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BAD ROMANCE: STORIES AND ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

Bad Romance is a creative collection of short stories and essays that detail, in so many words, our closest relationships. Most often these are between men and women, but they are not restricted to that. The collection examines these ties between people, twists them, stretches them to their breaking point, then tests them for survival rates. What we have as a result is relationships in various states of abuse: some shattered upon the ground, some elastic and resilient.

On a craft level, *Bad Romance* examines the stark similarities between fiction and nonfiction. What differences exist in form, character, plot arc, and emotion between these two genres? Perhaps more importantly, if these differences exist, do they matter? Or does the purpose of storytelling pervade both genres and make their differences inconsequential?

Bad Romance attempts to answer these questions, but at the same time, it aims to tell a good story. That, always, has been the end goal.

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To my fellow BAMAs: It's been one hell of a year. Best wishes, and "Roll Tide."

Chapter 1

The Thin Men of Haddam

He was a guy who would know about meth. He had probably fucked more than a few women in his 22 years, mostly college girlfriends and hookups, but there would be that cougar he'd screwed all last summer at the country club where he worked. He could probably get away with wearing his clothes from the night before, unshaved and unshowered, and it didn't make a difference in their Friday lab. He was all these things in her mind, and she loved him. She knew all this from his profile picture (of him doing a keg stand, which she'd found while Facebook stalking him), his appearance, and his casual mention on the first day of lab that he was actually a classics major and took physical organic chemistry because he enjoyed it. She couldn't imagine enjoying anything about it. He was the type of person who could—not definitely, but the potential was there—love her even though she was too skinny.

His name was Kevin, and whenever she thought about him, an irrelevant song from childhood popped into her head: *Kevin. Kevin. You make my bread leaven.* Silly songs aside, he was both a terrible and wonderful person to sit next to in lab. His hair always held that indelible deep, cheap, but still charming smell of store-brand cologne, but he was always telling the girl on his other side about his weekend and asking her out for drinks in half-comic tones. Sometimes he came to her while she was making love with Rupert, his face sweaty and grizzly and flushed as soon as she closed her eyes.

They rarely talked, although they always exchanged pleasantries before class.

Once she decided to test her theories of his life on him. “Our TA—Beth—is really pretty,” she said while helping him set up an experiment. The girl was even thinner than she was.

Kevin’s eyes focused on his test tube, not even looking up. “She’s nice, I guess,” he said, “but her milkshake most certainly does not bring all the boys to the yard.”

That did it. Joanna knew he could never love her. The problem was, she had stopped caring.

* * *

Joanna and Rupert were supposed to go on a date that night, dinner at Joe’s and swing dancing after, but when it got to eight o’clock she decided to call. “I got caught up in the studio,” Rupert said, sounding flushed. “Something hit me as I was getting dressed.” Rupert’s hook for Harvard—besides the obvious legacy link--had been simple: he had written and recorded a best-selling children’s album at age 16. Since then there had been three more albums, a statue in his hometown in Tennessee, and Joanna.

Joanna sighed. “What is it this time?”

“For my new album,” he said. “*Happiness is a Warm Gun* into *Happiness is a Warm Hug*. What do you think?” Rupert’s latest project was turning songs with mature subject matter into children’s songs. So far he had *Smells Like Warm Cookies* (at least, Joanna thought, Cobain would probably approve of his classic going acoustic), *Sympathy for the Daredevil*, and *Why Don’t We Giggle in the Road?*.

It didn’t matter what Joanna thought. “Sounds fantastic,” she said. “So I guess we’ll move our date to a later night?”

“I’m so sorry, *mon pomme*. I’ll make it up to you.”

After she hung up the phone, Joanna went out walking in the warm September streets. She was still dressed to go dancing, but she didn't get a second look. Couples were out by the dozens that night, holding hands, listening to live music in the park, flushed with the last days of summer. The heavy, attractive girls made Joanna tense and melancholy. She wondered if Kevin was strolling right now, caressing the flab of some girl in a summer dress. No, he was at some party, and the girl would be wearing a black sequined top instead of the summer dress, but she would still be there with him. Thinking about this, drawing out every detail in her mind, Joanna walked all the way to the Common and looked at the swan boats, chained together on the dock, held captive after their summer of freedom.

* * *

The best thing about Kevin was that he had a band. It fit perfectly, because he was the type of person who was a semi-serious musician. Joanna knew, when Kevin mentioned his weekend gig on Monday morning to the girl on his other side, that this was not an angsty band or half-hearted attempt to get laid. Kevin was serious about his music. When the girl next to him asked what kind of music he played—Joanna never did learn the girl's name—Kevin said, "It's a sort of ska-punk fusion," and Joanna's heart soared. She knew, without knowing that she knew, that she would go to the next show, wherever it was. She didn't catch the name, but when she got home from her classes and back on Facebook, it only took her two and a half minutes to find their page. The band's name was The Thin Men of Haddam, and they played a fairly regular schedule in the city and Cambridge, as well as surrounding areas. Their next gig was in two weeks, in a bar in Back Bay. Joanna was writing down the address when she remembered to check what

instrument he played. But of course, she already knew, it was perfect—bass and back-up vocals.

* * *

The bar was dark and sticky and crowded. Joanna would normally prefer a rooftop place with natural light and a decent mojito, but Kevin was not the mojito type. She settled back on a padded stool as yellow foam fell out of the cracks. The Thin Men of Haddam didn't play for another 45 minutes, but she thought she might have a few drinks and watch Kevin setting up.

In fact, a stunted little man with a beard did most of the mic checks and setup, and Kevin was almost late. A tall man with thin fingers that must have been the lead vocalist, Chad, was introducing them when Kevin walked in. Kevin mouthed, "Shit," and then, "Sorry," to his band mates when he saw the setup. They waved him in without a word, and he took the mic himself. "We are—The Thin Men of Haddam!"

They played one song after another, the sweat building on their flushed faces. Other people ordered more drinks, danced, screamed with laughter, or ignored the band completely. Joanna sat alone on the stool. She could never tell if music was good or bad, especially not in small, crowded spaces, but the energy was wonderful. She had thought about bringing Rupert, perhaps to make herself feel less guilty, but then realized she didn't feel guilty at all. Anyway, Rupert was caught up in *Don't Go Breaking My Toys* tonight.

The Thin Men of Haddam finished their set, ordered pitchers of dark beer, played a sloppier second set, then packed up. It was 1:30, and the bar was clearing out. Fat, foxy, flushed people had come and gone. One of these women played drums for the group, her

shiny brown hair falling in her face as she tapped the cymbals. Kevin hadn't noticed her, Joanna, but then, who did? Rupert did, their freshman year, when their friend Tatiana introduced them over cheap, boozy drinks at a house party. "But I'm not fat," Joanna had whispered when they were about to have sex for the first time. Rupert was quiet, and then he said, "It doesn't matter. You're lovely to me." Even now, when she asked him if she was ugly, his response was always, "I don't mind." It was so fucking *nice* of him.

The bartender made a last call for alcohol, and Joanna turned toward him. "Yes?" he said.

"I don't want another drink, but is the kitchen closed?"

"Kitchen is closed, miss, but there's a few fast food joints right up the street." Up and out—he pointed.

Joanna left the bar and walked half a block to the crowded McDonald's. She made herself a McGangBang—a McChicken surrounded by two cheeseburgers—and washed it down with a Coke and a few handfuls of cold French fries. She wasn't hungry. The sandwich was disgusting. She felt a headache coming on. She knew the food wouldn't make a difference.

* * *

At the Harvard clinic, Joanna discovered she had lost two pounds. "One-twenty-seven," said the nurse, writing the numbers on her chart. "You've gone down since the last time you were here." There was a contemptuous note in the nurse's voice, though of course she couldn't say anything.

Dr. Matthes extended his hand as he walked into the check-up room. "Joanna, nice to see you again," he said. "How's the research coming?"

“It’s coming,” she said, and he laughed as he washed his hands. He examined her ears and wrote up a prescription after determining that she did indeed have an infection. As he signed his scribble of a name, Joanna said, “I’m also concerned with my weight, although that’s not what I came in for.”

“What’s wrong with it?” he asked, looking at her. He checked her chart. “That’s a healthy weight for a woman of your height. Did you have dietary concerns?”

“No, I just—I want to be heavier.” The words were strange and clumsy in her mouth.

The doctor sighed. “I wish I could talk people out of the latest trends. Thing is, you’re taking great care of your body. You’re going to get sick less and live longer because you’re thin. Go to the gym?”

“I used to, but I stopped.”

“Eating well?”

“Whenever I eat junk food, I get a horrible headache.”

“That’s your body telling you that you’re doing the right thing,” he said. He gave her arm an encouraging squeeze.

