyday life, people had gawked at her when she wore bold colors and experimented with hi lo hems or over the knee boots. Maryland had hardly been a fashion capital. For years Rebecca had been forced to get her couture fix from Vogue, Elle, and countless fashion blogs. Now it was right in front of her, the prints were sharper and the details were perceptible, it was a perk she did not take for granted.

Rebecca barely had time to put down her purse before her boss Natalia was towering over her. Natalia was actually Sonia's boss, who was in turn Rebecca's boss. Natalia had a sleek hairstyle and dramatic cat-eye she sported daily. Her hair was short and curled upwards at the ends, she used a hair product that made it look crunchy but for some reason the hairstyle worked, Natalia bore a striking resemblance to Sophia Loren and was as tall as one of their models.

"We need your help for a model casting today, it will be in about 20 minutes," Natalia was talking to Rebecca but typing furiously on her phone.

"Absolutely, no problem," Rebecca said trying not to show her nerves.

Natalia looked up and started to walk away, "Great shirt by the way, I like it." Rebecca was taken by surprise and by the time she thought to say "thank you" or mention that she designed and sewed it herself she was gone. It was one of Rebecca's favorite designs she had successfully executed, it was a fitted black mesh top with a large gold zipper going down the front. She wore a black tank top underneath, it had been particularly hard to tailor to her body as it was entirely fitted throughout the bust and waist and then flared out at the hips. It had taken her nearly a month to finish. Rebecca's

spirits soared at Natalia's compliment, maybe she really could design. Fifteen minutes later she grabbed her lavender notebook and followed Sonia and Natalia into the showroom not knowing what to expect. Until then, her only contact with the models was the excited talks she overheard when waiting for the elevator to run one of her many errands. She quickly realized her notebook was unnecessary and felt foolish for bringing it. It was her job to help the models in and out of the dresses they would be photographed in.

Rebecca had never been comfortable with nudity in public, whether it be herself or anybody else. Being obsessed with fashion she had spent countless hours staring at photographs of models who were partially nude, but photography and real life were two very different things. Rebecca's parents were fairly conservative people, she had never really seen her mother undress and felt uncomfortable being intimate with any guy unless it was completely dark. So when the first six-foot-tall model unabashedly ripped off her jeans and tank top, exposing her fully naked body to a room full of strangers she was momentarily frozen.

"Rebecca, what are you doing?" Sonia snapped.

Rebecca realized she had been staring right at the model's exposed breasts, the model waiting in suspended animation for Rebecca to hand her the hot pink gown in her hands.

"Sorry, she said quickly handing the garment over. The model pulled the dress on and turned around waiting expectantly for Rebecca to zip her up. Rebecca quickly mastered her job of zipping up the dresses; she made sure every tag and strap was tucked away and out of sight, and that the dress was on correctly—something that was not as

obvious as you would think as many of the straps proved to be complex and difficult to maneuver. After the fourth model she stopped blushing at the sight of naked flesh and by the seventh she was able to look them directly in the eye. Each girl had something strikingly beautiful about her face, but Rebecca couldn't get over how severely underweight they all seemed. Surely they didn't look this thin on the runway or in advertisements? She felt as if each one were about to collapse from lack of nutrients.

Rebecca, like many other women, had always been envious of models' physiques. She never considered herself obsessed but she did fantasize about what it would be like to have long legs and a tiny waist from time to time. She now found herself far from envious of these strange tall creatures who dictated the beauty standards she herself followed; she felt protective over them. A sudden unbelievable sadness for them washed over her, even though she realized they probably felt sorry for her, the short chubby (compared to them) girl zipping up their clothes for free. But she knew in a few years they would be old and used up and have nothing to fall back on, and she couldn't help but feel partially responsible. She overheard their elevator conversations full of excitement and laughter and knew that most of them had not bothered with school or other jobs. They were all waiting to strike it big.

After the 15th model had finished putting her street clothes back on Rebecca was finally able to put the dresses back on their hangers and place them on their designated rack in correct order dictated by the line-sheets.

"What did you think about this one?" Natalia asked Sonia handing her the card of the first model Rebecca had been caught oggling.

"She's cute but there's something off," Sonia said staring at the headshot.

“It’s her spine. It’s far too boney, and there’s something about her gait that makes her seem like she’s dismounting a horse,” Natalia said taking the 6X8 card back.

Rebecca had no idea what that kind of gait would look like. The model had seemed perfectly beautiful to her, too thin but a very pretty girl indeed. She hadn’t picked up on a single fault that couldn’t be fixed by an extra helping at dinner time.

“I agree,” Sonia said, “plus she’s already 25. That’s too old.”

Sonia and Natalia went back and forth in this vain for over an hour until they settled on a model they liked. Her name was Anna and she was a 19-year-old fresh face from Russia, 5 foot 11 with dark raven hair and blue eyes. She was by far the thinnest of all the models they had seen, every bone in her chest visible through her creamy pale skin.

“She’s absolutely perfect,” Natalia gushed. “Her proportions are much better than the other girl, her feet were too large. I can’t wait to see her in the Spring styles.”

So this was it, this was the dark side of the industry. This was the festering wound on the beautiful face of an artistic calling. Rebecca wasn’t a fool, she had read all the articles on models presenting impossible beauty standards for young girls, she had read about the laws that were passed in Italy making it illegal for models with an unhealthy BMI to be used. But she didn’t think it was taken to this level. She would have to ignore it, there was no other course of action to take. There was nothing she could do about it, every job had its downside after all. She would focus on the fashion and learn as much as she could. She would just have to suck it up.

Something she found strange about Nancy Hoff was their lunch policy. Interns were not allowed to eat their lunch in the office. This wouldn’t be such a big deal if

Rebecca wasn't trying to save as much money as she could, it forced her out of the office for a full hour with nowhere to go to eat a packed lunch. If she were more street savvy she would have bought a dollar slice of pizza at one of the countless pizza joints in the city. But, having no money was new for Rebecca and she couldn't bring herself to stand for a full hour at one of the chair-less tables those pizza places had. So she went to the cheapest restaurant she could think of where she could sit and eat for the entire painstaking hour every day. Manhattan was still a new and intimidating city, so on her first day with nowhere to go and her stomach rumbling she ran into the first familiar place she saw: a Subway. The smell brought her back to her undergrad, when she would stumble into the 24-hour Subway in College Park with a few tipsy friends and drunkenly enjoy a 6-inch sub while winding down the night. She knew what to expect so she continually went back for more every day. It was her safe haven in a bustling and unforgiving city.

Rebecca walked into the empty Subway, a detail she actually enjoyed, and ordered her usual turkey sandwich on wheat bread. The Subway worker was friendly and jovial as usual and her sandwich combo was made in record time now that she didn't have to repeat her order. She had become a regular. She sat down at a table next to the window overlooking the street and pulled out a book to enjoy while she ate her sandwich and bag of chips. When she finished her lunch she pulled out her sketchbook from the distressed black purse she found at a thrift shop a year before and got to work on new designs. Looking through the different sketches at Nancy Hoff had given her an education on the design process, she was able to study the sketches that were then made into patterns before finally a dress emerged from the complicated puzzle. It inspired her

to work out the details of the garment first, instead of just jumping in headfirst as she had previously done.

The bells above the door announced a customer was walking in and Rebecca looked up out of reflex. She saw a disheveled woman in a heavy overcoat, far too warm for the 70-degree weather. But before the woman could step inside, the same Subway employee who had been so gracious to Rebecca just twenty minutes before yelled for her to get out.

“I’ve told you not to come in here!” He screamed. Rebecca was startled by his booming voice and harsh demeanor. She felt a tightening in her chest and flashed to fights with her father where he would go from calm to deranged in mere seconds.

“But I just want to buy a sandwich,” the lady said digging in her pockets for her hard earned money. She had yet to cross the threshold.

“Get out or I’ll call the cops, no one wants to smell you.” He came out from behind the counter and charged towards the door. Rebecca wanted to get up and help the woman, protect her from the intimidating Subway employee but it was as if she was super glued to her chair. She knew what the employee was doing couldn’t be legal but she felt utterly helpless. Before Rebecca could muster up any type of reaction the homeless woman yelled some kind of obscenity and walked away. She noticed her wiping away tears as she passed the glass window.

“Sorry about that,” the employee said in a voice so calm it was discomfoting. “She tries to come in here at least once a week but I don’t want her stinking up the place, it’s not good for business.”

Rebecca felt a sudden ferocity to avenge the homeless woman, to be the advocate she should have been. “Because you’re afraid you’ll offend all of your customers?” She said pointing around to the empty store. She couldn’t believe she had said something so brazen, she wasn’t one to get involved in other people’s business. After all, her mother had raised her to not meddle in other families’ affairs. New York seemed to be rubbing off on her, and maybe that wasn’t such a bad thing after all. The Subway employee became very concerned with preparing a new bread sheet and turned his back on Rebecca. She was on a high for the remainder of her lunch, feeling as if she had won a major victory for the disenfranchised everywhere.

The rest of the day flew by, it was a blur of dress deliveries, coffee runs, and steaming gowns. By the time Rebecca got home she was exhausted. Her friend from undergrad, Lenny, had been courteous enough to allow her to crash on his couch until she was settled with a job and apartment of her own. She met Lenny when she was a timid freshman and he was an all-knowing senior. He made introductions and invited her to parties when she was too shy to branch out on her own. She knew he had a crush on her back then but she was always careful to not lead him on and to show him she just wanted to be friends. He was the only person she knew in New York and he was well aware of that fact. She had hoped to be off his couch within a month, but quickly realized that was a completely unrealistic timeline. She felt bad about using Lenny in this way, he was a nice guy and it felt strange to trespass on his goodwill, but she needed a place to stay and promised herself she would repay his kindness as soon as she was able.

Rebecca made sure to be useful around the apartment, she picked the place up and did a deep clean every Sunday. She offered to cook as often as possible and even did his

laundry a few times with coins she scrounged from under the couch cushions—something she had only ever seen on cheesy TV sitcoms and was delighted to find actually worked. The housework eased her guilt enough to let her sleep soundly on Lenny’s uneven sofa indefinitely.

She got back to the apartment before Lenny, as she did almost every night, and let herself in with the spare key he had made for her. She rummaged through the contents of the fridge searching for ingredients and leftovers she could throw together for them to eat. She had been living off her tiny savings she had managed to put aside the past few years, but knew it wasn’t going to last forever. She tried to pinch and save wherever she could, but it was still new to her and she wasn’t that great at it. She found cashew chicken and hardened white rice that was a few days old and took out a pan to freshen it up. She grabbed two cloves of garlic, half a lemon, oil, and some other spices she had hunted down from the back of a cabinet two weeks ago and turned the gas stove on.

All things considered she was pretty pleased with how the dinner turned out and self half of it aside for Lenny. She binge-watched Netflix as she ate her portion of chicken and rice, falling asleep before he got home. He tended to keep odd hours as he did in college thanks to his collection of quirky jobs. Rebecca wasn’t entirely sure she knew all of his ventures but the list included being an apartment broker in the city, running his own small electronics start-up, occasionally tending bar at a small dive his friend owned, and working at a mom-and-pop three-room museum in Brooklyn that paid homage to the burough’s history. She didn’t know exactly how much he made, but it was enough to live in a decent sized one-bedroom apartment in an elevator building on the Upper West Side with a laundry room in the basement. He stocked the fridge for the both

of them when he remembered to do so and had an impressive collection of sneakers he was particularly proud of. To Rebecca, whose four years working in academia had left her with a meager savings account, he was a complete success. In the past when she had been unable to make rent or entirely pay off a high credit card bill Rebecca had been able to go to her parents with her tail between her legs and ask for help, she knew Lenny didn't have that luxury and respected him all the more for it. She admired his hustle and affable demeanor that quickly made him a favorite with everyone he met.

