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Conservative Daydreams

by

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I stand on the tarmac, the sky darkening around me, and turn my phone on. The cold radiates up from the gray concrete, through my shoes and into my feet. I knew I should have worn something heavier, but I was optimistic that it might be warmer when I arrived. The air is crisp and hurts my nostrils when I breathe in. Puffs of steam fill the air in front of me when I exhale. I can’t help but wish I were back in New York.

When my phone finishes powering on there is a text message from Chantal. *It’s supposed to get cold this weekend,* it says. *No shit,* I think. It’s also the first thing she says to me when I get into her car, an Audi TT that has the distinct fresh leather scent that fills all new cars.

“New car?” I ask.

“My father just bought it for me,” she says.

I find the button to turn on my heated seat.

“Of course.”

She looks over at me and furrows her brow. “You’re one to talk,” she says.

I don’t say anything. She is right, I shouldn't say anything. My father started his fabrication company with one truck just over fifteen years ago when times weren't that good. He did it as a side job to help bring in extra money. Then oil prices went up, and he added another truck and his first employee. From there it just continued to grow. Last I knew, my father’s company was worth over thirty million dollars and worked with some of the largest oil companies in the world. Because of that, I have a new BMW 3 series sitting at my mother’s waiting for me.

I look back down at my phone hoping to see more texts, but there aren't any and I feel lonely. I look over and watch Chantal’s hair wisps move in the breeze from the heater. Her face is soft and smooth. She has a subtle line of mascara around her eyes that amplifies the blue in her eyes. She looks over and smiles at me. She is beautiful. I want to tell her that, but I have never told her that.

“I hope you packed some warm clothes,” she says.

She flicks on the signal, and we turn to exit down the ramp and onto the four-lane highway toward the city. The traffic is dense because of rush hour, but she handles it with ease, moving smoothly between the other vehicles.

“Did you hear me?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Warm clothes.”

The fact that she is talking about appropriate clothing doesn’t bother me, but I start to get uncomfortable at being home and feel that, other than getting back on a plane, nothing else matters. I reach into my carry-on bag and pull out my glass vial of coke and do a hit. I tilt it in her direction.

“Do you want some?”

She shakes her head.

“Not while I’m driving.”

I put the coke in my pocket and push into the chair, letting the heat sink into my body. The lights along the edge of the highway swipe across her dashboard in a regular rhythm and I start counting them. A wave comes over me, and then I don’t care anymore. I don’t care that I am twenty-one and it is May and that my flight from New York was delayed and that the couple from Fort McMurray, who were sitting with me in first class, got drunk to the point that the man threw up and the lady laughed like a hyena. I don’t care that the spring thaw splattered my new Hugo Boss shoes, which felt like a perfect fit when I put them on this morning. I don’t care about my sweaty scent, grown from a solid day of travel with one layover. I don’t care that my throat is dry from the recycled airplane air and that it is now even drier because of the crisp prairie air. I don’t even care that I look crumpled compared to Chantal’s carefully put together navy jacket and silk Burberry scarf and her lush Givenchy perfume. It is all irrelevant next to the fact that I am coming home to something cold and that I need to dress warmer. The weather is easier to talk about—the weather is always easier to talk about—and I’m sure that Chantal would rather talk about that than school, than her parents’ divorce, or the song on the radio that Rihanna is singing, bragging about how she is good at being bad, or that Chantal and I haven’t spoken in four months, since Christmas break. Nothing matters to me right now except that I need warmer clothes. Not the sound of the tires against the asphalt, the smell of the spring manure in the air from the surrounding farmland, the setting sun on the western horizon. For Chantal, I am now finished with university, back home for good, ready to start our life together as a couple. But really, she wants me to be warmer.

Chantal jerks the wheel to the left and heads west off the highway, onto the freeway that circles around the city. The asphalt turns to concrete, and the ride gets quieter.

“They finished construction,” she says. “It takes no time to get around the city with this road.”

She turns and looks at me. I still feel lonely. We sit silent for the rest of the drive.

Chantal eventually leaves the freeway at an exit I don’t recognize and drives up the street, where she stops at a red light. Small mounds of snow still dirty from the salt and gravel lie in piles where snowplows would have piled the snow removed from the streets. It will be gone soon, maybe in a week or two, as the days get longer and the sun gets warmer.

She continues though the streets until she gets to one I finally recognize. It curves up a hill and to the right. Tall elms that have yet to develop any leaves line the street on both sides. She takes her time, as though she wants me to take it all in. When she finally gets to my mother’s driveway, she turns and drives up toward the house and through the gate in a way that will allow her to circle back around. She looks over at me again. I’m not sure if she wants me to kiss her. I don’t think she does, but I do anyway since we are supposed to be a couple. Her lips are soft and meet mine, and it is awkward for both of us, but I still like it.