“But they don’t sell clothes in my size anymore,” she said, close to tears. “I have to go to a special store. I’m so ugly.” The doctor handed her a tissue, his eyes full of pity. She could tell he wanted to hug her, but the political incorrectness of the move forbid it, so he settled for an awkward arm pat.

“Listen,” he said. “I’ll be honest with you. This fad will take a while to die. In fact, it might never.”

Joanna doubted it ever would die, and though she realized part of this was the

histrionic hopelessness and pessimism of a stressed 22 year old student, the other part was that it would take everyone months, years even, to lose the country's collective poundage. Better just to keep things the way they were.

“But, Joanna, you're doing the right thing. What they're doing, it's as bad for you as tanning.”

She thought of the charts flashing across TV screens showing people the rise in obesity and diabetes and cancer, reminding them it was healthy to be thin and pale. The fad hadn't jump started at a specific time. As the numbers on the charts rose, companies started tailoring their fashions to fit the masses, and then the movie stars jumped on the bandwagon, until one day Joanna looked around while walking around campus and noticed that almost everyone was overweight, and moreover, most of the overweight people were attractive. The last part was the most devastating; it sealed the deal.

“And you know, lots of men prefer girls that are thin. You have a boyfriend?”

She nodded, and the doctor seemed relieved.

“There you go,” he said. “Your boyfriend is one of those guys who knows appearance doesn't matter. It's all about how lovely you are on the *inside*.” He motioned to his chest.

Joanna wondered if Dr. Matthes had been a pediatrician before he worked at the clinic, and if so, why he had decided to switch. She sniffed.

Dr. Matthes took out a brown, beaten-up wallet of faux leather. “I'm giving you my card,” he said. “Call my office if you ever need a referral, or if you're having more issues. I'm sure we can get you some help.” He smiled, and Joanna noticed the wedding picture in its plastic sleeve. Dr. Matthes, balding, sheepish. His wife, bosomy in an ugly

lace gown with sleeves, sagging out of her dress as she threw her arms around his swollen neck. Joanna thanked the doctor, paid, and left the office. Two blocks away, she tore the card into four uneven pieces. Into the gutter they went, and she was off to Mad Harry's for happy hour. Today was Jalapeño Thursday: sixteen jalapeño poppers for a dollar.

* * *

The Thin Men of Haddam played that Saturday night in a better-known bar in Cambridge, and then two weeks after that at a club on Lansdowne Street. She went to both performances, alone, dressing discreetly in dark, baggy shirts and pants. The weekend performances became a routine, and Joanna found herself looking forward to the weekend, a time she normally dreaded for its spacious hours. Even when Kevin casually told the girl on his other side that she had missed out on some action, because he had started fucking his band's drummer for kicks, Joanna still planned to go to the next show, even though a spike of heat flashed through her. At least she had been right about the type of person he was.

Once Rupert had taken the night off and insisted on coming with her, and that was the worst time of all. He paid for her cover and all of her drinks, and he danced and rocked his head to the music, his hipster glasses askew. He even dragged Joanna out onto the dance floor, where she was afraid Kevin would see her. But he was oblivious, and Rupert was oblivious. Joanna felt like she was trying to walk through a field without stepping on a land mine. At the end of the night, Rupert told her he had had a thoroughly enjoyable time, and he spent the night at her apartment, and they went out for French toast the next morning, where he urged her to take extra syrup and butter. "It's real butter,

Jo,” he said. “You don’t get much better than that.”

Joanna thought of the time she had visited his hometown in Tennessee. It had been small, a suburb of Chattanooga, and all the houses had had swimming pools. Everyone at the country club, where they had taken some of their meals, knew Rupert, and Rupert puffed himself up with fake, pompous modesty, showy in itself, as he discussed his latest project. The second morning Rupert’s mother had taken Joanna to the town square to show her the statue of Rupert the town had erected in his honor. Joanna gazed at the rotund figure and puffy face—the same face that he had worn for the past few days—and wondered if he had always been this way before Harvard and her.

Kevin wasn’t fat, not fashionably, but he had a beer paunch that showed he was trying. He was like that jovial loser friend that everyone has—they pity him, but in the end, they let him into the party because he’s deeply cool. This was the way Joanna thought of it, anyway, when she sat in dank bars and clubs where sweat dripped from the walls and even a few decent pubs and watched *The Thin Men of Haddam* play. She was surprised by the amount of material they performed—some tributes, true, but a lot of original songs about a lot of different girls. She wondered who wrote the music and lyrics, although she still couldn’t tell if they were good.

Once she thought he saw her. It was 12:45, she was stuffed with food and alcohol, and for once the vibrancy of the crowd was infectious enough that she had made her way onto the dance floor. The last song ended, and Joanna stopped waving her arms and grinding up on strangers. The other band members left the stage, but Kevin grabbed the mic. “Thank you—you’ve been a great—“ he started to say. He stopped, and she looked up at him. He was gazing in a funny way at her corner of the floor, his face flushed. She

felt her heat rising, but just as she was about to move, he called out, “Hey, this guy over here just passed out!” As the bouncers moved toward her, she noticed that the man who had been dancing behind her was on the floor, breaking out in a cold sweat.

Joanna silently moved away and didn’t stop walking at a calm, deliberate, smooth pace until she was back at her apartment. She threw her saggy, blue, horizontally-stripped top on the bed and stood in front of her full-length mirror in her underwear, tracing the curve of her waist with her fingers. She thought she had never looked more flushed and beautiful.

* * *

That Monday in lab, Kevin was jocular as usual, telling his lady friend about the commotion at the bar. “I was telling our drummer all about it,” he said as he opened his notebook. “I mean, after we fucked in the bathroom.”

“Do you have the magnesium?” Joanna asked him. They were working together as partners, designing their own experiment on reaction kinetics.

“Of course,” he said, turning toward her. When the time came for chemistry, he was all business. He honestly seemed to enjoy jotting down figures.

They had been working for more than a minute in silence when Joanna asked, “Is she pretty?”

“Who?”

“Your drummer.” Of course she was pretty. She was gorgeous, with her luxurious layers of tanned skin, her thin brown hair resting on her rounded shoulders.

“Eh.” He shrugged. “She’s not bad.”

“Do you think anyone’s attractive?”

“I think lots of people are attractive. I think there are degrees of attractiveness, just like there are degrees of love.”

She glanced at him—how feminine—but he looked completely serious.

“You, for instance,” he said. “You’re not too bad-looking.”

Her face flushed and she felt nauseous. “Thank you.”

“I mean, you’re not ‘the thing’ right now—“ here he used air quotes—“and I’m not saying I’m not a follower, but I think certain people can be drawn together, even for a short period of time, no matter how much they suck together. A month, a day, an hour. Who knows? It’s how long you’re willing to suspend reality to be with the one thing about that person that makes your blood rush.”

Joanna couldn’t stop looking at him.

“I mean, if you think I’m saying you should look for the beauty inside, or whatever that shit is, I’m not. I don’t believe in that. But I do think you should not question attraction. Take it for what it is, enjoy it, and don’t try to get it back when it ends.”

They were both quiet again, eyeing the meniscus in the test tube he held through their goggles, and then Joanna stood straight up. “I’m going to get a soda. Do you want anything?”

He stood, too, and looked at her. “I think I’m good,” he said, “but thanks for the offer.”

* * *

The Thin Men of Haddam gave another concert two Saturdays later, this one in Cambridge, and Joanna lived close enough that she could walk. The venue was a popular

student club, cleaner and more well lit than other places the band had played at. There was a strange electricity about the night, and Joanna sensed that something would happen even before the band set up. She took her usual position beside the bar, but even before the band had finished playing their first set, she knew he had seen her from the front of the large room. They announced they would take a longer break before playing again. The latest Top 40 hit blared as someone near Joanna turned on a strobe light. The light made the electricity and the inevitable meeting seem cinematic and unreal. She would not be surprised if she suddenly awoke from a dream or a drug trip (not that Joanna had ever tried anything that could make her trip).

He was making his way back to her, in front of all his band mates, with that easy smile, and the strobe light made it inescapable; they were both smiling now. She stood as he approached. He lightly grabbed her shoulder and kissed her on both cheeks. "I knew it was you," he said. He turned toward the bartender. "A scotch, neat." Back to Joanna: "That's not usually what I get, but I decided it was time for something new."

He seemed like he would never stop smiling. She knew she never would. They smiled and gazed at each other and looked like idiots, Joanna was sure. Kevin got his drink and downed half of it in one go. "Want to dance?"

They were awkward at first, dancing apart from each other, but soon her twiglike arms were wrapped around his neck and they were swaying together in a rhythmic hum. Joanna glanced at his band mates, who were sitting at the bar drinking their usual pitcher of beer. She was afraid the drummer would be jealous, but the girl looked genial, even relaxed. The musicians talked among themselves and looked over at Kevin every so often. When the drummer saw Joanna looking, she waved. Joanna waited a moment, then

waved back.