The alarm on her phone jerked her awake the following morning. She reached for her cell desperate to silence it, not wanting to wake Lenny. She stood up and stretched as she did every morning and made her way to the bathroom. Something felt off, she could feel it as she walked. She felt sore as if she had been fooling around the night before—she usually was the morning after breaking a dry spell. But she hadn't been with anyone the night before. She sat on the toilet long after she had finished peeing, trying to go through all of the possibilities. Ten minutes later she realized she needed to get ready for work or she was going to be late, so she put her soreness out of her mind and scrambled for her clothes.

Sonia and Natalia kept her on the go all morning. It wasn't until lunch that she had a break to think about her body, she had never felt so disconnected with how she felt physically, at least not since she first started puberty. Rebecca may have blushed at the site of naked models, but she was proud of always be in tune with her own physicality. She knew her best friend Alex was the one to credit for that. Rebecca's mother had given her the classic "birds and the bees" speech when she was ten but they hardly talked about sex in any way since. Alex was the force of strong female energy Rebecca had

unknowingly craved for so many years. She was blunt and open about her own sex life and insecurities and slowly got Rebecca to open up about her own. She wanted to call her and talk about what she was feeling, but knew that wasn't possible. Alex had joined the Peace Corps three months before, and was currently working in a small village in Ghana. She'd have to send her an email later.

She walked into the empty Subway as she had every day for the past few weeks, her jeans rubbing uncomfortably reminding her with every step something felt strange. She waited for the same Subway employee to start her usual order as he now automatically did, but instead he stood still waiting for direction.

"Um," she faltered, "could I have a kid's turkey sandwich with no cheese?" Why had she put it as a question?

"I'm sorry we're not allowed to sell those to anyone over the age of 12," he said. It was the same man who had served her every day for the past three weeks. The same man who had run the homeless woman out the day before. This was his attempt to win back the upper hand. She had embarrassed him and he wasn't going to take it lying down. Rebecca was determined to not let it show that he had annoyed her.

"Fine, I'll have a six-inch turkey sub then." She could feel his disappointment at the lack of drama. She ate her sandwich slowly, carefully chewing over every piece of lettuce and explanation of her physical state. She couldn't admit to the thought that lurked in the back of her mind, the thought that would be the most obvious to some.

When Rebecca got back to the apartment that night she was greeted by a perfume of herbs wafting through the apartment and Lenny in the kitchen tending to a sauté pan.

"Hey how was work?" He asked while stirring a pot of boiling spaghetti.

“It was good, this is a surprise,” she said putting down her purse. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you cook before.”

“I thought it would be a nice change of pace if I tried it out tonight. It’s been awhile but I remember a few recipes.” Lenny was always careful not to mention his childhood, but Rebecca could always feel when he was broaching the subject. “Sit down, relax, have some wine,” he said herding her to the small kitchen table situated to the left of the couch. The table was pushed up against the wall, so as to give the living room as much space as possible. It was simple, a dark wood with matching chairs, probably something Lenny picked up from IKEA or a local thrift store. He poured cheap red wine into two mismatched glasses. Rebecca took a deep sip as Lenny went back to the kitchen to finish the meal.

“I really appreciate everything you’ve been doing for me Lenny,” she said before taking another long sip. “I wouldn’t have been able to move here if it wasn’t for you.”

Lenny brought two plates of spaghetti with meat sauce to the table, setting down a fork next to each of their plates. “We’ve known each other for years,” he said waving his left hand downward as if to signify he were throwing her words away. “Everyone needs a little help especially in this city. It can be brutal at times.” He dabbed at a splash of tomato sauce on his blue plaid shirt with a white paper napkin. Lenny was average height with dark hair and tan skin. Several of his teeth were crooked but they just made him even more endearing.

When they first became friends people assumed Rebecca was Lenny’s new girlfriend. If she were being honest with herself, she used to fantasize about what it would be like to be with Lenny. She would imagine big dinner parties they would host,

Rebecca in a perfect floral dress, hair set in immaculate curls, nude heels and a flawless red lip laughing with her guests as Lenny told yet another classic story. But those thoughts quickly faded as their friendship fell in step, Lenny could never be anything other than her friend.

“Tell me about it,” she said twirling her fork full of pasta, “I had the strangest encounter with this Subway employee. He was so rude to a homeless woman and then tried to get his revenge on me today.”

“Wait, what?” He said looking up at her confused.

“Never mind, forget about it,” she said. “It’s really not worth telling.” She didn’t feel like dwelling on the incident, and as stupid as it was she didn’t want to admit she ate at Subway every day. They finished dinner with Lenny telling her about a drunk bar patron who had to be thrown out, she nodded along and laughed at all the right moments, and when they were finished she started to clear the table but was immediately stopped.

“What do you think you’re doing? I cook and clean tonight.” Lenny said taking the plates out of her hands.

“At least let me clean up, you did cook,” she said.

“You have been doing so much around here, let me do this one night.”

“Lenny, you let me stay here for free. You stock the fridge, it’s the least I can do.”

Rebecca tried to grab the plates back but he walked away too quickly.

“No, you sit down and relax and I will do the dishes tonight.”

Rebecca grabbed her PJs and headed for the bathroom. She couldn’t help but feel that Lenny was atoning for something she didn’t know about. Lenny was a nice friend but he wasn’t always so helpful, especially when it came to housework. The question she

didn't want to ask was burning in the back of her brain, Lenny was a good guy. She just had to remind herself that Lenny was a good guy.

She tossed and turned all night, Lenny's sudden generosity racing through her mind. When she did get to sleep she dreamed that her credits in high school had been improperly calculated and in order to save both her high school and undergraduate degrees she had to go back to summer school to finish one more class. She felt ridiculous walking back through the high school campus, and got lost several times before making it to the right room nearly twenty minutes late. A teacher she had never met chastised her in front of thirty fifteen year olds, all of them pointing and laughing as she fought back tears. She was relieved to hear the alarm beeping on her phone.

Her body felt completely normal, nothing was out of place. She happily brushed her teeth and applied her makeup, thinking about how stupid she had been.

At work Rebecca sat in on three sales meetings. She shuffled the dresses back and forth, displaying the garments the buyers wanted and put the discarded gowns back on the rack. She ran the silks through her fingers, buttery and soft, and lingered on the chiffons, thick and unyielding. She loved the story a collection told, the colors working together in harmony and the silhouettes complimenting one another. She knew a lot of people looked at fashion as shallow and unimportant, but at the end of the day everyone subscribed to it in some way. Everyone got dressed in someone's design, whether it be a five-thousand-dollar dress or a ten-dollar jacket. Clothes molded people into what the world saw, fashion was living breathing art. Going to a fabric store provided endless inspiration and seeing a real showroom revealed a glimpse of what could be. Rebecca thirsted for more, and she was determined to get there.

When she got home that night Lenny wasn't there. She made dinner as she always did, scrounging around for proper ingredients. She managed to pull together a tasty chicken piccata and as she was plating Lenny's portion she heard the door open and slam shut. She poked her head out of the kitchen and saw what she knew was drunk Lenny.

"Hey Rebecca!" He said a bit too enthusiastically.

"Hey Lenny, have a good day?" She asked getting back to the food. "I made chicken piccata if you're interested."

"You are just too thoughtful," he said as he swaggered to the kitchen unsteadily.

"Maybe you should sit down, I'll bring you a plate." Rebecca was familiar with Lenny's drinking. When she was in college his antics seemed humorous. She never worried he had a problem because everyone was drinking, though he did always seem to be the loudest in the room. Rebecca was sure he wasn't an alcoholic, he held down several jobs and didn't drink every day. But when he did drink he could never seem to hold back, Lenny was very much an all or nothing person.

"That is a terrific idea. Just aces. You," Lenny said pointing his index finger at her, "you are a true find." Rebecca waved him away as she got him utensils and water for his meal. She guided him to the kitchen table where he happily sat down. She grabbed her pajamas and headed towards the bathroom to change.

"Where are you going? Aren't you going to keep me company?" Lenny asked dropping his fork.

"I'm just getting ready for bed, I'll be out in a minute." Lenny became intolerably needy when he was drunk, Rebecca hated it. She pulled off the black lace top she had

slaved over for two weeks—the lace she had purchased was very delicate and had proven particularly difficult to work with—taking extra care to fold it just right.

One of the last times Rebecca had seen Lenny in Maryland had not been a happy visit. She met him at a bar along with a few other people she had met a few times before and by the time she got there he was already wasted. She ordered a beer and sat down next to him, his other friends left to play a round of pool. She knew from his eyes and loud voice that he was drunk but he had only come to the area for the weekend and she hadn't seen him in nearly a year so she tried to catch up anyway.

“You are just so amazing Rebecca. What are you still doing in College Park? Why aren't you in New York City with me setting the world on fire?” She had been asking herself the very same question but knew Lenny wasn't in the right state of mind to speak seriously with her and offer advice.

“Well someone has to work in the business administration office,” she said smiling.

“Just come up for a week, during spring break or something, and see what it's like. You could stay at my place.”

“I'll think about it,” she said taking a long sip of her beer.

His other friends came back from playing pool and Rebecca found herself in conversation with a guy named Ryan. They had met briefly before, he worked in the district at a Boys and Girls Club and he had Rebecca laughing from one of his many kid stories. She went to the bathroom and when she got out Lenny was standing right outside.

“Everything ok?” She asked. He had a strange look on his face, he seemed upset and angry.

“Oh everything’s great Rebecca, just fabulous.” He said sipping his cheap whiskey.

“Did something happen?” Rebecca was dumbfounded, when she left for the bathroom he was laughing and telling one of his favorite stories.

“You ever wonder why you have no friends?” He said stepping closer so she couldn’t get past him.

“I didn’t realize that was a problem I suffered from,” she said. Rebecca was hardly a social butterfly but she had built a solid group of friends who she knew she could lean on.

“It’s because you think you’re better than everyone. Look at you,” he said gesturing to her outfit. “We’re in a dive bar Rebecca, and you come in here dressed up like you’re in some expensive DC restaurant. Why do you always try so hard? It’s fucking pathetic.” Rebecca knew she was overdressed for a dive bar, but fashion had been her outlet since high school. Putting together beautiful outfits made her feel confident and it’s what she loved to do. She had on a pair of riding-inspired black leggings, a plum velvet blazer over a plain white t-shirt, black boots, and a statement necklace she had picked up at a flea market. The outfit had been a hit at work, even the guy at her coffee place complimented her on her necklace, she didn’t understand why Lenny was suddenly on her case. It’s not as if she were wearing a ball gown.

“I think you should switch to water Lenny,” she said trying to get around him. He blocked her way.

“I think you should stop being such a bitch.” Though Lenny wouldn’t let her get back to the table she didn’t feel threatened. She didn’t know where any of it was coming

from but was confident that a good night's sleep and a massive hangover would reverse his attitude.