“I would spend time with you, but I have a committee meeting tonight.”

“A committee meeting?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she says. “I’m on the subcommittee for a fundraiser that we have coming up. I’m helping with the silent auction.”

“It’s that important?” I ask.

“Of course it is,” she says. “It’s a major political fundraiser. You know that I need to make connections to get a job, and I need to find one right away, now that I’m out of school. Politics is fast moving. If I don’t get in there, then I won’t get in there.”

“I’ll see you later, then.”

“I’ll text you,” she says. “There’s a party later.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah, tonight.”

I get out of the car, and it feels colder than when she picked me up at the airport. I stretch my legs and can feel the tightness in my hamstrings that I get from sitting for long periods of time. She pops the trunk, and I unload my treated-canvas Coach luggage set that she bought me when I left for New York.

“I’m glad you’re home,” she says.

I nod.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say.

“It’s just, you seem off,” she says.

I just look at her with a blank look on my face and don’t say anything. I’m not sure what to say. She kisses me this time.

“I’ll see you later,” she says. “After all, this is what we were waiting for. I have my degree in political science; you have your commerce degree. In a few years, we’ll be the couple that everyone wants to be.”

I feign a smile.

“I posted that on Facebook. I got over thirty likes.”

“That’s good,” I say, wondering why people on Facebook are important.

“I know, it’s exciting.”

She kisses me again, then gets into her car and drives away, leaving me standing on the driveway. There are no other vehicles around, which means my mother isn’t home. This is standard for my mother. She was never home when I lived here and probably forgot or didn’t even know that today was the day that I was coming home. I never held it against her, though. She became a career volunteer once my dad’s income allowed her to quit her job and has done a lot of good for others. She started volunteering at the local food bank, separating items, and over the years worked her way into a board position for the children's clinic at the university hospital. It was probably one of the most prestigious volunteer positions in the city, which she loved, because it allowed her to keep her status since she and my father got divorced.

I get inside, and the house is chilly. I turn the heat up when I walk by the thermostat. My mother left a note on the table to let me know she has gone out to pick up some groceries for a late dinner, which doesn’t matter, because I’m not hungry. I will probably try to eat something, though, because the note also says that she wants to celebrate my return from Columbia University, and I don’t want to come off as too much of an asshole. I turn up the heat a few more degrees and head upstairs to my room.

The trees outside my floor-to-ceiling windows are starting to develop small leaves. Soon, they will fill in and create the feeling of sleeping in a forest while living in the middle of a city that I missed while living in my fraternity house.

My room is unchanged. The dirty socks I left on the floor are in the same spots where I left them when leaving right after Christmas. On my wall, the television still hung surrounded by posters: Arcade Fire, Eddie Vedder, Damien Rice, Leonard Cohen, Daniel Johnston, Tori Black, and a postcard of the Golden Gate Bridge with the words *San Francisco* written in pink neon across the bottom right corner. Everything is just where it was when I finished high school four years ago. There is a stack of Blu-rays at the foot of my bed with a note in my mother’s handwriting that reads, *I want to donate these to the church for their garage sale. Let me know.* There is also a note saying that River stopped by to see if I was at home yet and a card from Bobby inviting me to the Phi Delta Delta convocation party, the party Chantal was talking about, that has a picture of the official fraternity crest on the front and a handwritten note on the inside: *This shit’s over. Let's make money Alberta style!* I toss the card on the shelf.

I reach into my pants pocket and pull out my iPhone. I text River and he texts back right away, wanting to know if I am going to Bobby’s party tonight. I text back that I am. I place the phone down on the shelf. It vibrates, and I know it is River texting me back. I don’t look to see what he has written. Instead, I look up at Tori hanging on my wall. She is lying face down on a bed with her head resting against her right hand, staring at the camera. Her ass is propped up in the air, and the small pink panties are pulled halfway down so you can barely see them. Her legs are spread, and I imagine the view from behind her is inviting. Her makeup gives her face a smooth, shimmering tone while the smoky makeup around her eyes gives them a fuck-me look. Her signature is scrawled in the corner, not real, just printed on as part of the poster.

I pick up my phone and look at the text. It is from River, saying that he can’t wait. I look back up at the poster of Tori. She looks deep into my eyes and I have an urge to masturbate. I wish, as I do every time I look at the poster, that I could be in the poster behind her. I light a candle and lie down on my bed, wondering what clothes I have for the Phi Delta Delta party. After all, I will need to be warm.