They moved from fast to slow to fast again with an unrehearsed smoothness. Occasionally they chatted, but most of the time they said nothing, each concentrated on the other. Finally the bearded band member tapped Kevin on the back. “Hey man, hate to break this up, but we’ve got to play our second set.”

“I’ll be right up,” said Kevin. The casual way he had focused his attention on the bearded man, turning toward him while keeping his hands on Joanna’s waist, thrilled her. The bearded man shrugged and headed back to the stage. Kevin faced Joanna again. “Are you sticking around? Why am I asking that, you always stick around. Want to come back to my place after we’re done?”

Joanna was too surprised to ask. “Okay,” she said.

By the time the last set ended and the band had packed up, the club was clearing out. “Let’s get going,” said Kevin. “The guys will load my stuff.” He waved them goodbye and caught her hand to avoid losing her in the crowd.

Once out on the street, they didn’t talk until they were out of the throng. “That was such a great gig,” he said.

“You had a nice crowd,” she replied. She was quiet for a moment, then said, “So how long have you known.”

He didn’t look at her, and she knew the answer before he spoke; she’d known the answer back in the club. “The whole time.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I figured if you wanted to tell me, you would.” He squared his chin and looked at her—with her heels, they were almost the same height. He smiled, and she smiled too.

They talked about the songs and the club. “I’ve wanted to know,” said Joanna, “who writes your music.”

“Alex writes the actual music, and I do most of the lyrics, although Mark writes some now and again.”

“It seems like they’re all about girls.”

He laughed. “You want to know about all of them?” She nodded. He looked down the street. “*Touché* is about Becky,” he said, and Joanna felt something uncoil inside her. “Becky was the biggest cunt I’ve ever dated.”

Joanna didn’t flinch. It came with the territory. “*Petra* is about Petra, obviously,” he continued, “my first love. The Russian foreign exchange student. I was in ninth grade. *Scotch n’ Soda* is about Rachel, and *Bitch* is based on Nadine.”

“What about *Knew It Was You*?”

“Ah, that was Isabel. We were fuck buddies for about a year. But, as is usually the case, she wanted something more.”

Joanna thought of Rupert, still in the studio, finishing up one of his latest rewrites. She wondered how he could reconcile songs with titles like *Fuck Them While They’re Hot* and *Chastity’s A Bitch*. She didn’t care, particularly; the thought was just amusing. She shrugged deeper into her green corduroy jacket and went out of her way to step on a dry leaf.

“Here’s my place,” said Kevin, and she looked up at the brown brick building. He lived closer to her than she thought. She had walked past here a dozen times and not known it was his.

They didn’t say anything, and just when Joanna was sure he would kiss her, she

said, “I have a boyfriend.”

He didn’t loosen his gaze. “I know.”

“And he’s good to me.”

He leaned back and gave a short, agitated laugh. “Well, you’ve come this far,” he said. He touched her saggy shirtsleeve. “You shouldn’t wear these loose clothes anymore,” he said, and his tone was soft and affectionate, something she’d suspected but didn’t know he could be. “They’re good for some people, but not you. You should wear tighter things, more colors.”

“I don’t even know you,” she said, but she leaned in toward him.

She was afraid his eyes were going to shatter her. “You know me well enough,” he said.

* * *

Afterward, in Kevin’s dark bedroom smelling of sweat (and, surprisingly, a faint pine odor), they lay, clammy and naked, staring at the area which might have been an abyss or only a ceiling. She thought Kevin would light a cigarette, which she dreaded and looked forward to in equal parts—that would be a definite signal that it was time to leave, she wouldn’t lay around being awkward—but he just lay next to her, like two parallel lines. “It’s so sad about parallel lines,” she remembered telling her father as he helped her with her third grade math homework. “They’re so similar, but they never meet.”

“Well, think about how much sadder intersecting lines are,” her father replied.

“They meet once and then never come together again.”

Kevin let out a breath, not so much a sigh as a release of tension. He had been rough and open and demanding, yes, but also light and considerate and soft at times. He

had even let her alone for a while, at the end, the way she had always wanted but never knew. The best part—the part that she would remember the longest—had been when he had taken off her too-baggy clothes and touched the pads of his fingers to her small breasts and slim figure. He had breathed, and it was *I love your body*, and she thought she misheard, but he said it again, two more times. She suspected it was because she was so different, a novelty, but she let the words cover her. She shook in gratitude.

When one of them finally spoke, it was Kevin. “I do not know which to prefer, the beauty of inflections or the beauty of innuendos, the blackbird whistling or just after.”

Joanna glanced over, but he was still staring into the abyss. “Did you write that?”

“Wallace Stevens. ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird.’”

“It’s just thirteen different short poems about a crow?”

“But they’re all different,” he said. He rolled over to look at her. “You know—that was good.”

She dared herself to look back at him, but his eyes were softer now, it was easier. She laughed in relief. “I’m still surprised you knew to look for me. I was trying to be so inconspicuous.”

“You were trying to be insignificant,” he corrected her. “Which is a lot harder for someone like you.”

Joanna sighed and sank down. She put on a light, sprightly, flirtatious voice. “So tell me: was I a better fuck than your drummer?”

“Don’t do that,” he said, and he sounded rough, almost angry. She should have shut up, but she had the irresistible desire to push harder.

“But was I?” She was so earnest, she might have added, *pretty please with a*

cherry on top? “Do tell. I want to know *all* the details—all the ones you don’t spill in lab on Monday.”

“There’s a reason I don’t tell them to *you*,” he said, rolling back onto his back. Joanna felt the scales tip against her; damn it, she’d been doing so well. “And maybe there’s a reason I was avoiding you so long at my shows.”

“And that is?”

“You know what? I don’t even fucking know. You’re pushing, Joanna, and you want me to push back because you want some kind of affirmation, some denouncing of your character that I’m not going to give you.”

Joanna was about to retort back, but she couldn’t find anything to say.

“Truth is,” said Kevin, still staring at the ceiling, “I could never write a song about you. Maybe it’s because you’re so hard to pinpoint, maybe it’s because you’re not as badass as most of the girls I fuck, but it’s not because you’re insignificant. If you were, you’d have a song. I’m sorry if that upsets you, but you’ll never be on my set list.”

The scales were still not in her favor, but there was a lightness in the room that hadn’t been there before, and Joanna’s adjusted eyes could now make out the ceiling. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to smile or cry. Joanna turned toward him, and he was looking at her, not smiling, but looking at her like they’d just been pronounced man and wife and the world around them had disappeared. She didn’t need his hand to draw her face to his; she did that all on her own.

* * *

Joanna walked home alone in the dark November night that was almost morning. He had offered to walk her back, with his coarse sweetness, but she only lived three

blocks away, she argued, in one of the safest neighborhoods in Cambridge. There was even a police station between their apartments. He had only let her because he had to be up early for church. Church—another thing that surprised her.

She didn't expect things to be any different in lab on Monday. Probably tomorrow he would hook up with the drummer again and proceed to tell the girl on his other side all about it Monday morning. She didn't care. She didn't know if they had just that early morning, or the rest of the semester, or the rest of their lives, and she didn't care.

Joanna passed three fast food restaurants that were opening for morning egg sandwiches already. She considered stopping in, but she hesitated, and stopped instead at a small bakery, where she got a cup of black coffee to go and a fresh egg bagel in a paper bag. Out on the street again, Joanna sipped the coffee and looked into the grayness that was almost light. A lonely truck rolled by far away, delivering cargo somewhere in the city. In that instant, the last moment of night before the sky flushed the faintest pink of morning and the noise began, nothing was lasting and everything was beautiful.

Chapter 2

My Vice-Presidential Debacle

My status as a bleeding liberal and staunch Democrat was in dire jeopardy in the highly political fall of 2012. In terms of the issues, I stuck thoroughly with the Obama/Biden party line. Socially, I fancy having more rights than a medieval wench. Financially, I figured, the world was shot to hell either way. I had always been an ardent Obama supporter, and Biden never bothered me. No, this recent switch to conservative leanings stemmed from entirely personal reasons. A new vice-presidential candidate who had made a recent rise to stardom was in danger of stealing my vote—and my heart.

I'm talking, of course, about that devilishly handsome darling of the GOP, the congressman hailing from Wisconsin, Paul Ryan. And while you may argue that I lived on a college campus where the pickings are far from slim eight months out of the year, my giddy soul would not be distracted. *I wanted Paul Ryan.*

Congressman Ryan may not have won me over with his stance on abortion, or gun control, or pretty much any other issue he's weighed in on, but do you ever discuss such serious issues on the first date? He's good with his kids. He's still married. He's got a can-do attitude and an ineffable Southern charm (coupled with a periodic accent that simply cannot be authentic). He doesn't seem afraid to roll up his sleeves, and in fact, has done so in multiple photographs. What's not to fall in love with?