“Get out of my way Lenny.”

“Why, so you can go hook up with Ryan?”

“What are you talking about? You're drunk, I'm not going to argue with you.”

She pushed him out of the way, grabbed her purse and left without saying goodbye to anyone. She was furious with Lenny, she didn't understand why he would suddenly turn on her when she had done nothing to provoke him.

She woke up the next morning to a barrage of texts. They were all from Lenny apologizing for his behavior. “I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened. I had a bad night. I've had family stuff going on. Please forgive me.” She took a few days to respond, she needed time to cool off and collect her thoughts. She sent him a text forgiving him. She said she was mad but mostly hurt. She didn't understand where these things came from, she thought they were friends.

“We are,” he texted back. “I'm just going through some intense family stuff right now. I didn't mean to take it out on you.” They went back and forth with their messages and she eventually let him off the hook. She didn't see him for an entire year, not until he was in DC again for the day and called to invite her to brunch. She agreed to go without hesitation. She missed Lenny and had long since forgiven his bad night. They laughed over eggs and mimosas, it was as if the bar incident had never happened. Lenny had seen some of her bad moments freshman year so Rebecca put that night out of her mind entirely until just then in the bathroom. She knew why it was flooding back but she didn't want to acknowledge it. She couldn't admit that it was a warning sign, because without

Lenny her New York City dreams were dead. She folded up the rest of her clothes and went back into the living room.

Lenny had sloppily finished his dinner. He had food stains down the front of his shirt and pants and some of his meal had even made its way onto the floor. He seemed to be unaware of his own mess.

“I think it’s time for bed,” Rebecca said grabbing his arm and lifting him out of the kitchen chair.

“I think you may be right,” he said wobbling. “How about you join me?”

“Quit it Lenny, you’re drunk. You know we’re just friends.” Rebecca had managed to guide him safely to his bedroom door when he jerked his arm away from her.

“You quit it,” he said angrily. “You know you’re beautiful. You know I’ve liked you.”

“Lenny, stop. We’ve been friends for years. You’ve had a few too many drinks and now you need to go sleep it off. Everything will be better in the morning.” Rebecca reached for his arm but Lenny pulled away from her.

“Why are you such a bitch?”

“Go to sleep Lenny.” Rebecca turned her back on him. She grabbed her keys and phone, too angry to be in the same room as him. She jammed her feet into the closest pair of shoes she could find, her workout sneakers, and slammed the door behind her.

Rebecca stormed down four flights of stairs, too furious and upset to wait for the elevator. She walked at a breakneck pace though she didn’t know where she was going. She had to keep herself moving, as long as she was doing something as long as she had a purpose she wouldn’t have to seriously think about what had just happened. She crossed

the street without looking at the light causing a white van to swerve just barely missing her. The driver spewed obscenities at her but she ignored him, and sat down on the nearest curb barely registering his presence. He sped off in a rage.

Rebecca scrolled through the names in her phone. The one person she wanted to call was thousands of miles away. She didn't feel close enough to her other friends to ask for advice when she felt she was in crisis. She knew she couldn't call her parents. Not after how they had left things. They were just a few numbers away, but they might as well be in Ghana with Alex. It's not as if they didn't speak at all, she had always been on good terms with her parents but they had been very vocal about their distaste for her New York City move. She couldn't call them now and prove them right.

Rebecca thought about the night she told them about her plan, she had been so excited her heart fluttered and everything seemed incredible, life was suddenly full of purpose and possibilities again. She drove back home to Ellicott City, a mere 40 minutes from the University of Maryland, excited to share her decision. She knew they would be worried, she knew they would have questions for her, but she wasn't prepared for their reaction.

"You have no job and no friends there," her mother had said. "It's a terrible idea." Her mother stood over the stove stirring a pot of homemade minestrone soup. Her circular motions became faster as her aggravation rose, her nose crinkled as it always did when she was upset.

"Completely short sighted," her father had chimed in. "Why would you leave all of the roots you've put down here? You've lived in Maryland your whole life; you have

friends, a career, your family!” Her father crossed the kitchen and paused behind his wife, he rubbed her back in an effort to soothe her.

“That’s the point. Right there. I’ve never lived anywhere else! I’m 26 and I’ve yet to see the world. I don’t have a career I have a job. I don’t want to work in the business school administration office for the rest of my life.”

“And what do you want to do exactly?” Her mother said turning around wooden spoon in hand. Minestrone soup dripped on the floor but neither of her obsessively clean type-A parents seemed to care.

“I want to work in fashion,” she said slowly.

“And how are you going to do that?” her dad asked. “You don’t have the right degree or connections. Just because you sew clothes on the weekends doesn’t make you some hot shot designer.” Her mother turned back to the stove not bothering to wipe up the floor splattered with red liquid and half cooked vegetables.

“There are tons of internships. I’ve already gotten one at a great designer, Nancy Hoff, I start next month. As for a place to stay my friend Lenny said I can crash on his couch until I save up for a place of my own. I’m putting my furniture in storage and I’ll come back for it once I have an apartment. I know what I’m doing, why can’t you just trust me?”

“It’s not a matter of trust,” her dad said finally getting a rag to clean up the soup. “How much does this internship pay? What if your friend Lenny gets sick of you staying on his couch and decides to kick you out? How well do you even know Lenny?”

Rebecca knew they were valid questions but she just wanted them to be excited for her. She was 26, she knew she could figure it out on her own. “The internship is

unpaid, but I have some savings that will help me get by until I land a job. Once I have some experience in the field I'll be able to find a position somewhere and work my way up. I won't be able to design right away, I know that, but maybe in time I can apply to a program at Parsons or F.I.T. and then really go somewhere. As for Lenny, I've known him since my Freshman year at UMD, we go way back. I trust him."

"Do you hear that Cal? They 'go way back,' this sounds like a wonderful idea!"

Her mother scoffed over the stove.

"You have a full time job at a prestigious university, why would you give that up to work for free?" Her father knew it was best to ignore her mother's comment completely.

"There are so many things that can go wrong here," her mother talked into the pot of soup, Rebecca could see her eyes were watery. She felt bad leaving her parents, she was an only child after all, but she had to follow her dream. She knew she would regret it if she didn't at least try.

"I work as a glorified secretary. Why did I even go to college if I'm just answering phones and making copies?" She took a long sip of the wine she had brought over, a \$50 red she had splurged for in hopes to get her parents in a good mood.

"If you want a change then why don't you look into applying for a different job within the university, or even a government job in D.C.? They have great pensions and job security," her dad said ringing the towel out in the sink.

Rebecca's father didn't have a college education. When Rebecca graduated Suma Cum Laude from the University of Maryland four years prior it was one the proudest moments of his life. He had worked the same government job for over 30 years. He had

watched younger less experienced workers quickly surpass him because of their degrees and had always wanted more for his daughter. Rebecca knew all of this was going through his mind.

“I’m not throwing my life away. I just want to go after something that’s been deep inside me. I want to love what I do. I want to feel passionate about something. I can’t find that here, I need to see if I can find it in New York.”

“You do what you need to do,” her mom said. “And when you realize the mistake you made we will be here because we’re your parents and we love you, but we will not give you money for this adventure and I will not be on the phone with you every day listening to you complain about the lowly work they have you do at that internship.”

“So I can’t call you anymore?” Rebecca was furious.

“Of course you can,” her mother said. “I’m not cutting you out of my life I would never do that. I just don’t want to listen to the complaining and the bitching when you realize the mistake you are making.” They ate dinner in tense silence and Rebecca left shortly after. Not having her parents on board was a blow but it wasn’t going to stop her from leaving. Three weeks later her apartment was packed up, her furniture secured at Extra Space Storage, and she was on a bus headed for New York City.

Rebecca hovered over the contact labeled “Home” for ten minutes. Her butt was numb from the concrete curb and she was beginning to feel self-conscious about her flannel pink pajamas. She couldn’t call her parents and prove them right. She had just talked to them the day before, assuring them that her internship was great and she was well on her way to an illustrious career in fashion. She couldn’t call them with a shaky voice and tears in her eyes. She just couldn’t do it.

She pulled up her email instead and crafted a carefully worded note for Alex.

“Dear Alex,” she immediately backtracked and deleted the “dear.” “Alex,” she started again, “I don’t know where to begin. Things are getting strange with Lenny and I don’t know what to do. He came home drunk tonight and had a sort of melt-down. I was trying to get him to bed when he just turned on me out of nowhere. He wanted me to go to bed with him, of course I declined, and he got angry. Before you fly off the handle he didn’t touch me or hurt me he just called me names and I stormed out. I’m currently writing you this from my phone sitting on a random curb after a van almost ran me over. I can’t call my parents and I can’t afford to get a place on my own. I don’t want to leave New York, but Lenny is getting weird. I don’t want to accuse him of anything but I have this sinking feeling he may have touched me in my sleep the other night. It sounds ridiculous and I don’t believe it myself. I guess I really just wish you were here to talk. Anyway, I’m rambling and I should get back and go to sleep. Hope everything is great in Ghana. XOXO.” Rebecca sent the message without reading it over. She knew if she proofed it she would just delete it. She needed a friend more than ever and Alex was the only one she wanted.

Alex had been her voice of reason ever since they sat next to each other in a Poly-Sci class their second semester of Freshman year. Rebecca was too intimidated by Alex’s strong opinions—which she was never shy to voice in a 200+ person lecture hall—to speak to her at first. She finally scooped up enough courage to compliment her knee high brown leather boots a month later initiating the start of their friendship. Alex quickly won her over with her easy manner and flawless insight. It had been over 3 months since they had one of their long conversations over coffee or wine in which Alex would dish out her

calm, practical advice. Rebecca felt like a junky going through withdrawals. She just needed a taste to get her through the next few days.

She got up and began her long journey back to the apartment. She had managed to walk nearly 20 blocks in her rampage daze. Several people bumped into her, causing her to come close to dropping her phone in a puddle of foul smelling stagnant water. She was in a city with no friends, little money, and nowhere to go. But she refused to admit defeat. She was determined now more than ever to land a paying job and find an apartment, perhaps a cute studio in Brooklyn she could brighten up with boldly painted walls and homey touches, proudly inviting her parents to come up for a visit. She tensed as she opened the door to the apartment, afraid Lenny would be waiting for her pickled in whiskey and ready for a fight. She was grateful to find the living room empty, threw herself on the couch and immediately drifted off to sleep.

The next morning Rebecca yanked on a pair of jeans and a royal blue silk blouse that cinched in at the waist she had recently finished, grabbed her makeup bag and left the apartment as fast as she could. She ordered breakfast and coffee at a café near work, opting to put on her makeup at a vacant table between bites of her \$8 egg white sandwich. She knew she would have to eventually face Lenny, but she wanted a little more time. She obsessively refreshed her email hoping that Alex would reply with the perfect advice she was looking for, but eventually had to leave for work empty handed.

Sonia was entrenched in her own work for the first hour and a half so Rebecca pulled out her sketchbook and began to draw some new dress ideas that had been slowly building up in her mind over the past few weeks. Despite her Lenny problems Rebecca couldn't help but be utterly inspired by the energy and architecture of the city. Never

before had she seen so many different people take such daring fashion risks as she did in New York. Walking into work that morning she saw a twenty something girl sporting a pair of fantastically embellished shorts that could have easily been costumeey and over-the-top, but on her petite frame looked absolutely glamorous. She wore a simple white cotton top and sandals, allowing the shorts to stand out on their own. Some people didn't understand that pieces needed to breathe, overwhelming a garment was a common mistake. Rebecca blamed Pinterest for that, every picture seemed to scream at the viewer to pile on as many layers and pieces as possible. She was surprised the girls were able to stand up straight long enough to snap a decent photo.