#

I meet up with Carson and his friend Glen, who is also going to the party. I knew Carson in high school, but we didn’t hang out until I found out that he was going to NYU and he found out that I was going to Columbia. He is in black jeans and a black T-shirt under a black leather jacket with a red stripe down the sleeve. On both of his wrists, he has leather bracelets. His curls are greasy, the way he likes them, and are hanging down over his Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses. He is already drunk and smells like whiskey and Marlboros. It helps complete his rocker image to look like a young Lou Reed. He rubs his nose.

“I might need some coke to keep me going,” he says. “Jet lag is a bitch.”

“When did you get here?” I ask.

“Yesterday. I don’t know if I would have come back without that job that your father hooked me up with.”

“I wouldn’t have come back,” Glen says. “Not from New York.”

“Most wouldn’t,” I say, wondering if I made the right decision.

I knock on the door to the Phi Delta Delta house. Someone in a purple dinosaur costume opens the door. Carson pushes the dinosaur to the side and steps inside.

“Every year, they make a freshmen dress up in that stupid fucking costume,” he says. “You’d think they could find something new by now.”

Carson’s right. We have been coming to these parties ever since we graduated high school and our friend Bobby became a member of the fraternity. We have seen it for four years in a row, and Carson thought the tradition went all the way back to the nineties, when Barney the Dinosaur was popular.

“I’m just saying, one year, it would be nice if they hired a stripper and dressed her up in the costume and she slowly removed it through the night. That would be something to get excited about.”

We walk into the party. It is filled with this year’s graduating class, all wearing the traditional navy blazer with gold buttons, a jacket that has been worn by every graduating class since the fraternity started in 1892, five years after the university was founded. The freshman in the crowd are easy to pick out. They are all dressed in bright orange prisoner uniforms, also a tradition since 1892. The rest of the party is full of some guys from other fraternities in their frat-boy T-shirts and girlfriends of the fraternity members or girls who want to be girlfriends of the fraternity members so much that they would even date a freshman. I see a freshman start to go upstairs with a smiling girl, and one of the guys from the graduating class stops him. The guy in the navy blazer says something to the freshman and then the freshman heads back down the stairs. The guy in the navy blazer heads upstairs with the smiling girl instead.

Across the room, I see Chantal. She is wearing a short navy skirt and a small Oilers hockey T-shirt with the number 99 on the back. The sleeves are cut off, and a knot tied on one side exposes her well-defined stomach. She has on her navy platform shoes, which make her taller than most of the men around her. Her brown hair is straightened and pulled back into pigtails, a look I have always liked as long as I can remember. She sees me, smiles, and comes over.

“Hey,” she says and grabs my hand. “Hey, Carson.”

“Do you have any coke?” Carson asks.

“No, not tonight,” she says. “Who’s this?” she asks, motioning towards Glen.

“Glen,” I say.

“What?” she asks. The music is loud.

“This is Glen,” I say louder.

She bobs her head in his direction. She says hi but I don’t think he hears her.

“Let’s go in,” she says loudly.

“We’re not in yet?” asks Glen.

“No.”She laughs. “This is only the front room.”

“Fuck me. It doesn’t look that big from outside.”

“It’s a deep house,” she says.

Chantal looks over at me and grabs my hand.

“Let’s go,” she whispers into my ear. “School’s over and our life starts.”

We head through the crowd and into the house that smells overwhelmingly of stale beer and weed. In the center of the library, hanging from the twenty-foot, dark-maple ceiling, is an effigy of the university dean. There are a few people I recognize from high school, but most I don’t know. Some of the girls near us are hugging in a drunken ecstasy and telling each other that they love each other. They say things like “I’m sad it’s over” and “we have to head out into the real world” and “it’s not fair.” I’m not sure that the real world is supposed to be fair, but I imagine that in the real world, we are all shadows of what we were when we were younger.

Hanging out in the corner, I see Natasha smoking a cigarette. It is hard to miss her. When Natasha was fourteen, she signed a modeling contract and accumulated a net worth of seventeen-million-plus dollars in seven years. She essentially looks the same now as she did then, which is stunning. Her blond hair is blown up and full, coming down over her shoulders. She wears a white silk dress, Versace, that hangs down over her nipples. Bras are a thing she stopped wearing at fourteen. She bounces awkwardly to the music, something she always does when she’s drunk and has also done since she was fourteen. Guys walk by looking at her, but none of them will stop and talk to her.

“I see some of my girls,” Chantal says. “You boys will excuse me.”