It also doesn't help that he's a dead ringer for Colby, a guy I fell in love with in

the summer before the election.

* * *

“Come here.”

Possibly the most romantic two words I’d ever heard in my life. This, said to me after a tumbler of Riesling, my first viewing of *The Prestige*, and a five-hour ongoing conversation about Mad Men, Minecraft, religion, Europe, and loneliness. Somewhere along the way, I was hooked.

Actually, I’d been hooked long before this evening. I first met Colby my freshman year of college. I was in the hospital with my new boyfriend of less than one day, who had contracted appendicitis as he was asking me out. In trooped Appendicitis Boy’s entire a cappella group for a visit, with turned into an awkward meet-and-greet with me, the new girlfriend. The visit didn’t last long—Appendicitis Boy was pretty sick—but the group decided to stop at a Thai restaurant on the way back to campus. One of them—a rather good-looking one—turned to me and said, “Hey, do you want to come?”

This guy is nice, I thought, even as I turned him down. He was clean cut and dressed well and had an honest smile. Somewhere in my subconscious, I knew I had to keep an eye on him.

Sure enough, we bolstered our friendly acquaintance over the next few years. We greeted each other on the street and sat together at a cappella formals, where, while Appendicitis Boy balanced numerous pieces of silverware on one hand and tried to blow out the candle on the table, the two of us held engaging conversations. From time to time, Appendicitis Boy (AB, for short) would pass on tidbits about Colby’s life, mainly about

his terrible luck with women. Once they went away to a competition, and Colby was astonished when AB mentioned that I didn't need him to call and check in, that I trusted him for the entire weekend. "I wish I had someone as nice as her," Colby said. I think I fell just a little bit in love when I heard these words—not as he said them, of course, but secondhand, half-consciously, as AB played video games. How dangerous for AB that he didn't see the star-struck look in my eye.

* * *

The illustrious Congressman Ryan has served Wisconsin's first district in the House of Representatives since 1998, according to the House's website, meaning he has been reelected six times, never receiving less than 57 percent of the vote each time he ran. At 42, he is currently the second-youngest member of the House, yet already has a number of considerable credits to his name. In his time in office, Ryan has sponsored or co-sponsored more than 1,000 bills or amendments. He has sat on several congressional committees and is currently the chairperson of the House Budget Committee. In 2011, he delivered the Republican response to that year's State of the Union address.

The votes and the numbers don't lie: Mr. Ryan is popular, and he gets things done. (Most likely he's popular *because* he gets things done.) But frankly, so have many other leaders--JFK, Martin Luther King, Jr., Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Why was America so in love with this man? Why were we fascinated enough to turn our heads every time he does a photo shoot for GQ or holds a rally in some no-name town?

Because for those of us who were disappointed by Mr. Obama, Paul Davis Ryan *was* the new Obama. His fresh young face and adorable young family promised us the same change we hoped for in a certain Illinois senator more than four years ago. And

while I'm not decrying President Obama's policies, many people are sorely disappointed in what they perceive is a lack of upswing for our future.

In walks Paul Ryan, Mr. Hotshot Tea Party Darling. And boy, is he hip. His musical preferences include Rage Against the Machine and the classic AC/DC. (In the same candidate profile, meanwhile, Joe Biden admits to having a soft spot for *When Irish Eyes are Smiling*.) His Twitter description features the Wisconsin mantra, "Go Pack go!" He counts chili dogs among his favorite foods and isn't afraid to roll up his sleeves and pitch in for charity.

Sometimes too much so. On a campaign stop in Youngstown, Ohio, Ryan, his wife, and three of his children made an unscheduled stop at a soup kitchen between speaking engagements. According to the Washington Post, the visit was unnecessary--lunch had already been served, the place was clean and empty--and Ryan and his family made a great show of scrubbing down perfectly clean pots and pans for a photo opp. "Had they asked for permission, it wouldn't have been granted. ... I certainly wouldn't have let him wash clean pans, and then take a picture," said Brian J. Antal, president of the Mahoning County St. Vincent De Paul Society and spokesman for the charity. He worried that he might lose funding from the charity's benefactors if they suspected the kitchen of harboring and promoting political leanings, regardless of whatever those leanings were.

* * *

I was on my way to Maine to begin my summer job when I stopped to see Colby. How coincidental that Groton, Connecticut was conveniently halfway between my house and Lake Sebago! We'd kept in some sort of vague contact after I broke up with

Appendicitis Boy and during the year I was abroad, but when I mentioned I was driving through his town, he scoffed at my idea of staying in a hotel and invited me to shack up with him instead. Of course, this was exactly what I wanted.

In the days before I drove up, I talked myself down to a state of semi-calm about the whole thing. *Most likely, nothing will happen. If the time is right, you'll tell him how you feel. You're that confident.* My therapist encouraged this meeting. My parents were teasing. I was undaunted by the seven hour drive. I didn't know why I had this drive to see someone I hadn't talked to for more than a year, but it felt right.

I finally pulled into the grey, foggy parking lot in Groton, and we were hugging, but the first five minutes were awkward. There was lot of hurried talking about my drive and what we were doing about dinner. After all, we hadn't been *that* good of friends. There were no inside jokes, nothing to catch up on. Silence filled the apartment as Colby rubbed his eyes and I presented him with my offerings: a bottle of Riesling and a copy of John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* to borrow (he'd mentioned he was in need of a good read).

"I have to lend you something in return," he said, and we went diving under his bed through his stacks of books. Soon we were sprawled on the carpeted floor, surrounded by everything from Dan Brown to *The Book of Mormon*, talking about mysteries and religion. Once we started, we didn't stop. I teased him about not having a bookshelf. He retorted something about me not owning a Kindle. We shared the same awkward sense of humor, the same bantering, and what I suspected was the same quiet rejection of organized religion and deism in general.

We didn't stop talking through dinner, where between mouthfuls of pulled pork (I

considered it a good sign that I could eat messy food in front of him, regardless of how slowly I was doing so), we talked about the recent scandal at our school (“I cried,” he admitted) and my trip abroad (“It’s so great you know another language. I took four years of French and can barely speak it.” “*Parlez-vous Francais?*” “Hardly,”) and everything in between. At one point, I thought I saw an old high school friend through the restaurant window. “That looks like somebody that I used to know!” I said. “Did you mean to make the Gotye reference there?” he asked, laughing at my corniness, and I giggled. He had a solid family (older sister, parents who met at Penn State, anecdotes I couldn’t find out through Facebook stalking) and when we passed a cop, he put on his breaks and said, “Copper,” just as my dad and I did. To say I was smitten would be the biggest understatement of the century.

I knew I had to say something, make myself clear, make a move, but when we finally were quiet—watching *The Prestige* over tumblers of wine—I was tongue tied. He got up to put our glasses in the kitchen, and when he came back, we were sitting closer together, not touching, but in that position where the potential is there and you have a heightened awareness of it and it takes your breath away. We were just close enough that I knew somewhere in the dark recesses of my mind that it was intentional. I remembered my resolve, but was thinking about how to go through with it—grab his hand? Wait until after the movie to say something?—when he scooted away and put his feet up on the other side of the couch.

I’m unsure what happened at this point. Perhaps he wanted me as much as I wanted him at that moment. Perhaps I cast an unconscious look of despair at him for moving away. In any case, he glanced over at me and said, in a tender and knowing and

older and almost resigned way, “Come here.” That was all the invitation I needed to put my arm around his slender abdomen and hear his heartbeat with my good ear, not wanting to break that pose for anything.

The movie ended, and Colby started stacking pillows and blankets on the couch, asking if the air conditioning was comfortable. Not wanting to speak, I drank a glass of water, then another. I was terrified of what we’d begun and even more afraid of its ending. He studied me, and that resigned, tender look came back. I could almost hear him sigh, say, *Well--this is what it is*. “Bed or couch?” he asked.

In his gym shorts from high school, head next to his on the pillow, I semi-aggressively pushed my head toward his until he turned and our lips met. We pushed against each other in a grateful, desiring, back-and-forth, and he ran his tongue along my lower lip, making me shiver. We fell asleep, then woke up, and I flipped over, knowing that sleep would probably elude me for the rest of the night. The alarm was set for six, and I still had four hours of driving ahead of me, but I watched the translucent bedroom shade for hours. The fact that he hadn’t tried to take advantage of me, hadn’t tried to get everything--he clearly wanted something more than my body. He felt the same way, I thought, and that realization was almost too much.

* * *

Of course, despite his can-do attitude and relative attractiveness, not everyone is enamoured with Paul Ryan. Mitt Romney, a notably middle-of-the-road Republican whose conservative beliefs extended mainly to his fiscal policies, selected Ryan as a social appeal to the right-wing Americans who wanted a definitive “no” on abortion, birth control, and gay marriage. Ryan was the answer to their prayers, and conversely,

ironically, Ryan was the average young American woman's worst nightmare. Campaigns for retaining reproductive rights were out in full force.

