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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

DRY

submitted by

CATHERINE WEINER 2022

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2022

Director: Francisco Goldman

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“I’m always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it’s very shocking to the system.” — Flannery O’Connor

Foreword

When you really think about it, college is super weird, because everyone is sort of shoved together all of the time. Everyone eats together, lives together, studies together, and goes out on the weekends together. It's inescapable, it's claustrophobic, and it's also quite wonderful. You learn to love people just as much as you learn to hate people. You grow out of some people as you grow with other people. You become someone new—someone who your freshman year self may not even recognize by the end of it all. What I'm trying to say, is that a lot can happen in four years, and that's where Lane comes in.

Lane is a student at Trinity. She is not an autobiographical reflection of myself. She is, however, entirely informed by my experience at a small liberal arts college. I wrote about Trinity because it is what I know: an old campus where everyone knows everyone and the classes are small and the social rituals are very set-in-stone. She is a culmination of myself and my peers and the strangers I walk past every day on campus. This thesis is a fictional plunge into reality.

My collection begins with Lane entering college and it ends with her leaving it. Each story has its own timeline—stories either last a week, a few months, or an entire year—they are snapshots of Lane's four years at school. The repetitive exchanges that students have with the social settings of college create all kinds of issues, and I hope my stories explore this reality honestly.

That First Fall

LATE AUGUST

There aren't many people who remember their first taste of chocolate cake, but Lane remembers hers. She was almost two and wearing a checkered party dress. Her reddish-brown hair had just started to really grow—thanks to her mother's prayers. It was her older sister Kara's fifth birthday party. The two sisters wore matching pink bows, their cheeks the same color—rose. Lane sat in a highchair, swinging her stout legs back and forth while everyone—meaning her mother, father, and grandmother—sang *Happy Birthday* to Kara. Kara closed her eyes and blew out the candles. Lane's father brought her a spoonful of cake. It was thick—dark brown with baby pink buttercream frosting. He fed her the cake like it was an airplane landing on her tongue, and her mind burst with the very first taste of all that sugar. Lane looked up at her father with big hazel eyes wanting more. Her mother laughed, smiled, and said, "I think she liked it."

Lane stared now at a photograph from this very day. She and Kara together with toothy smiles, their big cheeks stuffed with cake. She remembered her dad asking the two of them to say cheese. She covered the framed picture in bubble wrap, taped it together safely, and placed it on top of a few other family photos in a box as she packed her childhood bedroom.

Within a year or so after Kara turned five, Lane lost her mother. Even though she remembered the cake, she didn't remember her dying. Her father said she cried for days after she realized she was never coming home. Lane was only three and her mother was only thirty-three—the two didn't get enough time together in this world because cancer decided to take over her mother's breasts. It's weird—Lane could remember the feeling of her mother's chest warm against her cheek, but she couldn't remember her voice. Sometimes when she walked through flower shops, Lane would get a whiff of a scent and think *that's it—that's her*, but then the

moment would pass, and she could never remember if it was the lilies or the hydrangeas that made her think of her mother.

Lane moved onto packing up her closet. She was moving into college in three days and had only just started to prepare. Overwhelmed, she went to Kara's room and knocked on her door.

"How do you possibly decide what clothes to bring to school?" Lane asked while standing in Kara's doorway.

"I dunno, just pack up everything you think you'll wear—if it's too much you can store some of it under your bed in a bin, or dad can take some home with him after you're all moved in." Kara scrolled on her phone while talking to Lane, then looked up at her, deciding that she needed to give more specific advice. "You'll need less than you think...you won't need all your shoes. Just a pair of sneakers, boots, rain boots, and sandals. Oh, and shower shoes...definitely don't forget those."

"Shower shoes...gotcha!"

This was the first Lane had heard of needing shoes in a shower, but she thought it made sense, since 25 girls would be using the same 3 showers every day. She made a mental note to run to the store to get some before she left for freshman orientation.

"Frat shoes too, can't forget those," Kara said as Lane started to leave the room.

Lane turned back around and confusingly asked, "Frat shoes?"

"Yeah, like shoes you don't care about that you can trash on the weekends. Anything works."

How trashed could my shoes really get? Lane asked herself as she headed back to her room.

Her family was small—just her, Kara, and their father. They had always lived in the same house in suburban Massachusetts. They never moved because they could still feel their mother every time the sun came through the kitchen window. Lane’s grandmother visited often, since she only lived two streets over. Her grandmother always came over with a book for Lane, it all started with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* when she was about three or four. Lane had flipped through the pages so quickly, excited to see where the story would take her, that she forgot to look at all of the drawings. So, after she finished reading, she went through each page more patiently, running her small hands over all of the primary colors. The most recent book her grandmother brought her was *Mrs. Dalloway*, which sat on the floor of Lane’s closet—she had yet to get past the third page, distracted by all of the excitement of moving. She picked up the book and placed it in the box with the photographs, thinking she’d finish it while she was at school. She always loved the books her grandmother gave her most.

Growing up without a mother was a strange thing. Lane didn’t know any better, but she also knew that some things could be better. Like when she needed her first bra and her father took her to Target. They paced the pre-teen aisles and her father tried not to look too hard at all of the different sizes so that no one would think he was a creep.

Kara filled a lot of roles for Lane; she walked her through her first kiss, gave her many too-detailed tutorials on how to use tampons, and was always there when Lane came home crying from school with an empty feeling in her chest. Lane was 18, and Kara was 21, and Lane had been trying not to follow Kara to school, but she got into Trinity College and that was where Kara went. It was close to home, and close to their father, and Lane was worried that if she didn’t decide to go there, their father might’ve had some major-depressive-mid-life-crisis-level

breakdown. So, in September, she would drive two hours south and begin a new chapter of her life in Hartford, Connecticut.

EARLY SEPTEMBER

“Alright, looks like you’re all set,” Lane’s dad said while avoiding eye contact with her. His eyes were beginning to gloss over and Lane knew that if he didn’t leave soon, he might never. He walked aimlessly around her small dorm room, straightening her posters of sunsets and oceans and moving the purple and blue colored pillows around her bed.

“Yep! All set!” she said enthusiastically, because she knew that if she sounded remotely upset or gave the slightest hint that she didn’t want him to leave, he would stay. It was only half past nine in the morning, but they both wanted to beat the rush of new students to get settled before Lane’s first real moments of college began. Her dad sighed and looked her up and down as if trying to memorize her in that exact moment. He gave Lane one final hug and she inhaled his scent. He smelled vaguely like her mother used to—some sort of unreachable flower that faded more and more with time.

Lane was unsure what to do once he left. She sat on her twin bed, cross-legged, staring at the empty side of the room that her new roommate would soon fill. She then realized if her roommate walked in on her sitting like that, alone, just staring at the empty bed, she would think Lane was strange. That was the last thing Lane wanted. So, she gathered her new shower caddy and her new shower shoes and headed off to figure out the college-shower-situation. Taking her time, Lane read all of the names hung on all of the doors in the hallway of her dorm. *I wonder who my friends will be*, she thought to herself while pacing the barren halls. By the time she came back to her own room, clean and excited, her roommate was there, with both of her parents adjusting her own posters and pillows.

“Hey! I’m Lane, sorry, I just got out of the shower, but is there anything I can do to help you guys? Do you need me to carry anything from your car?” Lane said awkwardly with wet hair dripping down her back.

“I’m Molly,” her new roommate said. She was short and brunette, with a tiny frame and even tinier top on. “I think we’ve got everything, but want to get lunch together when I’m done setting up? I still haven’t checked out the dining hall.”

Lane smiled. “Yeah, sounds good!”

“Be careful ladiesss!” Molly’s mother said with a high-pitched voice while looking at the two of them. “You don’t want to gain that freshman 15… the dining halls will get ya!” She laughed and glanced at Molly’s father, who just shrugged his shoulders in agreement. “Seriously though girls, take it easy on the food and the alcohol—before you know it you’ll be wondering why your jeans don’t fit anymore!”

Lane responded with a fake laugh, then examined Molly and her family. They were all slender, brunette, and seemed a little stand-off-ish. Lane had heard of the freshman 15, but weight had never been an issue before—she played soccer in high school. She’d have to ask Kara if the freshman 15 was a real thing or not.

After Molly’s parents gave her their final hugs, the two headed over to the dining hall together. Lane remembered how to get there from one of the many tours Kara had taken her on. The lines were filled with new confused students. Some were reading all of the menus posted for each line, others just went up to the least-busy station. Lane spotted that the breakfast line was still open and told Molly she would meet her at a table. She was starving, as she hadn’t eaten since early that morning before the move-in, and breakfast food was her favorite.

She found Molly in the dining hall sitting alone by a window. Lane had stacked her plate with blueberry pancakes, tater tots, and strawberries, all drenched in maple syrup and butter. She cut up the pancake into little squares and stacked each bite with a bit of pancake, tater tot, and strawberry, in that order. Once she was halfway through her plate, she looked over at Molly, whose face held a slight grimace.

“I don’t know how you can eat that much this early,” Molly said while staring at Lane’s plate, her arms crossed over her chest.

“What do you mean?” Lane asked, puzzled, her mouth hung slightly open, ready to take another bite. “It’s already almost noon!”

“I just feel nauseous for like the first half of the day, I don’t know, and I hate feeling bloated.” Molly took a small bite of a banana, the only thing she had picked up from the food line.

Lane glanced down at her own plate, then looked back up to Molly. “But don’t you get hungry? I get too hungry if I don’t eat in the morning, especially after moving all of my stuff in... technically, this is like my second breakfast.” Lane smirked at herself, set her fork down.

Molly took another small bite of a banana. “Nope, I just drink a ton of water, sometimes I bring almonds to eat around lunchtime, but I don’t really feel the need to eat much before dinner time. My mom does the same thing.”

Lane pushed her plate slightly out in front of her, and realized that maybe after half of her plate she was now full. “Wow, that’s impressive, I don’t think I could ever last that long.”

LATE SEPTEMBER

While walking through campus during the first few weeks of classes, Lane took note of how happy all her peers looked. They wore small dresses and skirts and somehow always managed to look perfect, even after a late night out. She went shopping with Molly one day in an attempt to match her closet to the campus. The stores Molly took her to were expensive though, especially for such small and thin pieces of fabric. She tried on a few outfits, but the clothes never really suited her, so she left empty-handed. Molly left every store with an outfit or two—Lane couldn't figure out how she managed to look so perfect in everything she tried on. Molly always offered her clothes to Lane, but she was just *so* small, so Lane never even tried to borrow them.

Lane was in one night class. It met once a week for three hours, and always ended a little past nine. A girl in this class, whose name Lane was unaware of, was one of those perfect, happy, small people. She only sat two rows in front of Lane, so she couldn't help but stare.

The girl's blonde, blown-out hair framed her face, making her look like Rachel from *Friends*. Her arms were so thin it was as if they could snap like a tree branch. Lane thought this girl must have been like Molly—the kind of person that looked good in everything they wore. She wondered if this was because of the girl's thin arms rather than her style.

After one of those lectures, Lane laid awake at night with her hand on her stomach. She pinched the fat that surrounded her bellybutton, noticing how much excess she had. *Why is everyone so goddamn tiny on this campus?* she thought to herself while turning on her side so that her back faced Molly's side of the room. Feeling the squish of her upper arms, she thought of the girl in her class. *How are arms like that even possible?* Lane put her middle finger and

thumb together around her wrist and was disappointed when they didn't touch each other on the other side.

EARLY OCTOBER

Lane's dad called her every Wednesday night around eight. She missed him a lot, and she sort of wished that Molly would leave their shared room so she could talk to him in private. It wasn't like she needed to say anything super personal to her dad, but with Molly in the room with her, she felt like she couldn't be honest with him.

"How was your day?" Her dad always opened with the same question.

"Good! My day was good, how was yours?" she responded.

"Great, but I miss you...being an empty-nester is no fun." Her dad laughed deeply, in a way that Lane found both sincere and lonely. "Honey, how are you *really*? How's Trinity? Are you getting along with Molly?"

"Oh yeah Molly's great," Lane said while looking over at her on the other side of the room. *Tell him I say hi!* Molly mouthed to Lane. "She says hi!"

"Oh, that's great, well tell her I say hi back. Have you been seeing Kara much?"

"Not really, no, she seems super busy with writing her thesis and being in her senior classes and all that." Lane really hadn't seen Kara much. Every once in a while they would grab takeout on the weekend but since Kara lived off-campus and Lane lived on-campus, they didn't cross paths that often. Which was good, Lane thought, because she never felt like she was bothering or annoying Kara by being her clingy-freshman-baby-sister.

"Ah, yeah she seems stressed out with all that and the job search. How are your classes going so far?"

"Fine, a little hard, but I like my professors." Lane liked the way her classes distracted her from everything. When she was in class, she didn't have time to think about missing home or the fact that she'd only made one real friend in college.

“Oh good, that’s great Lane. Alright well I’ll let you go honey, talk to you next week, love you!”

“Love you too,” Lane said while hanging up. She laid in her bed and turned on her side, facing away from Molly, and tried not to let a warm tear escape her eye. It had only been two months since she’d been home, but it felt like years.

LATE OCTOBER

Occasionally, there would be a line for the showers. This normally happened on Friday afternoons, because everyone wanted to shave their legs and wash their hair before the weekend began. Lane stood in line behind two girls that lived down the hall from her. A gray towel was wrapped around her, her arms holding it up so it didn't fall. She held onto her plastic shower caddy, which was filled with Pantene shampoo and conditioner, Dove body and face wash, and a pink razor. She didn't intend to listen to the girls' conversation, but it was only the three of them in line, and there was no other noise in the bathroom.

"I feel like everyone gets to college and like, gains a ton of weight, or loses a ton of it." The blonde one was wearing a blue polka-dot shower cap and a matching towel. Her flip flops were blue and polka-dotted, too.

"That is *so* true. One of my friends from high school literally gained like, ten pounds already. Her face looks *so* different." The brunette one was wearing a white robe with her initials stitched into the chest. Her hair was tied up in a tight bun.