“Sure,” says Carson.

“I’ll come and find you later,” she says to me and gives me light kiss.

“I missed you,” she whispers in my ear, then walks away to her friends.

“She’s a keeper,” says Carson. “I’ve always thought so, anyway. I mean, you guys looked good in high school, like a real couple.”

“Yeah,” I say. “My mother thinks so as well. Let’s go say hi to Natasha.”

“What, is she here?”

Carson turns around and sees her standing in the corner.

“Oh, yeah, she’s too hot for me. I always get nervous around her.”

Carson, Glen, and I walk over to Natasha. She sees me and smiles as we get close.

“Hey, Evan,” she says, still dancing awkwardly.

“Hey, Natasha,” I say back.

“Hey, Natasha,” Carson says.

She smiles at Carson, then looks back at me.

“How’s New York?” she asks.

“I miss it already,” I reply. “Natasha, this is Glen. Glen, this is Natasha.”

Even though his sunglasses are on, I know Glen is staring at her breasts.

She offers her hand and Glen smiles. He hesitates for a moment and shakes it.

“How do you know Evan?” she asks.

“I don’t. I know Carson,” Glen says.

She nods.

“Do you go to U of A?” Glen asks her.

She smirks and, when she realizes that he’s serious, starts to laugh.

“No,” she replies. “I didn’t even finish high school. I sometimes wish I did, though.”

“Girls who didn’t finish high school don’t look like you,” Glen says.

“I started modeling when I was fourteen.”

“Oh,” he says.

Natasha laughs again and grabs onto my arm to stabilize herself. She is drunker than I thought.

“Come on, Glen, let’s get something to drink,” Carson says, then looks at me. “What do you want?”

“Vodka tonic,” I say.

“Some things never change, do they?” Natasha says.

“Do you want anything, Natasha?” Carson asks.

“No,” she says and then looks at me. “I got everything I need.”

“We’ll be back.”

Carson and Glen head into the crowd, like a rocker and his roadie, toward the bar. Natasha looks back at me and steps closer.

“You don’t look like you,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. “You just look different.”

“Jet lag,” I say.

“No,” she says. “That’s not it. Has New York made you hard?”

“Harder than living here?”

She digs her hand into her Gucci bag and pulls out a bottle of pills.

“Here,” she says and grabs my hand. “Keep these for later and take both of these before you need to go to sleep. Whatever time sleep for you is.”

She drops two red and blue pills into the palm of my hand.

“It’s Temazepam. I got it while on a shoot in Russia. The flight was long, and it screwed my routine up. These were the only things I could get. They work great, though, at giving your sleep cycle a reboot.”

I slip the pills into my pocket and wonder if my doctor would question me too much if I wanted my own prescription.

“It’ll be good for you,” she says. “It’s like booze but no hangover. It makes you tired and will knock you out for at least twelve hours. Since I started taking them, well, they’ll just help.”

I look around the room for Chantal and can’t see her. I do, instead, see a redhead by the fireplace, talking with a freshman. It is obvious that she is a freshmen as well, but I give her credit because she didn’t just put on a pair of Lululemon yoga pants and consider herself ready to go out. She is wearing a tight, espresso-colored minidress. It looks like an Armani, as that was his signature color this season, but I doubt she could afford it. Her red hair flows down over the dress and the two colors compliment each other.

“Did you ever have sex with a redhead?” I ask Natasha.

She laughs.

“No. I like blonds. They always have soft, fine hair. Anyway, take the pills—they’ll help sort you out,” Natasha says.

“I have always wanted to see red pubic hair,” I say.

I turn and look her in her eyes, which fade from a bright green on the outside to a light gray just around her pupils. Her lips are full and look large on her thin face. I think she is wearing Opium, but it is hard to tell with the smell of stale beer and weed in the air.

“Can I take the pills with anything else?”

“Maybe pot. Nothing else, though. They’re strong.”

“Okay.”

She nods.

There is an uncomfortable silence and we both stand there looking around the room. I can see that Carson got distracted by a cute girl, and Glen is playing the part of wingman. The girl is also dressed in black and wearing black leather bracelets.

“When did you get back?” Natasha asks me.

“Earlier today,” I reply.

“What about you? Shouldn't you be in Paris or something?”

I’m still watching the redhead as I ask the question. The redhead has now turned around, and I can’t stop myself from staring at her ass. Heather-gray thigh-high stockings stop about an inch below her minidress. I want her to bend over so I can see if she is wearing panties.

“I have some time off,” she says. “I’m getting too old for this, and to be honest, I’m tired of photographers trying to fuck me.”