Perhaps the most famous response to Ryan was a Twitter account named, "Paul Ryan Gosling." Created by five comedy writers who are also mothers, the account incorporates the worship of Ryan Gosling with the policies of our favorite vice-presidential nominee. "Hey girl," the posts begin, riffing on a popular Gosling meme. The tweet then strikes the balance between wit and criticism by mocking numerous Ryan policies. Examples include, "It's so adorable that you have the right to vote. Just remember to ask a man which buttons to push, k?" and, "Of course the GOP will support rape victims. We just won't support the babies we'll force you to have." Harsh, perhaps, but it seemed to strike a nerve. The Twitter currently boasts more than 53,000 followers. "He's the flip side of terrifying," "Marinka," one of the writers (speaking under a pseudonym), told *New York* magazine. "The idea of him being the heartbeat away from anything, let alone the presidency, is very threatening for some people, you know, with uteruses. It's a very thin line between the humor and the weeping uncontrollably."

Yet Ryan continued to gain popularity as election season went forth. Why? It couldn't just be his pretty face; countless movie stars and models hold that trophy. For half the country, it clearly wasn't his stance on the issues. My best friend and I, both bleeding liberals, found ourselves discussing Ryan on our weekly Skype chats with a mixture of repulsion and fascination. Despite our investment in the Obama campaign, the hope of our faithful president was growing a bit stale. Our confidence in Paul Ryan was a flawed, twisted kind of trust, but trust all the same. No matter how much we disagreed with his policies, the man was honest. He went *bow hunting*, for god's sake. He might

have it out for our ovaries, but with Paul Ryan, what you saw was what you got.

* * *

When we woke, it was like nothing had happened between us. We showered separately, dressed, I packed up the few things I'd brought in in my bookbag. We talked about everything but the thing, avoiding each others' eyes. "I don't have girl shampoo," he apologized when I went to take a shower.

Finally, in his kitchen, I jumped. "Can I ask what last night was?"

He looked at me. "Yeah," he said. "You can ask."

We leveled with each other for a long moment, and I gave a wave for him to continue. *Did I actually have to ask?*

He sighed. "I'd be lying if I said I really didn't want to do that," he said. "I'd also be lying if I said I knew where this was going."

"Meaning?"

"I can't do long distance." There was a crazy girl, he said, who'd broken his heart, converted to Mormonism and married far too young.

I drove, stopping only for gasoline a mile outside his apartment complex. I didn't stop for breakfast, or coffee, or to check which route I was supposed to take. As it happened, I was only supposed to stay on 95 for an hour, but I didn't get off in my strained strangeness, and I ended up driving through Boston at rush hour, listening to the Police on repeat. They seemed to fit the mood.

I didn't cry until I was past the city, but once I started, I couldn't stop. I called my sister, crying, at a rest stop in New Hampshire, and I talked to my best friend in my steaming, humid car for an hour in a Walmart parking lot just inside the Maine border. I

welcomed the cramped heat; it seemed to embrace my mood. I somehow pulled myself together, barely, to greet my employers when I arrived at Lake Sebago.

I welled in my misery for a few days, trying to distract myself with my new job and new friends, but the matter wasn't closed. I could message him in any number of high-tech ways, rehashing the entire incident, but it didn't seem sincere enough. I wanted him to see how serious I was about our future. Clearly he was, too, or he would have tried to take advantage of me.

So I got out my crisp, brown stationary with leaves on it, and I wrote him a letter. I've always found it easiest, most forthright, to say what I want in a letter. No one's interrupting you to disprove your point. It's clear you're serious about someone if you're setting pen to paper and using the ink and stamps and saliva to make your point. The tangibility stares you in the face, undeniable, demanding an answer.

"I'm not saying it wouldn't be hard," I wrote, the loops in my *ys* and *ls* barely touching the other letters in my earnestness. "But. . . I like you. I really, truly, honest-to-goodness like you, in a head-over-heels, high school, goofy, ridiculous way. But in a deeper way, too, or I would just pass it off and not be writing you this letter. If this comes across as creepy, or mushy, or thoroughly unsentimental and essay-like, know it's because I'm new to this, and it's not you. I just don't want to see you with someone else, years later, and wonder if things couldn't have been different between us if I hadn't tried."

In an excessively sentimental gesture that defied my normal nature, I kissed the flap with my tired, rough camp lips, then dropped it in the mail bin and handed the bin off to the postman, one of my duties as secretary. I'd be lying if I said I forgot about it entirely, but I stopped thinking about it as much. I could wait.

* * *

Vice-presidential debates have always intrigued me more than presidential ones. We actually care about the policies of the people who will potentially be running our country; the vice presidents are just along for the ride. As a result, they tend to be less coached, more candid, in their few televised debates. You can glean more of their personalities, what they're actually like making dinner or on a family hike or in the bedroom. The first and only vice-presidential debate between Joe Biden and Paul Ryan was scheduled for October 11, 2012, and I would be watching from my apartment in my college town. I had still not heard back from Colby, although he had sent me a text in August saying, "Cursive, caps, or print?"

Several friends had pointed out, in passing, how similar our new candidate looked to Colby Cushing--did I remember Colby? That kid from the a cappella group? I almost choked on my gin and tonic I was sipping at the bar. Yes, I said, I thought I had a recollection. And indeed, I'd seen several pictures, and yes, the resemblance was interesting, if not particularly striking. Perhaps I just didn't want to take a close enough look.

When Paul Ryan stepped onto the stage and waved to Centre College, I almost gasped aloud. The resemblance was beyond interesting. The two were doppelgängers, identical twins of different ideologies from different generations. They had the same head bob, the same way they moved their hands, the same genial way of addressing the audience like they were the most interesting person in the world. They were both cool, confident, but personable. Holy *shit*.

As the debate went on, I felt myself growing hotter. "You know, I think about 10

1/2 years ago,” Paul Ryan began, responding to a question about abortion rights, “my wife Janna and I went to Mercy Hospital in Janesville where I was born, for our seven week ultrasound for our firstborn child, and we saw that heartbeat. A little baby was in the shape of a bean. And to this day, we have nicknamed our firstborn child Liza, ‘Bean.’ Now I believe that life begins at conception.” I dug my face into my couch pillows, cringing and squeezing my eyes shut in silent agony even as I did so. I hadn’t told many people about my summer fling, but at that moment, the TV was blasting it for the world to hear. My affections were being broadcast in every living room in America. I felt like someone had found my imagined diary, pink and small, with a gold, heart-shaped lock, and published the pages on Page Six of the *New York Post*.

I got through the debate, albeit with more cringing and face-into-pillow shoving and pacing across my short living room. At the commencement, the Biden and Ryan families joined the candidates on stage. Biden gave his wife and adult children chaste kisses and hugs, but the Ryan children were more rambunctious, adorably so. His son Sam spun around in the moderator’s chair, and his daughter Liza (known forever after as “Bean” to the country, poor thing) threw her arms around him in an unrestrained display of genuine affection. Paul’s wife gave him an adoring look, and I knew--whatever warped ideologies they promoted, whenever life began for them--this family would be okay. And we as Americans didn’t know a thing about them.

I received my letter from Colby several days before Halloween. It was almost dinnertime, and already dark outside, but I bundled up and headed to Old Main, my college’s traditional frontispiece building. I sat on the steps. Took a deep breath. Opened

the envelope. It didn't matter. If a guy waits for three months to reply to a letter, and if he replies with a letter of his own instead of texting, or calling, or even Facebook messaging or emailing with, "Yes, yes!" you already know how it's going to turn out.

* * *

Of course, I voted for the Obama/Biden ticket. You mustn't think I was so infatuated that I abandoned my political values.

One of my favorite pictures of Paul Ryan is an Instagram he posted on his Twitter. The filter is 1970s-esque, perhaps Toaster, and the caption reads, "Great pep talk from one of my most trusted advisors." In a mass-produced, averagely-priced hotel room—perhaps a Best Western or a Holiday Inn—a boy of no more than five or six, dressed in pajamas with watermelons on them, grins hugely into his father's face. The boy is clearly saying something funny or enjoyable; the smile covers his whole visage, his eyes are squinched up. Squatting down to his level, large, thin, hands on his shoulders, his father listens intently to whatever the boy is saying. His face is mostly turned from the camera, but we can see the corner of a smile on his cheek, the poignancy with which he'll remember this moment. Neither one knows the picture is being taken. For them, it's unstaged, a private moment of patriarchal love.