"I *know* right. I feel like your face is the first place you see it."

"Yeah, now that I think of it, another girl I know lost a *ton* of weight when she went to college. I think it got like, bad though, I don't think she ended up finishing her first year."

"Jeez. That's sad."

"I know right, poor thing."

Someone got out of one of the showers, so the blonde one got out of line and into the open one. She kept talking to her friend.

"Are you washing your hair tonight? I wasn't going to, but I don't want it to look greasy."

“Yeah, I’m gonna. I want to curl it later.”

Another shower opened up, and the brunette got in.

“Do you know what you’re wearing later?” The two of them continued talking over the noise of the water.

“I don’t know, I feel super bloated today, so probably something black, and not cropped?”

“Yeah same, I’m thinking I’ll wear a bodysuit and jeans or something. I won’t look good in anything that shows my stomach right now.”

The last shower finally opened up, and Lane got in. When she dropped her towel, she looked down at her pale and puffy body, thinking that she too should probably wear something black and not too tight or cropped later that night. Both the blonde and the brunette were much smaller than her, anyways. Lane’s mind wandered as she stood under the hot water...*If they think that way about themselves, then what do they think about me?*

EARLY NOVEMBER

After midterms, Lane really started to get into the groove of her life in college. She and Molly did a lot together—eating, working out, walking to class, sleeping. Lane liked following Molly’s routine, she felt like it was helping her become a real Trinity student.

One morning, Lane and Molly went to the dining hall before class, they both picked up a banana and a granola bar. They sat next to one another. Eating was starting to feel a little like a chore for Lane—she was aware of every chew and swallow. One time, when Lane had the stomach bug when she was a child, the school nurse told her to stick to bland foods: toast, bananas, rice, crackers. Those were the foods she found most tolerable at school, they were never too heavy for her, never made her feel bloated, and they kept her going. If she didn’t eat a banana, then she would feel dizzy in her classes. So she ate, just enough, to avoid the dizziness.

One weekend, Molly went home to visit her family. It was the first time Lane had the room to herself. She was at ease. While sitting at her desk, flipping through readings, Lane’s grandmother called. They normally talked once a week, but Lane had missed most of her calls that month so far. She still hadn’t picked up *Mrs. Dalloway*, though she kept it on her bedside table. She always meant to read it at night when she got into bed.

“Finally you answer me! It is just so lovely to see your face honey,” her grandmother smiled on FaceTime. After catching up for a few minutes, her grandmother squinted at her screen. “Lane honey, your face looks so small, are you eating enough? I can practically see the outline of your cheek bones.”

Lane sighed. “The dining hall food is pretty bad honestly, but yes grandma, I have been eating enough.”

“Ah, yes, I remember Kara saying that too. How about if I send you some snacks and cookies? I can get them there by the end of the week.”

“Um...no, that’s okay, I’ll survive. Thank you though!”

“I’m sending them whether you like it or not, share some with your roommate! What’s her name? Molly? I’m sure she’d appreciate some homemade cookies.”

“Okay okay, thank you, I’ll tell her.”

Lane hung up, and thought about what her grandmother had said about her face looking small. She stared at her reflection in the small mirror she kept on her desk. Maybe her cheekbones *were* more prominent. She kind of liked the way her face was starting to look—like she was losing her baby face and looking more like an eighteen-year-old. Her hair was looking a little thinner though, which she hated. *Ah protein, I just need to eat more protein*, Lane thought to herself as she reached for one of the protein bars she kept in her desk drawer, a new brand that Molly had introduced her to. *Yes, I’ll just eat more of these once in a while.*

Lane chewed the protein bar slowly; she missed her grandmother. She missed her father. She didn’t see Kara as much as she thought she would. Lane’s mind wandered to her mother—she missed her most. Her mother sat on one of her desk shelves in a frame—Lane’s favorite photo of her. It was in black and white, her mother’s curly hair blowing in the wind from waves at the beach. Her mother was smiling. Lane smiled too. She picked her mother up from where she sat and held her to her own chest tightly—a hug. She hugged her mother until the corners of the frame started to dig into her upper arms, leaving small red marks, then she set her mother down, and continued to chew.

About a week later, her grandmother's cookies showed up in the post office. Lane was excited—they were peanut butter cookies with Hershey Kisses pressed into the middle. Lane offered some to Molly, like her grandmother told her to.

“No thanks, I don't need the empty calories,” Molly said while flipping her hair over her shoulder.

“Are you sure? They're really good, honestly. They're like, my favorite.” Lane held the plate of cookies out in front of her.

“Yeah—no, I'm definitely good. Thanks though!” Molly left the room to go to class, leaving Lane alone with the plate of cookies. She had yet to eat that day, and it was already past four in the afternoon.

She held one of the cookies up to her mouth, making sure to take a bite that got enough of the Hershey Kiss. She closed her eyes. It tasted *so good*. The pieces of sugary peanut butter and chocolate melted on her tongue. Lane shoved the rest of the cookie in her mouth. She picked up another one. She wanted it so badly, her stomach growled. She ate a second. And then another one. And another one.

Before she knew it, the plate of cookies was empty, and her stomach had pushed itself over the waistband of her jeans. Lane dusted the crumbs of the plate into her trash can, ashamed of what she'd done. She felt sick. *Molly would have never done something like this*, Lane thought, *she knows how to control herself*. When Molly got back from class she decided to tell her she had thrown the cookies out, in agreement that they weren't worth the calories.

LATE NOVEMBER

While brushing her teeth for the fourth time that day, Lane noticed her collar bones poking out more than normal. She liked the way they looked, and she traced one of her protruding bones with her finger lightly. She felt good—like all the excess weight she had come to school with was finally gone. She hadn't weighed herself since coming to school, but she'd never looked this good, so she knew she had to have lost at least ten or twelve pounds in the last two months.

She put her middle finger and thumb around her wrist and her fingertips touched on the other side—she gasped. *Finally*, she thought to herself. She spat out her toothpaste and went back to her dorm room, excited to go out for the night with Molly. Molly had picked them up a handle of vodka and wasn't even making Lane pay for any of it.

"I made you a drink!" Molly said when Lane came back from the bathroom. "It's just Crystal Light and vodka, so basically no calories, and it tastes good." Lane took a sip, the vodka burned when it hit the back of her throat, but it could've been worse.

"Perfect," Lane said. "Okay, what should I wear? I want to look cute tonight."

Molly threw her a tight cropped shirt from her own closet, one that Lane's father would definitely not be proud of her wearing. "You'd look good in this, you should borrow it!"

Lane laughed. "Molly, I'd never fit into your clothes, don't be ridiculous."

Molly rolled her eyes. "Try it on, I guarantee it'll fit, we're basically the same size."

Lane looked at the extra-small tag on the collar of the shirt, she always wore a medium. She slipped it over her head with ease, confused by the way it hugged her perfectly.

"See! I told you it would fit. You look so good, you should try talking to that guy from your class tonight," Molly said while taking another sip of her drink.

Lane smiled at this. She looked at herself in the full-length mirror her and Molly shared. Her stomach didn't bother her so much anymore, it was really just her arms that got in the way. They looked enormous compared to the arms of other girls on campus. She did have a crush on another freshman in one of her classes, but he barely knew she existed. Guys never really talked to Lane at parties, she always just stood next to Molly and stared down at her drink while they talked to her instead.

Lane's eyes landed on the photograph of her mother as she took another sip of her drink. She felt uncomfortable, like her mother was there—right then, in her room, watching her, judging her. It felt so wrong... Lane, in a tiny top, drinking her god-awful drink, all while her angel of a mother watched. Before they left to go out for the night, Lane picked the frame of her mother up, and placed her in one of her desk drawers among the pile of protein bars. *I'm sorry mom*, she found herself thinking, *I just don't want you to see me like this*. She shut the drawer, and headed out for the night.

The bar was just one street off campus. It was normally pretty well lit, always crowded with underage students using their brand-new fake IDs. The man at the door let Lane and Molly in without even checking their ages, which was definitely due to the fact that their chests and stomachs were showing despite the chilly November weather. Once at the bar, Lane and Molly ordered a round of shots. About twenty minutes after taking that shot, Lane's vision became hazy. Everything was dim, everyone was mumbling things to her. She was dizzy... really dizzy.

She sat down. Except when she sat down, it was not in a chair, like she thought it would be. Instead, she sat on the dark and sticky floor. She placed her hands on the ground by her sides to steady herself from tipping over.

“Lane?” she heard a familiar voice say. “Oh my god! Lane? What are you doing on the floor?”

Lane felt the voice’s hands scoop her up by her underarms.

“How much did she drink? What did you give her?” she heard the voice ask, aggressively, to whom she did not know, for her eyes were closed to stop all of the dizziness.

“I’m taking you to my apartment, come on.”

Lane hobbled out of the bar, holding onto the voice for balance. They arrived in a building that looked familiar, Lane thought she had been there before.

Ohhh, Kara—I’m with Kara, Lane realized as the voice dragged her into a bathroom.

“Wait here, I can tell you’re going to need to throw up,” Kara said while steadying Lane against the wall next to the toilet.

Once Kara left the bathroom, Lane stood up. She had to steady herself again, this time on the bathroom sink as she stared in the mirror. Her eyes were red, her makeup was no longer where it was supposed to be. She looked pale, sick. She felt a huge wave of dizziness come, and sat back down where Kara had placed her. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the bathroom wall.

Next thing she knew, Lane was groaning, “Kara... Kara,” as she lifted her head up from the toilet.

“Yes Lane, I’m right here, I’m right here.” She rubbed Lane’s back in slow circles.

“Don’t worry I’m here, you’re not alone.”

“Kara...I’m not having fun.” Lane rested her warm cheek on the cool toilet seat. Her hair was tied up in a misshapen bun—she had no idea if she had done that herself or if it was Kara or maybe Molly or someone else that she had run into that night at the bar.

“Lane, you’re throwing up, it’s going to be okay, you just reached your limit. It happens to all of us! And hey, at least you know where to stop now.” Kara smiled softly while continuing to rub her back.

“No, Kara. I don’t like it here. I don’t like myself here. I don’t like it. I really don’t like it.” Lane shook her head and shivered. “I miss home. Uh oh...I’m not done yet.” She threw her head back over the bowl of the toilet. That was the last she remembered of the evening.

Lane woke up the next morning in Kara’s bed. She was lying on her right side, and she always slept on her back, which made her realize that Kara probably had to sleep next to her. She wore an oversized gray t-shirt that had a faded high school logo across the chest—she was also not sure whose this was—at least her pants were her own. *God, what happened*, she thought to herself while she rolled over to check the time on her phone. 3:14 pm.

Shit, okay, normally Lane didn’t sleep past eight in the morning. 34 unread texts from Molly: “Are you okay????” “Answer me!!!” “Is your sister mad at me???” “Are you alive?????” Lane typed out “I’m okay! Coming back soon,” and shut her phone off. She pulled herself upwards and decided to make her way to the living room to apologize to Kara.

Dizziness rushed to her head. Her body felt entirely empty. All of the small amount of food and liquid she had in her stomach had been emptied the night prior. The only things in her stomach were her organs, who seemed to be asking her for more. She felt awful for the fact that Kara had to take care of her, but then again, she never got like this, so maybe Kara had found it funny and naive? She hoped so.

“Oh thank god you’re awake,” Kara said, standing up as Lane entered the kitchen. Kara had a larger chest than Lane, and a bit bigger of a stomach too. She was two inches shorter than Lane, and she always wore her brown hair back in a low bun. They looked like sisters—at least,

that's what strangers always told them when they were together. "Here, sit down at the table, I got you a Gatorade and some Saltines."

Lane sat down at the table and took a small sip of Gatorade. Kara pushed the box of Saltines towards her, but Lane shook her head.

"I can't eat yet, my stomachs not quite settled," Lane said as she pushed the box back toward Kara, and placed a hand on her lower stomach.

There was a long pause of silence. Kara broke it by saying, "Be honest with me." She looked directly at Lane. "How much did you have to drink last night?"

Lane thought back, Molly had made her the vodka and Crystal Light mixie, which probably had three shots, and she had two, maybe three of those, and then the shots at the bar...

"Oh God," Lane said aloud. "I think I had like, seven, eight shots? But normally that wouldn't have made me throw up that much, wow, I don't really remember much, I'm sorry if I ruined your night." She laughed it off, thinking of the amateur freshman she must have looked like to Kara.

Kara wasn't laughing.

"And what did you have to eat before you started drinking?"

"Ummm, me and Molly made popcorn at like, 7?"

Lane took another small sip of Gatorade, avoiding Kara's gaze.

"Just popcorn?"

"Yeah."

"You only ate popcorn?"

"Yeah."

“Lane.” Kara took a deep breath. “You’re telling me that you only ate popcorn yesterday, and then you continued to drink seven shots and go to a bar?”

“No, I did not *only* eat popcorn.” Lane rolled her eyes. “I also had some almonds.” She paused to think. “And some Ritz crackers?”

“Lane,” Kara said sternly.

“Yeah... what? Why are you being so weird?”

“I’m being weird because what the *FUCK* were you thinking!”

Lane looked up at her older sister, eyes wide, shocked. Kara had never raised her voice at her before.

“Oh my god, calm down. I don’t like to eat that much before I go out! I don’t like looking bloated.”

“Oh my god, eating dinner doesn’t change the way you look... Lane, I’m getting worried about you.”

Kara scratched her head while looking at Lane, as if she was trying to solve some difficult math problem.

“You look tiny. Like, really small. Have you been feeling okay? Are you sick?”

The word tiny was something exciting and new for Lane to be called, she liked the way it sounded.

“I actually feel great, I can even fit into Molly’s cute clothes now. I’ve just been eating healthier.”

“You fit into Molly’s clothes... she's like...5 feet tall...shit, Lane. I don’t think Molly’s good for you. Will you promise me you’ll start eating more? Like actual meals? No more popcorn before going out.”