The dress Rebecca sketched was an open backed gown with lace sleeves and a simple flare at the hem. She was proud of her creation and was sad to leave it behind on her daily errands. When she got back she was mildly frightened to find a post-it note stuck to her sketch she had forgotten to put away. "Meet with me before you leave for lunch—Ava". Ava was the head designer, under Nancy Hoff of course, and did about 85% of the designs for the line. She didn't think Ava knew she existed. She looked at the clock and realized it was about time for her to leave for lunch, she wouldn't be able to obsess over the note or try to decode its terse message. She would have to meet with Ava immediately.

Rebecca picked up her sketchbook along with the yellow sticky note and headed to Ava's workspace in the opposite corner of the open office. Ava's desk was littered with sketches and her computer played videos of several runway shows at once. Rebecca knew there were shows happening for various fashion weeks all over the world, and it

was the designers' job to keep track of what everyone was showing. Ava was entirely captivated by what looked to be a Dior show, not noticing Rebecca's presence.

"Um, Ava?" Rebecca stuttered quietly. "Your note said you wanted to see me?"

"What note?" Ava said not bothering to take her eyes off the computer screen.

"Oh, right. You're Rebecca right? One of the wholesale interns?"

"That's right, I started about a month ago."

"I saw your sketch, it's pretty good. Are you in design school? Why aren't you interning for the design team?" Ava brought up a few more shows, still not looking at Rebecca.

"I've never been to design school. I did my undergrad B.A. at the University of Maryland. I've just always loved design and make my own stuff."

"I liked the sketch, it's better than any of the fairy tale nonsense my design interns have shown me. Bring all of your sketches with you later in the week and we can go over them."

"Thank you. That would be fantastic!" Rebecca was elated, she couldn't believe Ava had actually taken notice of her work and liked it.

"I have to get back to work, we'll talk later this week." Ava gave her a shooing motion with her left hand and Rebecca walked away. Nothing could wreck her mood. Not the surly Subway employee, not even Lenny.

Though Alex hadn't answered her email yet, Rebecca went back to the apartment in high spirits that night. Her career in fashion was picking up steam, she had been noticed. Lenny wasn't home so Rebecca prepared dinner as she always did, happy to find a new pork roast in the fridge. She prepared and roasted the meat, steaming broccoli and

boiling wild rice to go with it. After the clean-up she got ready for bed and shut the lights off early. She was exhausted but her mind raced causing her to toss and turn for hours.

She heard the door open and Lenny walk to the kitchen. She was too lazy and tired to begin a conversation with him so she pretended to be asleep. She heard him heat up the leftovers and take it to his room, relieved he didn't linger in the common space. Without Alex's guidance she was at a loss as to what she should say to him. She was afraid if she confronted him he would throw her out, and besides, she was still unsure whether or not she had imagined it. It would be wrong to accuse Lenny of touching her without any proof. She didn't want to be one of those people. Rebecca rolled onto her back, hoping the repositioning would help dreams come. She heard Lenny's door opened, listened to his heavy footsteps lead to the kitchen followed by the unmistakable clatter of a plate being dropped in the sink. His footsteps were slow and cumbersome. They stopped completely next to the couch. Rebecca felt her stomach twist, the back of her neck became sweaty and her upper lip twitched. Lenny was standing over her for some reason; the scariest part was she felt this probably wasn't the first time.

She nearly jumped at the touch of his finger tucking a lock of her hair behind her left ear. An internal war was raging between her mind and body. She wanted to push Lenny away, she wanted to let him know she was awake and it was not ok that he touched her. But her body was paralyzed, she couldn't open her eyes, she couldn't wiggle a finger. Lenny let out a short breathy sigh and she felt his cold hand go under the baggy t-shirt she slept in. He fondled her left breast without making a sound. What was he thinking? Rebecca's heart was pounding so hard she was surprised it hadn't jumped out of her chest and scurried across the floor. His hand lifted and she was relieved to finally

be left alone when she felt a sharp intense pain course through her breast. Lenny was pinching her nipple, that's what the sensation was. Lenny was pinching her breast and she wasn't doing anything to stop him. Her eyes finally flitted open and she stared right into his vacant face. He didn't seem to be turned on or angry he was a blank slate.

“Stop Lenny,” she said in a voice so calm Rebecca almost didn't recognize it as her own. Lenny continued to fondle her breasts, it was as if he didn't register what she had just said. “Lenny, stop,” she repeated. He continued.

Rebecca pushed his hand away and sat up straight. “I think I'm going to go,” she said not really knowing what she meant. The world felt suddenly strange and foreign, it was as if she found herself on an entirely new plain and was still struggling to adjust.

“It's late,” he said in a unsettlingly calm voice. He had been caught touching her, shouldn't he be agitated? Shouldn't he be afraid? Why was he acting so abnormally normal?

“Yeah, I'm just gonna go though,” she said lacing up her boots and grabbing her phone and purse. She shut the door behind her with Lenny standing like a marble statue next to the couch. She walked slowly down the stairs, taking each step with great care. Her legs felt like they would buckle at any moment so she held on tightly to the railing as she made her way down. She walked a couple of blocks before finding a comfortable stoop to sit down on. She brought up her email on the phone, ready to write Alex another email, this one more urgent. She was grateful to see a message from Alex wedged between junk mail from her dentist in Maryland and a flash sample sale for one of her favorite brands. The email was short but to the point. “Call home immediately. Get your parents' help, then email me back once you have. Don't be an idiot, just do it.—Alex.”

There it was. The flawless judgment she had been waiting for. The answer she had known all along but needed someone else to say. Alex was completely unaware of what had just happened on the couch, but even she was concerned enough to pull the plug on Lenny. Rebecca folded her head into her arms, letting the tears fall in her lap. She listened to the early garbage trucks grinding their trash, the cabs honked their horns in frustration, and the laughter of drunk college kids making their way home after a late night. She scrolled through the contacts on her phone, pausing at “Home,” and pressed the number with little reluctance. She didn’t have to be alone. She knew there would be a voice to help her on the other side.

Itch

Eric asked me to have a threesome last night. He threw it out there like it was an inner-tube and I was drowning in a dark ocean with no other boats in sight. It didn't shock or surprise me. In fact, I was surprised it took him this long to ask for something more in the bedroom. I didn't respond to his suggestion, instead I walked to the guest room and locked the door behind me for the night. I suppose he thinks I'm scandalized. He would never suspect my actions were that of a nervous animal, retreating to safe coverage. I assume it's his last ditch effort to salvage our marriage, but I suppose that would sound strange to most people. How could bringing in a third person possibly save a marriage? It's cliché. It's ridiculous. We're too old to be acting this immaturely. It's actually quite a common phenomenon if you read up on it, which I have. I tend to be a voracious reader.

It's not my marriage that worries me. It will most likely end; I've known that from the beginning if I'm truly being honest with myself. It's this third person I worry about. Prostitutes don't interest me, and I can't see myself hurling some unsuspecting third woman into this relationship that is teetering on the brink of explosion.

I've been that unsuspecting third. It's the one secret I've managed to keep from everyone, even Eric, for nearly 20 years. It didn't end well as you can imagine. I can't blame them for that though, they were beautiful in all that they were. I had a sense that relationship wouldn't end well either, it's like a mental itch I feel warning me of the danger. It's guided me well with my career, but I've never seemed to listen to it in my personal life.

I was 28 when I first met Kayla and John on a Saturday night out in D.C. I was sitting at the grimy bar in an Irish Pub I've long since forgotten the name of, waiting for a date I had met online. Back then I did a lot of online dating. It's how I eventually met Eric, but he didn't come into the picture until much later. I was, oddly enough, too shy to meet anyone in the traditional way and I've always been consumed with advancing my career at the firm. As Eric says, I constantly boast about being made partner over five years ago, there was no mommy tracking for me.

Despite my experience with the awkward in person meet-up, I was still incredibly nervous to meet my date. I remember my sweaty palms and twisting stomach like it was yesterday; though, it should be noted that this nervousness did not stem from excitement, on the contrary I was not very excited to meet him. In order to quell my considerable nerves, I downed three screwdrivers in an hour. My date was a typical D.C. professional, making respectable money in some boring government job, which he believed made him powerful and important but in reality made him ordinary and expendable. But it had been two solid months of late nights working on a big case and I needed to let off some steam; so I decided to give Ted, or Tom, or whatever his name was a shot. I had gotten there early to scope the place out—typical lawyer move—but my date was 20 minutes late and I was growing impatient and increasingly buzzed.

In my crazed dash out the door I had accidentally left behind my usual book, which I would read at the bar before the person I was meeting arrived. Back then I wasn't great in social situations and although I spent my days arguing in power suits over various legal cases, once my business clothes came off it's as if I was stripped of my armor and I immediately became introverted. I was determined to loosen up. So I sat at

the bar tearing at a damp cocktail napkin and pretending to watch whichever game was playing on one of the many giant TV screens. That's when John sat in the empty seat next to me.

Though I only gave him a quick glance, I could tell he was extremely attractive. He was tall, had dark hair, and these brilliant brown eyes that seemed to jump out at you. Even though I hadn't met him yet, I knew he was much better looking than the date who had me waiting.

"I'm sorry, were you saving this seat for someone?" John asked after he saw me look him over. His eyes were captivating in a way I've yet to see since, not even with Eric.

"Well I was but he's either stood me up or takes more time to get ready than I do, either way I'm no longer interested in saving the seat." The alcohol and John's inherent approachability brought out my internal fierceness that I would eventually learn to embrace and then harness. Normally, I would have fumbled for the right words in front of someone so good looking, but he had me feeling like we were old friends. I would say I haven't felt this level of ease with Eric, but it would be a lie skewed by the last year of our fighting.

"If I were meeting you I would make sure to be here at least an hour early, worst mistake of this guy's life."

I looked up from my almost empty drink to John's smile, it was infectious. "I'm sure you say that to all the pathetic girls you meet in bars."

"You most certainly are not pathetic, and if I went around doing that my wife would not be happy." And there it was. He was married; completely untouchable. He had

a wife at home, maybe a few kids, and in his spare time he would go out to bars to watch the game and have a few beers. My smile dropped.

“I realize that sounded bad. My wife, Kayla is over there in the corner,” he pointed to a petite blonde sitting at a table by herself. She saw us looking and gave a wave; I was too confused and embarrassed to muster up any kind of gesture in exchange. So John was just a nice married guy taking pity on the sad lonely girl tearing up her cocktail napkin. I felt an overwhelming need to get out of there. “Kayla insisted on me coming over here and buying you a drink, we’d love to talk with a beautiful woman such as yourself but we understand if you have other plans.” I was utterly baffled by what was happening. Was a couple trying to pick me up? Did that actually happen? “So we’ll be over there,” he motioned to the table with tiny blonde Kayla, “feel free to come over if you’re sick of waiting for the jerk.” Even though he was insulting another person it seemed like a compliment out of his mouth, John’s face was far too kind to ever seem like he was being rude. That’s something Eric has never had a problem with.