Browsing through Paul Ryan's Twitter pictures, mostly of the vice-presidential debate and his campaign tour, this photo arrested me. It is true that the congressman has a very nice smile, which he shows off prominently in most of his publicity stills, wide crinkles at the sides of his mouth only confirming his all-American-boy can-do attitude and endearing himself to us even further. But in this photo, his eyes aren't foreseeing the

future. He's not situated in casually lush surroundings. He's not at the camera's advantage in any way. In fact, we can almost only see his profile, with all its imperfections—the large nose, the chin that juts out slightly, the wrinkles beginning to form on his taut neck. It's an imprecise, unplanned, lovely moment with his son, shared just before he takes the stage. In this moment, this man is not America's future. He is a father. And, flipping through those pictures, I stopped because I thought I saw my future husband in that profile.

I wanted everything for Colby and me and nothing less. I wanted him to sit with me in bed, in the middle of the night, explaining the more complicated physics of the big bang theory to me, and for us to talk about what we thought would happen to the universe long after it mattered for either of us. I wanted to read him passages of *Song of Myself* in a park after a picnic with wine, him lying on his back, eyes closed, me reading out of my massive book of Whitman. I wanted to cook for him, and I wanted to make him come, and I wanted us to travel everywhere our hearts desired and take photos in front of the Taj Mahal and Angkor Wat and the Eiffel Tower. I wanted to show him Berlin, my city, and to impress him with my German skills. I knew we could be silly and serious in equal parts; I knew our parents would get along splendidly; I knew we'd both want to have a secular wedding ceremony and that we'd listen to jazz while doing the dishes. But the bottom line is that he didn't want any of these things, and that's that. Just as voting for Paul Ryan because he projects the ideal of a good person won't make him a good vice-president, chasing Colby because he's seemingly my ideal man won't make him the love of my life. We can't project all our favorite qualities selectively onto politicians *or* objects of affection.

* * *

I'm not a crier, but when I told my mother on the phone about the whole Colby fiasco, I teared up a little bit. It turned from a conversation full of sarcasm and laughter into a genuine what-doesn't-he-see-in-me high school session, like I was fifteen again.

"But maybe he doesn't understand," I said. "Maybe he needs me to explain things again. Maybe he couldn't respond right away for some reason."

"Oh honey," said my mother. "There are plenty of fish in the sea."

"None as perfect as him."

"Toss this one back in."

We said a few more things and hung up, but that stuck with me. Clearly I hate Paul Ryan's policies, and the man and I would probably not get along below a basic surface level, yet there is something about him that fascinates America. Yet there are plenty of fish in the sea, as much as we may not believe it right now. Toss this one back in.

* * *

Thinking about the whole thing now, sometimes I can be distanced, and sometimes I want to throw up in equal measures. It's been almost a year since they entered my life, my straw everymen, and every so often I'll still catch some glimpse—a Facebook mention, a picture in the newspaper, a visit to State College—that reminds me that their lives are going on just as mine is. It's like hearing *On the Street Where You Live* in a minor key.

I still follow Mr. Ryan on Twitter, and every so often I get an update on his newly tame life not as a vice presidential candidate, but as a representative from the Midwest.

He goes skiing with his kids, he lights candles on Holocaust Memorial Day in a church alongside concentration camp survivors. What I remember most, though, is what happened during the holidays. It was one of those awkward few days in January between New Year's Day and returning to college, and I was absentmindedly flipping through my gossipy hometown newspaper over breakfast. We'd had a new state representative sworn in on January second—Scott Perry—and the front section coverage was all about him. I flipped to the inside to continue the story, which was accompanied by a small, grayscale photo of the congressmen taking the oath of office. Perry was in the foreground, but my eyes snapped to a familiar face. Paul Ryan stood a row behind him, face blurred but still recognizable, holding up the same hand and chanting the same words as everyone else.

I felt that familiar shock that I always did upon seeing my sweetheart of duality, but I felt some kind of disillusionment, too. Standing in the background, out of the limelight and out of focus, he didn't look nearly as good.

Chapter 3

Skyview

Wednesday morning at the Skyview Restaurant begins late. The local moose decided to explore my driveway and fall asleep right in front of my rusted, red Dodge. Annoying, but nothing a few Roman candles couldn't fix. Bam bam bam, and I was on my way. Charlotte's a lot worse to deal with than the moose.

"What are you doing?" she hisses as I tie on my apron. "You're ten minutes late!"

"It's not like we have that many customers anyway." I glance around the almost-empty dining room, which was top-rated in last year's Wyoming Zagat for fine dining and decor. You'd never know it based on the 7:30 a.m. breakfast crowd.

A family walks in, and Charlotte channels her annoyance into smiles and good mornings. Table for five? No problem. Great weather we're having, isn't it? The family agrees. I head back to the kitchen to get the specials before I have to explain about the moose.

The family's nice and normal, here to explore Grand Teton National Park, maybe try some white water rafting. I wonder when the sportsy teenage boy with them will figure out the meaning of the word Teton. They marvel at the dark wood furniture, the modern lodge feel, and they'll all have omelets. No sweat. I plug in the order at the POS and visit my only other table.

A tall, dark-haired, pretty girl sits alone. She can't be more than 20 or 21, and she's dressed in a dark suit, with her hair pulled back, looking vaguely familiar. I greet

her softly with my usual hello, welcome to the Skyview Restaurant, my name is Wyatt and I'll be serving you today, may I take your drink order? (Charlotte's very big on "my name is" instead of "my name's". "This is a *five-star* restaurant," she loves to say. "Save the contractions for a diner." She's a bitter woman with a degree in English.) The girl lowers her menu and gives me a hesitant smile.

"Just coffee," she says, glancing back down coyly. "Is this the only restaurant open around here at this hour?"

"Just for breakfast. All the others at the resort open for lunch and dinner."

"It's beautiful here," she says, glancing out the many-paned window to the mountains on the other side of the valley. The sun has just popped over them, casting them in shadow and everything else in light. It'll rain this evening, though. The just-healed cracks in my collarbone and thigh are beginning to ache, something I haven't gotten used to yet. My bones give a better forecast than the Weather Channel.

"Have you ever been to the Tetons before?"

"Never. I'm here on a job interview though, so hopefully I'll be sticking around."

"Oh really? For what company?" It's strange that she decided to come here of all places. Did she stick a thumbtack into her map of the U.S., I wonder? Did she find it on a random job search website? She has a definite East Coast accent, but I can't pick it out exactly.

"Teton Expedition Pursuits?" She makes it a question because she wants me to confirm that I've heard of it, that it's a legit company. "They need a P.R. person, and it came up at the career center at my school. I just graduated."

I nod. "They do good business. Where'd you go to school?"

“Boston College. I’m from Massachusetts.”

“Well, lah de dah.” Am I flirting with her? Hell, I know I’m flirting with her. And she knows it too, from the way she laughs—it’s not too degrading.

“Well where do you go to school, Mr. Lah de dah?”

“University of Montana. For outdoor recreational management. I was supposed to graduate this spring, but I’m on the five year plan.”

“Ah. Well, college is great. Make it last, that’s what I say. I already miss it.”

I realize that the family’s food is probably getting cold under the heating lamps in the kitchen. “I’ll be right back with your coffee,” I say.

No one comes in this early in the morning, since most of the vacationers are still asleep, so it’s just me, Charlotte, the family of five, and the girl in the dining room. She orders the special, buffalo hash with a poached egg on top. The kitchen makes it really good, and I can tell she’s getting nervous about her interview because she eats only half.

“How did you like your food?” I ask as I come to clear her plate.

“It was really, really good. I’m just stuffed.” She sets her napkin on the table.

“That’s one of my favorite dishes,” I say.

She brushes a few stray crumbs off her black skirt, which I see now is embroidered with dark roses. “What do you recommend for activities this afternoon? I should be done fairly early, but I didn’t look up anything about the area.”

“Well, there’s lots of things. The hiking trails around the mountains are really good, and you’ve seen the monorail that goes up the side of the mountain I’m guessing?” It’s right outside the restaurant, hence the name. “That’s pretty fun, and not too

expensive. There's rafting and sightseeing boats, or if you really don't feel like doing anything, I hear there's a great spa in the hotel next door."

"Are people still skiing? I saw some people doing that this morning off the mountainside. But it's summer."

I shift the tray. "There's still snow, so the really advanced ones can."

"Are you really advanced?"

"Actually, I don't ski." I shuffle her solitary plate.

"Really? But you're right at the base of the mountain."

"Yeah, I'm a little afraid of heights. It's weird."

"Are you afraid of airplanes?"

"No, I've flown plenty of times. It's different. It's like, being in the open air. With an airplane, you've got pilots taking control and they've been trained to fly the plane. Up there, it's just you, there's no one to guide you or keep you safe but yourself. I mean, I'm sure it's fine. People do it every day. It's just not something I do." Normally Charlotte would give me hell for talking with a customer this much, but the family has left by now, so it's just the two of us in the dining room, and Charlotte's rolling silverware in the back.