“Yes, yes, I promise I won’t black out again.”

“That’s not what I said. I said promise me you’ll start eating more. Before you drink you need like...pasta. Or a burger. Something that can absorb all the alcohol. Seriously Lane, it’s dangerous.”

Lane paused, gnawed at her lip, picked at her hangnail, “Okay. I promise. Thanks again, for taking care of me, and for letting me stay here.”

Lane stood from the table and put her jacket on over the random t-shirt and pants she was wearing.

“Oh, also, I almost forgot to tell you, for your birthday next weekend, I told dad we’d both go home for the night to spend it with him and grandma.”

“What? Why would you tell him that, I have plans to go out with Molly that night!”

“Lane, we haven't seen him since the end of August. He’s so excited, we can’t bail. And since when is going out with Molly more important than seeing dad?”

“Okay, you’re right, you’re right, you’re always right, I’m sorry, I’ll be there. See you later!”

Lane left quickly through Kara’s front door. She really did want to see her dad and her grandmother, but there was something about home that she was not in the right place to deal with.

EARLY DECEMBER

“Okay, I’m going to turn off the lights so you can blow out your candles.” Lane’s father said with his back turned towards the cake and away from her.

“Haappyyy Birthdayyy tooo youuu...” Her dad, Kara, and her grandmother sang in unison.

“Make a wish! And make it a good one!” her grandmother exclaimed, excitedly watching with her hands clasped together, as if she was praying. She had brought Lane a new copy of Jane Austen’s *Emma* as a present. Lane still hadn’t gotten past the fourth page of *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Lane closed her eyes, pausing a moment before she blew out the candles. Being home again, and seeing her dad and her grandmother, felt odd. She was not the same person she was in August before she left for school. It felt right, being with her family in her house again, but the version of herself that was sitting in that kitchen felt wrong. The sweater she wore hung off her, even though it used to fit her snugly. She tucked her thin pieces of hair behind her ears, bent over and blew out the candles.

Lane wished her birthday would feel like the other ones she’d had at that same table. Her dad took the cake to the kitchen counter, and came back with four even slices.

“I’m okay actually, I don’t really need one, I’m full from dinner,” Lane said while she pushed her plate slightly out in front of her. Her dad had made spaghetti and meatballs for dinner, and Lane had eaten most of her plate without even thinking.

“Honey, it’s your 19th birthday. I don’t care if you’re full. I haven’t seen you in three months. Of course you’re having cake.”

Kara put her hand on top of Lane's. "Lane, one piece of cake won't hurt, I promise. Look, it's chocolate with pink buttercream frosting, your favorite!" Kara pushed the plate back in front of Lane.

The thought of eating it nauseated her. She reluctantly took her fork and pushed it into the side of the slice with frosting. She made sure not to get any actual cake in the bite. She could feel her family's eyes on her. She put the fork in her mouth and let the frosting touch her tongue, slowly dragging it out until the fork was clean.

She gulped and swallowed quickly, trying not to taste the sugar, but she could feel its residue on her tongue. She desperately wanted to brush her teeth. To take back that bite. It was like she could feel the weight of it in her stomach weighing her down. She grabbed her glass of water and drank it quickly.

Lane looked up from her glass to meet her father's eyes, which were red and glossy, his smile bent in crooked pity. He looked her up and down. Warm tears filled her eyes.

"Dad?" she whispered as she stared up at him with her wet hazel eyes. She set down her fork, "I don't think...I don't think I'm okay..."

Lane hung her head and began to cry lightly. Her small shoulders slumped as she held her forehead in her hands. Her blue veins were visible through the thin skin that covered her palms.

"I know sweetie, I know," he said as he came toward her to rub her back.

"Don't worry honey," her grandmother chimed in. "You're home now."

Lane nodded silently, she forced her eyes shut so no more tears could escape her. Kara placed her hand over Lane's again. Lane grabbed it, squeezed it. Kara squeezed back three times. The four of them sat like that for a while, in necessary silence, until her dad cleared the plates and her grandmother stood from her chair. Lane looked up at her ceiling, not to focus on the

blank white space but rather to say to her mother, *I'm sorry, I don't know when it got this bad.*

I'm sick—I think—really sick, and I miss you now more than ever.

October, November, December

“I just need to know,” she said while staring at her dry hands that had begun to crack from the December air, “Is this ever going to be more than a friendship?” She pushes her hair out of her face and tugs at her Christmas tree colored sweater, pulling the sleeves down so they cover her hands. Adam looks out the window at the snow beginning to fall outside. He adjusts how he is sitting on the couch, runs his hands through his short curly brown hair. It is December 18th. After pausing for what feels like hours on end, he softly says, “Lane,” his chest sinking as he whispers her name. “I’m sorry if I ever led you on. You really are a great friend.” Lane exhales, realizing how long she has been holding her breath for. Adam clears his throat, his jaw tightens. He looks at her, finally, and the two just stare at each other, breathing, blinking, their chests rising and falling together, the same way they had that day in the midst of autumn leaves.

Lane fell in love in October. Her and Adam were on one of their late afternoon walks home from class. They were talking about classes and the future and careers and families and the leaves had just started to change. There were hundreds of shriveled up red, orange and brown leaves crumpled on the ground and Lane’s favorite thing to do as a child was to step on every single leaf to hear the perfect crunch. Adam, on the other hand, told her that he used to enjoy making huge piles and jumping on tons of leaves at a time. “Fuck it,” he said to her, his blue-gray eyes glowing as the lowering sun hit them. “Let’s run around in the leaves just like we’re kids.” He ran onto the nearest patch of grass and started collecting a pile of leaves. “Come here!” Lane ran over to him, giggling. Adam took both of her hands in his. “Jump around! These ones have the perfect amount of crunch!” They jumped around feeling like they were the only two people in the world—or at least that’s how Lane felt. Her foot caught a leaf that was a little too

slippery and she fell onto her backside. Adam laughed so hard tears started to fall from his eyes. He hunched over, grabbing his stomach with deep laughter to the point where he couldn't get any words out without bursting into another fit. "God, you're making my stomach hurt," he said while smiling down at her. She rolled around in the pile of leaves laughing just as hard. Once he caught his breath, he laid down next to her in the makeshift pile of leaves and they just stared at the sky together, recovering from the laughter. His eyes met hers and she thought he was about to kiss her. He stared intently, looking down at her lips and up to her eyes. She was so excited. He threw a leaf at her face instead of leaning over and kissing her, which sent him into another fit of laughter. Then he stood up, throwing more leaves at her while he ran away.

She snaps back into the reality of his cold dorm room. "I understand," Lane says while breaking his eye contact. She inhales sharply. "Well, if I'm being honest, I don't see you as just a friend. So..." she gulps, "so I don't think I can talk to you anymore. I mean, I don't think we can talk like we normally do. No, no I don't think I'll be able to do that." Lane stands up quickly, grabs her coat, and begins to rush out of the room. She looks back at him—he looks so confused, so lost, it makes her feel all the worse. She feels insignificant to him. She knows she has to leave immediately before she says something desperate; she needs to keep her head high. "So I guess I'll just see you around Adam." She refuses to look back at him as she opens the door to a gush of cold air. "Lane, Lane wait! What happened? I'm sorry I didn't even... I never even realized you... just wait a second, we can still be friends? I've had fun getting to know you..." Adam says with a confused tone as Lane closes the door behind her. If she had stayed a second longer, he would have seen her face go pale white and then flush with red, the same way it did whenever she had a fever.

That day in October was the first day Lane realized she saw a future with Adam. A real future—the kind you tell your family about. She even called her sister the next day to tell her about Adam. And Lane never told her sister about boys. Her sister Kara was engaged at the ripe age of 24 to her high school boyfriend, and she was a hopeless romantic who couldn't seem to understand how Lane hadn't found love yet. Things just worked out that way for Kara, and the puzzle pieces never quite fit for Lane. She never told her sister about any boys because the second she did her sister would ask questions like “Are you in love?” or “Is he the one?” and the answer was almost always “no,” and “no.” Most of the men she had entertained herself with through her two years of college were far below her standards, and certainly below her sisters, whom she was pretty sure was saving herself for marriage. Some of these boys did not even know how to spell Lane's name correctly. One boy that took her to a formal last semester wrote her name on the invitation list as “Lain.” A different boy, from freshman year, had her contact in his phone as “Layne.” Her name wasn't even hard to spell, but she never cared enough to say anything. Lane did not necessarily dislike these boys, but she also did not obsess over them, or imagine any sort of future together. They were sort of placeholders for her, keeping her busy while she found her way to someone she really liked. But this boy—Adam—was the first boy she felt comfortable talking to at all hours of the day. She didn't need a drink or two before sending him a text message—she just did it. And she knew he would always respond. He was just that type of guy. “Before you ask anything serious,” Lane told her sister on the phone, “the answer is no, we won't be getting engaged anytime soon, we haven't even kissed yet, and you won't meet him unless it goes anywhere. Just no. But please be happy for me, I think he's actually really sweet.” Her sister went silent on the other line. “Wow,” she said, “You've never

talked about anyone like that, alright alright, I'll back off, but keep me updated please, you know I live for this stuff.”

As she begins to walk home from Adam's dorm, Lane feels stripped down to the bone, raw. Like there is nothing between her and the freezing air. The wind picks up, and snowflakes stick to her hair and her eyelashes. She thinks about what would happen if she stopped walking against the wind—if she just gave up and let it take her. Maybe it's force would knock her over, or maybe it would carry her somewhere else—some place where relationships weren't so hard to figure out and everything was easier and she always knew what everyone wanted from her. She fastens the buttons on her winter parka and crosses her arms over her chest, determined to get as far away from Adam and his room as possible. She keeps her mouth closed in a tight line and her strides straight forward through campus. The combination of cold and wind cause her eyes to water in a way that makes her think *I might as well cry now*. The sidewalk is lined with benches, they are all empty. The entire campus she has crossed thus far is empty too—she thinks about all of the students watching the blurry snowfall from their cozy rooms, or through the windows of the library with a hot coffee and textbook in hand.

Lane had never even come close to love before Adam. And she thought she was in love with him because he took up all of her thoughts daily. *Should I wear this sweater to class today?* Lane would think to herself while getting ready in the morning, *Would Adam like this? Does he like the color pink? Is blue better?* Her roommate Maeve always told her she was crazy and thinking about everything too much. But there was nothing that made Lane happier than when Adam complimented her—no matter how small. One day when she got to class, wearing a new

pink top that buttoned down the front, and her favorite dark denim jeans, Adam told her she looked nice. “Thank you.” Lane said quietly while taking her seat next to him. “Of course, I mean, you always look nice.” She blushed. Lane spent the rest of that class not thinking about microbiology, but instead daydreaming about her and Adam together. That was the power that his compliments held over her—they could send her into a spiral imagining the future. She imagined them going shopping together, like couples always did in the rom-coms her and Maeve watched on Friday nights. Lane and Adam would pop into every store, trying on funny hats and scarves, surprising each other with what they had taken into the dressing room. They would open the door to show each other at the exact same time. The moments in her mind were so fun, and so perfect, that they almost felt real. Lane also started to plan her days around Adam so that she could spend more time with him. *I know Adam and I both have a biology test tomorrow, so he will probably be in the science building tonight, so I might as well go there too.* All Adam must have thought was that he and Lane had pretty similar schedules. Lane realized the idea that she was in love with him, or even interested in him as more than a friend, must have never really crossed his mind.

She finds a bench right next to the sidewalk she is walking on and uses her already numb hands to clear a place to sit. There is a small gold plaque nailed into the top of the bench with black writing. Lane clears that off too—she always liked to see who was cared about enough to have a bench dedicated to them. *Mary Jo Atkins 1932-1998, The Love of My Life, Dedicated to the Spot Where We First Met.* Lane smiles to herself. Something about this is so sweet, so adorable and so heartwarming, that it makes her slightly dizzy. She is entirely overwhelmed with the sentiment that two people met here on her very campus and fell in love. Their love must have

been so passionate, and so great, that Mary Jo's husband felt the need to donate a bench with a small gold plaque with her name on it. She wonders if he ever sits here with her spirit. One day, she wants to have what they had. Lane sits, thinking about Mary Jo, staring at her lap, waiting for tears to come. Nothing comes out though. She closes her eyes tightly, trying to force out any sort of emotion. She knows she has to let something go, but maybe there is nothing left to give. Maybe Adam has taken it from her.

Adam's hockey formal was at the end of November. Lane heard about it through Maeve, whose boyfriend was on the team. Adam and Lane had been spending more and more time together, enjoying each other's company. Lane thought, well, she hoped, that he would maybe ask her to his formal. They spent a lot of late nights together studying. One night, Lane baked chocolate peanut butter cookies for the two of them to share. It was the night before their big biology exam, so she knew they would be together for a while. She wanted to do something cute for him, something to make him happy and excited to be with her. When she sat down at their usual table, his face immediately lit up at the sight of the cookies. "Okay, okay don't get too excited," Lane said while laughing at his stupid grin. "We are only allowed to have a cookie break after going over each section of the study guide." Adam rolled his eyes. "What are you, my mother? Am I in kindergarten? C'mon let me just have one..." He reached over the table trying to snag one off the plate she set down. "No, no, we will use them as our study motivations. Trust me, you'll thank me later." Adam nodded and began to take out his study guide and textbook. After making it through the first section, Lane took the plastic wrap off the top of the plate of cookies and handed half of one to Adam. "Thank God for peanut butter cookies," Lane said while holding up her half, smiling, "and cheers to the biology department!" Adam reached across

the table to cheers his half with hers. “And may we pass the multiple-choice section,” he said before taking a bite. A week later, they both got their exams back in class. Lane got a 96, and Adam got an 84. It was the best either of them had done that semester, as neither of them were science majors. “Must’ve been the cookies, you were right,” Adam said while proudly pointing to the grade circled on the top of his exam. Lane grinned. She thought about his formal coming up, and how that could lead to something more between them. Maybe if he asked her to come with him, she could finally tell him how she felt, or rather how he made her feel.

