

I'm writing my memoirs. I'm not dying or anything. I've just decided that my life after this point in time will probably be a downhill slide. I could say that I'm at the top of my game, so to speak, and not likely to enjoy a long career before I am shelved. Besides, the memoirs of a twenty-something seems so tragic and romantic. There she was, perched on the brink of adulthood, her whole life ahead of her, her candle snuffed out too soon, et cetera. I think it sounds wonderful. Much better than, she lived to 85, went senile, was resented by her children, and died of some horrible incurable disease. I do not want my memoirs to include the drooling incontinent days. Plus, I'm sure to mess up my life drastically within the next decade so it would be nice if the memoirs captured only my mess-ups up to this point.

So, where to begin. I haven't read any memoirs before so I don't really have a set plan for how this whole is going to turn out. How about let's start with the fact that I hate my life. Already I know what you're thinking. If you're over the age of 40 (like my parents) you're thinking that I sound like every other petulant MTV-er of my generation, who doesn't know how good she has it and who furthermore, should quit whining and appreciate all the things I have that your generation didn't. But if you, like me, are 21, entering the last year of college with no ambition, no true calling,

surrounded by friends who are applying to grad schools or interviewing for great high-tech jobs, if you fail at every relationship you've ever had, if you want nothing more than to press pause for about 20 more years so you can stay right where you are until the thought of a future beyond being a student doesn't scare the shit out of you, then you should not only understand what I mean when I say I hate my life, you're probably saying it too.

I'm a "floater." At least that's what I've been referred to as by several of my professors, my high school guidance counselor, and my parents. I "float" through life. I always thought that word sounded beautiful, like floating in a dream on a warm feather-filled bed, or floating on my back in a blue, blue ocean. Why can't there be any jobs out there for professional floaters? *Must be willing to drift aimlessly through each day, shirk responsibilities, and refuse to live up to your potential. Prior experience required.* I think I would excel in this type of career, though there probably isn't much opportunity to advance up the corporate floating ladder. I know what they were trying to do, those various authority figures. They wanted to be the one to get through to me, to inspire me to use the brain I was given, to really push myself, I don't know- I can't remember any more hackneyed motivational pep-talk buzz words. What if I don't want to live up to my potential? What if I'm completely satisfied with my life right at this moment? I'm exactly where I want to be—out of my house, away from my

mother and in college with my best friend, Sam. I have no true responsibilities. Bills and tuition get paid without my having to worry, I can slack off in my classes for three quarters of the term and still pull decent grades by the end of the semester, in fact all I really have to do is tell my parents I'm "growing as a person" and they're happy. It's why I love school. I know the ins and outs of the system. I could be a professional student forever. You know how everyone always says that you'll look back on your time in college as the best years of your life? What if I don't want to look back? What if I just want to stay right here, right smack in the middle of the best years of my life?

Anyway, on to the memoirs. I think I'm supposed to start somewhere at the beginning and by the end I should end up having learned some essential truths about the world and people and human misery or something like that. I have to say that I'm sorely disappointed in the number of universal truths I've learned so I'll probably have to make something up. At any rate, I do know the beginning.

Birth

My mother was in labor with me for 22 hours. I know this because whenever I've gotten in trouble my mother bitches endlessly about how long she suffered to bring me into the world and how I shouldn't make her suffer now. I was born Julia Renee Williams, in spite of my big brother's

insistence that I be called Peaches, like out cat. We live in Landover County, Virginia where I was grew up alongside the boarding-schooled, tennis-lessoned, debutante party-throwing, rich girls named Tiffany.

I was a tomboy by choice. I think most girls are supposed to go through some stage where they think boys are “yucky” but I must have skipped right over it because I always loved boys. I loved sweaty, fort-building, shirtless, hide-and-seek summers spent with my boys. I still think of them as my boys. Nicky, Ben, Jeff, and Sam. Nicky and Ben’s families moved away and Jeff’s mom stopped letting us play together after he broke his leg falling off of my garage roof, so our group kind of disbanded except for me and Sam. Sam’s still my best friend. We even chose to go to the same college together, which both our parents thought was stupid. Anyway, the first 18 or so years of my life was pretty uninteresting. I got in loads of trouble. I was arrested twice. Once for shoplifting a package of three Bic lighters (Sam and I wanted to learn to smoke) and once for smoking pot in the parking lot of an elementary school at 1 a.m. (Sam and I succeeded in learning to smoke). I know I caused my mother endless pain and agony growing up. I think I consciously tried to make life hard for her. Is that mean? Looking back on it now, I think it was mean, but then I think about how she’s still trying to run my life and then I continue trying to cause her agony.

Mother

My mother's key goal in life is to see me married. I not sure that happily married is even one of her requirements, nor does she seem particularly concerned that every one of my relationships with men has been a disaster. She just wants the wedding. When she and my father built our house, she wanted a grand staircase where I could pose in my wedding dress. At holiday parties, she tells our neighbors how lovely it will be, me in a long white dress with my train draping down the stairs. They smile politely, but I can see them looking for a suitable conversational exit, any way they can get away from my mother's wedding mania. We argue constantly. It doesn't help that my grandmother (who came to our house a year ago on a short vacation and never left) is exactly the same. The two of them, when they gang up on me, resemble the head priests of the Spanish inquisition.

"Who are you dating?" my grandmother asks, puffing away on an ever-present slim black cigarette.

"No one, Lily." My grandmother has always insisted on being called by her first name. She says "Grandma" makes her feel old.

"That's a shame," she puffs, "cause your looks won't last forever. Pretty soon your breasts are gonna sag, and you'll start carrying all your weight in your hips. It happens to all the McMurphy women. Then they'll leave you." She jabs at the air emphatically with her cigarette.

“Just don’t get married too young,” my mother says over the top of her Woman’s Day magazine. “That’s what I did and look where it got me.”

Which I think is absolute bullshit because my father is a saint and my mother is lucky to have gotten him.

“You should wait until you’ve lived a little. Isn’t thirty the age everyone is getting married now?” she continues.

“Thirty? If she waits until she’s thirty there won’t be a man around for miles. She’ll give birth to deformed babies. Women who give birth later in life have deformed babies!” Lily interjects.

“Mother, that’s not true. Stop scaring her. I think she should wait until she’s at least seen what’s out there. Her clock hasn’t even started ticking.”

“Hrmpf.” Lily seems pacified for the moment.

My mother is so ridiculous sometimes. She claims she wants me to wait to get married, but whenever I bring home a guy more than once, she starts asking about his family and cracking jokes about the wedding and how she’s going to spoil her grandchildren. See, here’s my mother’s story. She was a fashion model before she met my dad. She could, I am told, capture the attention of a roomful of people just by walking in. She was invited to every party in New York and if she didn’t attend, it wasn’t a party. She made lots of money, spent it all on clothing and drugs and a sports car which she crashed into my father’s car. My father didn’t press

charges, he simply asked her for a date. And here's the part that blows my mind—she accepted. At the time she was living with photographer Remy, but she fell in love with the way my father got excited about war books (he's a librarian), and the way his corduroy sleeves always frayed at the elbows, and the way he talked to himself in the shower. She gave it all up for him. And now she resents him for it.

Father

My father was born an old man. Ever since I can remember, my father has had the disposition of a quiet, genteel Southerner, who has retired to his porch rocking chair permanently. He's always been more like a grandfather than a dad, which is odd because he's actually five years younger than my mother (she hates that). My father is my only ally against "the crazies" (Mom and Lily) and does his best to stay out of their way. He is my favorite person in the whole world. I love how anytime I want to talk, my father makes it into a production; he folds up his reading glasses and tucks them into his breast pocket, he slips a bookmark into his novel and places it reverently on the arm of the chair, he shifts and settles until his chair feels just right and then he listens, just listens (something my mother cannot do). It makes me feel like whatever I have to say at that moment is the only thing he wants to hear.

I don't know what else to say about him. I think Lily and Mom treat him like shit. It makes me hate them, for destroying him, one piece at a time. They seem to take sick pleasure in doing it too. They pick at him and pick at him until I could scream. He never seems bothered by it, just smiles a secret smile, like he knows something about the way life works that they haven't figured out yet. I like to think we've both figured it out, that we're in on it together.

Lily

Grandpa left Lily last year. He woke up one morning and said "I don't want to be married anymore" and then he packed one bag and left. Sometimes we get a postcard. I think he's following the rodeo circuit right now. This has made Lily a very bitter woman. She refused to get upset by it. Instead, she went out and spent a huge amount of his money having her hair dyed a deep shade of red. Then she bought a new wardrobe because "nothing matched her new hair." She takes a Yoga class three times a week and flirts with every man she meets. She chain-smokes, and gives air-kisses, and wears hot pink sweatsuits, and drives my mother crazy.

Me

Okay. So now on to me, since this whole memoir is supposed to be about my life. I'm not going to start at the beginning and wade through all

the boring life-lessons. I'm going to skip to right now. Well, actually to yesterday, to be exact. Yesterday was a really important day for me. I fell in love. With my ethics professor. A disastrously poor choice, I know, but I can't help it. Sam says I'm in love with him because I have no ethics of my own, which is true. But I walked in to 72-101, Ethics in the Modern World, my first class of my last semester, of my last year of college, and there he was writing his name on the board in a large chalky scrawl, Dr. Richard Sweet. I sat front and center and thanked whatever foresight I'd had to wear my sexy pink sundress.

"The name of the course as you all know is Ethics in the Modern World. So why don't you guys tell me, is it possible to be ethical today?" He perched his tight butt on the edge of the table and swung a sneakered foot back and forth. (I love it when professors wear sneakers with their suits). The class was silent. At that moment, I wished with all my heart that I could be an ethical sort of person.

"C'mon guys, there's no right answer here." He flipped through his roll book. "Let's see... how about Peter. Are ethics dead?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "They seem to be. At least the President's ethics are."

"Well, that's a good point. Politicians are highly unethical. I think its part of the job description. But what about you, Peter? Do you consider yourself to be an ethical person?"

“Yes. I mean, maybe. Well, actually no.” The whole class laughed. Peter seemed to be in pain. I raised my hand.

“Yes, um- your name?” he asked, smiling over his gold wire-rims.

“Julia,” I simpered. I didn’t really have anything to say and so I stupidly searched my brain for anything that remotely was about ethics. “I think people are ethical when it’s convenient.”

“Hmm. So when we have to be ethical we can be, but most of the time we’re unethical?” he asked. I felt my inner thighs covered in perspiration in one of those moments in life where you wish you had shut up instead of trying to look brilliant. Where you opened your mouth to argue about a topic you knew nothing about and then to keep from looking stupid, you have to argue really emphatically just to prove something.

“Well there are certain times when we have to have ethics. Like maybe when you could hurt someone.”

He nodded. “I agree. For example, I am you professor. I could not take advantage of my position of power over you as students, say by threatening your grade.”

Please threaten me, I thought. Threaten that if I don’t become your love slave you’ll fail me. Make love to me on top of your desk, on top of a stack of midterms. Ethics, for God’s sake. Why does he have to be a professor of ethics?

I spent the rest of the time staring at the open buttons on his collared shirt. At the thick, dark swirls of chest hair. I thought to myself, I have never dated a guy who was old enough to have chest hair, someone with maturity and depth. I'm tired of drunken college boys with acne problems and no oral sex skills who only want to play games. I hate mind games, but I'm really good at playing them. Is that weird? It's one of those things that I hate about myself, but I can't help it. I'm like a junkie—a mind-fuck junkie. I love the flirtations, the carefully placed forearm squeezes, the soft sexual laughter, the whispered innuendoes that could just pass for being nothing at all. And these guys don't seem to realize how easy they are to figure out. I mean, not to be conceited, but I've always felt like I was five steps ahead when it came to flirting, like I almost wasn't giving them a fighting chance.

I think I'm not a nice person. I do some things that are really mean. Say, when I know that someone likes me. Even if I have no interest in them at all, I flirt with them hardcore, to a degree which is absolutely criminal. I try to make them want me even more. The other night I went to a party with Sam and Kat, my roommate. I chose some poor Freshman, some boy that has probably never had his heart broken, who is still a bit afraid of women and I whored myself all over the place. I simpered and teased, all smiles, until Sam pulled me aside and said I was making an ass out of myself and who did I think I was hurting someone so callously and what

did the guy ever do to me. At the time it really hurt my feelings. Sam was right, of course. I don't really know why I did that.

Let's see... what else about me. Okay, without getting into a bunch of bullshit, here's me in a nutshell. I'm 21 years old, actually, I think I already said that. I'm 5'10" and thin with long blonde hair and huge tits (yes, I look hot), I love sarcasm, boys, oatmeal cookies, sleeping, and sex. I'm totally conceited, I lie all the time, I cheat, I'm mean to everyone, I always speak my mind- though this usually means I come across as rude, I'm spoiled, and I'm popular. I'm absolutely intolerant of fat people, ugly people, and anyone from New Jersey. I'm completely irresponsible, I'm always getting into trouble (though I usually manage to squirm my way out), I gossip, and I talk about myself way too much. Actually, looking at this list, I think I come across as a horrible person. I don't know. I guess it's easier to remember your bad qualities, right?

The one good thing about me is I'm a really good friend. It's pretty much the only thing I do well (besides flirt). I try to always be there for my friends and it seems like whenever one of them has a problem, I'm the first person they come to. That's another thing about me. When people tell me what's bothering the, I always cut right through their bullshit to see what the real problem is. I always seem to give the best advice, which I find odd considering my own life is usually in shambles. I'm especially good at relationship advice. I can critique the hell out of anyone's relationship

problem and yet I can't count the number of failed relationships I've had. I always seem to choose the wrong one.

I've come to the conclusion that in theory I am a master of relationships. I have incorporated words like *intimacy* and *communication* into my everyday vocabulary. I can share my feelings with my respective partner, and am in touch with my needs. I am able to discuss with candor my sexual fantasies (few) and my sexual problems (many). I have been tied up, spanked, blindfolded, massaged, and doused in honey or chocolate. In support of my various partners' fantasies, I have dressed up as 1) a catholic schoolgirl (6 times), 2) a prostitute (3 times), 3) a cheerleader (11 times), 4) a dominatrix (once was enough), and 5) a nurse (uniform borrowed from candy-striper high school friend). I've spent hours reading every sex book ever published, some stolen from my mother's stash under the bed, some from the stashes of my friends' mothers, and finally some purchased (with equal parts shame and bravado) from my local bookstore.

I can blow, suck, and spit, fondle, caress, and arouse. I can even do this trick with my tongue that only 2% of the female population is supposed to be able to do. So I must, in theory, be a wonderful girlfriend and a fantastic lay. Except I think I forgot to mention this fact to the past four guys I've dated, because they didn't seem to think so. My highschool sweetheart, whose virginity I was kind enough to dispense with, thought I was a great lay. Until he had sex with Jenny-the-school-nymphomaniac-slut

and decided I was only about a 7 (on a scale of 1 to 10). I am intelligent enough to realize that it has something to do with putting theory into practice. My competency as a girlfriend/lay in theory is not translating to competency in the real world. In reality, my most successful and exciting relationships last approximately 2-5 minutes.

I'm talking of course about my road relationships. The open road, the asphalt mega-highways, the one domain where my competency in the real world is fully realized. Last week, I drove home to do some laundry at my mom's and receive standard form lecture about the sorry state of my love life, career, and relationship with father. The road trip to Great Falls takes about 30 minutes from the city on Route I-495, a highway well-traveled. Left lane, windows up, AC full blast, sunglasses on, bouncing to latest R&B jam (despite impending mom lecture), and in general looking hot as shit. Black Audi (Kat's, not mine) is zipping along a good 20 miles over the speed limit. Pass red Jeep in right lane. Casually glance over shoulder, as rule of Jeep states: "All Jeeps are owned by muscular males between the ages of 16 and 30." Blind, backward baseball cap, reflective wraparound sunglasses, tanned forearm resting on open window, golden retriever in passenger seat. (Note: Man with a pet; this is always a good sign. If a man can handle the responsibilities of pet ownership, i.e., walking, feeding, grooming, and general paying attention to, they can usually walk, feed, and groom themselves. This is good.) I slow down a bit, let him see me, speed

back up to 80 m.p.h. and toss hair over shoulder. In car, I am god, can be anyone, can snare any man's attention. Power seems to be restricted to car only: not good.

In peripheral vision, can see Jeep giving chase. Pulls up next to me and maintains speed, desperately trying to catch my eye. Allow few seconds to pass before casually returning glance. Lift one eyebrow over top of sunglasses and smile mysteriously. He grins and waves. Return eyes to road, but allow smile to remain, continue set speed. He honks horn and waves again. Wave back as if exasperated, but smile a bit wider, showing teeth. He motion for me to roll down my window. I ignore request. He motion vehemently and dog begins nosing past him to stick head out window. Laugh at dog, wave at boy, speed up. He follows. Sip in and out of traffic, past construction and moms in minivans and other such obstacles. The Audi outperforms the Jeep and so I must slow down just enough to make him think he has a shot.

Finally, my exit. I move into the right lane and begin to slow down. Jeep moves into left lane and keeps pace once again. He leans over and mouths "can I have your number," making a motion as though holding a phone to his ear. I laugh, roll my eyes, shake my head, and say "bye," exiting the highway. The Jeep doesn't follow. They never do, though sometimes I wonder what would happen if someone did. I'd probably do something stupid like fall in love. See, with these road relationships,

nothing ever goes wrong. They follow the standard format, are filled with excitement and sexual attraction, and end just at the right moment. My road relationships are always perfect. I always feel this heady rush, this surge of power course through my adrenal glands when they begin and am completely satiated when they are over.