“How often does that happen?”

“All the time,” she replies. “Even if they’re gay. The gay ones just want to do anal and pretend I'm a skinny guy. Besides, I only do anal doggy style, and I won’t have sex doggy style with someone I don’t trust—especially with a photographer. I especially don’t trust them. I want to make sure that whoever I have sex with isn’t filming it or taking pictures that will end up on TMZ. If I have sex with someone doggy style, it means I really trust them.”

I laugh when she says this because she used to love doggy style when we would have sex in high school—it’s her favorite position.

“A friend of mine was dating a photographer and one time he asked her if she trusted him. Those were the exact words: ‘Do you trust me?’ She said that she did and then he blindfolded her and spent an hour slowly kissing her and teasing her until she said that she was begging for it. And she did. ‘I want to feel you inside me,’‘she said, ‘please.’ Then she said he gave it to her, and it was the best orgasm she’s had. Two weeks later, the video surfaced of her having sex with some guy she had never even seen before. In it, she was blindfolded, begging for it. The photographer didn’t fuck her at all—he just filmed the whole thing while someone else fucked her. She was devastated that she became a porn star overnight. TMZ plugged it for weeks. Can you imagine?”

“Asshole,” I said, thinking it was her fault for letting the guy blindfold her.

“It was full HD. You could see everything,” she said. “I watched the entire thing.”

I pull out my phone and pretend to check some texts. Then I text myself a reminder to look the video of her friend up on the Internet. I think I would enjoy watching a video of Natasha’s friend.

I am starting to feel edgy, and I am hoping that Ian, my drug dealer from high school, is at the party. I turn back to Natasha. “Where do you shoot next?”

“Cuba, in a month, unless something else comes up in the meantime,” she says. “They want some beach shots and some old Havana shots. Do you want me to bring you back some cigars?”

“Maybe.”

She nods.

“Wait,” I say. “Cohibas. Bring me Cohibas.”

Something catches her eye; I don’t see what.

“Sure,” she says. “I have to go. We should hook up later. I won’t tell Chantal.”

“Maybe,” I say.

“It’ll be like old times.”

She kisses my cheek and pushes past me into the crowd, dragging her hand across the front of my pants as she does so. I look over to the far end of the room, and the redhead has disappeared.

Carson comes back with my vodka tonic.

“Glen went upstairs with the girl I was talking to. Can you believe that? Here I am with a six-pack and she chooses the short, stubby guy?”

I take a sip of my drink. It’s strong, and I decide to wait for the ice to melt to help dilute it.

“She doesn’t know what she’ll be missing,” I say.

“I know. I’m like a rock star with my tongue.”

Carson sticks his tongue out and flicks it.

“I’m sure,” I say.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Bobby, president of the fraternity, talking to a blonde in Lululemon yoga pants. She looks like a freshman and is laughing at all of Bobby’s jokes, which I know are not funny. She will be an easy conquest for him, but I am sure that he will slip a roofie into her drink, just to be sure that she will be his, and think that he is the type of douche bag to film it and share it with his friends like the photographer Natasha told me about.

“You look like Jack White,” I hear someone say. I turn around, and it’s Lisa, Chantal’s friend. She is talking to Carson.

“Can you play guitar?” she asks.

“No,” Carson says. “I didn’t bring it with me.” He smirks.

She covers her mouth and laughs.

“Hey, Lisa,” I say and then introduce her to Carson.

“Really,” she says, “you look like Jack White. Thinner, though.”

“She has a thing for guys who look like rock stars,” I say.

“Whatever.” She giggles and grabs Carson’s arm. “It’s not true.”

I know that, in about ten minutes, Carson and Lisa will be in the bathroom fucking. If it takes any longer than that, it will be because Carson’s not interested, not because Lisa doesn’t want to.

“Look at Bobby,” she says. “He is such a dick. That poor girl doesn’t know that half the fraternity is going to fuck her tonight if she keeps falling for his shit. I should go save her. Can you believe that he isn’t in jail yet for date rape?”

“Asshole,” says Carson.

Lisa looks over at me.

“You don’t look the same,” she says.

“That’s what I hear,” I say.

“You look sad,” she says. “I have some ecstasy. Do you want some?”

I’m tired but know that it would help make me feel better about being home.

“Yeah,” I say. “Let’s have it.”

She passes me two pills that have an image of a unicorn on them. “This is good shit—only take one. One for later, though.” She winks at me.

“Thanks,” I reply. I drop them into the same pocket as the Temazepam that Natasha gave me and am grateful I have friends who care about my well-being.