While she sits on the snowy bench, physically and emotionally numb, Lane stares into the piercing white snow until her vision falls out of focus and she notices the sky has darkened to a shade of purple. A small pile of snowflakes forms on her lap. She stands up to shake them off and begins the second half of her trek home. The windows in the classrooms she passes are darkened like the sky, but the lights in the dorm rooms are just starting to light up. Some curtains are closed and some are wide open. Lane can see friends watching movies together, people alone in their rooms reading, some talking on the phone. She wonders what people see when they walk past her window. Most days, Lane is alone, focusing on school or talking to her sister. Some days, when Maeve is home and not with her boyfriend, the two of them sit on Lane’s bed, talking about everyone and everything. Those days are becoming fewer and fewer—Lane misses having Maeve to herself all of the time.

One night, while Lane and Maeve were watching *When Harry Met Sally*, Maeve’s boyfriend Tyler texted her to come over to hangout. Lane was bored, having already finished her homework, and was hoping she and Maeve could just finish the movie together. “I wish I had a

boyfriend like you to just hang out with whenever I wanted.” Lane groaned while Maeve got ready to leave. “Your time will come, I can feel it. Oh wait actually, I think Adam is going to be there, everyone’s watching the Bruins game in Tyler’s apartment, let me ask if you can come, he’s definitely going to say yes!” Lane’s face lit up. “Really! That sounds fun, let me know what he says.” Lane went back upstairs and quickly hopped in the shower. Tyler hadn’t said yes to her coming along yet, but if he did, she sure as hell wasn’t going to go with greasy hair. She double shampooed and conditioned as fast as she could, then hopped out of the shower to quickly blow dry. Her hair always looked the best when it was freshly cleaned and blown out. “Laneeee!” Maeve yelled from the bottom of the stairs. “Tyler said of course it’s okay for you to come, let’s go now though, we’re gonna miss the first period.” Lane grinned. She knew she was right to have showered. “Ah! Okay wait can I please put some makeup and a cute outfit on though, I’m like, nervous to see Adam.” Maeve rolled her eyes and laughed, “Lane you guys practically see each other every day in class, but yes, I’ll give you ten minutes to get all pretty.” Lane stared in her bathroom mirror, noticing the purple bags under her eyes and the acne scars on her cheeks. She rubbed concealer on anywhere she could find an imperfection, then brushed her eyebrows into place and swiped mascara on her eyelashes. Her sister always told her that less was more, and that guys never liked girls who wore too much makeup. After throwing on the same pink top she wore to class the day Adam complimented her, Lane ran downstairs to meet Maeve. “Okay, ready, how do I look? Oh shit, I forgot deodorant, one sec.” She bolted back up the stairs, swiped under her arms, and was back in seconds. “You look great, don’t stress, we’re literally just going to sit on a couch and watch the game.”

In the distance, Lane notices two figures walking ahead of her on the frosted grass. The further she walks the clearer they come into her view. A boy and girl are scooping up the small bits of snow that are stuck to the brown grass. They mold them into misfit snowballs. The snowballs are small and misshapen and kind of white but really mostly brown with mud. Both of them have long winter coats on. The girl's is red and the boy's is black, both of the coats go past their knees. The boy is wearing a knit hat with a pom-pom. The girl has a scarf wrapped around her neck so many times you can only see the apples of her cheeks and her eyes. Her eyebrows and forehead are covered by the hood of her coat. Their cheeks are red from the cold; the redness makes them look happy—they look so happy. Packing snow together, they laugh and run from one another, trying to avoid getting hit with the muddy snow.

When they walked into Tyler's apartment, Lane noticed her hands begin to tremble. She didn't really know Tyler, or his friends, or anything about hockey. Why did she come again? *Okay, calm down, Maeve was right, we're just gonna watch the game.* Adam opened the door after they knocked. "Oh, hey Lane! What's up! Maeve, welcome, as always." *Okay so Tyler did not tell Adam I was coming,* Lane thought to herself, her heart pounding, her cheeks building with warmth. She knew she saw Adam basically everyday whether it was in class or studying, but this felt different. This was a new setting for them. She felt like there was some social test she had to pass to eventually be with him. "Want a beer?" Adam looked at Lane, his eyebrows raised. "Yeah, sure, thanks." Lane was not a beer drinker, but it was all they seemed to have. Tyler, Adam, and one other boy on the team had claimed their respective spots on the couches that sat in front of their large television. Maeve snuggled up next to Tyler. Adam patted the seat on the couch next to him, "All yours," he said while looking up at Lane. She smiled and sat

down. Her back was straight, her hands placed neatly on her thighs. Tyler's apartment was honestly... pretty gross. There were leftover pizza boxes and beers everywhere, and the only sort of decorations were empty boxes that used to hold beer flattened out and duct-taped to the walls. *I bet this isn't what Adam's place looks like*, Lane thought while looking around. Maeve had been right, they really were there just to watch the game. No one was even making small talk—the boy's eyes stayed glued to the screen, making various gestures at certain moments, standing up for some, waving their hands for others. Sometimes they were silent, their elbows on their knees, leaning forward and squinting at the small black puck. Other times they were yelling, high-fiving, slugging back beers.

Lane zones out while she looks at the couple that plays in the snow, and becomes consumed by her thoughts. She thinks of Adam wearing the same pom-pom hat, and herself wearing the same scarf, wrapped up above her nose. All of a sudden they are laying on their backs—her and Adam—waving their arms back and forth to make angels in the dusting of snow. Adam makes the misfit snowballs just like this boy—they run from one another, throwing them, their cheeks growing red like this couple's. *I must be going crazy*, Lane thinks while she snaps out of her imagination. She looks around. *He just told me he never saw me like that*. The couple had left the frosted grass now, probably gone home together to warm up. She continues to walk.

Adam's leg was only a few inches from Lane's on the couch while they watched the game. She wondered if he was inching closer to her on purpose or if it was all in her head. The game went by quickly, especially since Lane had caused them to miss the first period to get ready. She was hoping she would have gotten more of a chance to talk to Adam, maybe just the

two of them. When the game ended, everyone stood up, getting ready to leave. “Hey, thanks for coming by, you should come hangout with us more.” Adam put his hand on her thigh while he said this. Lane flushed. “Yeah, totally! This was fun, I love hockey.” “No shit!” Adam responded, moving his hand off of her leg too quickly for her liking, “We’ll all have to go to a game sometime.” Lane could not hide her excitement. “Yes! Definitely, that sounds great! See you tomorrow in class.” “See ya!” Adam leaned back into the couch, changing the channel to another game, already losing focus on her. On the walk home, Lane was practically skipping. “Did you hear that?!” She said while talking excitedly to Maeve. “He said he was happy *I* came over and that we should all go to a game *together*. God I am so happy you asked Tyler if I could come.” Maeve smirked. “You are adorable, your crush is so cute, we can totally hang out with them more often, I can try to be your wing woman. I can totally see this happening. Formal would be the perfect opportunity for a double-date-type-situation.” Lane’s smile widened. “I think I can see this happening too.”

Lane closes her eyes for a little while she walks. She is aware this will look strange to anyone who might pass by her, but the sidewalk is empty and she can’t stop thinking about everything she missed with Adam. *Was he ever how I imagined him in my head?* She closes her eyes tightly, scrunching her nose and eyebrows until the black she sees turns into little spots of color. She watches the spots of color dance. She opens her eyes and blurrily regains her focus, the snow is coming down harder.

On a Thursday night in November, Lane and Maeve decided to venture out to the one bar near their campus. The bar was just a street over and always filled with people pushing past one

another, yelling over music. Tyler said the hockey team always hung out there on Thursdays, so Lane wore a dark pink spaghetti-strap tank top and straightened her frizzy hair in hopes of running into Adam. She hadn't seen him outside of class since they all watched the game together. Honestly, she had never really seen him on the weekend because she tended to keep to herself and Maeve and a small group of friends that hung out on some Fridays and Saturdays. Their nights usually consisted of Jeopardy and board games. She always wondered what he was up to on the weekends. Was he at a hockey game? Or just out with his friends at a bar or frat? Sometimes her mind would really wander, and she'd think he would text her to come join him somewhere at some party. Or maybe he'd text her and ask to join her wherever she was. Somewhere she had read that when you're thinking about someone it meant they were thinking about you, too. So in these moments she'd imagine him thinking the same thoughts that she was. He'd ask himself what she was up to, why she never reached out, and would hope that she'd text him soon. Lane and Maeve left their apartment and started to walk toward the bar. Lane wasn't a huge drinker—which was an unusual thing on her campus—but she knew that if she wanted to be in the same circle as Adam she'd need to start going out more. He was more immersed with the small college culture than she was. Whenever she did drink it was normally pink wine, which was not quite the kind of drink to order at a bar. Pink wine was more so a sitting-on-the-couch-in-her-pajamas type of drink. She was nervous.

A maintenance worker walks by her. He wears large tan gloves and a big brown jacket. He methodically throws salt on the sidewalk. They exchange smiles, she thanks him with a nod, she walks on.

When they got to the bar, it was exactly like Lane had remembered it from the one time she went freshman year when she first got a fake ID. Although it was freezing outside, everyone was sweating inside. The one small main room was packed with bodies. The bar was tended by fellow frazzled students who watered down all of the drinks and charged double what they actually cost. She once heard that the owner of this bar did not even have a liquor license. Lane ordered a vodka soda because it seemed simple enough, and it was what most of the people around her were ordering. Her face flushed with warmth when the vodka hit her system, she excused herself from Maeve and went to the bathroom to take out pieces of paper towel and pat them under her armpits; she was worried that she'd sweat through her top the second Adam showed up. She looked in the mirror and saw that her cheeks matched the color of her pink top. She held the cold backs of her hands up to her face to cool them down. A group of girls started banging on the door, Lane heard them muttering various versions of *I have to pee* and *God what is she doing in there! Let us in!* followed by pounding knocks that shook the old wooden door. Once she had gotten some of the redness to subside, Lane left the bathroom, offering a half smile to the impatient girls waiting for her. She scanned the room for Maeve, who had sat down at a booth next to Tyler. The two of them were facing Adam—Lane could only see the back of his head from where he stood. He wore a dark green t-shirt that hugged his arms and back tightly. She took a deep breath and made her way towards the table.

Lane sticks her palm out to catch snowflakes. She wants to catch them and stare at their designs. She wants to be with them for a second or two, she wants them to stay with her. They melt the second they meet her palm, making her hand wet and cold. She wipes her hand on the side of her pants, forgets the idea.

“Lane! Good to see you! Here, I’ll move over” Adam said while sliding slightly over on the sticky black leather booth seat. “How’ve you been? I feel like I never see you here” he asked while turning his body to face her in the tight space between the seat and the table. “I’ve been good! Yeah, I haven’t been here in a while, honestly since freshman year, but Maeve dragged me out,” Lane smiled at Maeve from across the table. The four of them ended up splitting a pitcher of beer and talking about everything from upcoming hockey games to school to home to siblings to new Netflix shows. Adam kept picking up his phone to text someone back quickly, and then setting it back face down on the table. Lane tried to see the name that was popping up on his home screen, but it was becoming too obvious, so she tried to forget about it. Maeve kept subtly trying to bring up their hockey formal in hopes of planting an idea in Adam’s mind, but the subject kept changing and it was impossible to gauge where his mind was at. After one vodka soda and two pitchers of beer, the night started to wind down. The bar closed around 11 and it was nearly 10:45—Tyler and Adam offered to walk Maeve and Lane home. Tyler and Maeve walked next to one another in front of Lane and Adam—they held hands and Lane wondered if Adam would try to hold hers. She wanted him to. Her hands built with sweat at the thought of it. He kept his hands in his pockets though, and she felt quiet being around him alone like that at night, despite the vodka and beer buzzing in her system.

There is another set of footprints in the snow, bigger than her own. Someone must have walked the same sidewalk moments before her. Lane squints to look ahead but all she sees is a withered empty campus, one with a chapel and buildings made of brick. For a second Adam flashes across her mind, maybe he had followed her out of his building. Maybe his footprints are

the ones next to hers and maybe she just missed him as he walked by. Maybe he changed his mind. She remembers the man with the salt. She looks closer at the ground and sees crystals next to the big footprints. *Oh, right, of course.*

“You’re really cool Lane, I like being around you,” Adam said with his hands still in his pockets, staring at the ground in front of him. “I haven’t been friends with many girls like you, it’s refreshing, I feel like we can talk about anything,” he looked over at her, smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “You’re really cool too,” she said, smiling and trying to match his amount of eye contact. *Friend* she replayed the word over in her mind *friends, refreshing, okay, I’ll take it, people are always friends before they date, right?* When they got to the front of their building, Tyler paused to kiss Maeve’s forehead before they went into the house. Lane looked up at Adam, but he had already started to turn away to walk back to his dorm. “That was fun, see you in class!” he said while waving and walking away from the door. Lane’s eyebrows scrunched, *what does he want from me?* Lane and Maeve made their way inside. “What was that?” Lane asked Maeve. “I thought the night was going so well, but he told me he liked being friends with me? He called it ‘refreshing’? What does that mean?” Maeve smiled. “Lane this is good! That means he likes you more than a girl that he’d just want to hook up with. Maybe he’s just nervous or something because he actually wants something with you?” Lane rolled her eyes. “Maybe... I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever talked to a guy that’s waited this long just to kiss me, it seems weird? Like the guy I dated in high school, Ryan. He kissed me the very first time we hung out!” Maeve shook her head. “And that’s because it was probably his first kiss. You’re thinking too much. Maybe he wants to take it slow!” Lane shook her head in response. “I don’t know, I’m so confused. Oh also, he kept picking up his phone to text someone, do you know if

he's talking to someone else?" Maeve paused. "Hm that's weird, I don't know, I can ask Tyler for you next time I see him?" Lane stuttered. "N-no, no, that's alright. Yeah, no, I don't want to make anything weird. I guess I'm just confused, I don't know what I'm even expecting..."