Unlike my relationships existing outside my car. I have had too many serious relationships since I began dating at the tender age of 16 and in each on I thought myself in love. I guess I just love to fall in love. It's pretty much my favorite thing to do besides have sex. But maybe I should summarize my top three most-important-made-me-who-I-am-today relationships. I think you can learn a lot about someone by who they date. Of course, my relationships don't say anything good about me. Anyways, enough prefacing. In chronological order they are:

Kenny, the nympho fucker

Our first date was to a Caps game with his parents. Remember we were still freshmen in high school so the dating options were limited to wherever the parents would drive us. I wore a red sweatshirt and my hair in a ponytail (I was still getting over the tomboy awkwardness that came with my developing chest). After the game, we went into his bedroom and he took off my shirt and kissed my breasts through the nude color bra, my one-step-above-a-training-bra bra. He made damp drool marks on my

nipples and when he tried to put his hands down my pants, I grabbed his hand and put it back on my stomach.

We replayed this steam make-out session for about four months, and in that time we perfected out intimate little dance of pursue and retreat until we moved together like a pair of professional ballroom dancers. Breast kissing, hand down the pants attempts, hand redirection, repeat. It got so that I could predict word for word what he was going to say to me.

Typical scenario:

“Baby, you are so fucking beautiful,” says Kenny. We feel very adult at being able to say words like ‘fucking.’

“Kenny...” I begin, as he smoothes his hands down my stomach.

“What, baby? What’s the matter?” Hand moves back to breast. Kiss for five minutes. “Damn, I’m hard. Can you feel how hard you make me?”

“Yeah.” (As this happened before my extensive reading of literature relating to sex, I was not an expert in talking dirty).

“Let me touch you, baby. I need to touch you.” He unbuttons my jeans. I grab his hands hard.

“Kenny, stop.” I move his hands back up and quickly button my jeans. He sighs and rolls off of me.

“Dammit, Julia. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I just don’t want to.” I roll onto my stomach. I hug myself and can’t look at him.

“You never want to.” Kenny is thinking that I’m a prude, that all his friends have gotten into their girlfriends’ pants, that Jenny has been flirting with him all week.

Little did I know that this same scene would be played out in similar fashion in many future relationships.

Typical scenario:

“Baby, you are so fucking beautiful. Do you have any idea how much you turn me on?” We are probably both naked and sweaty by this time.

“Do I turn you on? Do I make you hard?” (Post sex education, hence expert at talking dirty).

“Oh yeah. Feel it.” Being less of a prude, I reach down and stroke him.

“Mmm. It’s so big,” I say, though this is usually a lie.

“Julia, I have to be inside you now.” He climbs on top of me and makes a quick attempt to arouse me with his large fingers. I grab his wrist and stop him.

“Don’t. Please stop,” I say. He acts as though he hasn’t heard and continues his version of foreplay. “Seriously. I’m not in the mood for that.”

“Dammit, Julia. What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing. I just don’t want to.” I roll onto my stomach.

At which point he says, in a tone reminiscent of Kenny, “You never want to.”

Kenny did teach me one important lifelong lesson: kill or be killed. He killed me. I was crushed, absolutely crushed when I heard he was banging Jenny two days after he dumped me. And the way he dumped me was so awful. He came over to his house with three of his basketball buddies and asked for his class ring back. He had given it to me a month ago and I had wrapped yarn around the inside to make it small enough to fit on my finger, just as every other girl in my grade did with their boyfriends’ class rings. Giving back that ring was so demoralizing. My finger felt weightless in its absence. Later on in high school I wore other boys’ rings, but I swore I’d never let my heart be broken again.

J.P., the psycho stalker

My first college boyfriend. We met in the campus laundromat. The damn washer kept eating all my quarters, so he offered to make room in his washer for my stuff. There’s something really intimate about watching your pink thong underwear wrestle around and around with a man’s flannel boxers. His story with J.P. is that he was super attentive, always sending me love notes and flowers and mix tapes he’d made for me with all my favorite songs, basically did everything a girl would love for a guy to do. Except I hated it. In the beginning, it was so romantic and all my girlfriends were so

jealous and everyone wanted to be me. But I felt like I was drowning in thick water, dragged down further with every sweet thing he did. It seemed like every token he gave me was just a symbol, a pretty way to brand his possession. J.P. made me cry. A lot.

So I did the absolute meanest thing I could think of to do. I cheated on him. Not just once either. I cheated on him every chance I got. And I was so good and so slippery that he never caught me. That's not to say he didn't know. He definitely did. But when he'd confront me, I'd tell him he was insane and make him feel bad for doubting me. My friends all hated me. They thought I was such a bad person, how could I ruin something so wonderful? Maybe they were right. I crushed him. I broke his spirit and probably turned him off women forever. He did everything right. And I sabotaged the whole thing. My shrink said it's because I'm scared to love, scared to feel something for anyone and that when it happens, I feel threatened and I run. I thought that sounded like a crock of shit and stopped paying her \$80 an hour to tell me so. The shrink has been J.P.'s idea anyway—he said I needed to learn how to give. Like I said before, kill or be killed.

Jean Luc, French artist (need I say more?)

He was here on a foreign exchange program. He smoked clove cigarettes (which I now think was merely a stupid French affectation), wore

tight, threadbare black denims, and taught me absolutely everything about sex. Our relationship, I have to say, was by far the sickest one of them all. Jean Luc and I were experts at mind-fucking each other. I think I read in some magazine that within the first thirty seconds of meeting someone, you establish the dynamics of power, who's dominant, who's weaker. I think we never really figured that part out, so instead we were constantly riding a power seesaw. One day he'd be on top, the next me (and I'm not talking about sex).

I spent the entire time I was with him trying to prove that I didn't like him as much as I did. Instead I acted like I didn't care what he did and went out of my way to try and make him jealous. But infuriatingly, he never rose to the bait. He just smiled that stupid smirk that only French people can and tsk-ed me. I cut myself off from all of my friends and spent every free moment with Jean. We made love in public places and hid ourselves away from the rest of the world. It lent our relationship this otherworldliness, so that even now the whole thing seems like it happened to somebody else. He left in the spring and said we'd keep in touch, but we both knew it wasn't true. I never heard from his again and whenever I think of him I picture us naked and silent in bed, the smoke from his cigarette drying on our damp skin, and neither of us wanting to make a move to hold each other. I don't know what else to say except that ever since then I've steered clear of anything serious. My instincts about men are atrocious.

So that about wraps up my infamous relationship disasters. I don't know that reviewing them has shed any light on me, but what's done is done and I'm done talking about it. Let's move on to the other major players in my life.

Sam

Sam is my best friend in the whole world. He's my "if you had to spend the rest of your life on a deserted island and could only bring one person with you" person. I think the thing that I love most about Sam is that he's my only normal friend. Everyone else I know seems to have some major personality flaw, either an eating disorder or a drug addiction or a mental illness of some sort. But Sam is just blessedly average. I get so tired of having to listen to everyone else's problems and play resident psychologist; but Sam does that for me. He's the only person I can talk to~ and I do, about anything. He gives me advice on men... and clothing... and school... and money... and everything else I worry about. I try to give him advice about women, but it never helps.

He's what my mother calls a late bloomer (I think he may still be a virgin). I know I was his first kiss: we were eleven and just wanted to see what it was like. I remember it was during the summer before we started junior high and my mom was watching soap operas on TV. We had come in

to eat the Jello I had made and on the way back out to the yard, we stopped into the room and watched for a few minutes.

He whispered, "I think kissing looks stupid."

"Me too," I said, sucking green Jello through my teeth. "Do you know they're mushing their tongues together?"

"No they're not."

I was already an expert on kissing. "Yes, they are. Can't you see how they're moving their heads all around? That's because they're frenching." My cousin Elaine had taught me that word. She told me that she and her boyfriend would french for hours.

"Why do they call it frenching?"

"I don't know. Maybe because French people kiss a lot." I hated not knowing everything. When it happened I usually made something up, the more ludicrous the better. I was suddenly consumed by a burning desire to do it. I wanted to french someone too so I could be one of the first girls in junior high to have done it. Things like that were very important. No one cared if everyone did something, but everyone paid attention if you were the very first person doing it.

"Hey Sam?"

"Yeah," he replied, still staring at the couple on TV.

"Wanna do it?"

"Do what?"

“French each other.”

“You mean you kiss me and I kiss you?”

“Yeah, genius. Just for a joke.” Sam would do anything I asked him to. If I wanted to shoplift something from the Kmart, Sam would be my lookout. If I wanted to jump off the roof of his house, he would jump too. I knew he could be talked into kissing.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” He ate his Jello thoughtfully while rolling the idea over in his mind. I didn’t wait for him to say yes. I dragged him back behind the reclining Lazy-boy in the living room and pulled us both to our knees.

“Ready?”

“Okay.”

I leaned in and put my mouth on his. We sat there with our open mouths pressed to each other’s. “Sam, you’re supposed to put your tongue in my mouth.”

“I thought you were going to do it.”

“No! That’s the boy’s job.”

“Well, you didn’t tell me that.” He leaned forward and jammed his tongue in my mouth. It was wet and warm and sticky from Jello. We waggled our tongues together, and I forgot to breathe. We quickly pulled apart, both panting, and I wiped my mouth on my arm.

I think that was the only time we French kissed. We still kiss all the time, or actually, I kiss him on the mouth all the time. Little smacking kisses of friendship. I kiss lots of my friends that way, guy or girl. I think it keeps people guessing and if there's one thing I love, it's being mysterious. I was reading the book *The Rules*, you know, the one written by those two ugly anti-feminists about how to trap men into marrying pathetic women everywhere. I was reading it for a laugh and the whole thing is a load of crap. Like Rule #13: Don't call too often and always be the first person to get off the phone and more ridiculous stuff like that. But one thing it advocates that I have to admit is really smart is this whole mystery thing. Basically they figured out one thing about men—they love the chase. Not that this is a difficult concept to figure out. It's basic Darwinism. If you play "hard to get mystery woman," they want you more. Who wouldn't want that?

Anyway, more on Sam~ his dad left him and his mom when he was nine and his mother is crazy. She works at the Hoss' Steak and Sea House, which is a really cheesy trucker rest stop about five miles down the interstate. She works the night shift, which starts at 8pm and goes 'til 4 in the morning. Then she passes out on the couch and sleeps all day. She wakes up in time to smoke a large joint (which she sometimes shares with me and Sam) and then goes back to work. The truckers love her. She got that waitress bleached-blond look and they all call her Mom.

Sam's mom is really poor too. They live about four blocks away from me, but they only can afford to live there because Sam's grandfather paid off the mortgage left by Sam's dad. It's been this way since we were kids so he's used to it, but I always feel guilty for having money when he never does.

Sam's mom is convinced that I'm his girlfriend. I'm not really sure why because we've been friends forever. But she always teases us about it.

"When are you and my boy going to stop playing around and settle down?" she asks about once a month.

"Next week, mom," Sam says, humoring her. We've both realized that trying to explain the nature of our friendship to her does no good, probably because she's never been "just friends" with a man in her life.

"Well hurry up then. I want to be a young grandmother." She'll cackle to herself at this, and Sam will roll his eyes at her. I guess in some weird way, she's not that different from my mom with the constant wedding planning. Why do parents want to see their kids married so young? I don't even want to think about it until I'm like thirty. I look at my parents and wonder what the hell is so great about being married anyway. All they do is try to make each other miserable at every opportunity. I can see the strain of a twenty-two year marriage to my mom taking its toll on my dad. He's been spending more time at work and when he's home, he has this faraway look in his eyes. I like to imagine that he's visualizing all

the various ways he could kill my mother and grandmother; that's usually what I'm doing.

I guess if I had to get married to someone, Sam wouldn't be a bad choice. We've joked about how no one can stand us except each other and how we'll have to spend our lives together. In all seriousness, Sam is going to be awesome for someone someday. He's smart as hell. He got a full-ride scholarship to school, which he had to work his ass off for. It was the only way he was going to be able to go to school with me, but he did it. He's studying biology and business. He thinks he may want to work either for a pharmaceutical company, make billion dollars and retire by 40, or be a poor veterinarian. He's not only smart, but he actually likes what he's studying. I on the other hand hate every class I'm forced to take and do well only by flirting my way through the semester.

Sam's also gotten a lot better looking in the past few years. He used to be short and kind of chubby with bad skin and bad hair and bad clothes. But sometime towards the end of high school he grew about 6 inches and lost the acne and I started picking out his clothes and getting him decent haircuts. It worked. All the girls in our high school started looking at him like they'd never seen him before. I'm very proud of my little protégé. Of course, he's still shy as hell (hence the intactness of his virginity), but that's not something I can really change. Sometimes I think maybe I'm the reason

that Sam can't get a girlfriend. Maybe I scare off all the potentials. I do kind of hog him all to myself, but he doesn't seem to mind.

Kat

My roommate. She's absolutely insane. She's a drama major. She believes in things like yoga and crystals. She is probably the one friend I have who is better looking than I am, but for some reason this doesn't bother me. We ended up living together sort of by accident. She was supposed to live in another apartment in my building and someone else got it before she could sign a lease, so she came knocking on my door and asked if I wanted to live with her, said that she wasn't noisy (lie) or messy (lie) or a smoker (lie) and that she never had boys over (super huge lie).

Perfect example of "crazy Kat," as Sam likes to call her: Last week we're sitting in the apartment flipping through women's magazine's and bitching about how everyone in Hollywood is anorexic when she jumps up, grabs my hand, and forces me downstairs where she flags down a cab. I have no clue where we're going, but when the cab comes to a stop I realize we're stopped in front of a tattoo parlor called Roxy's.

"Oh my god. Kat, don't do this," I begin, but she's manhandling me up the steps and into the smoky waiting room.

"Relax, Jules. I'm just getting a little piercing. Now help me pick out a tiny little ring," she breezes, moving to the display case of various studs,

hoops, and spikes. Several beefy men and a woman with sagging breasts are flipping through books and books of tattoos. I'm feeling desperately out of place. I sit and wait, my eyes traveling over the photos on the walls of people with fresh, blood-oozing tattoos and I can feel my stomach turn. Kat clutches a small gold hoop in her hand and sits next to me, casually thumbing through a copy of Details. "You have to hold my hand, okay?" she begs. I smile weakly and nod. I hate needles.

At last, Roxy, the "artist" enters the room in a beat up black tank top, his arms covered in ink. He surveys the room, settles on Kat and points to her. She dashes up to the front, knocking over the other people, who have been waiting twice as long. They glare at me of course. Roxy brings us to a back room and settles her into a chair not unlike the ones from a dentist's office.

"You could give fillings in a chair like that," I giggle nervously. Roxy shoots me a look and I shut up. He pulls on rubber gloves in quick efficient movements, preparing a table with several odd shaped metal instruments.

"Alright, honey. Which side?" He poises over her with a purple Sharpie pen.

"The left," she sighs, delirious on the excitement of having someone named Roxy about to push a needle through her body. He holds her chin in his huge hands for several seconds before placing a small dot on her left nostril.

“Oh shit. Kat. Your nose? Are you sure?” I had envisioned a tiny hole somewhere in her earlobe. There was a huge possibility that she could look horrible with a ring in her nose and bitch that I can be, I didn’t say another word. I wanted her to do it and I didn’t care if she looked bad. Roxy removes the sterile needle from its package and bends over her, obscuring my view. I hear her quick intake of breath and then he’s reaching for the ring from the tiny table. Kat reaches for my hand and squeezes it hard.

“Fuck that hurts,” she breathes. And then it’s over.

“It looks very sexy, babe,” Roxy smiles, peeling off the gloves. Roxy steps away and in that instant I can see that he’s right. *Holy shit*. Kat, rather than looking terrible like I had imagined looks even more exotic and sexy. The nose ring gives her an edge, makes her seem tough, and I’m suddenly overwhelmed with jealousy. I know a nose ring on me would look ridiculous, but I can’t help it. She looked better than ever, like it had been there all her life. My stomach turned.

“What? What’s that look for? Oh shit, Jules. Does it look bad? Where’s a mirror.” Roxy hands her a tiny mirror and she hesitantly raises it to her face. And squeals. “Oh my god, Roxy! You are a genius. It’s looks so fucking hot!” She presses a large tip into his hands and jumps off the table. I can do nothing more than smile weakly and follow her out the door.

So okay, maybe I am a little bit jealous of Kat. She is after all exactly the opposite of me in looks and personality, and her relationships with men always seem to go so smoothly, ending with hugs and phone calls months later, rather than the death threats and suicide attempts I always seem to get. But, Kat is fun because like me, she also knows how to flirt. Her type of flirting is a more ladylike stereotypical sort of flirting as opposed to my tomboy abrasively sexual flirting. She reeks of southern gentility and charm. She can also drink like a fish so I always have a regular date for parties. I don't know why Sam likes her, but for some reason they hit it off from the start. He thinks she's fascinating and she adores him.

So those are the major people in my life, at least the ones worth a page or so in my memoirs. On to the action.

* * *

Sam and I had decided that we needed a break from school and so we road-tripped back home for the weekend. It's funny. When I'm at school, I think about how relaxing it will be to go home and get away, yet the minute I walk in the door to my house, my stress level increases times ten. I go into parent overload. I think it's hard for my parents too because when I'm at college they have the house to themselves and when I come home it disrupts

their entire routine. By Saturday afternoon I was clawing the walls so Sam suggested we drive to the lake thirty minutes away.