“Is River coming?” I ask. “He texted me.”

“I doubt it. He’s fucked.”

“Fucked?”

“Yeah, he started some business or something with some guys from that strip club on 118th and has been getting weirder and weirder.”

A chant begins in the corner. Something to do with the fraternity.

“U is for underage,” the chanting group says.

Lisa lets out a sigh.

“Oh, for Christ sake.” She says, “That’s the song that was sung during that university initiation, remember? The media didn’t do anyone any favors by showing the video of that chant all over the news. If anything, it became a theme song for fraternities across the country.”

I look over; the freshman blonde is leaning against Bobby. Her body is slightly limp, and her eyes are tiny slits.

“I just heard from Ian that River is in some trouble, that’s all. I got to go,” she says. “Hopefully I’ll see you later, Carson.”

“Yeah,” Carson replies. Lisa doesn't hear him; she is already moving toward the crowd of fraternity brothers. When she gets in the crowd, she pulls the freshman blonde into her. Bobby starts yelling at her and she starts yelling back. I can’t see what they are saying.

“Well,” says Carson, “you should give me one of those hits of ecstasy.”

“Maybe,” I say.

“Maybe?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

I gulp down the rest of my vodka tonic. It is easier now that the ice has melted.

“By *maybe,* I mean *no,”* I say.

In my pocket, my phone vibrates. It’s a text from Chantal. She says that she is a block away with a friend who started crying over a guy who just dumped her. They are in her car, and she is trying to calm her down and make her feel better, and she will be back in a while. I text back that I will see her when she gets back and that she is a good friend.

I circle through the party but can’t find anyone to talk to so I go outside. Natasha is sitting on the stairs smoking a cigarette while flipping through her phone.

“Hey,” she says. “I needed some fresh air. Some dickhead freshman ran up to me and grabbed both my tits. It was a dare.”

She took a long pull on her cigarette.

“I kneed the fucker in the balls. I don’t know why I come back to these stupid parties. I feel like I’m fourteen again every time I do. Always getting hit on by stupid boys. One week, I’m partying with the fashion elite; the next, university frat boys.”

“It’s an adventure.”

“It’s stupid.”

“Let’s go for a walk,” I say. “I need to get out of here.”

“Sure,” she says.

She stands up and drops her cigarette to the ground, where she crushes it out skillfully with her three-inch heels.

We start walking down the street and stop once we get to the midpoint between streetlights. We are in a shadow, and all you can see is our feet on the sidewalk.

“Hold on,” she says. “I need some of this.”

She reaches into her purse and pulls out a joint. When she lights it up, the strong, sweet smell of weed fills my nostrils. I know it is good quality because Natasha would never buy cheap stuff. We stand silent under the yellow light, passing the joint back and forth between us until it is done. She throws the roach to the ground and grinds it out with her heel.

“That’s it,” she says. “No more weed.”

I pull out the two tabs Lisa gave me out of my pocket.

“It’s ecstasy,” I say. “Want one?”

She smiles and reaches her hand toward me. Her fingernails are perfect. Long, with a glossy blue opaque layer and thin white French tips. She plucks the ecstasy from my palm with her nails and places it on her tongue.

“When this kicks in, can we go back?” she asks.

“Back?”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “Back.”

#

Natasha and I are sitting in a dark antique trolley car from the 1900s just off Whyte Avenue, a popular street close to campus filled with a mixture of high-end designer shops, pubs, and restaurants that all cater to the students and people who wish they were younger and cooler.

The city bought the car we are sitting in to use as an attraction for people to ride from the south side of the river to the north side of the river as a throwback to a simpler time when a trolley would take people from the south side to work downtown. It caught on quick with hipsters and is busy during the festival season, running all day, ushering passengers back and forth. But we are still a month from the beginning of festival season and it’s dark and cold.

Natasha is fondling an unlit cigarette and drinking a gin mixture from a sterling-silver Tiffany flask she had under her dress in her stocking. I am staring out the window watching a small group of people walk by. The ecstasy has fully kicked in, and I keep licking my lips, wishing I had brought some water with me.

“Can I have some?” I ask.

Natasha passes me her flask, and I take a drink.

“Thanks.”

I lean back and think of my day. Even though New York is only a flight away and I was there ten hours ago, I feel like it is a distant memory.

“Have you been to New York?” I ask.

“Of course I have,” she says.

I feel stupid for asking the question. Of course she has.

“There was this bagel place on the Lower East Side, Russ & Daughters, that I would go to for a lox bagel when I was in the area.”

She starts to giggle. “What about it?”