Maeve put a hand on Lane's shoulder. "Don't overthink it! I'm sure he'll ask you to formal and this will all work itself out, he's probably just too awkward to figure out how to tell you that he likes you!"

Lane watches cars drive by, their windshields move back and forth quickly to get rid of the snow. Their headlights are blurry through the winter weather—they look more like flashlights passing by, shining a spotlight on her failure. She thinks about all of the people in all of the cars, going on with their lives. They are probably on their way home to their warm houses, decorated with Christmas trees and stockings. They probably all have lovers—they will probably be in their lovers' warm arms the second they get home.

When Lane found out Adam had already asked someone to his formal, she was genuinely confused. Maeve asked Tyler for the list of girls invited. The two of them put their heads together to squint at the list, and Lane's name just wasn't on there. She desperately wished it was, even if it was misspelled. She scrolled through the spreadsheet looking for "Lanee" or "Laiyne" or anything. Instead, next to Adam's name, she found *Grace Cloverfield*. "Grace Cloverfield. Who the fuck is Grace Cloverfield?" She said aloud, while her roommate looked at her, pitifully, and shrugged her shoulders. "I'll look her up on Instagram," Maeve said. "Hold on, let me check, maybe her account is public." Lane waited anxiously. "Was that the girl he was texting at the bar the other night? I guess that would make sense," she picked at a hangnail on her

thumb. “Here she is! Ah and she’s public, so we can stalk her,” Maeve handed the phone over to Lane. Grace was blonde, small, athletic. Her bio said UConn track ‘23. She was a year younger than Lane and Maeve—a freshman. It looked like she was in a sorority based on the letters in her Instagram bio. “Oh, okay, Grace, gotcha, never seen her before.” Lane said while handing the phone back to her roommate. “Well, that sucks. I guess that’s why he didn’t kiss me.” Maeve sighed. “Again, don’t jump to conclusions or overthink this. Adam seems to really like spending time with you! Maybe you should tell him how you feel? I could also ask Tyler if Adam and Grace are like, a thing or not?” Maeve suggested. “I mean, Lane, you guys basically do all of the datey things together already, but if you don’t make any sort of move, then how is he supposed to know you’re like, desperately in love with him? I mean, it’s not like you tried to kiss him either.” Lane thought about this for a few seconds while anxiously gnawing at her lip. “Okay, yeah you could be right, maybe I will someday soon. Yeah can you ask Tyler and let me know what he says. And hey I’m not that desperate!”

Lane feels like she is someone Adam passed through on his way to better things. Like he needed to meet her to know the difference between a lover and a friend. It is like she is one of those towns you have to drive through on a road trip to get to your final destination; the kind of town you stop in for gas and a snack, but not one you spend time in, not one that is on your bucket list of places to see, and not the sort of town you get to know, certainly not the town you get to love.

When the day of the formal came—the Saturday before Thanksgiving break—Lane skipped dinner, bailed on Maeve, and laid awake at night, staring at her ceiling. She kept turning

over her phone, waiting for a text. Something like “Hey! I know it’s last minute, but I have a formal tonight if you want to join?” Or even something like “Hey, I’m on my way back from formal, what’re you up to?” But nothing ever came. Tyler told Maeve he wasn’t sure what Adam and Grace were yet—apparently Adam never talked about girls. Maeve seemed to think this meant they were nothing, since guys always talked about girls when they liked them. *But they had to be something, right? Even if wasn’t serious yet, he clearly liked Grace?* According to Tyler, the only girl Adam had ever talked about in particular was his high school girlfriend who cheated on him the second they went to different colleges. Maybe he just wasn’t ready to be in a relationship with Lane yet because of that breakup, maybe he was filling his time with Grace instead—maybe she was a placeholder—maybe he was scared of actually liking someone again. Lane never heard a word from him the entire weekend. He was probably busy with Grace all Saturday. He would probably spend his Sunday with her too. *She is very pretty, Lane thought to herself while staring at Grace’s Instagram in the dark of her bedroom and very petite, too, maybe that’s why he likes her.* Zooming in on all of her posts she kept thinking about what it was Grace had that she apparently didn’t. *What does he see in her? What am I doing wrong?* A tear fell from her eye as she tossed and turned trying to get Grace out of her head. Lane closed her eyes tightly to stop more from coming. She felt pathetic. She had never crossed paths with Grace, and she found herself wondering if Adam saw her on the weekend nights that she didn’t. Or maybe Lane was just a weekday thing, and Grace was reserved for the weekends. She could not get Grace out of her head. When she finally fell asleep, Lane dreamt that she and Grace became good friends. They ended up liking the same music, the same clothes, and eventually the same boy. Lane woke up disheveled in the morning, with marks from her pillows and blankets pressed into her body. She was confused—half-believing her and Grace really were the same, and half-

knowing they were entirely different, because one of them had spent the weekend with Adam, and the other had not.

The end of Lane's walk home finally comes as she approaches her dorm building. Her face is frozen, but beneath her layers of clothing she is sweating. *God, please don't let Maeve be home, I can't deal with this right now*, she thinks to herself while walking up the stairs to the third floor of the building. She needs to be alone for the night, and maybe for a while, before telling her roommate about her failure of a conversation. Maeve had so excitedly encouraged her to talk to him—to finally get her feelings off her chest. Neither of them thought it would go poorly, because neither of them thought it was just a friendship. Lane is embarrassed. Not even sad—just brutally embarrassed—that she let herself think her and Adam were anything more than friends.

The morning after the formal, Lane sat with Maeve at their kitchen table. “Formal wasn’t even that fun, seriously, you didn’t miss out on anything. And I barely even saw Adam and Grace talk to each other. There’s totally hope for you guys.” Lane poured herself Honey Nut Cheerios. “You know what’s weird? I just can’t get Grace out of my head. I keep trying to figure out why *he* likes *her* so much, she was even in my dream last night. I had to delete Instagram because I was just scrolling through her account for so long.” Maeve sighed. “Lane, you do not even know if he likes her or not. You’re coming to all of these conclusions in your head but how do you know if any of them are even slightly true? Maybe they are old friends? Or maybe she took him to a UConn formal, so he felt like he had to take her to this one and not you? You can’t obsess over her like this, you’ll just make yourself crazy.” Lane took a bite of cereal. “I know

you're right, but I can't help but compare myself to her, there's clearly something she has that I don't." "LANE!" Maeve said, this time more aggressively. "Stop talking about yourself like this! You seriously can't compare, that will lead your mind to dark places, trust me. Why don't we go do something fun today, like go out to dinner? And get your mind off stupid boys and their stupid formals?" Lane nodded while she brought her bowl to the sink. "Sure, yeah, I kind of need to get off this campus anyways."

Once inside her room, Lane strips her wet clothing off and lays them over her door to dry. Shivering, she realizes it would be best to warm herself up. She grabs the nearest towel off her floor and heads into the bathroom, locking the door behind her. In the mirror she looks pale, her brown eyes sunken, her collarbones poking out more than usual. Her sister would probably tell her she wasn't eating or sleeping or exercising enough. *All of the above*, Lane thinks to herself while dropping her towel. She hasn't been focusing on herself lately, consumed with overanalyzing every conversation and text with Adam. All it ever took was one of his smiles to make her feel like the feelings were mutual. She thinks about his eyes. They are the kind of blue-gray that makes you think, *Wow, I've never seen eyes that color before*. She never told him she thought like this, but those eyes—those are what haunt her mind now.

After the weekend of his formal, Lane went home for Thanksgiving break defeated, but she had not lost hope yet—Maeve made sure of that. She saw potential with Adam, and she could feel it was going somewhere. Why else did they spend so much time together? Love could finally be happening for her. She could tell. She knew she was falling in love because everything she did or saw or heard somehow reminded her of Adam. Even her own dog, who greeted her

when she walked in the door of her childhood home, reminded her of when she and Adam stayed up late together exchanging photos of their pets. Imagine that—her own dog reminding her of someone else, someone who had never even been to her house. While setting the table for Thanksgiving day, Lane’s sister brought up the boy she told her about on the phone in October. “Lane, if you really do like this guy, you’ve got to just go for it,” her sister said while folding napkins and spacing forks and knives evenly next to each plate. She was a few years older than Lane, already engaged at the age of 24. “I mean, how do you think I got Jaden to propose to me? I told him I wasn’t going to wait around for him to make up his mind.” Lane rolled her eyes, her sister and her fiancé had the perfect love story, and she’d heard all about it during the past year since her sister began wedding planning. “Laney,” her father joined in, “it’s true, you’ve got to be clear about what you want. Guys are stupid—I know I was stupid and waited too long to tell your mother how I felt, and I can never get the days I wasted not being with her back—this guy probably has no idea that you’re interested, just say something.” Lane finished fixing the floral centerpiece on the table. “Alright, alright! I get it! I’m not even sure if he likes me or not...honestly I’m very confused. Sorry not everyone can be as successful as you two.” If there was one thing that consumed Lane’s mind most during family holidays, it was the question of when she would finally be able to bring someone home to one. During the Thanksgiving meal, she pushed around the turkey on her plate until it was time to do the dishes, then excused herself to her room.

Once inside of her bathroom, Lane puts her mess of reddish-brown hair in a bun on the top of her head, and turns the shower knob all the way so it is set on the highest heat. She needs

to defrost. When she gets in, the water feels like little flames bouncing off her bare skin, singeing her back with every drop.

A little while after she got back to campus from Thanksgiving break, Lane called an emergency meeting with Maeve. The two sat on the carpet of her bedroom floor with crisscrossed legs. “Okay,” Maeve said, “what’s up, you’re freaking me out with all of this stress. Also, why is it such a mess in here, you’ve got to get your shit together, this isn’t like you. You haven’t even touched your ramen from last night.” Maeve motioned to the half-empty carton of noodles on the bedside table. Lane clasped her hands together, the way someone beginning a presentation might begin to speak. “I know I know, I’ll put everything away later. But Maeve, listen, I think you’re right, I think I need to say something to Adam. It’s time. But how?” Maeve’s face lit up with a smile. “FINALLY! I’ve been waiting for this all semester.” She began speaking fast, tripping over her words with excitement. “Okay you should just like text him and ask to meet up, like normal. You can be super chill about it. And then just bring it up while you’re together casually... oh my god I can’t wait to hear about this after. He’s going to be so happy you finally said something.” Lane nodded her head in agreement. “Okay, well let’s not get ahead of ourselves... but yeah, I think I can do that. But what exactly do I say? How do I even word something like this? I don’t want to freak him out but I’m also *sooo* over thinking this whole situation and need to get out of my head. Are you sure he and Grace aren’t a thing?” Maeve paused, thought for a few seconds, then said, “Tyler said she’s never been over to Adam’s room, don’t worry about her. And again, you just need to keep it super casual, just be like ‘I honestly just need to know, is this ever going to be more than a friendship?’ I’ll be shocked if he doesn’t tell you he’s in love with you too. It’s like, so obvious. I can see it in the

way he looks at you when you guys talk. I am *so* excited for this. Wow. Your sister's gonna be *so* excited too when you guys start dating. You can tell her when you go home for Christmas!" Lane stood up from the floor, straightened out her pajamas and nervously said "Okay, you've convinced me. I'm gonna do it! I'll ask him to go to his room tomorrow after class. I've never even seen it."

Lane stands now in the heat of her shower, blankly staring at the white tile. *What was the point of him talking to me?* She thinks as the water hits her upper back. *If he was talking to someone else why wouldn't he have told me? And is he even talking to Grace? Because if he likes someone else shouldn't I have the right to know? Was I always really just a friend to him?* Her mind is tired of thinking. *Was I oblivious this whole time? Was he?* She picks up her shampoo bottle and reads the back of it because she doesn't know what else to think about and it is the only thing she can seem to focus on. She has never read it before and she doesn't know why it interests her now. *Pantene Moisture Renewal. Use a quarter-sized amount. Rinse, wash, repeat.* She reads the words over and over again until they cloud her mind and start to make her dizzy. *Wash and repeat. Repeat.* "FUCK!" She yells, throwing the bottle against the side of her shower. It ricochets off one of the shelves and slowly rolls to the bottom of the tub by her pale feet. Her blue veins are visible through her snow-white skin. She nudges it over with her foot and sits down in its place on the floor of the bathtub. She feels small—frail. *A great friend. Friends. Always friends. Of course.* The water runs over her face, over her eyes and in her mouth, down her body. She pulls her knees in tight and hugs herself while she lets the water touch every part of her. She knows he never will.

Dry

MONDAY

When her breath became short, and her vision became blurry, she needed to remind herself of her humanity. She needed to remember she was a mind inside of a body—she needed to remember she was safe. She would begin by noticing the top of her head, and continue by naming every part of her body down to the tips of her toes. *Forehead, eyes, nose, lips, neck. Shoulders, arms, hands, fingers. Breasts, stomach, thighs, shins, feet. Toes.* She did this, over and over again, as he walked towards her on the sidewalk. She hadn't seen his face in half a year. She had blacked that one night out of her memory for good. He didn't exist. But there he was. Coming towards her. *Fingers, fingertips, fingernails* she thought, over and over again, as he tried to stop to talk to her. She gestured to the headphones in her ears as she walked past him, paying him as little attention as possible. She was not listening to any music. Instead, her mind was focused on her *knees, calves, heels.* He got the hint and walked past her. She exhaled. *Biceps, forearms, wrists.*

She took her phone out of her back pocket to text her roommate that she had walked past him. He was back on campus. She felt sick and needed to talk to someone. Her hands shook too much to type a message out. She was freezing, her fingers numb, not moving in the ways her brain was telling them too. It was warm outside though—it was September, the start of a new school year in Connecticut, and the sun was hot against her back. *Why am I so cold?* She asked herself while standing in the middle of the sidewalk, unable to take another step forward after seeing him. She shivered. She looked up at the sun to try to warm herself and loosen her rigid fingers. She couldn't look away. She stared at the white circle in the sky until it blinded her. She

stared and stared and began to feel dizzy. Nauseous. *Nose, lips, neck* she counted every body part she could think to steady herself. *Neck, collarbones, shoulders.*

“Lane? Lane? You okay?” Lane moved her eyes away from the sun in the direction of the voice. She could not yet focus on the figure talking to her—when she blinked all she saw were large white spots. “Lane? Let’s go sit down, you seem like you need to sit…” The figure took her hand and guided her to the nearest bench. Once sitting, her eyes began to focus again. It was Egan, the boy she sat next to in her American History class last spring.