I jumped out of the shower wrapped a towel around myself. Sam was picking me up for our trip to the lake in fifteen minutes. I went to my room and pulled out a white sundress that was too short to wear and dug through my drawers for some clean underwear. My mother walked in wearing her silk bathrobe, smoking a cigarette. She sat down on the bed and watched me. There's something disconcerting about your mother seeing you naked after you turn like sixteen. I think the last time my mother saw my breasts was the day she helped me pick out my training bra. I ignored her and pulled the dress over my head. It really was too short and I should have given it away last summer, but all my clothes were at school and it was warm outside. I braided my hair in two pigtails.

"Very provocative," my mother commented, inhaling slowly.

"Mom, do you have to smoke in my room?" She knows it drives me crazy.

"I'll open the window," she replied, getting up. I grabbed my make-up bag and sat down in front of the full-length mirror attached to my closet door. She sat on the window ledge and dangled the cigarette idly out the window.

"Where are you going?" I was busy putting gloss on my lips, so I didn't answer her. "Out with Sam?"

“Yup.”

“That’ll be nice.” She pushed a hand through her immaculate blond hair without ruffling it. “You know, he really does like you.”

“Well I should hope so, Mom. We’ve been friends for over ten years.” I rubbed lotion over my legs and braced myself for one of our infamous “chats.”

“No. I mean, I think he likes you as a woman.”

“Mom, Stop it.”

“Okay, okay. I won’t say anything. Except you shouldn’t flirt with him so much if you’re not interested in him that way.”

“Mom!” I was getting pissed because I hate the smell of smoke and any conversation in which my mother tries to tell me how to act.

“What?” she asked, the facetious kind of “what” where you know they know exactly what they’re doing to piss you off.

“I really think you’re the last person to give me advice about men, okay?” It was mean to say, given that I knew my mom and dad hadn’t been getting along, but I couldn’t stop myself. I watched her face crumple, and I sighed. She has a way of turning the tears on at the drop of a hat, and she cries so earnestly that you instantly feel about the size of a bug.

“Oh god. Mom, I’m sorry. Stop crying.” She continued to cry silently, and I felt the familiar irritation at her playing the victim. In the

grand tradition of women and passive aggressive behavior, my mother has a way of making me feel like a horrible person.

“I’m sorry... I don’t know why I’m getting so upset... I’m just oversensitive I guess,” she sniffled, lighting another cigarette. I sat down next to her and rubbed her back.

“It’s cool.”

She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her robe. “It’s just that your dad has been so distant recently. And he’s on the computer every night! I’d think he was having one of those online affairs, except I know that he’s just on there because he’s addicted to eBay.” The statement was so ridiculous it gave me pause.

“What makes you think that?”

“Well, he’s been buying all sorts of crap on these auction sites; stuff he doesn’t even need. Like knife collections, and belts made from alligator skin, and pinky rings. Pinky rings, for Christ’s sake!”

I understood her frustration—my dad is not a pinky ring sort of man. He’s a librarian. He has a charming collection of pullover sweaters in various knits and two pairs of loafers, one black one brown. But, he does not wear pinky rings.

I had showed my dad how to use the computer last summer and introduced him to auction sites when he was looking for an out-of-print movie. However, I’d noticed as well as my mom, that he was spending

copious amounts of time and money on absolute trash. He'd show me the latest item he was bidding on and it would inevitably be something stupid. I felt bad for my mom-- I mean, I'd be upset too if my husband were addicted to the Internet.

"Do you want me to talk to him?" It was my duty to ask, since I seem to have a way with my dad that my mother just can't match. He dotes on me, gives me whatever I want; comes to me for advice. There have been times where I've felt like the parent and he the child. It's a scary moment when you realize you're more mature than your parent. Of course, I'm sure that every person my age conceitedly thinks they're more mature than their parents are. But in my case, it's really the truth. Hey, you don't see me buying bowie knives online.

"No, no. Don't talk to him. I don't want to start something." She puffed nervously in her cigarette.

"Is everything okay with you guys?" I had felt a greater amount of tension in the house this weekend than usual.

"Yes, honey. Don't worry about it. I hate to dump on you when you come home to relax."

But you do it anyway, I thought, slipping on some scuffed flip-flops. She stood to go, then reached out and brushed some imaginary piece of lint off my shoulder.

"Thanks, mom."

“Have fun, sweetie. And put on some lotion if you stay out in the sun,” she said, and padded out of my room.

I heard Sam honk outside. Finally, freedom!

The first thing I did upon entering the car was mess up Sam’s hair. It was our usual routine: he’d comb his hair in a neat sideways part, and I’d muss it up rock star style. He raised a hand to smooth it back down.

“Don’t even think about it,” I bullied. He shook his head, but left it alone.

“Good morning to you too. Nice day for a picnic.”

“Well it hasn’t been a very good morning so far,” I whined. I pushed the passenger seat all the way back, cranked down the window, switched on the classic rock station and put my feet on the dashboard.

“Sick of them already?” he laughed.

“It’s not even funny,” I muttered, studying my chipped toenail polish. “How’s Brenda?” Sam’s mom was Brenda, even to him.

He sighed. “She’s good, I guess. That guy Pete, who always comes into the restaurant asked her to marry him again.”

“What else is new?”

“I don’t know. I think she’s thinking about it, you know. I’m thinking she’s tired of being alone.” He kept his eyes trained on the road, but I could hear in his voice that it bothered him. I popped off my seat belt

and curled up under his arm, resting my head against his chest. He yanked on a braid.

“Who in their right mind would want to get married?” Sam and I had discussed this topic a million times, given both our parents’ shitty relationships.

“Idiots,” he said. We drove on in silence, enjoying the music and the breeze coming in through the windows. “You know what I heard? Debbie Jessup and Mark Alexander got married two weeks ago.” Debbie and Mark had graduated high school with us.

“Holy shit! That makes like ten people in our class who are married. Doesn’t that freak you out?”

“I don’t know. I guess if they’re happy.”

“How can they be? We’re all just babies! I mean look at me—I can’t even decide what to wear in the morning. How could I possibly know who I want to wake up to every day for the next millennium?”

“Well if it were up to Brenda, you and I would be married.”

“Yeah, and if it were up to my mom, it wouldn’t matter who I was marrying as long as the wedding was big.” We lapsed into silence. Spring had just arrived and the weather was that perfect temperature where you can pull out your summer clothes and drive with all the windows down. I wished so hard at that moment that everything could stay exactly as it was, that nothing would happen to change the peacefulness that had settled in

the car. Every color seemed brighter, every word to every song on the radio took on a new level of significance. Sam's heartbeat under his cotton t-shirt was steady and slow. I breathed in his scent. It was the same way he had smelled since we were young, like soap and fabric softener and shampoo.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Sam asked, looking down at me. I hadn't realized that I'd grown quiet, but Sam could always tell when something was up with me.

"I don't know," I whispered. I felt tears burn the back of my eyes, but I didn't know why. He took one look at my face and switched off the radio.

"You okay? Is something wrong?" I shrugged, hating to cry because I know how much it bothers him. He drove on for another minute and the trees outside the window grew blurry. I blinked hard and felt a fat tear hit my cheek. He signaled and pulled to the side of the highway and turned off the engine. It was like once I started, I couldn't stop and I cried noiselessly.

"Jules, what's up? Are you sick?" He looked helpless, like boys do when girls start to cry for no reason.

"No, nothing's wrong. I don't know why I'm crying. I just feel so weird." I swiped a hand across my face. It was funny—I had gotten irritated with my mother for blubbering this morning and here I was doing the same thing.

“Weird like what?” Sam prompted. He took off his seatbelt, turned to face me and propped his elbow on the steering wheel.

“Like happy and sad at the same time.” Sam waited for me to continue.

“It’s nothing. I don’t know why I’m acting like such a baby. I’m just having a really nice day with you. And I’m sad because in a few more months we’re going to graduate and we’ll probably be in different cities and we’ll never get to do shit like this.”

“Like what?”

“Like picnics on the first warm day and bitching about our parents and all the other stuff we do together,” I hiccupped.

“Oh Jules. You’re being silly. We’ll always bitch about our parents together,” he assured me. Whenever I’m upset, Sam always tries to crack a joke, and it always pisses me off.

“No, just listen to me for a second,” I yelled and he got quiet. He gestured for me to continue. “Look, I know we’ve talked about this before, but I’m just scared out of my mind right now. I have no idea where the hell I’m going to be in two months and what I’ll be doing, and I hate everything I’m studying, and I just want everything to stay just like it is this minute. I don’t want anything to change.” I stared out the window at nothing, my heart pounding. Sam reached over and grabbed my hand.

“I’m scared too,” he said softly. He leaned his head back against the headrest and closed his eyes.

“I know you are, Sam, but at least you know what you want to do. You’re going to get some great job offer in some great city with a great salary and I’ll probably end up moving back here to listen to my mother and Lily bitch endlessly about my dad.”

“You’re wrong.” I turned to face him.

“No, I’m not. They always whine to me about him every minute I’m there.”

“I meant about the job offers. I didn’t tell you, but last week I got three letters of rejection in the mail from companies I had applied to.” His kept his eyes closed and his hand lay idly in mine. I was shocked. Sam had almost a perfect GPA, but even more than that, he really liked school and studying in a way I never understood.

“What did they say?” I asked, rubbing my thumb over the backs of his fingers.

“Oh you know, what you’d expect. Not what we’re looking for right now, we’ll keep you on file, blah blah blah, pretty standard rejection letter stuff.”

“Hey, at least you had the guts to apply to places. I’ve haven’t even done that much. And anyway, screw them. If they don’t know what they’re passing up, then they don’t deserve you. You have so much to offer—“

“No Jules,” he cut me off, “ you’re the one with so much to offer.”

“Right. Like my less than stellar grades, my incapacity to stick with any major.”

Sam pulled his hand out of mine. “You don’t get it. You think you have nothing, but you’ve got this incredible personality. You open your mouth and people listen. You tell a joke and everyone laughs. You get the quietest person in the room to open up and tell you their life story. People are drawn to you. Hell, I was drawn to you!” He smiled at me.

“Sam—“ I began.

“Hold on a second. I want to tell you this. I am so jealous of you. You have got that something that makes people want to be around you. I on the other hand have to work so damn hard to be social and even then I usually don’t get it right. Take high school for example. You think we were so popular and had all these friends, but they weren’t my friends. They were yours. They only gave me the time of day because they loved you, but I got to be your best friend.” He said this in a burst, and then was silent, like a balloon that had flown around the room, then lost all its air and fell. He gripped the steering wheel hard, his knuckles white.

“You are, you know.”

“What?”

“My best friend,” I said. He looked like he wanted to say more, but didn’t. I laid my head down in his lap and dangled my feet out of the window.

“Yes.” He smoothed my hair back from my face.

“Though god knows why you put up with me,” I laughed. He smiled and I relaxed.

“You’re just my arm-charm. If girls see you with me, they’ll think I’m a stud,” he said. I turned my face a bit him in the leg.

“Ow! Goddamn it, that hurt!” He pushed me off his lap to rub his thigh. He glared at me until I stuck my tongue out at him. “You do realize that you’re absolutely insane, right?”

“Pretty much.”

He shook his head and started the car, pulling slowly back onto the highway. He reached across the seat for my hand and I gave it to him.

“Don’t worry so much. We’re always going to be together. I can’t get rid of you. I’ve tried, but I’m just not that lucky,” he said. I smiled and didn’t say a word. He turned the radio back on and drove fast.

* * *

I had been anxious all week thinking about the next time I would have Dr. Sweet’s class. The more I thought about him, the more fixated I

became. I hadn't told anyone about my feelings either, which is not like me. Usually when I like someone, I tell anyone who will listen and inevitably the object of my crush will end up hearing about it and then he'll make a move. I've never liked someone and them not liked me back. Which I guess has made me pretty conceited. I wouldn't really know what it's like to be rejected or dumped because I'm the one doing the dumping.

Side note: I know everyone says it's horrible to be the dumpee, but I think it's much harder to be the dumper. If you get dumped, you can play the victim and feel bad about yourself and then stop feeling bad about yourself and hate the person who dumped you. All your friends sympathize with you and tell you how much they hated your significant other but didn't want to say anything. You can say anything you want about the person who dumped you; you can lie, gossip, slander, and humiliate them and there's nothing they can do about it (trust me, I know this from experience). Sure, they can deny it, but who's going to believe them? Trust me, the dumpees have it easy.

The dumpers on the other hand have to be the one to crush the feelings of the person they've been dating. They have to be the bad guy, the insensitive, selfish one, the quitter. Dumpers have to endure the condemnation of others, have to explain themselves constantly. I hate being the dumper. Sometimes to avoid having to do it, I'll behave like an ass for

extended periods of time until the guy breaks up with me. I know—mean, right?

But back to Sweet. His class meets twice a week at 9:30 in the morning, which usually is a struggle for me, but today I found myself wide awake before my alarm went off with my stomach in knots. I climbed out of bed and stared blindly into my closet for an outfit that would strike a nice balance between slutty and studious (not an easy feat). I settled on a black miniskirt and a red v-neck sweater. I slipped a headband into my hair and some Mary Jane shoes on my feet. Surveying myself in the mirror, I nodded at the catholic schoolgirl hooker looking back.

I arrived early and took the center seat in the front row. I felt my heart stop for a full minute when he walked in. Just so you understand why I could be attracted to him, here are some of the vitals. Early thirties, unmarried, blond in a surfer way, not a prep school way, muscled from weekend mountain biking, deep, sexy Jeremy Irons type voice. He looked up from preparing his lecture notes and smiled at me. I saw him double take and I consciously crossed my legs. Predictably, he followed the movement. Men of any age fall for that one.

“Julia, am I right?”

“Yes,” I said. He was speaking to me!

“Just checking. I’m usually really bad with names but I dated a Julia once a long time ago.”

“Did it end badly?” I flirted.

“Actually it didn’t.” God he had the longest eyelashes. Gypsy eyes, my mother would say. I watched him look me over, as though it were the first time he had actually seen me. “You know, I read your essay on religious ethics. I was impressed.”

“Really?” I had to remember to thank Sam later, since he was the one who had basically written the thing.

“Yes. I think it could use some revision in a few places, but it was a sound argument. If you have a few minutes after class, I could go over it with you” he offered.

“That would be great,” I gushed. Shit—too eager.

“Good.” Other students were trickling in and he studiously returned his attention to his notes, but throughout the lecture I could feel his eyes on me. I could have been imagining an interest, but I swear he seemed to be speaking directly to me, that we were the only two people in the room. I glanced around, but no one else seemed to notice. I leaned back in my chair as the rounded staccato of his speech filled the lecture hall. I suspected that his offer to stay after class was somehow more than the simple interest of a teacher for a student. At least I hoped it was. Oh God. But what if it wasn’t? What if he just thought of me as some brainless bimbo coed with boobs? I mean I know we’re nowhere close to being intellectual equals, but why can’t it happen? Maybe I should start wearing glasses. Like those thick

rimmed, black gen X-er glasses worn by pretentious lesbians and Marxists everywhere. Why can't I have "smart girl brown hair" instead of "Malibu Barbie blonde?" Why did I eat that entire package of Oreos last night?

"Julia?"

I glanced up from my notebook to find that somehow, in the course of my self-deprecating inner monologue, the entire classroom had emptied and Dr. Sweet was standing in front of me, waiting.

"Yes?"

"Your paper is in my office. Would you mind following me?"

Mind? Did he actually think I would mind? I'd follow him into the seventh concentric circle of hell if he asked. Must be cool.

"No problem," I said as I gathered my books. We walked slowly down the hallway and I swayed my hips as seductively as possible. When we reached the office he opened the door and I followed him inside. Even his office was sexy. Large hardback impressive looking books lined the shelves covering the walls. A poster of Miles Davis occupied the space behind his desk. The space was tiny, intimate-- the perfect setting for a student-teacher affair. There was only one chair, which he offered me.

"This is so great of you to do, really." Was that me drooling over myself?

"My pleasure," he replied. He stood behind the chair and leaned over my shoulder. I could smell him, his older man aroma. I swear I wanted

to lean my head back to rest on his chest and just inhale. “I made some notes, as you can see, places where I think you could push your argument harder. New transition here,” he said, thumbing through my paper.

“Yes. I did have a hard time making the ideas flow,” I said, bullshitting through my teeth. I just hoped he didn’t start asking me about the content. I hadn’t even read the final version Sam wrote.

“Don’t worry. Flow is one of the hardest elements of style to capture. I’m going to give this paper back to you to revise.” He handed it back to me and I allowed my hand to brush his. He jerked back just a hair, but enough that I could tell the chemistry wasn’t just on my part.

“How old are you?” The question popped out of my mouth before I could stop myself.

“I’m 31. An old man already,” he chuckled.

“31 is not old.” Where was this coming from? Who had taken control of my brain?

“Hmmm. There’s no way you’re any older than 21.” Shit. He guessed right.

“Actually, I’m 23,” I lied. Somehow an eight-year age difference didn’t seem as bad as a ten year gap.

“Still.” He had moved from behind the chair to perch a tight cheek on the edge of his desk. I gazed up at him, failing miserably to be mysterious. I felt his eyes travel over my face and I prayed to god that

whatever he saw there passed inspection. My hands were ice-cold, they way they always get when I'm nervous. He cleared his throat.

“Well, I have another meeting to get to so I'll have to cut this short. But seriously, feel free to stop by anytime to talk about class, or chat, or whatever,” he said, rising from the desk. By “whatever,” I hoped he meant hot sweaty make-out sessions. I stood up to pass by him and stumbled on the chair. Instinctively, his hands held my shoulders to steady me. I looked up and our eyes caught for a moment. Just as quickly, he let go and picked up his leather satchel.