"Interesting." The girl tilts her head at me.

"Can I get you anything else?" I have no clue why I talked to her for so long, except maybe that I was avoiding rolling silverware with Charlotte. But I'm sorry I'll never get to know her.

“No thanks, just the check.” She holds out her hand and gives me a perfect-teeth smile that reminds me of my ex-girlfriend Jenny, or some other girl I saw once but just remembered. “My name’s Diana.”

I shake her hand. “I’m Wyatt.”

“I know,” she says with a half-laugh. “You already told me.”

* * *

My mom’s favorite saying is, “meanwhile, back at the ranch...”. She says it whenever she can in public and then manages to add it that for us it’s really true, because we live on a ranch. I don’t think she’s trying to brag, she just loves where we live and, even more, to talk about where we live. More accurately it’s a house with a small horse farm, but there’s not really a ring to “meanwhile, back at the house with a small horse farm.” Jenny laughed when I told her that, back on our first date at college, like it was something original.

The house is empty when I get back, late afternoon shadows lingering on the walls. I worked a double shift today, and the last few hours were hell. I toss my keys on top of a note from Mom: Running errands with Dad, be back by dinnertime, any questions call me. No doubt Fitch is still at the kayaking shop. I chug a glass of Tropicana, then pour another with enough Absolut to keep me going. Gracie wakes up and comes at me with a ferocious tail wag, and I scratch under her chin. After half an hour of bad TV and another medicated Tropicana, the vodka has woken me up enough to go feed the horses.

I enter the stable, and my heart stops twitching. The stable smells clean, yet horsey, a smell that I’ve had around since childhood. I feed and water the horses—there

are only six—then lead Norris, my favorite, out and saddle him up in the yard. As I rub down his back and fit him with the saddle, I let my gaze drift to the Skyview Restaurant and finally, to rest on that mountain, still bright in the golden sunset, the last peak of the day to get the sun. The glare coming off the snowcaps isn't so bad at this time in the afternoon. It's almost too terrible and beautiful to look at. I look away. Saddling is done, and I mount Norris and take off, doing a full lap of our enormous field—as big as the world, I said at age six.

I finish my lap and let the horse do what he pleases. (This might make some people nervous, but I've been sitting on a horse since I was five, and I can ride, damn it!) This is my favorite time of day in the valley—the slow, long, drawn-out, spindly sunset. Half of the valley is in shadow, although still indirectly lit by the sun, which is sinking on the other half. The day might go by faster than thought, but this part is always slow, it seems you can never rush the sunset. I used to hate it as a kid, when I was go, go, go. Now I love it.

I slow Norris to a stop and let him shake his tufty head and dig at the grass. I regard the mountain again. I have no problems looking at it—I see it every day when I go to work, whether I like it or not. I have no problems with other people looking at it. I have no problem flying, rafting, hiking, extreme biking, riding bucking broncos—I almost made it to the Regional Rodeo Competition—but I won't set foot on that mountain.

Tom wouldn't be afraid of this mountain, I think, and then I'm angry at myself for thinking about him. I wish I would stop my goddamn train of thought every time it got to

him. I wish I was sitting there holding hands with Jenny, watching the sunset. I wish I had the bottle of Absolut with me.

I wish I hadn't gone to Vegas last spring break. It had been something else: the fluorescent lights made every part of the night day, so unlike the valley I'd grown up in, where the night was night and nothing else. We made it into the room and just opened the curtains and *watched*: the artificial daylight, all colors, and the people milling on the street like rats, and the musical billboards and crowds and traffic all glomming into one massive ball of sound.

Jenny called me at 3 a.m., which is one of the few parts of the night I remember. Even if I didn't, the proof's right on my call log, right above the three times I called her and got voicemail. "Where are you?" she asked. "I'm worried."

Where *was* I? "I'm in Vegas!" I shouted, and a few people on the sidewalk stared, but only a few. It was too common. The brothers sniggered, imitating me: "Hell yeah VEGAS! We're in Vegas, motherfucker!"

"What are you doing there?" she asked. "Are you okay?"

"Where *were* you?"

"I was asleep."

I scoffed. "Who sleeps?" The brothers echoed this.

"Wyatt, be careful." I didn't remember her sounding this concerned when we were dating. "Please."

"Why the fuck do you care if I'm careful?" I could feel my actions like I was an observer: *There is a very drunken frat boy holding the phone away from his ear so he feels like his yelling is more dramatic. How typical.* "This just-friends thing isn't going to

work out, *Jenny*,” I said. “So let it be.” I might have even started to sing *Let it Be*, but at that point I go black again until maybe 4:30 or 5. We’re back in the room daring each other to do ridiculous stuff—put your head in a plastic bag for a whole minute, play Space Monkey in the bathroom with Justin—someone’s sick, twisted fantasy. It’s some semblance of a game, what I don’t recall, and I’m up next for judgment.

“Brother Trady,” Edgar slurs out, since he’s the king of the game. I await the ruling. “For crimes of the heart—that is, mooning over your ex and being her bitch even though she *clearly* doesn’t want you—“ He looked at the circle of brothers, most of whom were half-passed out, trying to think of something to top our recent near-death attempts. It took him half a minute. “—lay one on Brother Brown,” he finished.

“Lay one on him?”

“First base. Give him tongue. Do I hear you refusing, Brother Trady? Or should I say, Jenny’s Bitch Trady?”

I didn’t hesitate, but stumbled over to Tom bent over, and looked him in the eye. “Hello, Brother Brown,” I said, and before either of us knew what we were doing, my tongue was in his mouth and my hands were on his shoulders, I was doing all the things I did with a girl. He stiffened for a moment, then relaxed—we were too far gone to be resistant to each other.

There was silence in the room after I pulled away, and I wiped my mouth off with a man flourish. “How do you like them apples.”

After that, someone—I think Pat—said, “Holy shit, Trady. Way to take one for the team.”

“Game over,” said Edgar with a grin. “I don’t think anyone can top that.” I glanced at Tom, who was staring at Edgar but had been looking at me the minute before. I glanced at him many times in the months after that, but it seemed as if he always looked away at the right time to not catch my glance.

The valley was dark now, the last few bits of sunlight still trying to shine in the gaps between the mountains. It was time to take Norris in. I tried to level with the mountain one last time, but it looked even worse with the sunlight behind it, so all you could see was its silhouette. I dig in my heels and head for the stable.

* * *

Diana’s weirdly familiar face is at the restaurant again the next morning, and this time she’s the only person in so early. I ask her why she’s up so early on vacation and she shrugs, says she’s used to it. Her thin brown hair’s in a ponytail today, and she’s wearing jeans.

“How’d the interview go?” I ask while setting down her plate of two eggs over-easy, homemade home fries, and fresh fruit.

She shrugs as she unfolds her napkin. “Well enough. No clue if I got the job, though.”

I refill her glass of water. “What did you end up doing yesterday? After the interview.”

She took a sightseeing raft tour, through my brother’s company, as it turns out, down the Snake River. “I didn’t see any animals, though,” she adds with a smile that shows she’s trying not to be too disappointed.

“Not one? They’re usually out in flocks when they take those tours.” I tell her about the bald eagles we see flying over the ranch. I tell her about the moose in front of my car yesterday. She laughs; they don’t have anything like that back East. I’ve never been to the East. No? Well I should come out for a visit, there’s so much to do. I realize I’m stopping her from eating, and I retreat. “Well, if you move out here I can guarantee you’ll be seeing a lot of animals,” I say.

We talk more every time I return to the table, and by the time I’m dropping off her bill, we are almost friends. “Well, it was a pleasure seeing you again this morning,” she says with a smile.

Something in the sadness of the phrase—maybe because it seems fake, like something I’m supposed to say to her before I run off to take another table’s orders—makes me say to her, “Listen, if you’ve got nothing to do today, would you like to come see my ranch? After I get off work, I mean. I promise you’ll see some animals there, and if not, I’ll show you my dog.”

She laughs but looks hesitant, and I realize why.

“It’s my family’s ranch,” I say. “There’s no way I could afford one on my own.” *So you won’t get raped*, I add in my head, hoping she’ll get the intended meaning.

When she laughs a second time and turns red, I know she’ll go.

* * *

Everyone’s at work again, so it’s just Diana and I in the house. The house is awkward, and I don’t intend to be there longer than I need to. But Gracie runs out first, and I introduce her. “She’s a sweetheart,” says Diana, and Gracie’s ears go lax and she

wags her tail. I wonder if I should offer her a drink, but realize that most of the world probably isn't downing rum and cokes at 2 in the afternoon.

"You can leave her out," I say as I open the door to go back out. "But now, come out to the stables."

Diana's not frightened by the horses, just unsure of herself. "I haven't ridden since I was ten," she says as I fit Regina, the mare, with a saddle.