“Thanks,” I said looking back at my watery drink, “I think I’ll wait a little longer to see if he shows.” My curiosity was peaked but I needed time to lay out the facts and go over a proper course of action in my head, I tend to be extremely analytical.

“No worries,” he said, “you know where to find us.” He got up and weaved his way through the crowded dark bar back to his wife. I had entirely forgotten about the drink he had promised, and I would have surely rejected, until the bartender put another screw driver in front of me.

“I didn’t order another one,” I said starting to push the drink away.

“They did,” the bartender pointed to Kayla and John who seemed to be deep in conversation. I stared at the drink not sure whether or not I should take it. What if they had put something in it? I quickly realized that was impossible as they were nowhere near the bar. Before I could decide, the bar tender pushed the drink back in front of me and walked away. I was halfway through John and Kayla’s screwdriver when my date finally showed up.

I’d like to cut in here to explain that manners have always been very important to me. I was raised in a very formal home where things like how you held your fork mattered a great deal. When people keep me waiting, or chew with their mouth open, or show up to a party without a gift for the host I get angrier than most people would. If you think that means I would have left after the first 20 minutes you would be wrong, standing up a set date, no matter how late the other party is, would be the highest form of rudeness.

So, as I was saying my date was a typical D.C. professional. There was nothing special about him except that he was on the short side. He was wearing a suit and seemed to have come straight from work.

“Chloe.” It was more of a statement than a question, “I’m Tom (at least that’s what we will refer to him as for the sake of the story), I’m so sorry I’m late work has been crazy.” I had no intentions of being civil to someone who had proven to be so rude.

“I hadn’t realized that you lost my phone number,” my three and a half screwdrivers guided my words.

“I’m sorry I work in a federal building, no cells allowed. I got here as fast as I could.” I gestured for him to sit down. I wasn’t done with him quite yet.

“You went for a cocktail in a beer place? Strange choice,” his voice gave no indication that he was attempting to be humorous.

“You show up late and then insult me? Strange choice.” He laughed thinking I was joking around.

I got through about ten minutes of boring conversation when I decided I had to get away from him. I usually gave someone at least a two drink chance but he was especially boring and I was already a little drunk. Let me jump back in here for a moment. I realize that this story may make me sound like some sad alcoholic, but I can assure you that is far from the truth. I have two drinks a week, if that, meanwhile a bottle of whiskey is lucky to last a week around Eric. But that’s beside the point. I was young and nervous so I indulged a little more back then when I went out.

“Listen,” I said placing my hand on his shoulder, “You’re a good enough guy I suppose so I’m not going to waste your time. The truth is I have absolutely no interest in you. Not for another date or even a one-night stand. Frankly I’m bored to tears. So I’m going to the bathroom, and when I come back I will be leaving.”

He didn’t know what to say and I didn’t give him enough time to come up with anything. Yes, I was blunt. Yes, I was sort of a bitch. But I was done letting D.C. men treat me however they saw fit. I was ready to take control damn it! Or so I thought. I grabbed my purse and jacket and headed to the bathroom. I passed John and Kayla who seemed to still be in deep conversation and I decided then that I would stop by their table on my way back, as a way to show Tom that I meant business. In the bathroom I fixed my hair, getting my bangs to fall just right, and applied more light pink lip gloss before

finding the nerve to exit and approach their table. Two minutes later I found myself standing in front of them at a complete loss for words. Thankfully John took the lead.

“Well hi there,” he said standing up and offering me his seat. I took the chair across from Kayla and John sat down next to his wife. He always knew how to make me feel comfortable, he read my body language as if it were a book he had perused countless times and was intimately acquainted with. Sitting across from them made me relax, it was now a chess game and I could start putting together a strategy like I did at work. “We saw your date finally showed, I’m guessing it didn’t go so well.” Kayla had yet to say anything; up close she was intimidating. She had long blonde hair that curled perfectly, light blue eyes that shined much like John’s did, and her body was tiny but had an impressive muscle tone that seemed to solidify her presence.

“I’d rather stick myself with needles than spend another minute listening to him talk about his boring government job.” Things were apparently just flying out of my mouth that night. I had never flirted with a woman before and I was turning out to be abysmal at it. I started thinking of excuses to leave when they both started laughing. There was something about them sitting there laughing like two gorgeous idiots in a grimy bar that made me feel like I could be entirely myself. I guess Eric used to make me feel that way. Now he’s far too hostile to laugh.

“Well there seems to be a lot of that in this town,” John said. “This is my wife Kayla by the way and I’m John. I don’t believe I ever got your name.” He was right, how had we not yet exchanged names?

“Oh, right! I’m Chloe. Nice to meet you.” There were two of them so I felt strange holding out a hand and settled on a pathetically confusing mini wave. I really was

a child then. “Thank you for the drink by the way. It saved me from having to refuse one from my date.”

“A beautiful woman like you shouldn’t have to pay for her drinks,” Kayla said touching my hand lightly. I felt my cheeks burning but didn’t pull away. John’s arm was around Kayla, linking us in an intimate chain no one could penetrate.

“So do you guys just go around the city looking for friends?” I knew what they were after at this point, well at least I thought I did, but decided to play coy. I’ve never played coy with Eric, maybe that’s one of our issues. There were never any fun games between us. No useless secrets we share for amusement.

“Not exactly,” Kayla said smiling at John.

“My wife can be a bit shy; she’s bisexual and we enjoy bringing women into our sex life from time to time.” I nearly spit up my drink. I hadn’t expected him to be so blunt. D.C. isn’t exactly a city known for its open honesty.

I can’t say that at 28 years old I had never encountered this idea before. I wasn’t a prude but I had only ever been with one man at a time. Until then I thought threesomes were for college kids or people who had so much money they had to hunt down their thrills in other places. But here was an intelligent, mature, attractive couple who routinely had threesomes. I guess at this stage I couldn’t really know all of that about them, but it was all true. They were all these things and more. Could marriage really be like that? In my experience it hasn’t been. But back then I saw the possibilities.

“We don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable,” John continued. He reached over the table and touched my hand that Kayla was still holding. “Don’t feel pressured to say or do anything, we just both found you to be a very beautiful woman and if you want

to get to know us we'd love to take you out. My brain was telling me to get up and run home; to leave these strange people and never look back, but my body fought to stay.

“Can we order another round?” I asked.

“Of course, what would you like?” I can now recognize this moment as the turning point. I was in and they knew it. We sat for hours talking in that grungy dive bar, from movies to books to cities we had lived in, neither of them asked me what I did for a living—in D.C. it's the first question you're asked and the only answer that matters—and I found it incredibly refreshing to leave my credentials behind. Before I knew it the bartender was announcing last call.

“Wow, is it 2 in the morning already?” I couldn't believe how long we had talked for.

“I guess so,” Kayla said. She smiled and shared a look with John. “We'd love to take you out to dinner later this week. If that's something you're interested in.”

“That sounds great.” I gave them my number and they waited with me until I was able to hail a cab. I hugged Kayla then John and climbed into the car feeling as light as whipped air. The next morning, I woke up with a headache but surprisingly no regrets. I knew I felt a connection with Kayla and John, and I was looking forward to having dinner with them, even if it led to nothing more than a solid friendship.

I'm a very practical person. It might as well be a requirement for a corporate lawyer. I'm rational, I don't believe in superstitions, I don't throw salt over my left shoulder when it spills, and I certainly don't believe mystical forces are at work on Friday the 13th. But I do believe that I was meant to meet Kayla and John that night. They are by

far the most important relationship I've ever had. More important than Eric even. I would call them my soul mates if I didn't think that was a ridiculous farce.

I met them at an Italian restaurant in downtown D.C. the following Saturday night. I spent hours agonizing over what I should wear, something I had never done for any date before. Though I didn't know if what I was going on was a date or not at that point, the uncertainty bled over to my wardrobe and I found myself staring at a mound of black dresses that all seemed to look the same. I finally got a grip of my senses long enough to pick one with a halter top, I've always had darling shoulders, and finish my hair and makeup at a reasonable hour.

Eric insists I never dress up for him anymore. The funny thing is I never have. The only people I've ever played dress up for are Kayla and John. But we'll get to that later. I arrived at the restaurant a mere five minutes late and was anxious to see my two dates were already sitting at the table.

"Sorry I'm late, traffic was a nightmare," I lied sitting down in the circular booth next to Kayla.

"Not a problem we just got here ourselves," John said. His eyes really were dreamy—I know I sound like a teenager but he truly was.

"Shall we order some drinks?" I suggested. How foolish I was.

"Well, we wanted to talk to you about that," Kayla said looking at John. Great, I thought, they think I'm some sort of alcoholic from the other night.

"We don't want this to come across as strange or elitist," John said grabbing hold of my hand. "It's just, when we go on a date with someone who we are interested in we try to leave alcohol out of the equation for awhile." I hadn't pegged them for being

Mormon, it crossed my mind that I had stumbled into some strange religious plural marriage where they wanted to use me as a baby farm, but I had quickly dismissed that as ridiculous. Then it was Kayla who took my hand and maintained eye contact. Physical touch was vital for them, they felt it connected you when having meaningful conversations. It added an extra layer of sensation that sealed the emotional impact of the moment.

“Consent is very important to us,” she said. “We don’t want to force anyone into something they aren’t one hundred percent comfortable with. We don’t want a meaningless fling, we want to connect. When you add alcohol into the mix things get messy and we don’t want that. Does any of this make sense or do we sound like completely ridiculous hippies?”

“No, I understand. And I think it’s a great idea.” In truth, I hated it! I was a basket case, a ball of nerves, every cliché you could think of involving anxiety and I was it. I wanted a glass of wine to take the edge off, but I knew they were right. If I wanted to do this I should be stone cold sober. Consent could not be a question it had to be a certainty. So I did it. I went the entire night without a drink. It was some of the best conversation I’ve ever had. We talked about life, travel, pets, crazy parents, and a little bit about love. Then came the big question.

“We want you to know that this decision is entirely up to you and feel free to do what you like,” Kayla said. “We could all take a cab back to our place, it isn’t far, or you could go home and call us, or don’t if you don’t want to we wouldn’t take offense.” She stroked the back of my hand under the table, we were careful to just look like friends in

public. The back of my neck tingled, my thighs clenched tightly. I knew I had made my decision the second I walked in the restaurant.

“Your place sounds great,” I said.

We grabbed our coats and headed outside. I wondered what people thought about us, did they know what we were about to do? Or did we simply look like a married couple out with a single friend? It was exhilarating to think that we had this big juicy secret the rest of the world wasn't in on. That secret would come to destroy us. It would eventually tear at my insides like a hot knife, but back then, in the first months, it was fun. I was first into the cab followed by Kayla and then John. Every move they made seemed synchronized to ensure my comfort. Being next to Kayla in the cab put me at ease, it simply felt like two girlfriends bumping shoulders.

When we got to their apartment I reached for my purse to split the cab fare but John wouldn't let me pay. They never let me pay. They would always insist that I was their “guest” and it would be rude. I tried to explain that I was a corporate lawyer with a very comfortable salary but they shot down my many protestations time after time. I thought that was charming, now I see it was controlling and a way to keep me in my box like a shiny toy. Their building was nice but no frills, they clearly weren't rich. Their one-bedroom apartment was immaculate; every item had a purpose and a place. I was glad we hadn't gone back to my condo, which was always a mess. I was too stubborn to hire a cleaning lady then. My mother had relied on help so much that she wouldn't know how to boil an egg, and I was determined to be nothing like her.