“Hi,” she said while staring at the ground trying to regain her vision fully. “Thank you...I...I feel better now... I must’ve not eaten enough today... I just got really dizzy walking to the library...”

Egan patted her on the shoulder. He had curly dark brown hair and a goofy smile that made Lane think he was nerdy and sweet. “All good, I totally get that. Here, take some of my water, I can walk you back to your room if you need,” he said while reaching into his backpack for his water bottle.

Lane shook her head, snapping out of her daze. “N-no, no, that’s okay, thank you, I’m just going to go home and lay down. Thanks again.” Lane quickly stood up and put her headphones back in, waving to Egan as she walked away from the bench.

God, he probably thinks I’m a freak, she thought while scrolling through her playlist looking for the perfect distraction song. She settled on “American Idiot” by Green Day—it was loud enough to make her stop thinking. With max volume on, she stomped back to her house, knowing she should probably take it easy for the rest of the day, and figure out what to do next time she saw *him*. After all, the campus was only a mile long. They would surely cross paths again.

“Oh my god, thank god you’re home,” Lane said to her roommate Maeve while entering their apartment. “You’ll never guess who I just saw on campus.”

“Hmmm, someone cute?” Maeve asked, giggling, not yet looking up from the semester calendar she was filling out with different colored gel pens. “It is that time of the year you know, time to scout for crushes.”

“No, no, God no.” Lane shook her head. “I saw *him*. I saw *Drew*.”

“Oh shit.” Maeve put the calendar down and stood up from the couch she was sitting on. “I thought he graduated. Isn’t he like 24, 25 now?”

“He must be taking one more semester of classes?”

“Damn, are you okay? Do you want a hug?”

Lane shrugged.

Maeve moved toward Lane, her arms held slightly out from her sides. Lane put her head on Maeve’s shoulder.

She took a deep breath in, and exhaled by saying, “I will be okay, I just kind of forgot about all of that, everything from last spring. I guess I was blissfully living with the fact that he was gone.” Lane backed away from Maeve and sat down on the couch. She patted the spot next to her for Maeve.

“Okay, well if you want to talk about what happened, I’m here,” Maeve said while looking directly at Lane. “I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

Lane stared blankly at the black screen of the TV. “It wasn’t. I got really dizzy for some reason...I felt like I couldn’t feel my own body. It was like my fight or flight response was trying to kick in. I walked past him and just ignored him. But then after he walked past me, I just like, stopped? Oh, actually, that kid Egan from my history class last year saw me and offered me

some water and to walk me home. I must've looked like a mess." Lane ran her hands back and forth on her thighs to warm them up. "Did you turn on the AC in here? For some reason I'm *freezing.*"

Maeve shook her head. "Lane, I think you might've just had an anxiety attack. If Drew's going to be on campus for this entire year, I wonder if it's worth... Maybe filing a report? With the Title IX office or something? It can't hurt, right?"

Lane looked over at Maeve, her mouth pursed tightly. "Yeah, maybe it is time," she said quietly. "I'll think about it. I just hate that he's here. The chance of running into him makes me not want to even leave this house."

"God, that's the last thing you need." Maeve stood up from the couch again. "Alright well, unfortunately I'm off to class now, let me know if you want to talk through anything though, I'm here for you. I'm sorry that happened. I hate that guy."

Lane nodded while Maeve left the house. Once the door swung shut, and Lane was finally alone, she crumpled. Her elbows dug into her knees as her hands held the weight of her head. Her mouth filled with spit and her nose started to drip. Her eyes welled. Noises escaped her mouth while she cried—they surprised her. *Fuck*, she thought to herself *How am I ever going to get through this? It's only September! Can't he just get out of my life forever?!?!!*

TUESDAY

When she arrived in class the next morning Lane sat in the very front row next to her fellow humanities majors. The Introduction to Creative Writing course was always half-filled with writers who really cared and half-filled with those fulfilling an arts requirement who would take the loose attendance policy and run with it. Lane wore a light pink sundress and tan sandals. Her reddish-brown hair was up in a ponytail with a few strands pulled out in front to frame her face. She arrived early, as she did in all of her classes (especially on their first days), and listened as students bustled in, filling the rows that resembled pews and chattering amongst themselves.

“Alright everyone,” the professor began, about five minutes past the listed course time. “I am going to call out everyone’s names, just say here please, and if you don’t hear your name, stay after class and we’ll figure it out.”

The professor pulled out a typed sheet of paper and a blue pen to mark everyone down.

“Okay first up, Kylee Thomas?”

The professor lifted his head from the paper to scan the room. His forehead wrinkled as he squinted behind his glasses.

“Here,” said a small voice a few rows behind Lane.

“Great, nice to see you again Kylee. Alright, up next...Drew Archander?”

Lane's face went white.

“Here,” echoed a deep voice from the back of the room.

Lane’s spine stiffened. Her posture was as straight as the back of the wooden chair she sat in. She heard a muffled “Lane Webster” toward the end of the list and mustered some sort of sound as close to “here” as she could manage. She didn’t hear much after that. For the rest of class, she tried to calm herself down—she couldn’t focus on what the professor was saying, let

alone on what her own mind was thinking. Calming herself down meant focusing on one object in her direct view and not moving her eyes from it. She had learned this tactic from being carsick so many times—focusing on the horizon of the road always calmed her stomach, so now, as she stared at a small chip in the chalkboard, she tried to calm her spinning mind.

She still wasn't sure what had happened last spring. She knew she'd had a crush on Drew—the kind of crush where she just stared at the back of his head during class hoping they'd be paired together for a project. She knew she had drunkenly agreed to go home with Drew after talking to him for a while at a party. She knew subconsciously she wanted to go home with him and had been hoping he'd ask her to. She knew she had been excited on the walk back to his dorm room despite her drunken dizziness. She knew she had left his room, two hours after getting there, wandering her campus alone with smudged mascara and swollen lips. She wasn't quite sure what had happened in those hours in between, her mind wouldn't let her. When she had finally found her way home and gotten undressed to get in the shower, she noticed her underwear was missing. When she peed before falling asleep, it stung, and she had to hold her thighs together as she winced in pain until all the liquid dribbled out. After she carefully wiped, or rather patted herself dry, and pulled up her pants, she turned to flush and saw a bright red color in the toilet. When she awoke the following morning, she saw purplish bruises that resembled handprints around her wrists. When Maeve asked what happened, she told her it had been fine, maybe a little strange, and she knew she didn't want it to happen again. *Honestly, I don't remember too much*, she had said. *Oh*, Maeve had said, *Oh, okay. I love you*. Then everyone had left campus for the summer, and Drew had supposedly graduated, as it was his senior spring (she wouldn't know if he actually had of course, since she'd blocked his number, his Instagram, and just about every other form of him she could find online). He was gone,

graduated, and so was his memory in her mind. The bruises faded to yellow, the bleeding stopped within a week, and her roommate never really brought it up again. She was clean of him, except here he was, sitting behind her in a room full of students who had no idea that even the slight sense of him in the room was enough to make her ears ring.

The second class ended, Lane stood as quickly as possible, rushing out a side door and not looking back to hold it for anyone. A wave of heat spread over the top of her forehead—it was burning up, but it felt like ice when she put the back of her hand against it. She could feel whiteness flood her cheeks. She then quickly ducked into the closest building, which happened to be the Economics Department, and scanned everywhere for a bathroom. Once she saw the glowing ‘women’s’ sign, she bolted toward it. She pushed on all of the stall doors, hearing various versions of ‘excuse me’ and ‘one minute’ before finding an open one. She kneeled down, put her head over the toilet bowl, and threw up the bagel she had eaten before class. She slinked down against the stall door. *Looks like I’m dropping that class*, she thought to herself while wiping cold sweat off her forehead.

When she arrived back at her apartment she filled Maeve in on what happened. Maeve was enraged. Even though she never really brought the situation up to Lane, Maeve seemed even more uncomfortable with Drew’s presence than Lane herself.

“What if you just filed a report? He shouldn’t even be on this campus, it’s not safe,” Maeve said while shaking her head in disbelief.

“What would it say? Hi, I’d like to file a report against Drew. I gladly went to his room last year while I was drunk, and I don’t remember anything? Like anything at all? They’re going to say ‘okay, thanks for filing a report,’ and then never look at it again.”

“You don’t know what they’ll do, maybe they’ll talk to him?”

“Yeah, and what if they make *me* talk to him. I couldn’t even walk past him on the sidewalk, let alone talk to him about what happened that night.”

WEDNESDAY

On Wednesday night, the campus bar had a deal on pitchers of beer. Lane and Maeve decided to go out and ring in the new semester. They hadn't had much homework yet, since it was only the first week of classes, and professors were mostly just walking through their syllabi. Drew was in the back of Lane's head as she poured herself a drink. The thought of alcohol made her anxious, like she would be out of control if she continued to drink...or if she did drink enough to get drunk, he would show up at the bar, and come near her, or even worse, try to talk to her. So, she decided to nurse a beer throughout the entire night. It was funny, while everyone else was drunk they tended not to notice as much that she was sober. In the past whenever she'd decided not to drink because of an upcoming test or interview or just plain not wanting to, she'd face a lot of questions. Questions like *why aren't you drinking? Is there a problem? Why aren't you having fun? You used to be so fun!* Tonight though, Lane would answer said questions with a quick lift of her beer to show *What are you talking about? I'm drinking tonight, see this beer?* Because if you already have a drink in your hand, then people seem to back off more.

Lane spotted Egan across the bar. He wore a well-fitted navy t-shirt with khakis. The bottoms of his khakis were slightly rolled up—she could see an inch of his white socks. His eyes met hers. She looked away quickly. She hadn't seen him since Monday when he helped her sit down on a bench after seeing Drew. She never noticed how handsome he was until this moment. His dark brown curls hung messily around his forehead and ears. She had been wrong, his smile wasn't goofy and nerdy, it was *cute*. He started to walk towards her.

“Feeling alright tonight?”

“Yes,” Lane said while laughing. “Yes, much better. Hopefully you never have to save me from nearly passing out in front of the library again.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I didn’t mind feeling like your knight-in-shining-armor.”

Lane smiled with her mouth closed and let her eyes fall to the warm beer she was holding. She half-expected Egan to leave her side to go talk to someone else. Instead, he stayed next to her. She could feel his body warmth radiating. She looked back up toward him, realizing how tall he felt when standing next to her. He was sort of staring at her.

“What is it? Is there something on my face? Or do I look like I’m about to pass out again?” She asked, confused, shyly glancing down at her shirt to make sure she hadn’t spilled on herself. She was wearing a dark green sundress that hugged her hips tightly, and off-white sneakers that probably needed to be cleaned.

Egan smiled with half of his mouth, “No, you just look pretty tonight.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Her mouth went sort of twisted whenever she received compliments.

“I’ll see you around, Lane,” Egan said while moving slightly away from her. She instantly missed the warmth he somehow brought with him.

On her walk home Lane told Maeve how much fun she had at the bar. Maeve was confused, saying that the bar was always the same, with the same music and the same people.

“Oh *I* know why you had fun!” Maeve realized eventually on the walk home. “I saw you talking to Egan! He looked cute tonight, you should go for it!”

Lane just smiled and said she’d think about it. He was *really* cute.

THURSDAY

After getting off a call with the registrar's office and successfully switching Introduction to Creative Writing for some random Art History course, Lane opened up a blank email. She knew her professor would be confused why she dropped the class, as she had met with him over the summer and determined she would minor in Creative Writing, therefore needing to take the introduction course.

She stared at the subject line, unsure what to title the email. *Schedule Issue with Introduction Course*, she typed out, though she was confused what she even meant by "schedule issue." She moved her cursor down to draft the body of the email. *Hi Professor, Hope all is well*, she typed, then stopped typing, as she was stuck on what to say next. The black cursor blinked, and blinked, and blinked at her against the empty white space of the email. She placed her middle finger on the delete key, letting the weight of it on the keyboard erase the message. Because how could she explain her reason for dropping the class? Something she didn't remember happened months ago with one person that happened to be in the 40-person lecture, and even hearing his name on the first day of class was enough to make her spit up everything in her stomach? Lane closed her laptop, deciding she would rather leave her professor confused about her absence than come up with an excuse.

Lane got up from her desk and asked Maeve if she wanted to go to the bookstore to pick up everything they needed for their new courses. Lane needed the walk and the air anyway. Maeve agreed, and the two went on their way.

But when they entered the front doors of the bookstore, Maeve quickly turned around, blocking Lane's view.

“You know what, why don’t we grab lunch first instead, so then we don’t have to carry our books to the dining hall?” Maeve said quickly, grabbing Lane’s hand and beginning to lead her out of the bookstore entrance.

“What? We’re already here, let’s just pick them up!” Lane said, pulling her hand away from Maeve’s.

“Well, uh, no, let’s just go. Please? I’m hungry.” Maeve’s eyes dashed around their surroundings as she spoke.

“You’re acting weird.” Lane made a face.

Maeve looked around again before whispering, “Well... he... uh... he’s here. I just saw him go in.”

“Oh.” Lane felt that dizzy, cold, shaky, hot feeling coming on. “Yeah, yeah let’s just go grab lunch first then, that’s fine.”

The two roommates turned, walked out of the bookstore and headed toward the dining hall. *I can’t even go to the bookstore in peace anymore*, Lane thought to herself during lunch while pushing around pieces of her salad.