“I miss it,” I say. “The first time I went, I was expecting the bagel to taste like every other bagel. I was wrong, and I ate it so fast that I ordered a second one to savor. It never occurred to me, until now, that I may never get another lox bagel from there again.”

“You’re so dramatic,” she says.

“I just wish we had that here.”

“Does your friend River always bail on parties?” she asks.

We are waiting for River, who texted me and said he’d meet us at the trolley and would drop off some weed for us.

“He was never very reliable. I would always get my drugs from Ian. He’s the dealer now, ever since he got out of rehab in ninth grade. Besides, River just sells stuff Ian sells to him. Lisa said he was in some kind of trouble. Do you know what she meant by that?”

“Sorry,” she says, “I just got back myself. I never really knew River anyway.”

She sighs.

“Well, we’ve been here for an hour waiting, and I’m wasting a good high sitting in a trolley that smells like dank must.”

She gets up and grabs my hand.

“I’ll get some more weed from a friend of mine tomorrow. Let’s go.”

We catch a cab downtown to The Hat, our high school hangout that we went to when skipping a class or when we were high, or, more likely, both. When we walk in, I feel old. Most of the people in the booths are teenagers and stoned, like we used to be when we would come. The lights are dim, and we walk down past the rows of booths full of giggling teenagers until we see an empty booth at the back that we take. I sit down and drag my hand across the fake-leather bench seat. The fine-grained texture rubs in between the ridges on my fingers and I keep stroking it in a slow, circular motion.

“We should eat,” Natasha says.

“I’m not hungry, just thirsty,” I reply.

“Everyone wants water when they’re high on E,” she says. “But, we are smarter than that, and we know that we need to eat. Right?”

“You order—I’ll just eat some of yours.”

“Fine.”

The server comes and places two menus down in front of us. She is wearing a black long-sleeve shirt that looks like merino wool and a short black mini. They aren’t designer, but I want to touch them. She notices me staring at her sweater and feigns a smile.

“Can we get two glasses of water, please?” Natasha asks.

“Sure, I’ll be right back,” the server says.

Natasha leans forward and puts on her sunglasses, and I feel her place her hands on my legs. Electric currents shoot through my body as she circles her fingers around on the tops of my knees.

“You used to like when I would do this,” she says.

I put my sunglasses on and smile, not caring if I look like a douche bag. I can feel myself getting hard and hope that she will keep circling her fingers up my thighs. The server comes back with water, and Natasha pulls back.

“Thank you,” Natasha says.

When she puts the water on the table, I grab it and drink my entire glass.

“Are you ready to order?” she asks.

“Sweet-potato fries with spicy chipotle sauce,” Natasha says.

The server looks over at me.

“And you?” she asks.

I am still thinking about the circles Natasha was making on my legs and my hard-on. I want her to start making the circles again.

“Nothing. I’m not hungry.”

She feigns another smile and gathers up the two menus and walks back to the bar, where she spends time talking with the bartender. Natasha leans forward and slides her hands up my leg. She smiles, then starts to lightly brush my cock through my pants.

“You used to like this, too. Remember?”

I tilt my head back and moan. I’m sure that people are looking but don’t care. The feeling of her dragging her fingers across me sends waves through my body. My entire body is pulsing with my hard-on.

“Holy fuck,” I say.

“You’re too much.” She giggles and leans back in her seat.

I reach down into my pants and shift my hard-on so it will be less noticeable. It is uncomfortable, and I hope it goes away soon.

“I can’t handle this,” I say. “I’m going for a smoke.”

I drink half of her glass of water and get up.

“I’m coming, too,” she says. “You can’t leave me in here while I’m tripping on E.”

“Fine.”

She follows behind me. I light the cigarette before I get outside the door, and I hear Natasha laugh from behind me.

“You are too New York for this city,” she says behind me.

Outside, there are construction signs lining the sidewalks. The chain-link fence that surrounds the construction zone is covered in large drawings, renderings of what the new street will look like. This is the third time that I can remember the city spending money to refresh the street. I’m not sure why they need to keep spending money—the streets are busy with people, mostly in suits, walking from restaurants to bars. A few years ago, the streets would have been almost empty at this time. Now, because of the oil boom, the street is busier.

I hum “Dead and Lonely” by Tom Waits. Natasha hums along with me while smoking her own cigarette. When we are done humming, I take her into the back alley, and we fuck. I make sure not to come inside her.

#

The next two hours are blurry. Natasha and I end up back by the university in the club district. I can’t be sure of the time, but I think the bars are closing, which would make it two in the morning. My penis is throbbing and sore from the continuous sex that Natasha and I have randomly had throughout the night. I can’t be sure, but I think we have fucked three times, maybe four.