“So, I'll see you in class,” he said and opened the door. The shift in mood was so startling, that it took me a full five seconds to realize that I was still standing behind the desk and he was waiting to leave. I quickly moved past him out the door. He locked it and began walking away down the hall. I turned in the other direction and started heading outside. I thought for a brief instant that he had turned around to look at me, but when I turned back to check, I saw only his retreating back.

That was weird, wasn't it? I'd never felt so unsure about a man's response before. Was he attracted to me, or just being friendly? He could have been expressing an interest, or I could be (as is my tendency) reading into each microscopic detail looking for hidden significance. I know it has “marked for disaster” written all over it in thick black permanent marker. I just really want him to like me. I knew exactly what I needed to do next:

rehash every single detail with my friends and ignore their advice to leave it alone.

* * *

Kat and I dragged Sam out to the bar that Friday night. I consider it a personal mission to ensure that Sam has a life outside of studying. If left to his own devices, I truly think he'd choose never to leave his apartment. I once read an article about some 65 year old janitor from Chicago named Henry Darger who wrote and hand-illustrated this genius 15,000 page fantasy story in his spare time that no one ever saw until he died and people cleaned out his apartment. I could so easily see how Sam could turn out just like that—a totally brilliant loner being amazing all by himself with no one to appreciate it. (I, on the other hand, could never be like that. I want instant recognition for every single thing I do and brag about myself whenever possible.)

We decided to go to The Panther Inn, the local college dive bar that Kat and I had been patronizing long before it was legal for us to do so. She and I had decided to dress up anyway in cute sundresses and tons of lip gloss. I was forced to admit we looked totally gorgeous. We grabbed our usual booth in the back left corner and ordered a round of tequila shots. It was our standard wind down from the week meeting and we always spent

the first hour discussing the events of our lives. During the week we rarely had a chance to hang out. Sam was always working and Kat and I were always procrastinating. I was bursting to tell them about yesterday's encounter with Dr. Sweet. I was nervous to share my crush with them because even I knew I was being ridiculous and they'd be the first to tell me. Still, they'd both asked me earlier in the week why I'd been acting so strange and being my best friends, I knew I'd spill everything. The shots arrived and we each raised our glasses.

"To surviving another week of hell," Sam toasted. We pounded the shots and slammed them back down on the sticky tabletop.

"Hey, at least we only have six more weeks to go," Kat said.

"Don't remind me," I muttered. "Graduation can't be that soon. I'm not ready to leave."

"Well, I sure as hell am," said Sam.

"Me too. Classes just seem so irrelevant right now. I mean what am I going to learn in my last month of school that I haven't learned in the four years I've been here?" Kat said, flagging down the waitress for more shots.

"Kat, I'm not going to get drunk tonight," Sam declared. "I have too much work to do."

"Sure, Sam. No problem. Just one more round," Kat said. They had this same discussion every time we went out and she'd always cajole him into keeping up with us. I smiled, loving that my two best friends loved

each other too. I had introduced them a year ago when I moved in with Kat and was surprised how well they got along, considering how different they were. I listened to them chat about the statistics class they shared with one ear. My mind was revolving over Dr. Sweet's incongruous behavior. The more time passed since we had met, the more I begin to think I had imagined the whole flirtation.

"Right, Jules?" Kat asked, and I realized with a start that I had been daydreaming.

"I'm sorry. What were you saying?" She and Sam exchanged a look.

"Alright. Out with it," Sam said.

"Out with what?" I asked.

"Whatever has you a million miles away."

"That obvious?"

"Yup."

I took a deep breath and tried to organize my thoughts. "Well, there's this guy," I began.

"Isn't there always?" Kat rolled her eyes.

"I know, I know. You're both probably sick and tired of hearing my shit week after week."

"We are, but tell us anyway," Sam said. Our shots had arrived and we silently raised glasses. I took the shot in a fiery gulp and wiped my eyes.

"I don't really know where to start."

“How about with a name,” Kat suggested.

“No. I don’t want to tell you.” I fiddled with a bar napkin, shredding it into tiny pieces.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re going to yell at me,” I pouted.

“Julia, this is already sounding bad,” Sam said, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“Okay, look. Remember how I told you I had a really cute, young ethics professor?”

“Oh no,” Kat whispered.

“No, let me finish. It’s just that I’ve had this huge crush on him for weeks now and I think he has one on me too. Well, at least I thought he did, but now I don’t know. I’m just confused,” I said in a rush.

“Well, something happened,” she guessed. She leaned forward in the booth.

Normally, I love telling them about my collection of men, because I love being the center of attention and I embellish and alter my stories to shock them or make them laugh. But this was different. I told them as simply and plainly as I could about our meeting and what he said and what I said and how he touched me. Sam shook his head back and forth the whole time, which pissed me off more than usual.

“You have to know without my telling you that this is a bad idea in every respect,” Sam began.

“I know, but—“

“No Jules. This guy is your professor, he’s older than you, and you don’t know a thing about him. I mean, does anyone else know about this? You could get yourself and him in trouble if you start talking.”

“I haven’t said a word!”

“I think it’s juicy,” Kat decided. “I mean it’s not like student and teachers never get it on. Besides, I think I’ve seen this guy and he it really hot.” I knew Kat would understand.

“Look, all I’m saying is that you don’t know this guy at all. What kind of creep flirts with his student?” Sam argued.

“So you think he was flirting,” I asked.

“I don’t know. That’s beside the point.”

“He was definitely flirting,” Kat said.

“See, I think so too!” I leaned forward and grabbed her hand. “You should have smelled this guy.”

Sam stood up. “I’m going to the bar. You two can talk about this without me, since it’s obvious you’re not listening to me.” Kat shrugged as he left.

“He’s mad at me,” I said.

“He’ll get over it. He’s just jealous cause he’s in love with you,” she said.

“Stop it. Sam’s not like that.”

“Whatever.” She’s convinced Sam is burning with a secret passion for me even though I’ve told her eight million times she’s wrong. She refilled the beer glass I’d been chugging from for the fourth time. The bar had filled since we had arrived and the music was blasting from the jukebox in the corner. I waved to a few people I knew and almost fell out of my chair. Dr. Sweet was standing in the doorway chatting with some students.

“Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod.” My hands began to shake.

“What? What is it?” Kat looked around the bar.

“He’s here. By the door. Black leather jacket.” I hunched down in the booth.

“Holy shit. Jules, he’s hot!”

“I know. What’s he doing now?”

“Nothing. He’s going to the bar.”

“Kat, what do I do?”

“Go over and say hi, moron.”

“I can’t. I don’t know what to say.”

“C’mon. You always know what to say,” she laughed.

“Sure, with dumb college guys. When I get within ten feet of him my brain stops functioning.”

“Well, you can always bullshit about class. Wait. I think he’s—“

“What?”

“He’s about to walk past.”

“Oh no.”

“Sit up straight.” I shot up in my seat. He moved through the crowd towards the back of the bar.

“Julia?”

“Hi Dr. Sweet.”

“Please, call me Richard. I hate all the doctor stuff,” he said, smiling.

“Right.” I sat stupidly waiting for the floor to swallow me whole.

Kat extended a hand.

“I’m Kat, Julia’s roommate.”

“Richard.”

“We were just talking about you actually,” she said. I kicked her under the table. “Julia was just telling me how interesting your class is.”

She returned the kick.

“Wow. That’s nice to hear.”

“Do you want to sit?” she invited.

“Um...”

“Go ahead. I’m just getting up. Julia, I’ll be back in a minute,” she said, winking at me before joining Sam at the bar. He looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

“Are you sure you want to sit with your professor?” he asked.

“No. I mean, yes! I mean, please sit down.” Idiot, I thought, gulping my beer. He took Kat’s seat and shrugged off his coat, his muscles straining under a tight cotton t-shirt. I had to drag my eyes back up to his face.

“Thanks. I’ve never been here before. Pretty popular,” he said, setting his glass down.

“Yeah. We come here every Friday. You know... relax... have a few beers.” Or ten...

“I can imagine. You may not believe me, but professors deal with a ton of stress too.”

“No, I’m sure.” We both drank, setting our glasses down at the same time. He smiled at me and I smiled back.

“So did your meeting go well the other day?” I asked.

“What?”

“Your meeting. I made you late I think.”

“Oh. No it was fine. I wished I’d had more time to talk with you, but I’m under review this year for tenure and I have meeting with other professors in the department to prepare my application.”

“Wow. Tenure. That sounds exciting.”

“Well, if I get it, it will be exciting. I’ll be the youngest professor in the department to have earned it. But it’s very competitive and there are a lot of people up for the position.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it,” I simpered. He laughed to himself.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that you sound so sure and I’m totally pessimistic. Anyway, I sick of thinking about it. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay.” I racked my brain for something witty, but of course, I came up empty. I caught Kat waving at me from the corner of my eye. She gave me the thumbs up sign. Sam just shook his head and turned back to the bar.

“So what are your plans after graduation?’ Oh god. Not this question. The one everyone asks that makes me sound like a scatterbrained loser for not knowing the answer to.

“I wish I knew,” I sighed, figuring truth was better than making up a plausible story.

“You look like you want to crawl into a cave for a few months and figure it out.”

“Yeah. That sounds about right,” I laughed.

“You know something? I didn’t know what I wanted to do when I graduated either. I was an art major in college and after I left I went to Europe and bartended in a pub in London. So don’t worry. You’ll figure it out.”

“I know. It’s just the not knowing that drives me crazy. It seems like all my friends are fielding job offers with signing bonuses and all I know is what I don’t want to do for a living.”

“But that’s a start. You know what? Something will come into your path. I can tell from your writing that you’re very intelligent.”

I felt guilty. Sam had written that last essay for me and here he was thinking I was a brain. “Yeah,” I began. He sipped from his beer slowly.

“I know,” he said.

“Know what?” I asked.

“That you didn’t write it.” My stomach dropped as though I were in an airplane that had lost cabin pressure.

“But—“

“Julia, stop it. I’m not an idiot.” I slumped in my seat and frowned. “Don’t look so upset. I’m not mad. It’s why I wanted to talk to you after class.”

“Oh.” That answered that. He wasn’t interested in me. He’d wanted to catch me cheating.

“You want to know how I knew?”

“No,” I muttered weakly. He threw back his head and laughed.

“Julia. You don’t give yourself enough credit. I knew because all your other papers were absolutely fresh and surprising and this last one was as dry as the textbook.”

“Really?” You don’t think I’m a brain dead bimbo?

“Really. You’re a very talented writer. When you do the writing,” he said sternly.

“I’m sorry. I totally fell behind and my friend helped—“

“Don’t explain. I gave it back to you because I want you to write it over again. I know you can do a great job. I look forward to hitting your paper in the stack of boring ones.” He ordered a beer for each of us off the waitress.

“Wow. That’s um... that’s awesome. I can’t believe you’re not mad.”

“You forget. I was an undergrad not too long ago.”

“I know. But you’re still being really cool about the whole cheating thing.”

“Let’s just say I have a special interest in you.” He sat back in the seat.

What the hell did that mean? “Oh. What does that mean?” Did that just come out of my mouth? I wanted to snatch the words back as fast as they had poured out.

“It means that if I were ten years younger, I’d probably be smitten with someone like you.”

“But you’re not,” I pouted. I flipped my hair back, my confidence returning now that I was in familiar territory.

“Julia—“ Our waitress returned at that moment with our beers. He reached into his jacket and pulled out his wallet.

“Dr. Sweet, you don’t have to pay for mine. I have a tab.”

“Richard,” he commanded and shoved the money at the waitress. He lifted his glass.

“To honesty,” he proposed. We touched glasses and took a long swallow. We were silent for a moment. I decided to go for broke, the alcohol loosening my tongue.

“Well, in the name of honesty, I have to say that I find you very attractive.” I watched for his reaction carefully. Depending on what he said I would know whether this was going to be at all possible or whether he saw me as a student and nothing more.

“You know, you could get us both in a lot of trouble for saying something like that,” he said quietly. I waited. “I am your professor. You’re my student.”

“I know.” My heart was racing. “In the classroom,” I whispered. He hadn’t moved a muscle, his eyes locked on mine. I took a deep breath and broke his gaze to stare at the tabletop. “Do you want to go for a walk?” I couldn’t look at him, I almost didn’t want to hear his answer. He didn’t give one. He picked up his coat and stood. He glanced around briefly and said, “I’ll be outside.” He pushed his way through the bar and walked out the door. Kat jumped down from her barstool and raced over to the table.

“What the hell were you two talking about for so long?” She clutched my arm, her nails digging into my skin.

“Hmm?” I asked dreamily.

“Don’t give me that shit! What did say? What did you say?”

“I don’t really remember.”

“Julia!” she wailed. I stood and picked up my purse. “Are you leaving now?”

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna go home. I just want to be alone for a minute.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow,” I smiled. I noticed Sam frowning at me. His eyes held mine steadily and I felt his disapproval down to my core. I broke away. “Make sure Sam gets home okay, will you? Tell him I’ll see him later.” She backed up.

“Okay. Walk safe.”

“I will.” She hugged me tight and kissed my cheek. I turned towards the door, not really knowing what I was walking into.

He was leaning against a tree, his hands buried in his coat pockets. I walked up to him, close enough that I could feel the heat of his body. He started walking slowly and I fell into step next to him, our shoulders touching. We didn’t feel the need to talk. Words would complicate things too much. It seemed better just to feel. He headed away from campus, towards my apartment. The night was warm, just a slight breeze floating in

the trees. We turned one corner, then another, moving into a quiet residential neighborhood. A cat ran across the street, but except for that, we were alone. We walked a few more feet and then stopped; still without communicating. He leaned in towards me and moved a strand of hair out of my face.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered. I reached out to capture his hand.

“Come with me,” I said and led him through side streets towards my apartment. He held my hand tightly, lacing his fingers with mine. Our strides matched perfectly, hips swaying in a gentle side-side motion, brushing. I stopped outside my apartment. He seemed to know where I had taken him. I walked around the back to the side door. He leaned against the brick wall and stared down at the bump and curve of our knuckles, clasped loosely. I moved in front of him and put a hand on his chest inside his jacket. His heartbeat was fast and irregular and his chest moved rapidly with his breath.

“Julia,” he said, as if to warn me of something, but I didn’t give him the chance. I reached up and pulled his head down to meet my hot mouth. Our lips met hard, teeth lamming and tongues already exchanging. Instantly we gentled, tasting each other, biting softly. He sucked my lower lip into his mouth and I moaned. His kiss was expert, unlike the sloppy mashing of fraternity boys and football players. He was seducing me with

his soft lips and gentle pressure, a pressure so light I was afraid to move for fear it would end. But it didn't. It went on and on, for minutes we kissed until it was no longer just the taste of him in my mouth, but the taste of us. His hands reached out to hold my face and he lifted his head to gaze at me.

“Richard,” I whispered.

“Say my name again.”

“Richard,” I repeated, the syllables rolling smoothly over my tongue. He bent to kiss me again, this time longer, more intense. I could feel his arousal through his denims and my dress and I wanted him as I had never wanted anything else in my life. I didn't feel like myself. I didn't recognize this feeling of being completely out of control, but I liked it. He broke away roughly and put me away from him.

“Is this where you live,” he asked. I nodded, reaching in my bag to pull out my keys.

“Do you want to...” I fumbled, my hands shaking. He took the keys from me gently, selected the right one on the first try and opened the door. He guided me inside but stood on the step below.

“Not tonight,” he said. “Not so fast.” I think I fell in love right there, with the light from the hallway softly bathing his face. He leaned in and kissed my forehead briefly. “Sleep well,” he said and closed the door between us.

* * *

Every time I hook up with a new guy for the first time I sleep the sleep of the dead. I know some girls stay awake all night, replaying the scene over and over again in their mind, but I just fall right into bed and into dreamless sleep. I woke up the next day at 7am, and found I couldn't go back to sleep. I decided I would make breakfast for Sam. It was obvious that I had pissed him off last night by ignoring his advice about Dr. Sweet, but after what had happened-- once he and I left the bar, I knew that Sam was, for once, totally wrong. Ordinarily, I'd agree that getting involved with your professor is wrong, but in this case, there was something real there. He had felt it; I had felt it. I wondered how long it would take before we started having sex.

I went to the market across the street from my apartment and the necessary ingredients and a three-pack of condoms (I figure in this day and age its as much the girl's responsibility to protect herself as it is the guy's). Maybe the condoms were a bit optimistic, I mean, maybe he's not the type of guy to have sex on the second date, thought I guess last night couldn't really be counted as a first date. I am a slut in the truest sense of the word-- I had hooked up with him and we haven't even been out on a date yet. I pulled out my spare set of keys to Sam's place and let myself in. He lived in

a tiny studio with his pet mouse, Spike. His place “decorated” in typical college boy fashion; a worn blue sofa, some jazz cds stacked on a folding chair, an empty fish tank that held plastic fish tied with string, a poster of Van Gogh’s self-portraits. Though I felt much more comfortable in my place with overflowing ashtrays, empty beer bottles, and women’s magazines, Sam’s place was my second home.

I went into the kitchen and made him scrambled eggs (his favorite) and pancakes in the shape of Mickey Mouse like his mom used to make for him. I cut and sectioned the grapefruit and poured a huge glass of orange juice, arranging it all on a wicker tray. I carried it to his room and set it on the small dresser next to his twin bed.

His eyes were scrunched tight and he had a frown on his face. Asleep and frowning—this epitomizes Sam to me. Can’t relax even when he’s unconscious. I kicked off my shoes and jumped on his bed, threw back the covers and curled up next to him.