She felt defeated. Small. She excused herself from the dining hall table and went to the bathroom to splash some cold water on her face. After running the sink, she looked at herself in the mirror—there was a poster taped up in a spot where no one could miss it, next to the sign that said, “Wash Your Hands!” The poster was the size of a printer sheet piece of paper. In bold black letters it read: “HAVE YOU OR A FRIEND BEEN SEXUALLY ASSUALTED? YOU HAVE OPTIONS! YOU HAVE RIGHTS!” Lane shook her head. *Why was this poster in the women’s restroom? Why not out in the hallway or in the dining hall where everyone could see it?* The poster had lists of people to contact: campus safety, the women’s center, the counseling center.

Lane stood and stared with her arms crossed and her mouth in a tight line, reading every word and phone number. Her eyes reached the bottom of the poster, where, below the resources, there was a statistic printed in the same bold black letters as the title: “1 IN 5 WOMEN ARE ASSAULTED IN COLLEGE, IF IT’S NOT YOU, IT’S SOMEONE YOU LOVE.” Lane bit her lip. She uncrossed her arms and let them hang by her sides. She walked quickly out of the bathroom, letting the door swing behind her. It was all too much—she just wanted to get her books and get to class. There was nothing more terrifying for her than realizing the statistic was real. She knew it was real because she was a part of it.

FRIDAY

Lane's phone lit up with a message from an unknown number:

You going out tonight?

It's Egan, by the way

Lane waited about five minutes, then excitedly typed back:

Yes, I am!

How'd you get my number?

She watched the black screen of her phone for two minutes until it lit up again:

Can't reveal my sources ;) I'll see you later then?

Lane barely waited five seconds before sending:

Yes, I'll see you later :)

She placed her phone down and smiled like a kid.

Once she and Maeve got to the party, Lane noticed Egan immediately when she walked into the crowded room. He smiled when he saw her, pushing his way through people to get next to her side. He smelled more like beer than the last time she'd seen him, but his hair remained in perfect messy curls. Maeve pushed Lane playfully and left the two of them alone. Maeve had walked Lane to the party as a wing woman, but was going back home to watch a movie, since she had a track meet early the next morning. Lane didn't care about being out alone, since she only lived a street away from the party, and she knew she could call Maeve to come get her at any time. Lane decided to nurse a beer again, since still she felt sort of uneasy with the music and the drinking and the people. It all made her think of last spring.

“I was hoping you’d come out!” Egan said enthusiastically while leaning down so she could hear him. Lane could tell he was slightly drunk, but she found it kind of cute how drunkenly excited he was to see her. He had a small stain of beer running down his chest.

“I said I was, didn't I!” she said back quickly, smiling and looking up to meet his eyes.

The two stood next to each other, with their backs against the sticky frat house wall, watching the party, making meaningless small talk about classes and housing and the start of their semesters so far. Egan said something that Lane didn't quite pick up on due to the music and conversations of everyone around them.

“Sorry, what'd you say?” she leaned into Egan to hear him better, but also to get closer to him.

“I said, do you want to get out of here?” He asked a little too loudly now in Lane's ear, slightly slurring the word ‘you,’ so that it sounded more like ‘yew.’

“Oh.” Lane was surprised by this bold question. “Sorry, not tonight, I think I've had too much to drink,” Lane said while avoiding his eye contact, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear. She was using alcohol as an excuse for him to leave her alone, even though she hadn't had more than two drinks since knowing Drew was back on campus. She thought Egan was nice, and therefore saying she was drunk would clearly throw him off. In fact, she was sort of expecting an apology for asking a question like that so abruptly, though she knew he was drunk, and probably feeling more ballsy than usual.

There was a long pause. Egan looked around the party, scanning the room entirely, before leaning down in Lane's ear again. Chills worked their way up the back of her forearms like small pricks of a needle.

“So have I, and if we both have, then it doesn’t even matter,” Egan said, louder this time, his spit spraying the side of her face and her ear. She wiped off the wetness and crossed her arms over her chest.

“What doesn’t matter, exactly?” Lane couldn’t have heard him right.

“If you’ve had too much to drink, it won’t matter.” His gaze remained aimed out at the party. “Like if we’re both drunk, then what’s the difference?”

“I don’t think you’re meaning what you’re saying.” Lane *had* heard him right. She felt like she was going to vomit.

“Alright, alright you don’t want to leave with me, I get it.”

“I’m going to go home now.” Lane unknotted the jacket that was tied around her waist and shoved her arms through it quickly. She zipped it and looked up to see Egan staring down at her still. His eyes were bloodshot, and she was scared of what he might say next.

“I’ll walk you back.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Fine, have it your way, but I know we’d be good together.”

He smirked.

She winced.

“I’m leaving.”

Egan took a large sip of his beer, gulped it down, and looked out again at the party.

“I see how it is...are you gonna go call Drew now?”

“Excuse me?” Lane coughed out. Her face reddened.

“You heard me.”

“Did you say *Drew*?”

“Of course I said Drew, who do you think gave me your number? I know you guys used to be a thing.” Drew looked down at Lane, “Or should I say, I know you guys used to *fuck*.”

The word ‘fuck’ hung in the air like dirty laundry.

The music was too loud, the bodies were too close, too sweaty, everyone was bouncing around to meaningless music that might as well just be called sound. Lane felt dizzy. Her face went white.

“Fuck you.” Lane said, firmly, shoving her way past Egan and to the front door of the frat house. *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you*, she recited, over and over again as she ran down the stairs to make her way out to the street. She walked quickly, her arms swinging by her sides, barely having enough time to keep up with her legs. After making it down the street of the house she was at, she began to take off running. *Oh my god, fuck you!* She repeated in her head as she lunged one foot in front of the other and pumped her arms by her sides. “FUCK YOU!” she yelled, this time out loud while sprinting as she turned onto the corner of the street she lived on.

Breathless, she opened her apartment door and slammed it behind her back. Maeve sat up from the couch where she was watching a movie.

“Lane? Holy shit, are you okay! Come here, what’s wrong?”

Lane’s mouth opened and closed but words wouldn’t come out. Her face contorted in a way that meant she would soon cry. Maeve stood up and rushed towards her, hugging her tightly. She rubbed her back in circles. Lane’s arms remained by her sides, immobile.

“You’re okay, you’re safe with me, you don’t have to say anything.”

“They’re... they’re...” Lane tried to spit the words out. Her mouth filled with hot saliva. Her nose was starting to drip.

“They’re all the same...they’re all the *fucking* same.” She spat the words out before beginning to shake in Maeve’s arms—noises escaped her mouth like vocal tears, and the two roommates just stood there, in each other’s arms. Lane laid her head on Maeve’s shoulder.

SATURDAY

Lane woke up on Saturday morning twisted up in her sheets. She had tossed and turned all night—she wasn't actually even sure if she'd slept at all. Salt rimmed her eyelids and without looking in the mirror she could tell her face was swollen and puffy. The only reason she decided to open her eyes was because the shade she had forgotten to close was letting direct sunlight into her room, making it impossible to forget it was daytime. She looked at the clock and noticed it was 11:45 in the morning, which was much later than she normally stayed in bed for. She slipped her slippers on and got up from her bed, wearing only an old oversized gray t-shirt her dad had given her years ago. When she opened her door she saw Maeve sitting up on the couch, having already gotten back from her track meet.

“Put some pants on, we're getting bagels,” Maeve said as an order, rather than a question.

“Maeve, ugh, I don't know, I'm sorry, I don't think I'm up for it, I kind of just want to curl up in a ball under my covers and never move.” Lane tried to avoid any further coercion by walking towards their bathroom.

“Lane, it is a beautiful Saturday morning in Hartford. Bagels make everything better. C'mon, I'll drive.”

Lane grudgingly went back into her room and peeled the gray t-shirt over her head, switching it out for tan flowy sundress. She hadn't been outside yet, but the beginning of September in Connecticut was always around 70 degrees. She shoved her feet into flip flops and ran her fingers through her matted hair, deciding not to look in the mirror at all. She grabbed her wallet off of her dresser and met Maeve in the kitchen. The two of them headed outside to Maeve's car and Lane took the passenger seat. Maeve rolled all of the windows down, including the sunroof, and shuffled the *Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers* album. “American Girl” spilled

out of the speakers and out from the windows. As they drove away from campus, Lane held her hand out of the window, letting the warm air push against her palm. The two of them didn't talk, but rather zoned out on the highway stretching ahead of them as they drove further and further from the tiny bubble they lived in.

They ordered everything bagels with plain cream cheese, and Maeve didn't let Lane pay for herself. They grabbed a table outside, sitting across from one another, and talked about everything but Egan and Drew. They talked about their classes, which ones were their favorites, which ones were their least favorites. They talked about their old friends—the ones from freshman year who they didn't even say hi to anymore—and their new friends—who they were excited to start spending more time with. They talked about their bagels, about whether they'd had better or worse ones from this specific Bruegger's location before. Lane would've liked more cream cheese, and Maeve's wasn't quite toasted enough. The sun warmed Lane's back. She felt dry, like laundry on a clothesline in summertime.

Two of Us

AUGUST

Lane sat on Cam's kitchen table. Her legs swung back and forth, her feet crossed one over the other. One of her hands was pressed into the sticky edge of the table. The other held a cold Corona. She had squeezed a quarter of a lime into it, dropping it down the center of the bottle afterward. She wore faded denim shorts and a white spaghetti-strap tank top. It was the beginning of senior year of college in Hartford, Connecticut.

"How was your summer?" she asked while taking a sip of her beer.

"It was good! My brother got engaged in July."

Cam wore khaki shorts and a faded Trinity College t-shirt. His hair was still kind of blonde from the sun, his nose had a few faded freckles across its bridge.

"That's exciting! Are you close with the girl?"

Lane hopped off the kitchen table and went to grab another Corona from Cam's fridge.

"Oh yeah, they were best friends for like, six years, before they started dating."

"That sounds adorable."

“Yeah—they are, it is. He’s really happy.”

“Good for them.”

Lane went into a drawer in Cam’s kitchen, found a bottle opener, and popped open her next drink.

“Should we head out now?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The two of them were meeting up with the rest of their friend group at a different house on the street. Lane and Cam had met freshman year when they were paired for a group project in Spanish 101. They hadn’t become close friends until junior year though, when they had three out of their four Psychology classes together. This semester, they had two together.

SEPTEMBER

“You never wear your hair up like that, it looks pretty.”

Lane and Cam were studying together for an upcoming Brain and Behavior exam. Lane wore a gray crew neck sweatshirt and the same denim shorts. Her hair was pulled back because she hadn't washed it in two days.

“Really? Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

Cam looked back down at the notes he was studying from. He wore a fitted navy Trinity Baseball t-shirt. It made his arms look muscular.

In a good way, Lane thought.

OCTOBER

“Do you have any siblings?”

Cam had his hands up behind his head as he leaned back on the wooden restaurant chair. He and Lane had gone to grab breakfast at a nearby diner, after realizing that they both loved blueberry pancakes even more than chocolate chip ones.

Lane gave him a playful smile with her eyebrows scrunched together.

“Why do you want to know about my family?”

Her face was bare, still puffy from sleeping in on that Sunday morning. Her hair was brushed, it frizzily hung next to the sides of her face. She wore a faded navy sweater that used to be her dad's, light-wash jeans and white Converse.

Cam leaned his elbows forward on the table, putting his hands below his chin. He wore a dark green and navy flannel shirt, which he had left unbuttoned over a white t-shirt.

“I just want to know more about you! Is that too much to ask?”

Lane shrugged and laughed.

“Okay...well, I have an older sister, Kara, she’s engaged to a really nice guy. My dad is great, he’s like, my best friend. My grandmother lives a street away from us, so she’s always over. My mom, well, my mom actually passed away when I was little.”

“Oh shit, I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay, I was really young, so I haven’t really known anything else.”

“Still, that must be tough.”

“Yeah, I guess it is sometimes.”

Lane took a sip of the black coffee the waitress had just served her.

“So, what’s yours like? I know you said your brother got engaged over the summer.”

“Yep, just got the one older brother. My parents are divorced, I grew up at my mom’s house mostly. She and my dad are both great—just not together—if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah that makes sense, sorry about that.”

“It’s all good.”

The waitress interrupted their conversation with pancakes. Lane had ordered two and Cam had ordered three. They looked crispy and fluffy and the butter was melting in the centers of the stacks. Lane and Cam both reached for the syrup at the same time.

“You first,” Cam said.

NOVEMBER

Lane wore a dark green puffer jacket, zipped up so that the collar was just below her chin. She was experimenting with new makeup; her eyelids were brushed lightly with gold and her cheeks were a warm color pink. She had curled her eyelashes so the tips of them hit just below her eyebrows. Her hands were in her pockets as she and Cam left the campus bar. She was about four whiskey sours in.

Cam wore a fitted black hoodie and dark denim jeans. The pitchers of beer that he split with his friends kept him warm, buzzing. He had offered to walk Lane home—they only lived a few houses apart, anyway.

The two of them walked next to each other, quietly, noticing the way the cold air turned every breath they took into smoke.

When the two of them arrived at Lane's doorstep, she turned around to tell Cam she would see him tomorrow, and to thank him for walking her home.

He looked down at her.

Within seconds his hand held the side of her cheek. He tilted her chin up towards his, and slipped his tongue between Lane's lips.

He was warm.

She felt warm, too.

Her eyelids drooped—she didn't think she could open them even if she tried. His arms crept around her hips, he brought her in closer to his chest.

“Wait,” Lane said, pulling away, placing her hands on Cam's chest.

“I'm not sure if this is a good idea.”

She looked up at him.

He looked down at her, slightly frowning.

“I'm sorry, you're just my best friend here, I don't want to lose that.”

Cam smiled and defensively backed a few inches away.

“Whatever you say, Lane Webster. Just let me know if your mind changes.”

“I will.”

“I can wait alllllll year.”