“I know,” Kayla said studying my face, “I have a cleaning problem. Completely anal.”

“I wish I had that problem,” I laughed shrugging off my jacket.

“Can we get you something to drink?” John asked heading to the kitchen. I was excited, thinking he meant an alcoholic drink, but he didn’t. “We have water, juice, soda, whatever you want.”

“Water would be great,” I said. I sat next to Kayla on their white couch and the conversation started back up again as if it had never stopped. She was like a close friend I had known for years, but somehow she was more than that, for the first time I felt myself wondering what her breasts would feel like in my hands and what her vagina would taste like. I was undeniably attracted to her in a way that I have never been attracted to a woman since. I’m sure a lot of people would accuse me of being a lesbian. If that were true, my failing marriage would make a lot more sense. But no, sorry to disappoint you, I am very heterosexual. The only woman I ever wanted to sleep with was Kayla.

I drank the glass of water happily, I needed something to do with my hands. John sat in a chair across from us as we discussed our mothers and how they made our lives miserable in vastly different, yet equally as horrible, ways. Kayla swiftly asked if it would be ok if she kissed me. So there it was, the moment of truth. Would I let her kiss me? No, I wasn’t going to *let* her, I was going to take control for once. So I started to kiss her in reply.

Kissing Kayla wasn’t much different from kissing a man. In fact, it was almost better. Instead of rough stubble chaffing my skin I smelled her sweet perfume and ran my fingers through her long soft hair. She was gentle and playful and I didn’t want to stop. I almost forgot John was in the room until he said, “Watching the two of you is amazing.” It wasn’t creepy though, it only added to the excitement. Eric would be such a creep in a

threesome, I can picture him giving me and some poor girl order after order. Demanding who be on top and what needs to be accomplished. He's no John. After a few minutes Kayla pulled away and suggested we move into the bedroom where it would be more comfortable. She grabbed my hand and led me to the back of the apartment. They had a large King-size bed that fit the three of us perfectly.

I sat on the edge of the mattress and stripped off my boots and socks before laying back. I didn't expect what came next, a barrage of compliments from the two of them about how beautiful I was. It was unbelievably empowering and only made me want to be with the both of them more. I was intoxicated, I had never been in a situation where I wanted to be with two people equally. At first it felt strange to kiss John, I was afraid that Kayla would somehow be jealous, but I would later learn they had a set of rules they strictly followed for these sort of encounters. I was surprised to find that when I kissed John, Kayla got even more excited, constantly saying how "hot it is to see the two of you." I don't think I would be jealous of Eric with another woman, it would most likely make me laugh seeing his chubby out of shape body pushing away into some poor girl, sweat dripping down his paunch.

That night, I had sex with Kayla and John and then we fell asleep cuddled into one another. When I woke up the next day there was coffee and homemade donuts waiting for me on the nightstand courtesy of Kayla. It was much better than the expired orange juice and stale bread Eric offered me after the first time I slept over his sad little studio apartment. Of course back then I thought it was cute. Anyway, after breakfast I got dressed and grabbed my coat, ready to catch a cab and do my walk of shame, but Kayla and John insisted on driving me home. I prepared myself for an awkward car ride but was

surprised to find the conversation flowed just as easily as it had the night before. We arrived at my apartment and they both got out of the car to give me a hug.

“We had a great time,” John said, “We’ll leave it up to you on whether or not you call us to do this again.”

“Definitely,” I said smiling, “I had a great time too.” I walked into my building feeling like I had the answers to life. Everyone else in the world was barely existing; only the three of us mattered. Over the next week I struggled over whether or not to call them. I didn’t want to seem needy or like I was infringing on their marriage but I had an unbelievable urge to see them again. It’s true that we had had sex, but it was more than that. We connected emotionally and I wanted more. Every day at work I would stare at my phone wondering if I should attempt to send them a cute text. I realized I couldn’t even come up with a text that didn’t seem ridiculous or like I was insane so I did nothing. Then on Friday night when I thought I was going to explode if I didn’t call, I got a text message from John asking me to come to a party the next day. It was a costume party, and they had a closet full of options if I couldn’t come up with anything on such short notice. And then the catch came, the party was for swingers.

“Me and Kayla are not swingers though, we just like going to these parties because they are big and crazy and it’s fun to be around open minded people.”

I asked for some time to think about it and he was understanding, as he always was, and told me to take as much time as I needed. So I poured myself a glass of wine, turned on a movie, and started going over all the reasons why I shouldn’t go. It would be gross. The people would be old and creepy and expect me to have sex with them. There would actually be people having sex in the open. This was surely crossing a line I

couldn't come back from. It would change me into a person I wouldn't like or recognize. And swingers? Really Kayla and John? I thought they were classier than that. I didn't want to be their sex toy I wanted more from them. After three glasses of wine and two hours of trashy reality TV later I told myself to stop being such a judgmental prude and just go for it. Besides, if I hated it or felt uncomfortable I could always leave. It's embarrassing but I thought it could be my ticket to a relationship with them. I guess it was in a way. I think Eric would have a cardiac arrest if he found out I attended a swingers' party. He's never had an imagination.

I woke up the next day feeling nervous but excited; I was going to see John and Kayla again and I couldn't wait. I went back to their apartment with my overnight bag. We went out for a quick dinner at a café down the street from their place. Second dates (if that's what that was) are usually painful, full of strange lulls and tedious fact gathering, but I was with a married couple who already knew each other inside and out; it was an entirely new set of rules. Talking to Kayla was easy. We laughed and joked without thinking about how the week before she had been doing me with a strap on while her husband watched. We finished dinner and went back to their apartment to get ready. Kayla lent me a costume, she really did have a closet full, so I settled on something classic and went for a nurse's outfit. Her and John both dressed as vampires, which was the party's theme.

Getting ready was relaxing rather than the frenzied feeling I usually had. I shared a mirror with Kayla, John checked in on us several times, providing non-alcoholic drinks and anything else we wanted. It was nice to have company. The idea of seeing people have sex all night was still intimidating but I felt safe with them.

“So I have to warn you,” Kayla said while applying her fake eyelashes, “there will be a lot of people at this party who will be interested in you. Feel free to make whatever connections you want but also be careful you don’t want to come off too flirty if swinging isn’t something you want to do.”

“It’s definitely not,” I said smiling nervously. But what did she mean by making “connections”? Didn’t she want me to herself?

“Well you’re what we call a unicorn,” she said.

“What does that mean?” Images of My Little Pony swirled in my head.

“It means that hot single women who want to be a third are extremely rare and hard to find. This party is for couples only, no single men allowed, but if you’re a third you qualify. It’s rare for a couple to have a single woman to bring along.” Kayla must have seen the fear flash in my eyes because she quickly followed up with, “But John and I don’t have sex there we just go for the fun people and insane party.”

“So everyone there are going to be swingers?” I was losing my nerve.

“Everyone except us. But they are the nicest people you will ever meet, we always stay friendly, but we’re also careful to not lead anyone on. It’ll be fine, if you get nervous just stick with us.” I had never been more scared in my life. Not even when my best friend made me ride a roller coaster in college that went down at a 90-degree angle, something I still haven’t quite recovered from with my fear of heights. I felt myself at the top of that drop, dangling for hours with panic and praying for it to finally just come. The lawyer in me wanted more answers, I couldn’t go in blind.

“So what was the last party like?”

“It was insane. It was at this huge mansion; the theme was Alice in Wonderland. The entire place was decked out and each room had a different purpose. Some were just for bars and talking, and the others were for the kinkier couples. They always have the best entertainment, they really put on a show.” Ok, so there were separate rooms for sex. It was comforting to know I could easily separate myself from all of that stuff.

“So single men really aren’t allowed?” It seemed like a strangely close-minded rule to me.

“Nope. Otherwise the parties would turn into some gross pickup scene. Couples have to apply and not everyone gets in. You have to send in pictures and fill out this whole application, they take it pretty seriously.”

“Wow, I had no idea.” I had a hard time imagining what the best of the perverts would look like.

“Yeah they really don’t tolerate any bad behavior. No one will touch you unless you say it is ok. There are rules in place.”

“There are rules?” Who knew swingers were so official. I was liking them better already.

“Yes,” she stopped fixing her eye shadow and turned to me counting them off her fingers, “you can’t touch anyone without their consent, you bring your own alcohol that they keep for you behind the bar, you can’t have sex outside of the designated rooms, no single men allowed, and you can’t take pictures of people without their consent.” Well thank god for that rule, I hadn’t even thought of the possibility of someone taking a picture of me.

“Those seem like some good guidelines to have.” I felt like a third grader giving my approval to the top dog on the playground.

“Yeah, it’s good to have a system in place, it keeps people in line. But I don’t mean to scare you or anything almost everyone who comes to these things are really great people.”

I smiled and continued fixing my hair. The one thing I was worried about was waiting for the party shuttle to come. To keep it safe everyone got rooms at a certain hotel in D.C., then a shuttle would arrive and bring people back and forth all night so everyone could enjoy drinking and not worry about driving home later. I was afraid someone would see me waiting for the shuttle in a ridiculous costume when Halloween had long since passed, D.C. could be a very small city, especially when you didn’t want it to be. Kayla could practically hear my thoughts whirring inside my brain because out of nowhere she asked, “Are you ok? You don’t have to come if you don’t want to, don’t feel pressured.” Her words sparked my impulsivity, I had to see what the party was like and I couldn’t lose John and Kayla.

“I definitely want to go, I’m just a bit nervous someone from work may see me waiting for the bus. It wouldn’t be good.” Forget mommy-tracking, I would have been laughed out of the firm.

“We can fix that,” Kayla said getting up to rummage in her closet. A few minutes later she returned with a black glittery mask. “Here, you can wear this while waiting for the bus and take it off when we get there, or don’t. Whatever you want.” It was simple, but it worked.

“Thanks,” I said, “that’s actually perfect.” I put the mask over my face, and liked the way it framed my eye makeup. I ended up keeping the mask on all night, it gave me the power to finally let loose.

We stood outside in the freezing February weather waiting for the shuttle to come. The few people standing around were not promising. A woman in her fifties walked out of the hotel wearing a dog collar. She was with her pale lean husband who seemed to be dressed in a silk bathrobe a la Hue Hefner style. John, being the nice guy that he was, said, “That’s a great collar.” I looked at it more closely and realized it had “bad girl” written on it in sparkly rhinestones. Her husband took that as an invitation to open her sweater, exposing her very large breasts subdued only by the wisp of a fishnet top.

“She’s a very bad girl,” he said, “we usually have her leash with us as well but we forgot it at home.” I was eternally grateful they had forgotten it at home. The shuttle was taking a long time and the area in front of the hotel was filling up with more people. Most were dressed as vampires but others were wearing impressively elaborate homemade costumes. Many of them were wearing big coats or capes closed over them, not comfortable enough to show what they actually had on until they were in the safe confines of the party. There was one girl in particular I couldn’t stop staring at. She stood towards the back and had a big black cloak draped all the way around her, it was impossible to see any part of her outfit.