“Jesus, Jules,” he moaned, turning his face into the pillow. I poked him in his side.

“No you can’t go back to sleep. You have to get up and play with me.”

“What time is it,” came a muffled response from under the pillow.

“I don’t know. It’s late. You shouldn’t sleep the whole day away, or you’ll die sooner. I think I read that somewhere.” I picked a piece of toast of

the tray and began munching. He rolled over and propped himself on one elbow.

“It’s fucking 8am. What the hell are you even awake for?”

“Because it’s a pretty day. And besides, I made you breakfast and you haven’t even acknowledged it.”

“I’m sorry. It was very nice of you-- you’re spilling crumbs all over the sheets!”

“That’s the point of breakfast in bed! You’re supposed to make a mess and get crumbs everywhere and spill stuff.” He sat up and reached for the tray.

“Well, don’t spill stuff in my bed. I don’t want to clean it up later, and I know you won’t.” He popped a pancake into his mouth.

“You’re grumpy this morning,” I pouted. He grunted.

“I’m hung over.”

“Well it’s not my fault you have the tolerance of a sea slug. Why’d you drink so much anyway?”

He dropped his fork onto the plate with a clatter. “I don’t want to talk about last night.”

“Well, I do. I know you’re mad at me so you may as well admit it.” He ignored me and resumed eating. “Don’t you even want to hear about my night? It’s 8 a.m. and I’ve been waiting all day to tell you.”

“Not particularly,” he said.

“It was absolutely amazing. One of the best nights I’ve ever had. We talked and talked about everything—oh! And he knows I cheated and he wasn’t even mad.”

“Of course he wasn’t mad, he’s trying to get into your pants. Assuming he didn’t already.” I hit him in the arm.

“For your information, all we did was kiss. But he does that better than anyone I’ve ever been with, so I can imagine that when we do have sex it’s going to be awesome.” I threw myself prone on the bed and stretched my arms behind my head.

Sam put the tray on the floor and lay back down next to me, our shoulders touching. “So, you’ve decided then.”

“Decided what?”

“That you’re going to sleep with him. That you’re going to start an affair with your professor,” he said quietly.

“Goddammit Sam. You make it sound so sleazy. I really wish you could have seen the way he treated me last night. I got way more respect from him than from half the guys I’ve been with.”

“You are such an idiot.”

“Why? Why am I an idiot? Because I like a guy and he likes me back? Does that make me an idiot?”

“Yes it does when that “guy” is your professor.”

“So what? It’s not like he’s sixty years old or anything.”

“I just think you’re clueless when it comes to guys. You don’t know anything about this guy.” He shoved his hand through his hair and sighed.

“I know that he’s smart and attractive and young and interested in what I have to say. He makes me feel important.”

“Well, he may respect you and all, but I sure as hell won’t if you go through with this,” he said. I felt the words like a kick to the gut. Sam is never cruel and would rather cut off his arm than hurt me.

“I hope you don’t mean that,” I whispered.

“Look, I can see where this is leading, even if you can’t. Do what you want, but I’m not going to sit here and watch you make another relationship mistake. I’ve stood by you through every mistake you’ve ever made and held you hand and helped you figure out how to get out of it and I’m tired. I’m not going to clean up your mess this time.”

“Sam...” I reached over and pulled his back into my chest so that I was spooning him. He reached for my hand and held it.

“I’m just tired, Jules,” he said softly. I squeezed him tight.

“I won’t ask you to clean up anymore messes. I’m sorry I make you so tired.” He turned over and hugged me to his chest.

“Don’t sound so sad. You’re still my best friend, idiot or not.”

“Hey thanks,” I muttered, but smiled into his chest.

“I have some news to tell you too,” he said, sitting up. I sat up too.

“Well?”

“I met a girl last night.” I couldn’t help the odd sensation of jealousy that rose up in me.

“Oh yeah?” I asked weakly.

“Yeah. Her name is Kelly and she came up to me last night at the Inn and just struck up a conversation.”

“Wow, that’s great, Sam.” But it wasn’t great. I hated when Sam started liking someone and I always hated the girl.

“She asked me to go hiking with her today. Actually, I’m supposed to meet her in an hour.”

“So what’s her story? Does she seem cool?”

“I think she is. She’s gorgeous. Long black hair, green eyes.”

“And she just came up to you? Out of the blue?”

“Just came up and started talking to me. And it was so easy to talk to her. You know how bad I am at all that small talk, the ‘get to know you’ shit, but with her, it was like we just skipped over that part. We were talking like you and I talk. It was great.”

I hated that they talked like he and I talk.

“I really think you’d like this girl. I mean, I don’t know how anyone couldn’t. She’s really nice,” he gushed.

“Well, we’ll see. I’m sure she’s fine.” I couldn’t keep the edge out of my voice, but luckily, Sam was so engrossed in Kelly-land that he didn’t notice. I had to get out of there. “Look, I’m sure you want to get all hot and

nice smelling for your date with Kelly so I'll just let myself out," I said, rising and sliding my shoes on.

"Okay. I'll talk to you later to let you know how it went," he called after me as I walked towards the door.

"Yeah, that sounds great. I hope you have fun," I said, though secretly I hoped he wouldn't. I hoped she would twist and ankle or it would rain on them or something.

"Oh. Thanks for breakfast," Sam said, waving at me.

"Don't mention it." I hate the name Kelly.

* * *

I'd been fucking Dr. Sweet for about three weeks, when I realized that he was a horrible lay. Not like a bad lay or even a passable lay (I've had both before). No, he's just horrible and for the following reasons:

- 1) He has yet to give me an orgasm.
- 2) He has yet to realize that he hasn't given me an orgasm.
- 3) When he orgasms he makes this high-pitched barking moan. Like a monkey.
- 4) He wipes himself off when he's done. With anything—socks, boxer shorts, balled up tissues, and then tosses it to me.

I believe number four is the killer for me. I could even deal with having to fake it, but the sock thing... Why do guys do that? Why do they feel the

need to wipe themselves clean after sex? I mean, it's not like I'm dirty. Kat and I have engaged in many conversations about why men do it. The best we can come up with is that it must have something to do with masturbating when they were young. You know, doing it quietly in the bathroom or bedroom, really fast in case someone was coming. The wiping must be some remnant instinctual "hide the evidence" sort of gesture that while may have been necessary when they were twelve, is now just disgusting.

Men do some of the strangest things during sex. I know this not only from my own experience, but also from the collective experiences of other girls who love trashing their men behind their backs. One girl I knew was dating a guy who liked to masturbate with olive oil. She said he always smelled like a Tuscan restaurant. Kat said once she slept with a guy who would get turned on when she wore his steel-toe army boots to bed. One time I had sex with a guy and he called me "mommy."

I found out yesterday that Dr. Sweet gets turned on when I argue ethics with him.

"We shouldn't be doing this," he sighed (this said while I'm giving him a hand job in the classroom twelve minutes before class begins).

"Why not? Aristotle always says our actions should be governed by the ultimate goal of being happy." I pushed him to lean against the big oak desk.

“Yes, but he also thought this was best achieved through uhh-- moderation, remember?” His hand moved into my hair and settled hard on the back of my neck.

“No, I must not have been paying attention that lecture.”

“This is wrong.”

I was getting tired of his eruptions of conscience. “Okay, fuck Aristotle! How about a utilitarian viewpoint then.”

“Yeah, baby?” I could hear that he was getting turned on and I timed my motions perfectly. Cosmo magazine had taught me well.

“Well, correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the utilitarian strategy to quantify all the pros and cons, and see which side wins?”

“EEuuhhhhhmmmm.” He threw back his head.

“Uh huh... alright, pro: I’m giving you a hand job.”

“Con: I’m not doing anything to you.”

“Don’t worry, I’m getting turned on. Pro”

“Okay, con: we could get caught.”

“Pro: we could get caught. Don’t you find this at all kinky?” I was getting bored so I sped up my hand motions.

He groaned, spent.

“See? Now wouldn’t you say we chose the greater good?”

“Damn, babe. You are absolutely fantastic at that.”

“I know.” He zipped up his pants and moved behind the desk. He started shuffling papers and organizing his notes for lecture. I stood there stupidly and watched him. I was a bit perturbed. He didn’t even thank me; at least guys in college are appreciative when girls do something like that. He was acting like this was just your typical “student hand-job in the middle of the afternoon.”

“So do you want to get some dinner later? Or maybe a drink tonight?” I could have kicked myself as soon as the words left my mouth. I sounded like one of those needy women; you know, the ones who end up on Oprah crying about how their man isn’t meeting their needs. I hate those girls.

He didn’t even glance up. “I don’t know. I’m kind of busy tonight.”

“Yeah, actually I am too. I have this thing to go to that I forgot about. One of those things where you commit and then you forget all about it. But I should go, I guess.” I was blabbering on and on. I couldn’t stop the asinine ramblings from pouring forth in gushing waves.

“Hmm?” He was completely engrossed in reading the papers on his desk.

“I was just saying that tonight I’m going to have an orgy with my girlfriends.” I hate it when people don’t listen to me. It almost never happens.

“That’s nice, babe.” He glanced up and flashed his dimples at me.
Damn it. Why does he always have to look so hot?

“Richard, you weren’t even listening to what I said.” I sounded like a petulant whiny baby, even to myself.

“Hmm? What? Oh—I’m sorry. Just got a lot on my mind.” He put down his papers and held out his arms. I inched closer, not wanting to be so easily won. He reached out and pulled me under his arm, planting a kiss on my forehead. I love it when guys do that. “Listen. I know I’ve been busy. But how about we go away next weekend. Just you and me, maybe to some quiet little bed and breakfast, where we can make all the noise we want.” He gave my butt a pat and let me go.

“Sounds nice.” I fiddled with a hangnail.

“Good. You should probably sit down now. People will be coming in soon.”

“Right.” I sat down and got out my spiral and pen, but I found I couldn’t take a single note during lecture. Instead, I thought about how impossible it was going to be to wait for the following weekend to arrive.

There’s something about him that I hate. Or maybe it’s not really something about him, but rather, something about the way I am when I’m around him that I hate. See, the thing is, I never act this way around guys. Usually I’m the one in control, the one calling all the shots. I’m the one who decides when we’ll hang out and where. I decide when to move things up

or down a degree. I like keeping them guessing about everything, but most especially about how I feel. If they aren't sure about the depths of my feelings, they'll work that much harder to get me to reveal that I like them.

But with Richard, I always seem to be doing the chasing. He calls me; I meet him. He breaks the dates; I feel like shit. He keeps me by the phone in case he decides he wants to get together. For Christ's sake, I don't even have his phone number! I'm completely obsessed. I spend hours thinking about what outfit I'll wear on our next date. If I were a little more stupid, I'd wonder why I was doing this. But there's something about him. Maybe it's that he keeps me guessing for once. As much as I hate it, he's the first guy that's ever been able to make me want more than I'm getting, and I can't seem to get enough of it.

* * *

I'm depressed. Nothing in my life is going the way I want. All I've been doing for the past two weeks is reading trashy romance novels, avoiding my schoolwork even though finals begin in a few weeks, eating like a pig, and generally letting my looks go to shit. The whole looks/hygiene thing is really a bad sign, I think, because I'm usually obsessed with myself. To bring you up to speed:

- 1) I still have no clue what I want to do with my life.

- 2) My mother has called me every day for the past week to bitch to me about my dad's new motorcycle, and how he's going to kill himself.
- 3) My dad bought a motorcycle (which I feel can only be a bad thing).
- 4) Dr. Sweet has continued to be a bad lay, but he's also been remiss in calling me...
- 5) Both Kat and Sam have found really great people who they like and more importantly, who like them back.
- 6) I'm jealous of both of them.

So I think that's the laundry list. Now you know why I've eaten nothing but reheated pizza and a total of four pints of Ben and Jerry's Rocky Road. It was Saturday night, I was all set to read my Cosmo (and curse all the models who are thinner than me) when Kat plopped down on the bed next to me and dropped the bomb.

"I'm in love," she sighed, dramatically flinging a hand over her eyes.

I sat upright and tossed the magazine to the floor.

"Oh my god, I did not just hear you say that."

"It's true. I am. I am in love," she giggled.

"Wait a second. Kat, the eater of men, the girl who hates the word monogamy, this girl is in love?" She lit a cigarette and I passed her an empty cup from my bedside table.

"I know. Disgusting, right? I'm not entirely sure how it happened."

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“Well, it was kind of an accident.”

“Like, oops I accidentally bounced a check, or oops I accidentally locked my keys in the car?”

“No, you idiot.”

“So it was more like oops I accidentally tripped and fell in love?” I lay back on the bed and propped my head on a pillow.

“I just mean that I didn’t expect it happen. I wasn’t planning on it. Shit, we graduate soon and I’m leaving for New York.”

“So why now?”

“He’s just the absolute best part of me. He makes me feel like I’m the most special person in the world.”

“Right. So who is this guy? Do I even know him?” She swung a pillow at my head.

“Jules! It’s Pete! Who else would I be talking about? I swear it’s like you don’t even listen to me. I’ve only been talking about him for forever.”

“You’ve only known him like two weeks. How in the world can you be in love?”

“I told you, it just happened. I just love the person I am when I’m with him.”

“Kat, have you ever thought that maybe its just sex? I mean, not that you don’t like him and everything, but maybe it’s all the physical stuff that’s fooled you into thinking you love him.”

“Look, I don’t have to explain it to you. I mean, how could I? You’ve never loved anyone in your whole life! I just thought that you’d be happy for me.” She got up off the bed and left the room to stomp down the hall. I heard her door shut softly.

I am such a bitch. I can’t even let my friends be happy if I’m not happy. I had to add to my list.

7) My roommate hates me.

I tried to keep reading my magazine, but I felt horrible. I walked down the hall and tapped on her door.

“What?”

“Can I come in?” There was a long pause before she said, “fine.” She was lying on her stomach writing in her journal, probably writing about how shitty her roommate is.

“Kat, I’m sorry. I was being mean.”

“Yes, you were.”

“I didn’t mean it.”

“I know.”

“In spite of what you may think, I am really happy for you.” She put her pen in her book and put it aside.

“Well, I’m sorry I said those things to you too.” I sat on the bed and she put her head in my lap. I idly smoothed her hair back from her face.

“Don’t be. You’re right. I’m completely the asshole here. I haven’t been in love before. I wouldn’t know it if it smacked me in the face. But you deserve it. You’ve had your share of assholes. I can’t believe I didn’t know how far things had gone with Pete.”

“Well it’s not like you’ve had a whole lot of spare time to talk. Every time I try to talk to you, you’re on your way out to meet up with Richard, or you only want to talk about what you did last night with him. I guess I got tired of trying to be heard.”

“Have I really been that bad?”

“Yes. But it’s okay. I understand. It’s exciting.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I sighed. “It’s not really as exciting as I thought it would be.” She rolled over in my lap to look up at me. “Don’t worry. It’s not big deal.” I played with her hair and she closed her eyes.

“Jules?”

“Yeah?”

“He’s wonderful.” I smiled and plopped a kiss on her forehead.

“Well, why don’t we get the hell out of here, get some drinks, and you can tell me all about him. We’ll celebrate or something.”

“Let’s do it.”

We chose a pricey restaurant past campus that we had heard served great martinis. It was over our budget, but we were both horrible with money and felt like really celebrating. We sat in a corner booth and sucked down a few apple martinis. I was happy because the tension I had noticed between us over the past few weeks melted away and we were laughing like old times. It was obvious that she really was in love. I could see it in her face. Her skin looked softer, her cheeks pinker, her eyes brighter. I had always thought that love made people miserable, like my parents, but maybe it was just marriage that did that. Kat looked even more beautiful than usual and I felt a deep sadness settle down low in my chest just looking at her. I wanted to be rosy and smile at nothing and gush forever about someone. I had thought that someone might be Dr. Sweet, but looking at her, I realized that what I felt for him was mostly lust or maybe some attraction to the danger of it. I wanted someone who I could talk to and cuddle with, not meet in the backseat of a car between morning and afternoon classes for a quickie.

I let Kat ramble on about the way Pete held her cheeks in his hands before giving her soft little kisses and the way he wanted to listen to her talk about herself for hours, and the way he would laugh at her jokes, even though knowing her, I'm sure they were horrible. I smiled as she told me this, quietly sipping my fourth drink. But I could feel that my smile was strained and tight. I hoped she was too delirious to notice. I didn't want to

be a bad friend. I didn't want her to have to ask me what was wrong and then listen to me feel sorry for myself. I zoned back into the conversation.

"Julia, his hands are so big. When he wraps them around my waist, I feel small and delicate and I've never felt that way before." I took a large swallow from my glass and felt my throat choke. Hot tears were filling my eyes and I didn't want her to see so I jumped up.

"I have to go to the bathroom. I'll be back in a sec."

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked, worriedly.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I just need to pee," I assured her, turning before she could see me cry. I pushed through the crowd of people standing around the bar and headed towards the neon restroom sign, my eyes training on that and nothing else. An obviously drunk redhead in a tight black halter dress and stilettos stumbled into me and I lost my balance. I fell down hard on one knee and pushed my hair out of my face. She reached down to help me up, her heels narrowly missing my hand.

"Oh, honey, are you okay? I didn't see you there," she drawled with thick southern sweetness. I stood up quickly, embarrassed. I turned to face her.

"I'm fii—" The words died on my lips as I realized that the man's hand resting on her butt belonged to my father.

"Oh my god," he said and dropped his hand from the woman as though he had been burned.