"You'll be fine." I hoist her up, which feels strange but not uncomfortable, and then mount Norris myself. I teach her how to use the bridles, and we take one slow trot around the ranch. Diana is quiet. "I don't know how I'm going to live here," she says at last, looking around the valley. "It's so beautiful, but just terrifying. It's so different."

I don't know what to say to that, so I teach her how to gallop, and before long we're racing each across the field.

We both stop and look at the mountain. "It's beautiful," she says. "When we sang about purple mountain majesties in elementary school, I never knew they were like this."

"The best way to see them," I reply, "is at the very top, right at sunset, just before you push off and ski down for the last time of the day."

Diana looks over at me, eyebrows raised. "Thought you said you didn't ski."

"I don't." I can't make myself stop staring at that terrible, silent peak. "I used to."

"Why'd you stop?"

"I had an accident." I can still be there if I close my eyes. It was one of two double diamonds at the very top of Albright Peak, the Bear Claw Drop. I'd skied it at least ten times, knowing just where to bend my body around the surprise curve and at what point to swerve to avoid the rock crevasse that split the mountain. Spring break had

come and gone, and I'd come home for a weekend, for the last good skiing of the spring on Albright.

It's a sunny day, and I'm worried the snow melt will slow me down—I want to go fast, faster than I ever have before; I want to drop down the mountain with as much recklessness as the paragliders have grace. I don't deserve grace; I don't deserve to descend the mountain at a leisurely pace. I need to work up some speed. Wait, who's that snapping on his skis? *No Tom, this memory doesn't involve you.* There, there's no one else on the mountain.

I barely pause to take a breath before casting off on the trail. I know this mountain better than I know myself sometimes. And at first, I *am* slow—the snow's getting softer, and my skis are sinking in. "Come on," I say to myself. "Let's get moving, you fucker!" *Fucker* seems to be the magic word, because I take off. I'm swerving down the trail, faster than my life has gone by. This must be what they mean when they say your life flashes before your eyes just before you die. I'm glad I wore goggles, because the sun is fierce, and otherwise my tears would just freeze to my face with how much speed I've worked up.

I see a brown-ponytailed girl flash by me, going even faster than me. *Jenny?* No, there's no one else on the mountain. And then, as I'm going god knows how many miles per hour, I see the moose. He's maybe fifty yards to my left, just above me on the rocks, eyeing me without a movement. I'm so in awe of him, so envious of him, that time stops for me. What can he think of me, a stupid, strange creature going by him faster than he can run?

Unfortunately, time doesn't stop for my skis, and when I look back at the trail, I'm headed for a tree. The only thing I can do to save myself is make a sharp right, off the mountainside. I don't hesitate. Then I'm airborne, and everything is frozen. When people asked me as a kid what one magical power I would want, my answer was always flying, and now I see why. There's something amazing in being apart from the ground, unable to control, even for a moment, anything about your situation. Up in the air, you have no choice in any matter. It's the perfect, terrifying existence. There's nothing I want or fear more.

I suppose, had I actually fallen off the side of the mountain, I would have felt like this until I died, but as it so happens, I only fell into a bowl, a small 90-degree gorge on a mountainside that's quite fun to ski in if you're doing it properly. I land on my chest and my right leg—later, I will discover that my right thighbone and collarbone are both broken, the thighbone in two places—and I make no sound, other than a sharp exhale of breath. I am lucky there is still enough snow to pad my fall; any less and I'd have broken ribs and caused internal damage.

And still I make no sound, though the pain is searing. It is nothing, *nothing*, close to shame and heartbreak, and for this reason I enjoy it for the moment, since it makes me forget everything else. People have asked me, many times since that day, *Why didn't you scream? Why didn't you try to attract attention?* There's nothing to say, so I keep quiet.

The searing grows worse, mind numbing. I should find someone to help me. The sun is terrible. The snow is terrible. Everything in life is fucking terrible. That's the last thought I had on that mountain. When I woke up, I was in the hospital, immobile, my parents thanking the Swedish couple who were skiing on a neighboring mountain and

saw me fall, my mother coughing repeatedly to avoid crying in public. Every part of me that wasn't covered was sunburned; my hat fell off and my scalp was a terrible, wonderful red. When I started peeling a few days later, I loved to scratch at my head until it burned and the dead skin peeled off in big, white flakes. Then, I thought, I was healed.

Diana and I sit and look at the mountain.

“Bad?” she asks after a moment.

I nod.

She looks proactively sad, like she wants to pat my shoulder or give me a hug but is afraid to. And suddenly, in that flash, I know where I've seen her before. One night at the Sigma Nu house, last winter, I'd walked into Tom's room to ask him about chapter meeting and found him beating off to *Christmas is Cumming*, as the amateur-looking box on his bed read. I'd managed to walk out without being seen, but not before a glance at the lonely, naked woman on the screen with her sad, sad face. It's the exact same expression, of people leaving her behind in train stations and talking to her while they're high and she's sober and rejecting her futile attempts at a first job on the classy East Coast. I want her, more than anything, to stop making that face, because I didn't leave her behind and the West didn't leave her behind, so I lean in (we're pretty close) and touch her chin firmly and kiss her in a way I'm sure she was never kissed in *Christmas is Cumming*—hesitantly, by a man who almost jerked back when he went in for it. And she kisses me back the same way; she doesn't have the sureness of a porn star or Jenny or even Tom. Who knows how long we kiss.

We break away and don't know whether to look at each other or not, so we almost miss my friend the moose skulking around just outside the outer limits of the ranch.

"Wow!" Diana says. "I wish I had my camera. Can I get closer?"

"A little, but not too much. The horses might aggravate him." I'm glad she doesn't have her camera, she can never document this moment, put it up on Kodak PhotoShare, send it to 20 friends and her parents and living grandmother. This is one to share in words, but never pictures.

Diana takes one last look before the moose walks away. "It's so different out here," she says. "Things like a moose being so normal, these mountains being normal—it's almost ludicrous. I almost like the East Coast more—there you don't have to think about anything that's not right in front of you, like these mountains. But here, I think I'd be so preoccupied with the beauty, I'd have to think about it."

"So why *did* you come out here?" I ask.

She looks at the setting sun. "Life can be interesting," she says, and I can't agree more.

* * *

This is ridiculous. The end of August, and I'm as cold as if it's December and I don't have my parka. I know no one else is.

The smooth mechanical doors slide closed on their tracks and the gondola starts its ascent up the mountain, the last trip of the day and the last trip of the summer. I barely made it on. I thought about it throughout the day and decided around lunchtime I didn't want to do it, then decided five minutes ago that I did want to do it and ran out to the ticket sales, panting as I tried to talk to the man behind the window.

There's mostly resort workers on here, enjoying one gondola ride before they head off to their winter jobs, one last reminder of why they moved to Jackson Hole in the first place. A family of four, the only tourists, sit in the plastic seats. The family has a little boy and girl; the parents look jet-lagged, but the kids run around the car and bounce up and down on the seats. Amazingly, they're not loud, just energetic.

The car begins to pick up speed, and my ears build some pressure, but not enough to pop—I'm too used to the altitude. They don't bother with live narration on the last ride of the year, so all of the passengers completely miss the moose—the same moose—eating the last greens of the summer on the mountainside. His rack is beginning to grow back, but he looks unperturbed by the gondola. I watch him as we pass by.

I get colder and colder the farther up we go, and it has nothing to do with the altitude. I get dizzy and my stomach is balling into a tighter and tighter organ. Soon it will implode on itself. And then we reach the top and I see stars so that I can barely step off the gondola. I stop walking right when I get off, because I really don't feel like walking off the face of the mountain today, but someone behind me pushes me aside so they can get off and then I breathe and, gradually, I begin to see.

I walk away from the gondola, measuring each step, and climb each step with a jerk until I'm on the very top of the mountain. It smells like dough and warmth, and the waffle shop billows out inviting smoke clouds. I could go inside, I could have a waffle with whipped cream and strawberry syrup, but I'd still have to get back to the gondola.

Instead, I stand and remind myself to breathe and look down. The cold has caught up to my body—I did remember to bring a sweater—but I'd forgotten how amazing the valley was from 8,000 feet. It looks like a secluded tribe of people that no one will ever

find, not surrounded by all these mountains. I could never have left, I could have stayed here and built up the ranch, I could have seen the river swell with the snowmelt in the spring and never known—never known!

Below me, the Bear Claw Drop shoots straight down. One of the kids from the gondola—the boy—wanders toward it and peers down. “Don’t get that close!” says the mother, finally noticing, as she drags him away into a Kodak moment with the father and sister.

The sky is the dark blue of almost-evening, and as I look at the sunset on the valley I don’t think about Tom or Diana or Jenny, or my parents or brother or the moose or anyone, I just stand there until the last gondola leaves and look.

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