Lane gave him a soft smile, and then leaned in for a hug. Her cheek sank into his chest. He kissed her softly on the top of her head.

She could feel the spot where his lips touched her hair for the rest of the night. She even placed her hand on her head once she was in bed to see if she could feel it that way, too.

DECEMBER

Lane was at home for winter break in Massachusetts. Cam was in New Jersey. He had started to call her every couple of days or so. One night, while she was wearing Christmas pajamas that had little snowmen on them, about to fall asleep, her phone rang. She smiled, letting the glow of her screen light up her face. She answered immediately.

“Did you know our houses are only four hours and forty-six minutes away from each other?”

Cam said.

Lane could tell he was lying in bed from the way he was breathing.

“I can’t say I did, that’s not too far away.”

“Not at all...I’ll have to come visit you sometime.”

Lane smiled, holding the phone tightly next to her ear.

“Yes, yes you will.”

There was a pause before Cam said, “I heard a Beatles song I thought you might like today.”

“Oh yeah? I love The Beatles, what is it?”

“It’s called ‘Two of Us.’”

“I don’t think I’ve heard that one before.”

“It goes like,” Cam took a breath before softly singing, “*Two of us riding nowhere...*”

Lane giggled in a girlish way, her phone glued to the side of her cheek.

“Okay, okay that’s all I’m gonna sing, I sound ridiculous, you’ll just have to listen.”

“I’ll listen to it, it sounds good so far.”

Cam paused on the other end, Lane heard another voice yelling his name.

“Ah shit. I think my mom is calling me downstairs—I’ll call you later this week?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

Lane hung up and held her phone to her chest. She rolled onto her side, smiling. She was a little worried about how much he made her smile.

She got out of bed, grabbed a notebook off her desk, and sat cross-legged on the floor. She looked up “Two of Us,” on Spotify and hit play. She ripped a piece of paper out of the back of her notebook. She took out two pens: one blue and one red. On the left side of the paper, in blue, capitalized letters, she wrote PROS. She drew a line under the word and began her list.

First, *good kisser.*

Second, *possible boyfriend?*

Third, *good taste in music.*

She couldn’t stop writing, they came one after the other.

Muscular arms. Comfortable with him.

Cute nose. Cares about school. Curly hair.

Makes me laugh!

Her hand moved to the right side of the page. She used the red pen, writing and underlining CONS. She took a deep breath.

First, *ruin friendship*

Second,

She paused.

Second...

She thought back to all the guys she’d talked to over the past four years.

The ones who led her on.

The ones who used her instead of getting to know her.

The ones who didn't even say 'hi' to her when she walked past them on campus.

Second...*he could be like the rest of them.*

JANUARY

The first weekend back from winter break, Lane and Cam went to a party together. They had both gone tequila shot for tequila shot until they ran out of salt and limes. Lane wore her best pair of black jeans and a red top she had gotten for Christmas from her sister. She wore lipstick that matched the color of her top—it made her lips glossy and full. Cam wore a thermal shirt that had three brown buttons on the front by the collar. It hugged his arms tightly, but hung off of his chest.

“Lane, I gotta say, I missed you.”

Cam put his arm around her as they sat next to each other on the couch. Lane nuzzled her forehead into his side.

“I missed you, too.”

He looked down at her, so that their noses were only a few inches from one another.

“Would it be alright if I walked you home?”

The two of them dizzily stood up from the couch, finding their way to the door.

“What if we went to yours instead?” Lane said the second they were outside.

“Well, I would love that.” Cam took her hand in his, excitedly.

Once in his room, the two of them sat next to one another on his bed. Cam muttered something about how he’d been thinking about her and this happening for a while. Lane just kept laughing at his excitement, at how quickly the night was moving, and at how easy the decision had been for her to make.

She woke up in Cam’s room. His shoulders had hundreds of tiny freckles, which surprised her—they were sort of pretty in a way that made her feel like she shouldn’t have seen them. His back was muscular, his arms even stronger than she thought they would be. She guessed he actually hadn’t been lying to her about going to the gym so often—something she poked fun at almost every time he mentioned it. Staring at his back, she lay there, cold from the fan that blasted air at them from across the room, with only half a navy bed sheet covering her pale body.

She decided it’d be better to be gone when he woke up. Her hangover was starting to hit her, and she didn’t want him to see what a mess she looked like in the morning.

She slipped into her jeans and top. He’d offered her a sweatshirt the night before, saying it’d look better on her than it ever did on him, so she threw that on over her clothes.

None of his roommates were awake, so she was able to sneak out of his house without any surprised looks or uncomfortable small talk. She shut his front door behind herself carefully so

that she wouldn't make a sound. Her feet pressed into the rough pavement on the sidewalk. She made sure to look down as she walked, avoiding the broken beer bottles and strange liquids that adorned the streets of Hartford on Sunday mornings. The sky had a faded pink color to it, as if she could've watched the sunrise but had missed it, being so busy with her eyes glued to the ground.

FEBRUARY

Lane bit her thumb, making her hangnail worse. Her face had started to break out a little, her hair was pulled back in a greasy ponytail. She'd been in the same old gray t-shirt for two, maybe three days. She was staring at her phone screen, typing out a message to Cam.

Something was off.

He was off.

She wanted to ask him if it was okay, but she didn't want to be weird, or invasive. They had a paper due that night in one of the classes they had together that semester. She had already turned it in, but it felt like a safe topic to bring up. She just wanted to talk to him about something, anything really.

How are you doing your citations for this paper? 11:23 am

She pressed send.

The two of them hadn't talked much since January. Lane couldn't figure out why, she thought it all went pretty well.

Was it perfect? No, but the first time with someone new rarely is, right?

By the time it reached 3:30 pm, Lane was flipping her phone over every few minutes to see if Cam had answered her text. Her hangnail got worse, a small bit of blood turned into a scab.

Was her text annoying?

Why wouldn't he answer a text about citations?

Should she just ask what was going on?

Did something happen to him?

Did she do something wrong?

Was she too drunk when it happened?

Was he?

Did he regret it?

Did she say something that she couldn't remember?

She couldn't have done anything wrong, right?

Was she not all he had imagined?

Was something wrong with her body?

Did he want his sweatshirt back?

He was the one that wanted her...

Was she not what he wanted?

She was the one that gave in.

By the time it hit 6:45 pm, she considered sending him another text, bluntly and honestly.

Or no—actually, maybe she'd say something vague, like ask if he was okay or if he needed to talk.

She typed a message out, then immediately deleted it.

Maybe she'd ask if she did something wrong...

But she knew she didn't, so she decided against that, too.

She could ask him to talk in person, but that felt really serious, and her and Cam weren't serious.

They weren't like, dating, so asking to talk might freak him out and drive him even further away.

She had always been the kind of person to hold her bladder throughout an entire lecture, rather than raise her hand, ask to use the restroom, and walk across the front of the classroom. She was kind of that way about people, too. She decided not to say anything else.

Lane lay in bed at night, in her same snowman pajamas, trying to distract herself from Cam by getting ahead on readings and homework. Her phone dinged, she had turned the ringer on in case he responded after she fell asleep.

It was a text from him.

Not sure yet. 10:49pm

MARCH

Days without Cam felt duller, but they went on. The two of them still crossed paths in class and in the dining hall. They still said hello. Lane still woke up in the mornings to crack an egg over a buttered pan on medium heat. She would stand and watch the whiter parts cook, flipping it exactly at the point when the whites were opaque and the yellow was still shining, holding it on the other side for only a few seconds, then transferring it to the top of her toast. She would then tap the yoke with the sharp point of a knife, watch the yellow ooze out of the center, onto her toast. If she was having a good day, she would eat it all, the egg and the toast and the runny yolk all at once. If it was a bad day, she'd stare at the yolk while it ran, often until it hardened, then she would try a bite, but the yolk would be cold and hard and by then the toast would be too. So she'd stand from her kitchen chair and swipe all of it into the trash with one swoop.

One afternoon, when the Connecticut weather had finally started to brighten, Lane sat on the front steps of her campus house. She wore a blue sundress that she had dug out of the box of spring clothes she put under her bed for the winter. The sleeves of the dress fell off her shoulders in a way that showed her collarbones. Her hair was tied back in a loose braid. She crossed her legs and put headphones in, clicking on a random album by The Kinks. She had been in a Beatles phase since January, and was now exploring the 1960s in general, trying to listen to specific bands discographies in full.

Maybe it was the sunshine or maybe it was the strained voices of the Davies brothers together, but Lane fell in love with the entire Sleepwalker album. She must have played the song "Full

Moon” twenty times in a row. The lines, “If the face in the mirror/ Isn’t you at all/ It’s just another full moon,” completely blew her mind. She kept starting the song over before it was even finished. Her and Cam always used to talk about their favorite songs and the importance of albums and song orders and the fact that people move on from certain sounds far too quickly. She thought back to the time in January when he showed her the song “Two of Us,” which quickly became her most played Beatles song.

She went to send “Full Moon” to Cam—she knew he’d like it just as much as her.

Her thumb paused over the blue arrow to send him the text. It hovered only millimeters above the screen of her phone. She stared at her screen, then closed her eyes.

Lane deleted the message, took her headphones out, and went back into her house, straight to her bedroom. She laid on top of her covers, still warm from the sun, and pulled her knees into her chest.

She coughed, pulling her knees in even tighter. Her mouth wavered. Her eyebrows raised and scrunched together.

She put her hand over her mouth so that her roommates wouldn’t hear her as she cried.

APRIL

After lying in bed all afternoon, and falling in and out of sleep, Lane pulled herself together, took a long hot shower, and decided to go out for the night. It had been awhile since she'd gotten dressed up and drank with her friends and there was a party at a house nearby. There were only a few weeks left in college, so she figured she needed to start making the most of them. She wore loose fitting distressed jeans and a pink tank top. She went with a light makeup look—just mascara and blush.

People like her grandmother always told her she looked prettiest with her hair pulled back away from her face, so she tied her reddish-brown strands up in a high ponytail, which made her cheekbones more noticeable than usual.

Cam would be there, she was sure of it.

Lane made herself a drink—orange soda and vodka. She quickly drank two cups, then decided to bring a third one with her to the party.

She looked herself up and down in her full-length mirror. She made sure there was nothing in her teeth and that she had properly covered the redness around her eyes. It was warm enough to go without a jacket.

When she walked through the front door of the house, into the party, Lane scanned the room. She recognized most people there, but noticed a few underclassmen scattered throughout the house.

And there he was—just like she thought he would be.

Cam had his back leaned against a wall, a Bud Light in his hand. He wore a fitted white t-shirt, light denim jeans, and white sneakers.

In front of Cam was a small blonde who flipped her long hair over her shoulder while she looked up at him. She was short, definitely shorter than Lane—her head only came up to Cam’s chest. She was probably a sophomore—Lane had never seen her before. The blonde threw her head back in laughter at everything Cam said to her, touching his chest with her hand as they spoke. She wore a black mini skirt and an even smaller black top.

Lane stood alone, watching the two of them. She gulped her orange drink, nodding as she watched them interact. She even laughed for a second, thinking to herself: *of course*.

After a few minutes, Cam turned his head and noticed Lane.

She continued to stare, but now she smiled at him.

He moved his arm up to begin to wave at her.

She waved at him slowly.

She then turned her hand, lifted her middle finger up, tilted her head, and smiled even wider.

She held her finger up for a few seconds—long enough for him to register that she was no longer waving.

She then lowered her finger and shrugged.

Cam stared back blankly.

The blonde turned her head to see who he was looking at.

He looked as if he wanted to say something, but didn't quite have the words.

Lane set her orange drink down on a table, flipped her ponytail over her shoulder, and walked out of the house.

Her hands began to shake the second she was alone outside. She put one foot in front of the other on the sidewalk until she was at her own house. Her fingers fumbled with her keys as she opened the door.

She reminded herself to breathe—exhale.

Once finally inside her house, she lifted her shoulders up then let them down, draining tension like sand in a flipped hourglass.

MAY

Lane's back stuck to the black foldable chair that she sat in on the quad on the morning of her graduation. One of her legs bounced up and down quickly. She could tell the harsh sun was making her cheeks red. She wore a plain white dress and beige wedges, along with her black cap and gown and the purple, yellow, and red chords that she'd earned for her grades over the past four years.

She could see Cam's back from where she was sitting. His broad shoulders made his black gown stretch at the top. He was wearing brown leather dress shoes that she'd helped him pick out online back in December. Her last name was Webster, and his was Antone, so his name had already been called and she was just waiting for hers.

It was her row's time to line up next to the stage. She put one foot in front of the other and followed her classmates. She stood in line, waiting for her name to be called so she could walk across. She looked out at her peers. She wanted to meet Cam's eyes.

She did.

He gave her half a smile, half a wave.

She gave half a smile back, keeping her mouth closed, then glued her eyes to the patch of grass that her wedges were flattening as she stood.

When she raised her head again, she scanned the gown-filled crowd. Molly, from freshman year. Adam, from sophomore year. Maeve, there for it all. She bit the inside of her cheek. She was ready.

“Lane Webster,” was enunciated by the president and Lane walked across the stage. After a handshake, she was handed her diploma. It only took a few seconds.

It was lighter than she’d expected.

She went back to her seat.

The president told them it was time to move their tassels from one side to the other—it was all over.

Lane watched the students in front of her move their tassels as she moved hers.

Over five hundred students threw their black caps in the air, smiling, their arms held up to catch them as they came down.

People clapped.

Cam clapped, he smiled at the person sitting next to him.

Lane had read somewhere—in a psychology class—that by smiling you can actually help your body release endorphins—the things that chemically make people happy. By doing this, if she was remembering correctly, you can actually trick yourself into experiencing happiness.

So, Lane stood with all of her classmates, next to people she loved and people whom she no longer loved, and brought the two corners of her mouth up so that they pitched small tents, her teeth resting stoically in between.

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And to whoever is reading this now, thank you for making it this far, Lane's journey is not over yet!