I took a step back and opened my mouth to say something, but my tongue was large and cumbersome in my mouth. “Dad?” I managed, sure I was wrong, sure that this wasn’t my father in a bar in a leather biker jacket with whore red lipstick all over his mouth.

“Julia, what are you doing here?” He kept inching further and further from the woman.

“What am I doing here? Dad, what the fuck is going on?” My heart was pounding in my chest and I could feel the alcohol and vomit pool in the back of my throat. I started breathing hard, my nostrils flaring as I watched the redhead look from him to me and back again. Sensing that something was very wrong she reached for her purse.

“I think I’ll just step into the powder room,” she whispered. My hand snaked out and held her arm in a deathgrip.

“Don’t fucking move,” I growled. I spun her to face my dad. “Who the fuck is this?”

“Julia, stop it. You’re behaving like a child. This is just a co-worker of mine,” he said.

“You stop it!” I screamed. “Don’t fucking lie to me! This is not a fucking librarian! This is a fucking whore!” I was screeching at the top of my lungs, my nails digging into her porcelain white skin, hard enough to bruise. He slapped me hard across my face, stinging tears to my eyes. He

gasped as he realized that he'd hit me, something he's never ever done, even when I was little. I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

"Jules?" Kat was beside me, her hand wrenching mine off the woman. I spun around to her, but the movement was too much. I threw up on my shirt and shoes, dizzy and crying. She put her arms under mine and dragged me to the ladies room. She opened a stall and guided me to my knees.

"Oh my god, oh my god," I repeated, incapable of saying anything else. I vomited again and again, until there was nothing but bile burning the back of my throat. All throughout I sobbed. Kat, kneeling behind me in the stall, pulled my hair off my face and secured it with her hair clip. She alternately rubbed my back and pressed damp paper towels to my face and neck. I don't know how long I was in there, but I could hear my dad pounding on the door, calling my name. I rested my head on the rim of the toilet, feeling its coolness cover my hot cheeks. Kat didn't say a word, just shushed me and held me and called me sweetheart. When my stomach stopped the violent heaving, she helped me to stand and guided me to the sink. I took one look at myself in the mirror, and not recognizing the girl I saw there, burst into a new round of tears. She sponged the mess off of my clothing.

"Jules, I'm taking you home."

"No! I can't go out there. I don't want to see that bitch."

“Baby, it’s okay. We’ll just walk right out and no one will see you, okay?” She held me and pushed open the door. My father was pacing on the other side.

“Julia! Please, I need to talk to you.” We pressed past him out the double doors of the restaurant. The cool air chilled the perspiration soaking my skin and goose bumps covered my arms and legs. He followed us out into the street.

“Julia. Stop. Please stop. I need to explain,” he begged and I could see tears streaming steadily down his face. I stopped and stared.

“Julia, let’s go,” Kat said. I pushed her off, my eyes never leaving my father’s face.

“Julia...” he reached out as if to touch me. I stepped back.

“What? What in the world could you possibly say to me, *Dad?*” I sneered, drawing the last word out sarcastically.

“Please. Please.”

“Please what? Please don’t tell Mom? Please don’t hate you? Guess what? You’re a little late for that.”

“Julia, you don’t understand,” he blubbered. I walked to the car and climbed into the passenger seat.

“Didn’t you hear me, you asshole? I hate you! I hate you!” I screamed, not caring that I knew my words were killing him.

“Julia, stop it,” Kat said.

“Fine.” I slammed the door between us. He tapped on the window, but I wouldn’t look at him, not even when Kat started the car and we drove away.

On the way home, I made Kat pull over twice so I could lean out the door and throw up. It was as though every emotion I had was pooling in my stomach and I had to expel them. I raged, cursing him, cursing her. Every time I played back her saccharine voice, I wanted to break something. I stormed into the apartment, slamming the door, then opening it to slam it harder. I was out of control, unable to think about anything except how many times they had fucked each other, and where, and if it had ever happened in my mother’s house. The thought of my mother drained my anger completely. I sat down heavily on the couch and Kat sat next to me. I think she was scared to talk to me so she just held my hand.

“Do I tell her?”

“Your mom?”

“Yeah.”

She sighed. “God, I don’t know. What do you think?”

“I have no idea how I would say it to her.”

“Maybe you should wait then, you know, until you’re sure.”

“It’s going to kill her.”

“Maybe she already knows,” Kat said.

“I don’t think so. My dad isn’t really the type to have an affair. Well, I thought he wasn’t.”

“Julia, I’m so sorry. I don’t even know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say.” My foot was shaking uncontrollably, my energy level through the roof.

“Do you want me to call Sam?” she offered.

“No. Don’t. I’m sure he’s with Kelly. I don’t want to drag him away.” Actually, I didn’t want to see him because I was ashamed. Sam loves my dad—he’s sort of filled in as a replacement father for him, and I didn’t want to tell him because I knew it would change his opinion. It made me angry that I was still trying to protect my father-- it made me feel weak. I jumped off the couch and lit one of Kat’s cigarettes.

“Julia, don’t smoke. You hate it.”

“Not right now I don’t. Please—I need it.” I puffed, feeling the nicotine hit me hard. It made my head feel light, like it was floating off of my body. I grabbed my coat and keys. Kat jumped up to stop me.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to get out of here.”

“Well, let me come with you. Don’t leave like this.” She hugged me hard and I felt my chest tighten with emotion. It felt good to be held, and at that moment, I realized that what I really wanted was to feel Richard’s arms around me. I pulled back.

“Kat?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“I need you to help me.”

“Anything, sweetie. What can I do?”

“I need to see Richard,” I said.

“Oh, Jules. Don’t do that.”

“Please. Just help me.”

“Okay, okay. What do you want me to do?”

“Help me find out where he lives. I don’t even have his address, if you can believe that,” I whispered. She frowned, her eyes searching mine. She went into the kitchen and pulled the phone book from the cupboard.

“I’ll see if he’s listed.” She thumbed through until she found it and wrote it down on a yellow post-it. I reached out a hand for it, but she hesitated.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asked.

“I’ll be fine.” She shook her head, then handed it over.

* * *

I found his apartment easily. It was a colonial brick house not far from campus. As I climbed the steps, I began to get nervous that he would be mad at me for coming over unexpectedly. But I needed to feel something, anything besides this incredible emptiness. What I wanted him

was for him to make love to me in the dark and hold me when it was all over. His name was listed on the buzzer and I pressed it before I had a chance to change my mind. I listened for noise, but it was quiet. Please let him be home. I pressed again. A light flickered on and I released the breath I realized I had been holding. Richard bounded down the stairs in a pair of blue jeans.

“Julia? Is that you?” He looked confused. I threw myself into his arms and hugged as hard as I could.

“Richard,” I whispered into his bare chest.

“Julia, what’s wrong? Are you ill?” He smoothed a hand over my back, closing the door behind him.

“I’m sorry I came over like this. I just had to see you.” His arms were strong and he smelled warm and comforting and familiar.

“Baby, what’s the matter? Can’t you tell me?” He drew back a little to look at me.

“I don’t want to talk about it. I just need you. Can we go upstairs? I want to do it.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, now,” I said, kissing his chest and neck, molding myself to him.

“Baby, hold on.” He pulled my arms from around him and held me away from his body. “You’re upset. Why don’t I call you a cab so you can

go home and get some sleep and we'll plan on a nice long date tomorrow," he said.

"Just let me come up for a while. I really don't want to be alone right now."

"Honey, I would-- it's just that I have an early class tomorrow and a tenure meeting in the afternoon and I really need to be on top of my game."

"I understand. Look, I'll come up for a bit and then I'll go home and let you sleep," I said, hating that I was begging.

"Richie, is that the food?" a female voice called from the top of the stairs. Richard dropped my arms and spun around. A willowy blonde pushed open the door wearing one of his dress shirts half buttoned and a pair of shorts.

"Oh! You're not Chinese delivery," she smiled. She stood in the doorway and balanced one foot on top of the other. Richard was rooted to the spot. I couldn't stop staring at her. She was absolutely beautiful; tall, high cheekbones-- she reminded me of a tiny little music box ballerina.

"Well, Richie, are you going to introduce me or are we all going to stand here?" she laughed.

"Yes, *Richie*, please make the introductions," I seethed. He cleared his throat and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Uh, right. Merrill, this is Julia. She's a student from my ethics class. Julia, this is Merrill, my..." he cleared his throat again.

“Fiancée,” she finished for him, extending a manicured hand. “Well, I certainly hope he’s not this verbally inept when he’s lecturing you,” she said, giving him a playful shove in the ribs.

“I’m sorry. Did you say fiancée?” I asked, my voice rising.

“Yes. We’re getting married this October,” she said.

I couldn’t even look at him. I knew that if I did I wouldn’t be able to keep from clawing his cheating face. “Wow. That’s interesting. He never said he was getting married,” I replied calmly. The tension was so heavy I wondered how she wasn’t feeling it, but she seemed blessedly oblivious. “So how long have you been engaged,” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. Baby, what do you think—about a year?”

“A year. Huh.” I laughed, slightly hysterical. “Well, you must feel very lucky. Dr. Sweet is a great guy. He’s taught me more about ethics in these past few months than I can even begin to tell you.”

“Really? Richie never tells me much about what goes on at his school.” She wrapped an arm around his waist and kissed his cheek. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m completely rude. I’m obviously interrupting your conversation.”

“No. Don’t worry about it. Our conversation was already over,” I said. “In fact, I was just leaving.”

“Oh. Well, it was nice to meet you,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind, but I’m freezing cold so I’m just going to scoot back upstairs.”

“I’ll be up in a minute,” Richard called after her, finally finding his voice. I looked at him for the first time since Merrill had come down. He looked ill.

“Well, Teach, I obviously have a lot to learn about ethics. Maybe I should go home and start studying,” I said, my voice rising hysterically.

“Baby,” he began, reaching for me.

“Don’t you fucking touch me. Don’t you ever touch me again,” I whispered, stepping off the landing. I wouldn’t cry in front of him. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction.

“Julia, we need to talk,” he said, moving down the steps.

“No. You need to go in and eat Chinese with your fiancée, you piece of shit,” I yelled at him.

“Please, lower your voice,” he begged.

“Why? Afraid someone might hear me? I hope they do! I hope everyone on this whole block hears me when I say that you were the worst sex I’ve ever had and that I faked it every single time!” A dog barked loudly down the block and I saw a couple of lights turn on in nearby houses. “Do you hear me up there?” I yelled towards the sky. “I faked it!” I walked tall down the street. I think he may have called after me, but I never turned to look.

* * *

“Men are the root of all evil,” I mumbled, my mouth full of raw cookie dough.

“You’re absolutely right,” Kat agreed. I surveyed my bed. We were sitting amidst a menagerie of candy bar wrappers, empty potato chip bags, balled up tissues, bottles of nail polish, and various versions of a flyer I wanted to post around campus proclaiming that Dr. Sweet had a small penis. Kat had been very supportive and didn’t even once say “I told you so,” which I thought was very big of her. I had holed myself in the apartment for the past week, blown off all of my classes, and generally sat around feeling sorry for myself.

“You know, I had an epiphany today,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Here’s what I figure. You can separate your life into four areas. You’ve got school, money, your family, and your relationships, and usually one out of the four at any given time is a mess. But right now, everything in my life is a mess.”

“Oh Julia,” Kat sighed, painting my nails.

“No, it’s true. I’m broke, I’m barely going to graduate, and even if I do, I’ll probably end up working minimum wage at some clothing store for obese women. My father’s moved out of the house, my mother is having a nervous breakdown, and I picked the biggest asshole on earth to get involved with.”

“Well, I can’t argue with you on the last one.”

“I should just throw myself off a bridge somewhere. I don’t think anyone would miss me.” Kat blew on my nails to dry them.

“That’s not true. Your friends would miss you.”

“What friends? I’ve cut myself off from all of them. I have no social life.”

“Well, I still love you.”

“Thanks.” The phone rang shrilly.

“Uh oh,” Kat whispered.

“If it’s him, tell him to piss off and die. No! Don’t even give him the satisfaction. Hang up on him,” I moaned.

“Hello,” she answered. She listened for a few seconds and then hung up.

“I knew it was him.”

“He says he wants to talk.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet he does.” I swiped a finger into the log of cookie dough and plopped it into my mouth. Kat had stocked our place with all the best comfort junk food and I had gained three pounds as a result.

She held up my hand to my face. “What do you think?” The nail polish was a garish red that totally suited my mood.

“Nice.”

“You know what the name of this polish is? ‘Back in the Saddle,’” she grinned.

“Hardly. If I’m back in the saddle, I’m only there because my foot got caught in the stirrup and I’m being dragged along in the dirt.” She shoved a pillow at me, laughing.

“Stop it, please. Anymore self-deprecating humor and *I’m* going to jump off a bridge!”

“Seriously though Kat, I really want to thank you. I don’t know how I would have made it through these last few days. I don’t have anyone to talk to except you.”

“You could talk to Sam,” she offered.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“A bunch of reasons. One, because I’m too embarrassed. I mean, he *knew*. Sam knew all along and he tried to warn me, but I was too infatuated to listen.”

“You’re being stupid. Sam will understand. He always does, right?”

“That’s the thing,” I sighed. “He’s always been there for me, through every relationship mess I’ve ever made. But he told me he wasn’t going to do it again. He told me I was an idiot for getting involved with Professor Dick and that he wasn’t going to clean up my mess this time.”

“I still think you should talk to him.”

“Well, even if I wanted to I doubt he’d have the time since he seems to spend every waking moment with what’s-her-name.”

“Kelly.”

“Right. Kelly. I don’t know how I feel about that girl.”

“Why? I think she’s nice,” Kat said.

“I’m sure she’s nice. That’s the problem. She’s too nice. She writes poetry and likes to hike, for God’s sake. She’s so damn boring.”

“Well, Sam likes her.”

“Of course he does! She’s shy and innocent-- she’s like the female version of him! And I don’t know what it is about them, but they’re driving me crazy on top of everything else.”

“Hmmm.” I hate it when she hmmms like that, like I’m being ridiculous.

“Fine. Disagree with me,” I muttered.

“I didn’t say that I disagree with you. I just think that it’s about time Sam found a girl to like.”

“You’re right. Sam does need a girl. But he needs someone exciting. Someone who can drag him away from his books to let loose and enjoy life every once in a while. He needs someone who can make him be wild and crazy—“

“You mean, someone like you.” Kat interrupted.

“What did you say?”

“I said that the person you’re describing, the one Sam needs so bad, sounds exactly like you.”

“That’s not true,” I argued.

“Oh come off it, Jules. When are you going to figure it out?” She raised a slim eyebrow in my direction.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you! Why do you think Sam having a girlfriend is driving you nuts?”

“I don’t know! ‘Cause she’s not right for him!”

“Maybe. Or maybe it’s because you’re in love with him.”

I burst out laughing. “That’s it Kat. It’s happened. You’ve finally gone insane.”

Kat raised her hands in mock defeat. “Okay, fine. I’m the one who’s insane.”

“What is that supposed to mean? That sarcastic little voice you do. What? I’m certainly not the crazy one here.”

“I’m not saying anything of the sort. But I would like to point out that you are getting a bit defensive,” she said, smirking.

“Kat, stop it. I’m serious.”

“I know you are. I can see that you are very serious,” she laughed.

“Kat! I’m gonna smack you in about two seconds if you don’t wipe that look off your face.”

“Sure,” she said.

I shook my head. “Look, I would be the first to admit it if there was even a remote possibility that it was true. You know I would. But come *on*. I’ve never once thought of Sam as anything other than a friend. A guy friend. That’s it.”

“Absolutely.”

“I mean, he’s...he’s—“

“He’s what?”

“He’s *Sam*, for God’s sake. We used to pick each other’s scabs, his mom spanked me, we had head lice together!”

“Look, all I’m saying is that every time you have a problem, you run to him. Every time he disapproves of you or something you do, you feel ashamed. Now he finds a girl who he actually likes and who actually likes him and you-- his best friend-- can’t even be happy for him.”

“I am happy for him,” I yelled.

“So why can’t you remember his girlfriend’s name? Why do you insist on calling her “what’s-her-face?”

“This conversation is pissing me off.” I got up to leave.

“Too close to home?” Kat asked, as I slammed the door. “Just think about it,” she yelled.

I stormed into my room and kicked the piles of dirty clothes out of the way. I tore off my jeans, climbed into bed, and turned out the light. But I didn't fall asleep until much later.

* * *

I agreed to meet my father for lunch, but I wasn't looking forward to it. We usually met up with each other for lunch every week, but since I had caught him, I hadn't been able to. He was sitting in a booth when I got there, and he rose as I approached. We greeted each other like strangers, but in a way, he did seem like a stranger. There were dark circles under his eyes, a testament to many sleepless nights. I knew from my mother that he'd booked himself into a cheap motel and had taken a leave of absence from work. We ordered food that I knew neither of us would be able to eat and then sat in silence. I fiddled with a straw wrapper.

"I'm glad you came. I wasn't sure you would," he said.

"I wasn't sure I would either."

"This is really hard for me."

"I know." His voice sounded old, like the voice of a man twice his age.

"I know it's been hard on you too. And your mother."

I didn't answer.

"You must hate me right now, huh?"

“Dad, I don’t hate you. I’m sorry I said it the other night. I just wanted to make you feel like shit.”

“I do. I mean, I’ve tried to imagine what words I could use to explain why I’ve been acting the way I have—“

“You know something? I really don’t want an explanation. I don’t think there’s anything you could say that would make me understand.”

“Julia, you need to give me a chance.”

“I don’t need to give you anything,” I said, hating the childish tone of my voice.