The bus pulled into the hotel parking lot and after verifying our names on an electronic list we were let on one by one. Because of the limited seating, due to the long wait, Kayla, John, and I shared two seats. I was relieved I didn’t have to sit next to anyone I didn’t really know, which was idiotic seeing as I didn’t even really know John

or Kayla. I felt like a scared 7-year-old clinging to her parents at Disneyworld, afraid to get lost in the scary chaos. It took me years to see they liked having that power over me. Kayla sat on John's lap leaving me free to clutch at my purse like it was my one connection to safe civilization. Everyone piled in, and finally the bus was completely full, even the aisle was filled to capacity. The ride was a blur and the next thing I knew I was being thrust outside and led into a giant warehouse in the middle of nowhere. At that moment I knew I was definitely going to be murdered. But wait, that would mean John and Kayla hired over a hundred people to lure me to a giant warehouse all to murder me. Yes, I thought, that was definitely it, I was walking to my death. When we got there I realized my fear was completely ridiculous, as a party in full force raged around us.

The warehouse was transformed into a vampire club. The place was dark, but subtly lit by purple lights. House music was loud enough to dance to but not so loud that you couldn't hear anybody. To the right was a giant stripper pole, which would later house the performers, and to the left were couches and small tables to sit around, while straight ahead was the bar. Of course alcohol was still off limits to us at that point in our relationship so I steered clear of it all night. Kayla took me around to see the other rooms. One was reserved for taking pictures, which I would definitely not be doing, and the other was a large sex room. About ten beds were lined up next to each other, each divided by nothing more than a sheer gauzy curtain. There was a sex swing being used by an attractive man and a surprisingly older woman, and next to that there was an actual coffin. Besides the sex swing, the room wasn't being used yet.

“I’m surprised there aren’t more people in here,” I said in a low voice to Kayla. I didn’t know the proper etiquette one was supposed to abide by while standing next to a fornicating couple.

“The party just got started, this place will be filled within an hour.” Kayla barely seemed to notice the couple next to us. Because no one had used the coffin yet Kayla and I decided to take a picture together, very G-rated stuff. I’m not stupid enough to capture any of my proclivities on camera. No matter how much Eric has begged over the years. We put our arms around each other and smiled, if it weren’t for our low-cut costumes it could be a picture to put on the refrigerator.

We went back into the main party room to find John. We found him talking to a couple and made our way over. The woman was young and attractive; her costume left little to the imagination. She was dressed as a cat, with a full mesh body suit and nothing underneath.

“She just had her breasts done,” Kayla whispered to me, “that’s why they stand up so perfectly.” They did indeed stand up perfectly.

After John introduced me to the woman—whose name has long since slipped my mind let’s just call her Lisa—she got back to her story.

“So the babysitter rang the doorbell and I was like ‘Shit! I can’t go to the door dressed like this!’—

“Wait,” I said cutting in, “you have kids?” I was in shock. I hadn’t thought about the possibility of parents being swingers before, stupid I know.

“Yeah, two of them,” she said smiling, “Anyway, thankfully I have a long bathrobe that I slipped over my costume, and when we left I switched to a full length

coat. It's so cold outside I could easily get away with it!" We all laughed. I began to wonder what it would be like to be her children when they grow up. What if they found out their parents are swingers? What if they ran into each other at the same party? Talk about an awkward meeting. I thought about all the people I knew and whether or not they could be swingers. But that seemed like a dangerous road to go down so I immediately stopped.

Kayla and John introduced me to a few more couples, each were just as nice as the next, which helped to loosen me up. Several performers came out to strut their talent. The main act was a beautiful black woman in her twenties who pole danced for a good 20 minutes. She was the best dancer I have ever seen despite the many ballets I have attended over the years. She climbed the pole like it was nothing, and the way she swung her body around made it seem as if she was floating underwater.

Something in the dancer's moves must have flipped an internal switch because I suddenly found myself asking if Kayla and John wanted to go to the back room just to look. "I mean how often do you get to see tons of people having sex in person?" I asked laughing.

They led me to the back room and sure enough all of the beds were full of couples having sex, some had several people on them at once. I walked through the room in a trance; it didn't seem real. It was so animalistic it was hard for me to see these creatures as human. Every person had a long past of school, family, hobbies, and friends. All were complex and yet here they were simple and one dimensional. It was a strange dichotomy. I had never seen other people having sex so freely in the open like that before. I mean sure, I'd watched porn, but this was different. This was a live show. This was people

going at it, fully aware they were being watched and getting off on it. That's when I saw the girl who was wrapped in the cape waiting for the bus. I now knew what she was hiding underneath it, a very large strap-on dildo that she was using on her boyfriend. The strangest part about it was how normal that seemed in the environment.

We had walked the length of the room and were headed back to the dance floor for some more PG fun. Even though I wanted to see what it was all about I knew I was not and never would be a swinger. I had a good enough time at that party but I never thirsted for the lifestyle as some do. We danced for what seemed like hours and eventually it was time to go. We got back to their apartment and took off our costumes.

Kayla, John, and I didn't have sex that night; instead we fell asleep side-by-side. I convinced myself that this gesture meant I had been let in on their covenant. I thought that was the moment I was unofficially let into their marriage. Their hearts had opened for me. That wasn't the case. I dated Kayla and John for nearly two years. In that time I fell deeply and stupidly in love with both of them. They loved me too, but not like I loved them. It all gets very messy and I'm not one to dwell on those particulars. Let's just say they moved away and I wasn't invited. I haven't seen them since they left D.C. over 15 years ago.

I met Eric when I was on the rebound. That should tell you everything you need to know right there. I would say more but my dearest husband is drunk and at my door. I must deal with him before there is a scene. I don't know when the divorce will happen but I do know this marriage cannot last. I was in love once, it just wasn't with him.

Guillotine

October 11, 2014

There was nothing special about the night of the accident. The air was thick and hot as it usually is, the sun had burned brightly all day as it usually does, and the roads were empty as they always are at that time of night. I wasn't supposed to be driving. I told mom I was too tired. I told her I hadn't had enough sleep the night before. I told her it wasn't my job to be grandma's chauffeur just because she decided ten years ago she would no longer drive. Don't get me wrong. There are tons of old people in South Florida who shouldn't drive, but that wasn't my grandma's issue. She was perfectly capable of getting behind the wheel, but about a decade ago had decided that she should be taken care of. So she gave up menial tasks such as going to the grocery store or stopping by the ATM. Apparently 64 is the age where you no longer have to do these things. 64 is the age where your children, and grandchildren, start picking up the slack.

At 64 the inner workings of Dr. Guillotin's mind were still churning and sparking with excited activity; ready to change society for the better.

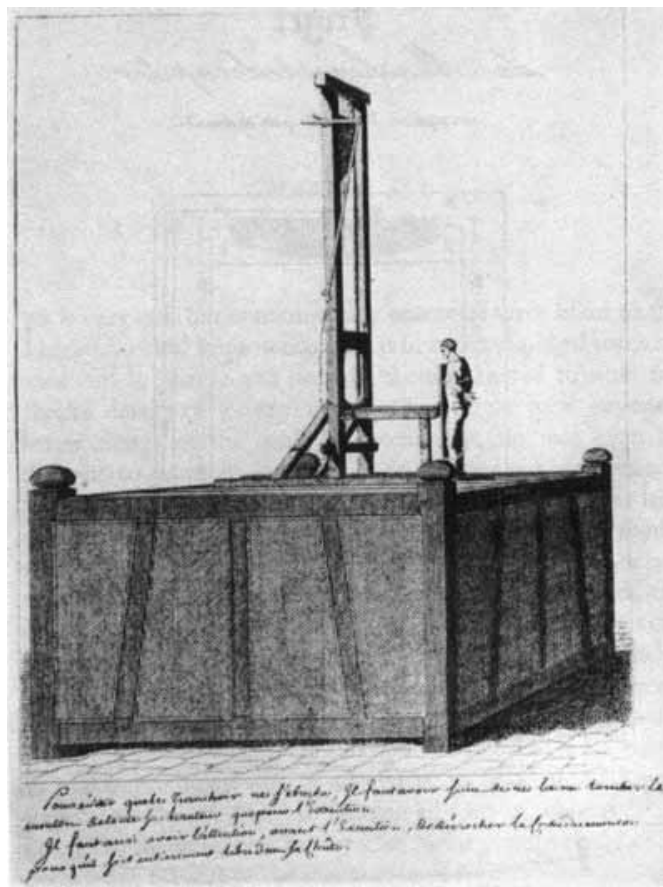
Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin had an uneventful career until he was 50. Yes

he was a physician, but he had no involvement in politics until later in his life.

- Born May 28, 1738 (Arasse, 8)
- Famous myth about his birth: Madame Guillotin, out walking in Saintes, was startled by the screams of a man being broken on the wheel. The shock is said to have hastened Joseph Ignace's birth, and the "executioner was thus his midwife"
- Was at a ministry from 1756-63, left to study medicine
- Was awarded his Doctorate in Paris in 1770.

October 12, 2014

Why didn't I insist on having grandma sleep over that night? Why didn't I offer up my bed as a guest room and take the couch? Why would mom allow her 17-year-old tired daughter drive across town at midnight on a Friday? Why did I have to take the highway? How many times do I have to ask myself these questions before I get an answer? Maybe if I write enough it will come to me.



Most people don't know that the guillotine was named after the doctor who created it. Though it isn't quite fair to say he invented the idea by himself as some form of the guillotine had been in existence in Italy for quite some time. (find quote later) No, it's not the machine itself that is Dr. Guillotin's greatest contribution but his insistence of

equality within the process of execution. Before the guillotine became the primary mode of execution in France those who were put to death could be killed in a number of ways by the state. Some of these were:

- Burned at the stake
- Drawn and quartered
- Hanged
- Decapitation (But only for the high born)

Decapitation afforded dignity and a quick death. The way in which a criminal died depended upon the crime committed and the social class of the convict. Those who committed treason were by far given the worst sentences:

- In 1521 Edward, Duke of Buckingham, was sentenced to be drawn, hanged, cut down while he was still alive, castrated, then made to watch as they burned his parts before finally having his head cut off. (Abbott 21)
- In 1323 Sir Andrew de Harcla, Earl of Carlisle, had his sword broken over his head, was drawn to the place of execution and hanged. His heart (“from whence came his treacherous thoughts”) and bowels were then cut from his body and burnt. (22)

Dr. Miller is looking at me right now. There’s something satisfying about having a secret all to myself. I can write anything I want about her and she would never know. She keeps asking me to tell her about the accident. Her asking just makes me not want to tell her. Is that petty? I don’t really care if it is.

I have nightmares about the accident almost every night; even with the new medication they give me here. They always come. It’s not the same exact dream every

night of course. It's not a videotape that can be replayed over and over again. Certain qualities change. Last night instead of driving my grandmother home I dreamt it was Dr. Guillotin himself sitting in the passenger seat. We were discussing the merits of having the machine on a platform making it easier for everyone in the crowd to see not just those few in the front.

“What I don't understand is why you wouldn't want everyone to see your invention. Don't you think it would scare potential criminals from committing any crimes?” I knew I was with Dr. Guillotin even though I kept my eyes on the road. I could feel him next to me.

“No. I am entirely against public spectacle. Executions should be a private affair. Not like they are now with everyone screaming for blood. Just the other day I saw an executioner lift up the severed head of a lord and slap it at the behest of the crowd. Absolutely despicable. And the government condones this!”