“Look, I may have a made a lot of mistakes, but I’m still your father.”

I slapped my hands down on the tabletop. “See, Dad, that’s where you’re wrong. My father wouldn’t have done this. My father taught me every single thing I know about being an honest person. My father would never have done something this selfish and stupid. I don’t even know who you are.”

“Don’t say that,” he said.

“Why? Does it hurt your feelings? Well, I’m sorry, but the only reason I came here was to get a few things off *my* chest.” The waitress arrived with drinks and I tried to compose myself. I took a deep breath and waited until she had left before I spoke.

“You may think I’ve been acting like a kid, but dammit, Dad, I am a little kid! And you’re supposed to be the adult here. I know you’d love for

me to be all mature and understanding about this, but maybe I'm not big enough for that."

"I never said I expected you to understand," he said.

"Well, I don't. I mean, my whole life it's been you and me versus Mom. We were a fucking team. And in one moment, you changed that. I can't even look at you without seeing Mom crying." Tears were slipping down his face, but I resolved that I had to say it all now or I knew I never would. "You know, I always used to think Mom was weak for crying at the drop of a hat. I hated her tears. When she'd cry, I'd roll my eyes and laugh. But now, when I hear her crying herself to sleep every night, it makes me so incredibly sad," I said, realizing that I was crying too. He reached across the table and grabbed my hands in his.

"What can I do?" he asked miserably.

"I don't know. I don't know," I repeated. Minutes ticked by. The man in front of me was so lost. I think it's probably the hardest day in the world when a child is forced to realize that their parents are imperfect. We sat gloomily and looked anywhere but at each other. The irony of my father's situation and my situation with Dr. Sweet didn't escape me. Shit, maybe it was in the blood. I was tempted to confide the whole story to him, as I had always confided in him, but found that I didn't want to. I sighed heavily and took back my hand.

“Dad, I don’t think what happened is really any of my business. What you did is between you and mom. Any explaining that needs to happen should be to mom, not me.”

“She won’t talk to me.”

“Well, what did you expect? Did you think you could talk your way out ruining a twenty-two year marriage?” He paled visibly and dropped his eyes to the tabletop.

“I don’t want it to be ruined. I never wanted to ruin it.” I saw through my own anger to my father’s broken heart and felt myself want to give him something, anything.

“You should give her some time,” I suggested.

“I know. I know, you’re right, but all I want to do is go over to the house and make her listen. Oh god, I’ve fucked up.”

“Yeah. But people fuck up sometimes.”

“Even fathers.”

“I know.”

“Can I call you at school? You know, to talk?”

I pulled my hair back from my face. I knew he needed me to say yes. Hell, in some small way, I was beginning to understand why he had done it. But I found that I couldn’t let go just yet. “Why don’t I call you.”

“Oh. Okay,” he said.

“Dad, I’m really not hungry. I kind of need to get out of here, if that’s okay.”

“Please. Whatever you need.” I gathered my coat and purse and stood. This was usually the moment where he stood up too and we would hug. But instead he sat and as I looked down at his hunched shoulders, I thought how he seemed so small. I wanted to hate him, but found that I couldn’t. The only emotion I felt for him that I could name was pity. I shifted my weight from one foot to another, hesitating.

“She still loves you,” I said finally. He raised bloodshot eyes to look at me.

“I hope so. I hope so.”

* * *

It couldn’t be avoided any longer. I had to go back to Dr. Sweet’s class. I had wanted to withdraw from it, but after looking at my schedule, I realized that without the credits, I wouldn’t be able to graduate, and I’d be damned if he was going to keep me from my diploma. When he walked in and saw me sitting three rows back, he almost toppled his cup of coffee down his shirt. I didn’t listen to a word he said. I doodled in my notebook and composed a list of ways I could publicly embarrass him. I was surprised, but not that much, when he cut class twenty minutes short. I

gathered my bag and was all set to walk out the door when he called my name. I had my hand on the doorknob, but I stopped, my back to him.

“What.” The rest of the students filtered out past me.

“I’ve been calling you for eight days.”

“Have you?” I turned slowly to face him. He looked like shit. His face was covered in stubble and his eyes were red.

“Julia, don’t.”

“Don’t what?” I asked, my voice giving away nothing.

“I need to talk to you.” He moved closer, slowly, as though he was afraid of frightening me.

“I really don’t think you have anything to say that I want to hear,” I replied. I looked away. He was silent for a moment then sat down heavily on the edge of the desk.

“Damn it, Julia. I need you to understand.” I had thought that I could stay calm and indifferent, but the anger was still fresh.

“Understand what exactly? That you lied to me for three months? That I was nothing but a final fling before you settled down to married life?”

“That’s not what you were. Don’t cheapen it.” He buried his face in his hands.

“Me cheapen it? I don’t think so. I think you were able to do that all on your own.” I felt my eyes begin to fill, but I didn’t want him to see how much he upset me.

“Julia, you don’t have any idea what things have been like for me. I’ve been miserable, keeping this from you.”

“Good,” I said, feeling my heart tighten in my chest.

“Please. Five minutes. Give me five minutes and I promise you, I’ll never bother you again,” he begged. I wanted to walk out, but found that I was rooted to the floor by invisible weights. He breathed heavily and as though in a dream, I watched him lift my hand and hold it tightly between his own.

“I’ve missed you so damn bad,” he whispered.

“Have you?” I asked listlessly. A tear escaped and trailed down my face under my chin. Damn it. Damn him. And damn me for crying. I forced myself to pull it together.

“I’ve wanted to see you every day. My life is a mess right now. I’m stuck in this relationship with a person who deserves better than the way I’ve been treating her, and instead, all I can think about is you.” I closed my eyes, wishing I could close my ears against his words.

“Stop it,” I said.

“I can’t. I can’t stop caring about you, and wondering how you are, and missing the way you smell on my hands.” He pulled me to rest between his legs. I held myself rigid. It wasn’t what I’d expected him to say. I figured I’d get the stereotypical “it-was-fun-you’re-a-great-girl” speech,

but not this. Not this intimacy and anguish. He leaned in to breathe the scent of my hair and pressed his face into my neck.

“I’ve been lonely without you,” he said, kissing my jaw, my cheek.

“Richard--” I sighed, and then he moved his mouth until it rested on mine and for a moment I allowed myself to feel the softness of his lips, to recall the taste of him. But only for a moment. I pulled back and moved out of his arms. His defeated posture reminded me vaguely of my father sitting in that booth yesterday. Just as I had not been able to hate my dad, I couldn’t hate Richard either. Instead of hate, I had felt pity for my father, pity because I know he really loves my mother and wants to make her happy again. But Richard didn’t want to make Merrill happy or me happy. He didn’t want to fix things with one of us and end it with the other. The only person Richard wanted to make happy was Richard, and for that I could feel nothing but indifference.

“You said your fiancée deserved better than the way you’ve been treating her, but you know something? I deserve better than the way you’ve been treating me.”

“I know,” he said quietly.

“If you really wants things to work with her, you need to make some decisions.” I wiped my eyes. “I’m making mine.”

He closed his eyes tight and nodded. I shut the door softly on my way out.

* * *

That weekend: home with Mom and Lily and hating every minute of it. Mom crying, Lily bitching, me wanting to kill myself. I did my damn best to avoid both of them as much as possible. I rented movies, washed my laundry, caught up on schoolwork, tried to forget about men. Of course, when I had packed my car up to go back that Sunday, my mother started in on another crying jag.

“Julia, I wish you could stay,” she sobbed, crumpling, then smoothing, then re-crumpling balls of tissue.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’ll try to come back soon, but finals are starting.”

“I know. You have your own life,” she sniffed. “I’m sorry I’ve been a wreck.”

“Julia understands. She knows her father has made you like this,” Lily said. “Don’t you?” she asked, looking up from lighting her cigarette. I ignored her barb, just like I had ignored every single one she’d spat out since I’d arrived on Friday afternoon.

“Have you seen him?” my mother asked softly.

“Yeah.”

“Oh.” She sniffed a few more times, her hands worrying the tissues.

“How is he?”

“Darling, stop that. How do you expect to move on with your life if you keep dwelling on *him*?” Lily ordered. Again, I bit my tongue and pretended she wasn’t in the room, on the planet, etc.

“He’s not good, Mom. He doesn’t eat, he doesn’t sleep. He said he’s tried calling.” My mother lifted her shoulders and dropped them heavily.

“I can’t, honey. I can’t talk to him.”

“He’d just lie to her like he’s been lying to her for years. Honestly, I tried to tell you from day one that you were too good for him and it makes me sad, really quite sad, to have been right,” Lily said, shaking her head in sorrow, as though her wisdom pained even her. In my mind I could see my hand reach out, pluck that thin black cigarette from her liver-spotted fist, and grind it into her forehead.

“I know, Mom. You’re right,” my mother said. I hate the way my mother turns into this shell of a woman around Lily. Lily steamrolls over her, orders her around, berates her, and does it all with sugary sincerity and *darlings*. My mother stuffed her tissue balls into her purple housecoat, the only item of clothing I had seen her in all weekend.

“Of course I’m right,” Lily puffed away. “I didn’t like his eyes. When I met him I took one look and said to myself, this man is not worth my daughter. I mean, darling, you could have had anyone! With your looks and your career in modeling, you were meeting the most *adorable* men. And why you settled on him, I’ll never understand.”

She tsk-ed and tapped a long ash onto the carpet. I stared down at it, and I couldn't even blink because I knew even that slight motion would set me off.

"Just like your father," she continued. "Happy to be married when it's convenient, but when they want out, that's then end of them. And then here we are, left to pick up the pieces and start all over again. And try finding a man at our ages. Impossible!" She patted my mother on the shoulder and dragged on her cigarette. "But not to worry, darling. I'm your mother and *I'll* be there for you, even if *he* won't."

"Thanks, Mom," she replied, and that was all it took, just the word 'thanks' and I felt my body burn.

"What the hell are you thanking her for?" I laughed harshly. "She just trashed your husband, the man you've loved your entire life and you're thanking her?"

"I'm just opening her eyes," Lily snapped. "He's fooled everyone for far too long! I won't see her hurt."

"That's what you don't get, you selfish bitch. The only one hurting her is you!" I said, jabbing a finger into Lily's chest. "You did more to cause the problems between them than anyone, and I'm sick and tired of hearing you pretend that you're doing her a favor." Every word was punctuated with a push of my finger, until I had her backing away from me.

“Julia, that’s enough,” my mother defended, but I was well past caring whether I was being rude or burning bridges.

“No, Mom. I’m just getting started, so shut up.” My mother actually fell into the chair at her back. Lily and I faced each other like prize fighters stepping into the ring for a rematch. “You know something? Ever since you came here, you’ve done nothing but complain and whine and slam my father down until he couldn’t even handle being in the same room as the two of you. And my mother defended you. We all wanted you gone, but she insisted that you needed us, that you were all alone in the world.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Lily barked.

“Oh, I think you know exactly what I’m talking about. You’ve done your best to make everyone as miserable as you are. Well, guess what? Congratulations on a job well done,” I laughed, clapping my hands loudly in her face. “You split up my parents. I hope that makes you deliriously happy, because you’re the only one who is.”

“I didn’t do anything! *Your* father cheated on *her*. I didn’t make him go out and start an affair with a twenty-five year old.”

“You’d think you didn’t have anything to do with it, but I’m not so sure.” I spun around to face my mother.

“And you! You’re just as bad. He loves you. You love him. He wants to work things out. But you won’t let yourself try to fix it because you listen to *her* rantings night and day,” I screamed, waving a hand at Lily.

“Look at yourself. You’re pathetic. And I won’t stand here and let her say one more word until you tell me the truth.” She was pressed deep into the chair, her eyes wide. “Do you want him back?”

“Julia Renee, stop it—“ Lily began. I whirled on her and came within two inches of her face.

“I am talking to *my mother*,” I said, with icy calm. Her mouth opened and closed several times like a fish out of water as she fumbled for a response. I deliberately turned my back to her and stared down hard at my mother. “Now answer me! Do you want him back?” I asked.

“I—I---,” she sputtered.

“Don’t think, just yes or no. This is not about pride, this is about what you want.”

“Yes,” she whispered, her eyes on the floor, hands shoved deep into her pockets.

“Then do me a favor and don’t let yourself turn into your mother.” I sucked in a ragged breath, my nostrils flaring. I felt my heart pounding at having finally said what I’d wanted to say the moment Lily set her bags down on our front steps. They were both silent, stunned by the force of my anger. The grandfather clock in the front hall struck, disturbing the silence. I shook myself out of the rage that had held me rigid. I picked up my bag from where I’d dropped it on the floor and kissed my mother on the cheek, sparing a glance at Lily.

“Mom, I’m leaving now. I’ll call you tomorrow. Lily, I’m sorry if I upset you. I love you a lot, but most of the time I can’t stand you,” I said. She blinked once, twice, then turned and stared out the window at a passing car.

I made the trip back to school with record speed, feeling like myself for the first time in weeks.

* * *

Back in school with a vengeance. Caught up on late work, finally punched out a resume and placed it on some websites. I felt lighter, laughed more, cleaned out my closet. Kat and Sam marveled at my unbounded energy and asked me what drugs I was taking. I resolved to clean up all the problem areas in my life in the following ways:

- 1) Got a job bartending and with the money began to make a dent in my bills.
- 2) Called my parents every other day to check up on them in manner of perfect daughter.
- 3) Refused to entertain any thoughts about certain professors of ethics.
- 4) Decided to meet Kelly, Sam’s girlfriend.

I wasn’t thrilled with the last one, but I was on a roll in every other respect and plus he is my best friend and I have been rather shitty to him, i.e., not calling, pretending to be too busy to hang out. Kat continued to drop her

little comments about my having feelings for Sam, but I laughed them off and resolved that not only would I be happy for Sam, I would make Kelly my new best friend, and that would put an end to Kat's insane theories.

I had called Sam and arranged for us to meet down at our college's deli for gyros and draft beers. The party consisted of Kat and Pete (who by now were picking out color swatches for the duvet they would purchase when married), Sam and Kelly, and me and Jordan, one of my coworkers. Jordan and I arrived late and the four of them had already chosen a booth in the back. We made introductions and I was surprised at how beautiful Kelly was. Not that I didn't think Sam could attract a girl as good-looking as she was. But she beautiful in a very quiet, serene way. We settled in and made small talk about the warm weather and Pete and Kelly made us laugh with stories about the crazy professor they had for history, who made them sit in assigned seats with all the girls up front and all the boys in the back.

"Sam, doesn't that guy sound like Mr. Holloway?" I asked, grabbing his arm. He started laughing and then realized that since we were the only ones who had gone to grade school together, no knew who we were talking about.

"Mr. Holloway was our driver's ed instructor," Sam explained to the rest of the group.

“Remember how he always used to stare at me and Becky Baumgartner when we wore our cheerleading outfits to school,” I giggled. Everyone at the table laughed.

“How could I forget,” Sam said.

“So, Kelly,” I said, leaning past Sam to face her. “Tell me everything there is to know about you,” I smiled. She smiled back uncertainly and I saw her eyes dart to Sam and then back again.

“Um, like what?”

“Oh, I don’t. Everything. What’s your major?”

“Well, actually, I’m undecided right now.”

“You are? Wait—what year are you?” I asked.

“I’m a second year,” she replied softly. Oh my god, this girl was like 18 years old.

“Huh.”

“I’m think about Creative Writing,” she offered.

“Kelly writes some amazing poetry, Jules. You’ll have to get her to read it to you sometime,” he said, a hand straying to her thigh. She blushed. I can’t remember the last time I blushed.

“Yeah. Great. I’m sure it’s wonderful. Not that I would know. Poetry was never my thing.”

“So Jordan, are you in school,” Kat asked and I realized that I’d completely forgotten he was at the table.

“No. I graduated last year,” he said. I elbowed him playfully in the ribs.

“Actually, I’ll have you know that Jordan makes the best rum runners in the whole world,” I bragged. He elbowed me back, and I caught Kat’s raised eyebrow. I tipped my head up to her in salute. “Speaking of, why don’t we get some drinks,” I decided, flagging down a waiter.

“What can I get for you?”

“Six tequila shots, lots of salt,” I ordered. Kelly cleared her throat.

“Actually, I don’t want anything. Maybe a Coke,” she said.

“Why not? Don’t you want a drink?”

“No. I don’t really feel like it,” she said. “Just a Coke.”

“Yeah. Coke for me too,” Sam told the waiter.

“Sam, do we really have to go through this again?” I leaned over to Kelly. “Every time we go out, Sam sits there trying to order water and Kat and I have to force the first one down him. But then he always has a blast, right Kat?” Kat looked at me strangely.

“Right,” she replied, her eyes conveying something which I chose to ignore.

“Julia, what are your plans after you graduate?” Pete asked, slinging an arm over the back of Kat’s chair.

“Oh God. Isn’t that the million-dollar question. You know, I don’t have a clue. I’ll probably open up a pub with Jordan here and serve nothing

but excellent cocktails.” I glanced at Jordan and gave him a wink. He really was attractive and I felt bad since I’d practically begged him to be my date for the night.

“Knowing you, I’m sure you’d end up raking it in,” Kat joked.

I glanced next to me and caught Sam whispering something in Kelly’s ear, to which she laughed softly, intimately. I hated her laugh. The waiter returned with our drinks.

“Did you guys want any food?” he asked.

“Yes, we do,” Kat said. “I haven’t eaten all day and I’m starved.”

The waiter took her order, then gestured to me.

“I’ll have the chicken sub and he’ll have a steak gyro, no sauce, extra onions,” I said, ordering for myself and Sam. He turned away from Kelly to stare at me. “See?” I smiled. “Can’t remember a calculus formula to save my life, but I can remember how Mr. Picky likes his gyro.” He smiled at me, but didn’t say anything and turned back to Kelly. It was strange to see him with a girl. He wasn’t awkward or uncomfortable. He actually looked calm, happy. I stood suddenly, need to be away from them.

“I’m going to the bathroom. Be back in a sec,” I said.

“I have to go too,” Kat said, and followed me down the aisle to the ladies room. As soon as the door shut, she started in.

“What the hell is up with you?” she asked.

“What? Nothing.”

“Julia, you’re acting like an ass.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about all your little inside jokes with Sam, and ordering his freaking dinner for him and acting like his girlfriend isn’t even at the table.” She threw up her hands.

“What the hell? I’ve been nice to her. I tried to get her to talk,” I argued.

“Well, how the hell is she supposed to get a word in edgewise when you’re monopolizing the entire conversation,” she yelled.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, turning to wash my hands at the sink.

“What’s ridiculous is that you’re completely ignoring your date and making Kelly uncomfortable.”

“Look, Jordan’s just a friend. And of course she’s uncomfortable! She’s here to meet all Sam’s friends.” Kat reapplied her lipstick.

“Don’t pull that crap with me. Making fun of her because she writes poetry and doesn’t like alcohol. Look, if I noticed, then you can damn well bet Sam did too. Jesus, Julia. You can be a royal bitch sometimes.”

“Kat! What are you talking about?” I ripped a paper towel from the dispenser.

“I’m saying stop for five freaking seconds to think about why you’re treating Kelly this way.”

“What way?”

“Like an outsider.”

“I’m not—“

“Yes, you are. I knew this was a bad idea,” she said, recapping her lipstick with a snap.

“What was a bad idea?” I asked.

“This whole date thing. I didn’t know what you were thinking when you suggested it. Obviously you still haven’t realized how you feel about him.”

“Not that again,” I sighed.

“Jules, would you look at yourself? When are you going to see what everyone at that entire table can see?” I pushed past her and stalked back to the booth. The conversation died as I sat down and then it was my turn to feel uncomfortable. I kicked my foot under the table endlessly.

I was quiet the rest of the meal, barely tasted my food, and didn’t even remember to thank Jordan for coming with me when he dropped me off at my apartment. I stripped off my clothes and climbed under the comforter. Kat’s words rang in my ears. Had I really been a bitch? I hated to think that maybe I had been, even unintentionally. If Kat was right, then Sam was probably pissed at me too. I tried to sleep, but couldn’t and finally reached for the phone, speed-dialing Sam’s number.

“Yeah,” he answered, his voice low and sleepy.

“It’s me,” I said, rolling onto my back.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just called to talk.”

“Okay.”

“So... um, did you have fun tonight?” There was a long pause on the other end.

“Not really.”

“Oh. Me either.” I twirled the phone cord around my finger.

“Yeah. I noticed you got kind of quiet. What’s up?” he asked.

“Kat said I was being a bitch to Kelly,” I burst out.

“She did?”

“Yeah.”

He was quiet.

“So... was I?”

“Kind of.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I just don’t know how to share.” I detangled the phone and crossed an arm behind my head. “Hell, I never did, even when we were kids. I’d always hog all my toys and yours for myself.” He chuckled on the other end.

“It’s okay.”

“You mad at me?”

“Do I ever get mad at you?”

“No.”

“Okay then.”

“Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“I miss you. I mean, I’ve missed my best friend,” I said.

“I have too. You kind of gave me the deep freeze there for a few weeks.”

“I know, but I didn’t really know how to talk about everything. I’d like to though, sometime.”

“That sounds good.” His voice wrapped over me like a warm blanket.

“Maybe tomorrow? I could make us a picnic,” I offered.

“Can’t do it tomorrow. I’m taking Kelly to a play.” I felt my throat constrict.

“Oh. Another time then,” I said, unable to keep the hurt from my voice.

“Maybe the day after,” he said, yawning. “I’ll call you, okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Sleep well,” he said.

“You too.” I pressed my hand to my temple. “I love—”

I heard the click on the other end as the phone went dead. I set the receiver back in its cradle and felt more alone than I could ever remember feeling. My heart hurt in my chest and I felt like crying but couldn’t get the

tears to start. I realized I had a lot to cry about. My whole life I'd been best friends with the perfect guy, someone I'd never even considered in a romantic way, and now he was with someone else. I wanted to kick myself for being blind, for refusing to see what Kat had been telling me ever since I broke things off with Richard. And the worst part was, I knew Sam loved me too, or had anyway. It shows in all the ways that count. I think he'd even been trying to tell me that day in his car- when he said we'd always be together. And stupid me, I teased and flirted with him like I do with every boy who has a crush on me, and completely ignored his feelings.

I couldn't let him ignore mine. I was barely hanging on to him by a single thread: if he was in love with me, or ever was, then it must have begun a long time ago, I reasoned. To love someone quietly over *years* must mean that it's deep-rooted, right? Then I haven't lost him. I haven't at all. Almost immediately, my tears began to stop, then dry, and I began to think of a way to make sure that single thread didn't snap—a way to turn it into a stronger cord. I knew I'd do anything to get Sam back, but even I couldn't believe the plan that was forming in my head. It was so mean and so cruel that it made me wonder what kind of person I was to be willing to do it. But for Sam... I convinced myself.

* * *

I had thought it through so many times that I couldn't believe it was actually happening. I had called Sam the next day and told him that I felt

bad for not giving Kelly a chance, and would he give me her number so I could make plans to hang out with her. She seemed surprised, but pleased to hear from me and quickly accepted my invitation for a girls outing. We set it so that I would meet up with her at the Panther Inn at 6:30 p.m. I then called my bio lab partner, Mark, whom I dated briefly a while back, and invited him to meet me and some of my friends for drinks at 8 o'clock. He agreed and the course was set.

I chose a booth near the door and seated Kat facing the exit. I ordered fruit punch with rum for her and a beer for me and set them down on the table in front of her.

"Don't worry, I didn't forget," I said, gesturing to the glass. "It's just fruit punch."

"Thanks," she said. "It was really nice of you to invite me. I was beginning to think you didn't like me," she added. Very perceptive of her.

"Oh, don't be silly. Of course, I like you. I just thought we should get to know each other better."

"Sam was happy that we were going out together."

"Was he? That's nice. So how are things going with him," I asked, not wanting to hear an answer. But apparently Sam was Kelly's favorite topic of conversation, because she gushed steadily over him for the next hour, during which I ordered her two more drinks, the next ones even stronger. Idiot that she was, she didn't even realize she was getting

smashed, but by 8, she was slurring her words and leaning her head back against the booth like it was too heavy to hold up.

“Wow. I’m feeling dizzy,” she said, holding her head in her hand.

“Oh, it’s probably just the heat. I’m feeling a bit warm too,” I lied.

“Maybe. I just feel weird.”

“I’ll bet you’re hungry. Low blood sugar can make you feel sick sometimes. I’ll order us some food in a little bit,” I said, pacifying her.

“Okay,” she said, and closed her eyes for a minute.

So far everything was moving along nicely. I was impatient for Mark to arrive and kept glancing at my watch, not sure I could take any more of Kelly’s “Sam this” and “Sam that.” He finally strolled in, spotted me and sat down next to me in the booth.

“Mark, this is Kelly, Kelly, Mark,” I said, flagging down our waitress for two more beers and a fourth drink for Kelly. We chit-chatted for a while and Mark kept glancing for her face to mine and back again. When I went to the bar for napkins to wipe up the drink Kelly had spilled on herself, he followed me.

“Hey. I’m sorry more of my friends didn’t show up. I wouldn’t have dragged you down just to hang out with her and me.” I let my tone imply that I wasn’t enjoying myself and waited for him to do the rest.

“Well, I was wondering what was up. There’s obviously some tension between the two of you. I mean, is this girl your friend?”

“Kind of. Actually I’m sort of upset with her right now,” I said and fiddled with a napkin, putting on my best sad face.

“Why?”

“Well, I like this guy and she knows it and has been going after him. I think she thinks she’s in love with him or something,” I laughed, dejectedly.

“Wow. That’s a shame. She seems nice enough.”

“Actually, she is. To tell you the truth, it’s part of the reason why I asked you down tonight. I was hoping the two of you might hit it off and she’d realize that there are plenty of wonderful men out there. Then maybe she’d leave my guy alone...” I trailed off and faked a tear from the corner of my eye.

“Julia. God, don’t cry about it. I hate it when girls cry,” he said, awkwardly patting my shoulder.

“Could you maybe flirt with her a little,” I asked. “I can tell she’s attracted to you and you seem to like her and—“

“Will you stop crying if I do,” he asked, playfully tugging on a strand of my hair.

I smiled up at him. “I promise.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Hell, if it works out, maybe I’ll be the one thanking you. She’s gorgeous,” he said and walked back over to sit next to Kelly, who had not opened her eyes. He leaned his arm across the back of the booth and said something that made her laugh. I looked at my watch.

8:27pm. Come on, Mark. Don't let me down. I stood near the bar and kept checking the door. I had told Sam to come down and meet Kelly and I at 8:30 and if all went well, he'd find his little miss perfect girlfriend cuddled up with another guy. Mark looked over and winked at me. I gave a little wave and he turned back around. I watched him lift a strand of hair out of her face and smooth it behind her ear. Kelly, smiling the smile of someone who is truly wasted, was none the wiser. She blinked slowly at him and grinned. Taking it as an invitation, Mark leaned down and kissed her on the mouth. I almost fell over. She wasn't even pushing him away, which of course, just goes to show how much she really cared about Sam.

I felt better about what I had done—it was really a favor to Sam for him to find out what she was like now and not later. I swung my gaze to see push open the door to the bar. His eyes squinted as he adjusted to the dim lighting, saw me and waved, then happened to glance at the booth where Kelly and Mark were embracing. I couldn't have planned it any better. It was literally too perfect to be true. Sam stopped and stared, his eyes never wavering from the booth. I hurried towards him and grabbed his sleeve.

“Oh my God! Sam. I don't know what happened. She's been flirting with my friend Mark all night and then the next thing I know...” I noticed then that Mark had lifted his head and Kelly blinked, saw Sam, and froze.

“Sam?” she whispered. She tried to stand, but lost her balance and fell back down into the booth. Sam took one more long look at the two of them and then turned and tore out of the bar. I ran out after him.

“Sam!” I called. He was halfway down the block, sprinting towards his apartment. “Sam, wait!” I ran hard towards him and finally he stopped and I was able to catch up.

“Jules, oh my god. Oh my god.” He was crying harder than I’d ever seen him cry and I felt a twinge of conscience. This was for his own good, I repeated to myself.

“Come here, baby,” I whispered and pulled him into my arms. He wrapped himself around me tight and buried his head in my neck, his hot tears leaving their imprint on my skin. It felt so good to be holding him like this. I smoothed his back up and down and squeezed him tight. “I’m so sorry, honey.”

“I don’t understand. She wouldn’t do this. I know her. She wouldn’t do this,” he repeated, crying harder. I ran my hand into his hair.

“Maybe you don’t know her as well as you thought you did,” I offered. Which was true. I mean, look at the way she had thrown herself over Mark, kissing him with no hesitation. I pulled back and looked into his eyes.

“Jules. What do I do?” he whispered. I kissed both his cheeks, which were hot and wet, and held his face gently.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you. Whatever you need,” I said and leaned in to kiss his mouth softly. He raised his head and stared at me.

“I have to go,” he said abruptly, then he stepped away and turned down the street.

“Wait! Where are you going?”

“Home,” he said. I almost followed him, but the set of his shoulders told me not too. I figured he needed some time to sort everything out in his head, his feelings for her, his feelings for me. I knew it would only be a matter of time before he’d call. And I’d be there for him.

* * *

I heard loud pounding on my front door sometime after 2 a.m. It could only be Sam and I rushed to the door, anxious to see him. I opened it and he pushed past me, heading straight for my room.

“Sam, are you okay? I was so worried about you. I’ve been thinking about you all night,” I said, reaching up to give him a hug. He caught my wrist, squeezing it so hard, I thought he’d break it.

“You were worried about me, Jules?”

“Of course I was. Ow! Sam, you’re hurting me!” He dropped my wrist instantly and I rubbed it with my other hand.

“I hurt you? I find that so amusing—I was just going to say the same thing to you,” he sneered. I took one look at his face and saw it; pure rage, and even further, beneath that, I saw hate. He knew. I could tell. He knew.

“Sam, I—“

He cut me off. “No, Jules. This time you’re going not going to talk. This time you’re going to sit your ass down and listen,” he said, pushing me onto my bed. He paced in front of me, his face transformed into someone unrecognizable. I closed my eyes.

“A funny thing happened tonight. I wasn’t home twenty minutes when my doorbell rings and your friend Mark comes in, and Kelly is passed out in his arms.” I felt my stomach clench and I wanted to throw up. “I almost punched him, but then he stopped me and told me a story. He apologized to me and said that as soon as I left Kelly started crying hysterically because her boyfriend had just left. Interestingly, he didn’t know Kelly had a boyfriend. But then, I guess that isn’t so surprising to you, is it? He wouldn’t have known because you didn’t tell him,” he screamed, pointing an accusatory finger at me.

“Kelly kept begging that she wanted to see me and Mark dragged my address out of her and brought her over. She was so damn drunk, I was afraid she was sick, after all she’d never been drunk before. I put her to bed and then Mark explained to me all about how you had asked him to flirt with her because she was trying to steal away the boy you liked. And I’m

sure you were very convincing when you cried.” He stopped in front of me and forced my head up to look at him. I couldn’t stop the tears that rained down my face.

“Oh yes, I’m sure you were the perfect liar. God knows I’ve seen you lie your head off in the past. I guess I just figured you’d never do it to me.” He laughed, his voice crazed. I covered my ears, not wanting to hear another word. He yanked my hands down.

“No, Julia. You’re not going to get off that easily. I’m not done.”

“Sam, please, let me explain.”

“Explain what?” he screamed. “Explain how you set Kelly up? Got her drunk, convinced some poor guy to take advantage of her, and for what?”

“Because I love you, Sam. I love you.”

“How in the world can you expect me to believe that? You must think I’m the stupidest person alive.”

“No. Sam, it’s true. I know what I did was wrong, but I had to do something. I’ve wasted so much time because I didn’t realize that what I felt for you was love. And I did it because I know you love me too.”

“Julia—“

“You do! Don’t deny it. What we have is too strong to be anything else. Our whole lives we’ve been everything to each other. I couldn’t let you walk away from it, not when I’ve realized how right we are together.

Sam, I love you so much!" I cried, my vision blurred that I could barely make him out in front of me.

"Julia, you don't love me! How on earth could you love me and have done what you did tonight? It was so cruel that I don't even have the words to tell you how much you hurt me."

"I'm sorry, Sam. I wasn't trying to hurt you."

"Well, you did. You hurt me and you hurt Kelly, who's done nothing to you. Nothing!"

"Sam, you love me. You have to know why I did it. You love me," I sobbed, reaching for him. He stepped back and stared at me.

"You know something, maybe once, a long time ago, I did love you. But you never wanted anything more from me than a shoulder to cry on or someone to flirt with to stroke your own ego. So I moved on and accepted that we'd only be friends. And finally, I find someone who loves me back, and you almost succeed in ruining it. I mean, I don't know how I could love you as a friend after tonight."

"Stop it. Stop it," I begged, his words cutting me in two.

"You are the most selfish person I've ever met. I can't believe how much friendship I've wasted on you," he said coldly and walked out of the room. I heard the front door slam and still I sat, on the edge of the bed, unable to move. I cried until I made myself sick and then I cried more for the friendship I'd just thrown away, and because I couldn't picture my life

without Sam in it. But mostly I cried about the person I'd become, perhaps the person I'd always been. Whoever she was, I hated her.

* * *

So by now you probably think I'm the worst 'twenty something' in the universe. I would too if I were you. It's been three weeks since it happened and I've only seen Sam once on campus, and even then he walked past me like I was a stranger. I feel like one. I'm trying very hard to try to get to know this new person, the person who woke up a few weeks ago and decided to change her life.

I'm graduating tomorrow. My mom and dad are coming. Together. They've been working things out slowly. My dad has moved back in and Lily has moved back out. I'm happy for them because I've never seen the so much in love. There's getting to know each other again, a little each day. I'm nervous about tomorrow. High school graduation feels like it happened last week and now it's time for "the real world."

So I guess this is where the story ends, since I don't know what's coming next. This is probably the part where I'm supposed to reveal all the essential truths I've learned over the past three months. But I can't say that I'm in that different a spot than where I was when I started this. I'm still scared of where I'm going to be in a few months time and I'm still no closer to figuring out where that place is exactly. I can't say that I'm more self-

aware or more mature now that I'm soon to be a college graduate. In fact, I'd say I regressed a lot and acted like the child I wished I could be forever. I know that in time Sam will forgive me. I know that in a way, he was right—I didn't really love him. Maybe I just began to see in him what Kelly saw, and wanted to feel something more. I've heard from Kat that they're still together and doing well. And I can honestly say that it makes me happy for him. I hope one day to tell him myself.

I wrote at the beginning of all of this that I figured life after college would be a downhill skid into my thirties and then from there, to the grave. I hope that turns out not to be the case. I hope that when I write my memoirs over in say, sixty years, I'll have been a hell of a lot more interesting than I am at this moment. At least now I'm ready to take my hand off the pause button.