I looked over at him for the first time. His hands were raised in exasperation and he was staring at me waiting for me to show outrage. Though he was dressed in 18th century attire I was not, and the fact that we were in a car did not seem to bother him. When I've dreamt of him before he always talks of his France as if it was occurring in the present, and last night was no exception. But when I'm dreaming this all seems normal so I never question him.

“But don't you think it can be a healthy outlet for the poor to see the rich lords succumb to justice?” I asked him. I no longer cared about looking at the road.

“I think that people have too much of a blood lust for their own good.”

But before Dr. Guillotin could finish his thought we crashed. A metallic taste filled my mouth and then I woke up. These nightmares always end like that.

Before the guillotine was used the executioner's sword was engraved with some sort of motto that he worked and lived by. Example:

- “Whenever I raise the sword, I wish the sinner everlasting life” (I wonder if the executioner actually did)
- Must find more examples

October 14, 2014

Grandma is still here in the hospital. She's in another wing of course; one where they don't guard the doors or confiscate your shoelaces upon entry. I don't want to see her. They tried to set up a visit yesterday but I refused to come out of my room. I can't bare to see what I've done.

Dr. Guillotin was once a professor of literature for a few years at the College of Bordeaux. Talk about a Renaissance man. Mom has stopped asking me about the notebook. She probably knows this has something to do with my history books. I used to think Dr. Guillotin was a bit of a prima donna for naming his invention after himself, but apparently that's not how it happened. The machine wasn't meant to be his greatest achievement. The machine isn't what he wanted to be remembered for. His greatest achievement would have been to abolish the death penalty completely. But at least the guillotine would make the process pain free. The public named the device for him. Back then he was seen as a joke, a laughingstock. When he first introduced his idea for a machine to be used for every execution almost no one was on board. It took many years of him making speeches before he was taken seriously, and by then the name “guillotine”

had stuck. (more facts on this later) So the man who was against the death penalty shall forever be associated with the ultimate symbol of capital punishment. Isn't that a bitch.

- The term itself—the guillotine—was only gradually made official after a royalist periodical first jokingly suggested it almost as soon as busy little Dr. Guillotin got up to urge on the States-General the advantages of a simple head-chopping mechanism. (23)
- Other names: the People's Avenger, The National Razor, the Patriotic Shortener
Dr. Guillotin took it in stride though. He still fought for the end of the death sentence and thought his machine made for a painless way to die. How was he supposed to know that people still felt pain for several seconds after the decapitation process?
- The use of sword or axe rendered the headsman's attentions personal, and unforeseen consequences could and did arise. The guillotine, by contrast, made simple use of the basic laws of mechanics. Applied mechanics, by eliminating all human contact in the course of the execution, spared the executioner his guilt of blood; but the human body was none the less mutilated in a highly symbolic fashion, and the condemned man deprived of his last moral and physical confrontation with his fellow man. (102)

So the guillotine made the process of execution less personal. But what's more personal than taking a life? I wonder what Dr. Guillotin would think of this.

- The guillotine itself is not monstrous, but becomes so relative to the society it served (58)

I doubt the convict would feel this way. Walking towards his death. Feeling the weight of each step as the blade drips with the blood of those who came before. That seems pretty monstrous to me.

October 15, 2014

I found this picture of Dr. Guillotin in one of my books. He doesn't look like I pictured him. There is a kindness in his eyes I never thought about before. I always thought he was a good man, but I figured he was calculating and scientific.



- Between 1776 and 1789 Guillotin rejected any attempt to extract profit from torture, confining himself to a single goal, that of replacing death by torture with a humanitarian device, the guillotine. (62)

In my dreams Dr. Guillotin's manner of dress is much more flamboyant. His clothes are brightly colored, his wig is large and curly, and his scarf is always puffed up. I don't know why I always pictured him in this way. I think I just assumed all Frenchman during the 18th century dressed like that.

Before the accident I used to care about what I wore. Now I just wear the nightgowns the hospital provides. No one else here does though. A girl name Carla complained about it today in group.

"I find it odd that Kelsey doesn't wear any of the clothes her mom brings for her," she said not daring to look in my direction. I don't like Carla. She's always talking about other people in group even though we're not supposed to.

"How do you know what her mother brings her?" Dillan asked. He's alright. He's the only one who hasn't asked me what I'm writing about.

"Because I've seen her. Every time she visits she brings her fresh clothes, but she still wears the hospital gown. It's weird."

"Let's focus on how you are feeling today Carla instead of what other people are wearing." Dr. Miller finally stepped in. I don't understand why it takes her so long to break up these arguments in group. It's one of the reasons why I never talk during these sessions. I guess that's unusual here. Most people can't stop talking about themselves. They would go on for hours if Dr. Miller didn't step in to cut them off.

I'm not allowed to bring my notebook to group. It's one of the many rules here. My hands feel empty without you and I find myself fidgeting the entire hour until I can run back to my room and get you from under my mattress. I keep you there so no one will find you. Everyone around here is a snoop. I don't trust any of them. Not even Dillan.

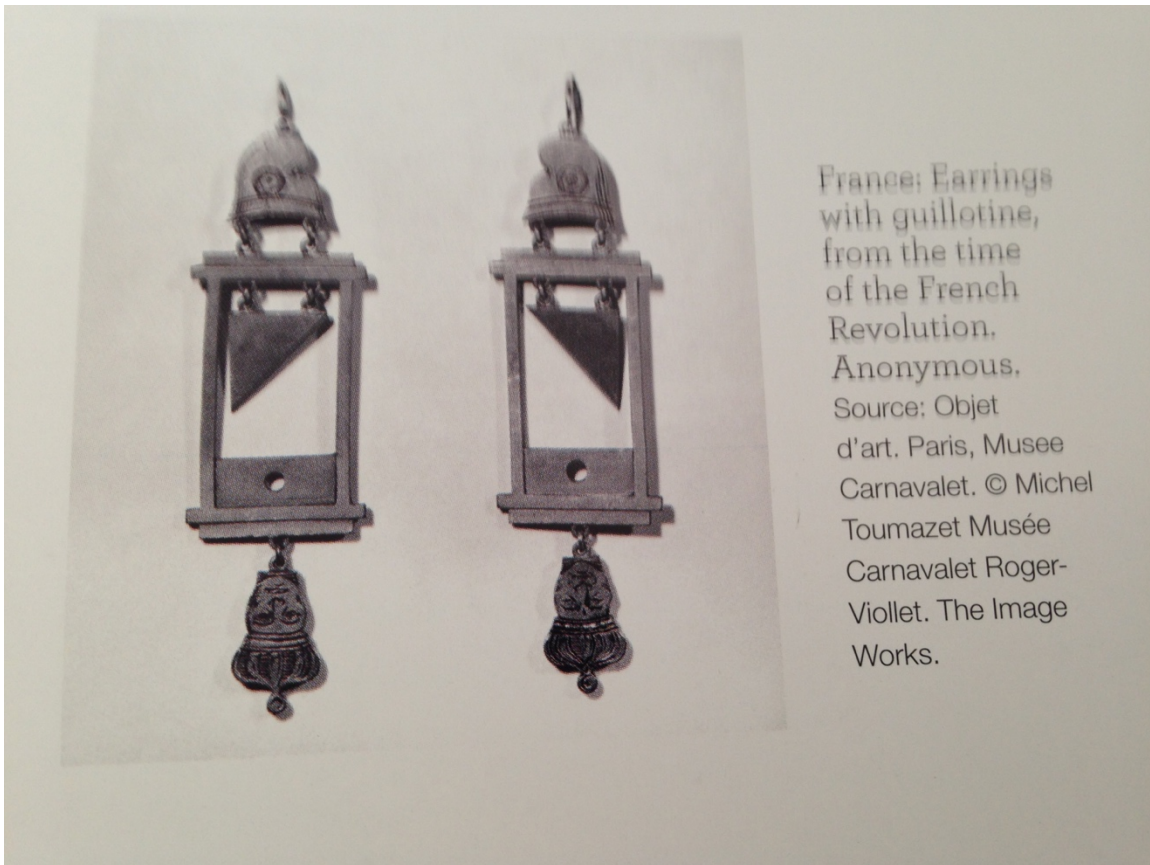
- In September of 1794, the Conseil general of Arras discovered that the infants of the district were diverting themselves by lopping off the heads of mice and birds with the aid of little guillotines two feet high.

I don't find it strange that young children can have such a bloodlust. Group has shown this to be true. People love to tear each other down.



October 16, 2014

During the revolution the guillotine was extremely fashionable. It wasn't just children playing with miniature toys, but most houses featured a small working model in their drawing rooms. Women wore guillotine jewelry. Executions were a daily occurrence.



- The guillotine: it was more, much more than a toy; it was the symbol of a religion (56)

Religions have always been bloody. I guess most things that have a large amount of passion are. The accident was pretty bloody. I tried to keep my clothes from that night but they wouldn't let me.

“Why would you want to keep them? They're covered in dried blood, it's a hazard,” my mom said when I asked for them.

“It’s my blood. It’s part of me. How can it be a hazard?” I said.

“You are acting insane.” This was before they in fact classified me as insane.

Well, I’m exaggerating. I don’t think they actually classify anyone as “insane” anymore.

The point is mom would never throw around a word like that now. It would be too close to the truth.

The toy guillotines were eventually confiscated as well.

- Robespierre had just fallen and ferocity was no longer fashionable; the Conseil general of Arras ordered the police to seize the playthings which ‘although only intended as an amusement might imbue (the children) with notions of death and hence extinguish all humanitarian feeling.

Was mom worried about my humanitarian feeling? Did she think that touching some bloody clothes would turn me into a bloodthirsty monster? One who roams the streets searching to cause accidents and create destruction?

- The Bill that legalized the use of the guillotine not only approved its use but it abolished the confiscation of goods (from the dead) and secured the rights of the family over the body. The rights of the condemned man and his family were thus, for the first time, acknowledged. (68)

These condemned people must have been bloody. Their belongings were probably soaked in the warm organic material. But their belongings were saved. When did everyone become so afraid of the natural?

October 17, 2014

Dr. Miller asked to take a look at what I'm writing in here today. I told her I couldn't allow that.

"Does what your writing have to do with the history books you always have with you?" She asked writing something down on her yellow legal pad.

"Does that make a difference?" I asked holding on to you even tighter.

"I'm just curious as to what's going on in that brain of yours. You never talk in group, why is that?" Dr. Miller is around mom's age, though unlike mom she doesn't seem afraid of me. She has a kindness to her much like Dr. Guillotin's picture. It's in her eyes too.

"I don't like group." I wanted to give her some sort of answer. I began tapping my fingers on your cover anxious to get back to you.

"Why is that?"

"I don't need to talk about myself like everyone else. I don't care about them or their problems."

"Group is meant to be a safe place to connect to others going through a similar situation. You may find that you feel better once you open up."

"I doubt any of them would understand me."

"Not like your notebook does?" She asked pointing to you.

"Not like Dr. Guillotin does."

At that point one of the new patients started causing a commotion in the hallway. I watched as a nurse readied a needle with some sort of medication meant to put her to sleep while two others did their best to hold her down. She was screaming something

about her children and how they are all out to get her. I couldn't quite make it out. I was just relieved I could get back to you.