“Kind of like old times,” she says.

“Not really.”

“Of course it is. You’re the only one I’ve had sex with from high school.”

We are standing outside the club Lucky 13. The music is pounding in my body, the bass echoes through the walls into my veins. People are making their way onto the streets. Some of them look like they could be sixteen, which makes me feel old.

“I still feel messed up from the booze and the E,” Natasha says.

“I know what you mean. This is the best E I’ve been on. I don’t know how much longer I can handle it, though.”

I reach into my pocket and pull out the two Temazepam pills that Natasha gave me, then stare at the concrete. It swirls around like gray paisley.

“I wouldn’t take those,” she says.

I feel her hand cup mine. She removes the two pills and puts them back into my pocket.

“How much longer do you think our high will last?” she asks.

I don’t answer and just shake my head. My breath runs deep into my chest.

“Maybe we won’t come down,” she says. “Maybe this will be our new normal.”

She leans backwards and stares up at the sky.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” she says.

I think she is right—it doesn’t matter—but that doesn’t seem right. Deep down, something is supposed to matter—Chantal is supposed to matter. I pull my phone out of my pocket and take the few seconds for the screen to come into focus. Three text messages from Chantal. All wondering where I am.

“We should go back to the party,” I say.

“Not that shit,” Natasha replies.

“Yeah, Chantal is looking for me.”

“Right,” she says. “Chantal.”

We are only about six blocks away from the party, so it doesn’t take long to walk back to the fraternity house. The street continues to fill up with people coming out of the bars, heading towards the numerous twenty-four-hour restaurants that line the street. Two drunk guys in ripped jeans are yelling at us that Natasha is a sweet piece of ass. She doesn’t seem to notice them, so I follow her lead and keep walking.

We get close to the fraternity house, and Carson is outside with Lisa. Under the streetlight, she looks like she is wearing too much makeup, and the light makes her top sheer, so you can see her bra through her shirt. Carson is laughing with his hand on her ass. He nods when we walk by and says something. I’m not sure what he says, so I keep walking, wanting to find Chantal.

I go back in the house and Natasha walks past me, heading toward the bathroom. The lights are dim, and most people have left. I walk through to the main room. The redhead I was looking at earlier is on a ratty couch that is pushed against the back wall, making out with a guy in a toga sheet. His hand is up her dress. Another freshman stands behind them with his iPhone, filming it.

I hear laughter from the kitchen, so I go there, even though I don’t hear Chantal’s voice in the laughing. The lights are brighter than the rest of the house, and I have to squint because the E has made my eyes sensitive. There are four freshmen, including the one dressed as a purple dinosaur, standing around a keg trying to get the last of the beer out of it. They are chanting the word *chug,* and one by one, each freshman takes a turn chugging down a glass of beer. I think they are too young to realize that beer is an entry-level drink. For now, the keg is the pinnacle of their drinking experiences.

I finally find Chantal in the den, talking to a well-built blond guy wearing a U of C T-shirt. She sees me and points to her wrist, at her Chanel tank watch. Her brow furrows, and I know that she is pissed. I feel guilty knowing that I left her alone at the party, and I nod to acknowledge her being pissed off, hoping that she catches my meaning. She leans over and whispers something in the ear of the guy in the U of C T-shirt and then heads over to me.

“Where have you been?”

I try to think of an answer that won’t get me in trouble.

“Whyte Avenue. I was looking for River. He texted and said he would meet me there. He was going to give me some weed.”

“You should know better than that,” she said. “You should have just gotten it from Ian.”

She still looks pissed, but she doesn’t push it.

We get outside, and it is colder than I remember it being a few moments earlier, when I arrived. Chantal pulls a joint out of her Gucci clutch bag and lights it up.

“Want a hit?” she asks.

I can’t remember if I took the Temazepam or not and I reach into my pocket. The pills are still there.

“Yeah,” I say.

I take the joint from her and do two quick inhales, then hold my breath until I can’t hold it any longer and exhale slowly. I’m sure she knows that I was with Natasha and I was doing more than waiting for River, but she doesn’t say anything to that point.

Natasha and Carson are standing on the street by Natasha’s Mercedes SUV, looking up into the sky. Lisa is nowhere to be seen.

“The stars look different from different places in the world,” Natahsa says. “Try to find the Big Dipper in Australia—it isn’t going to happen.”

“Hey,” Carson says to me, “you didn’t tell me about Lisa.”

“I don’t really know her,” I say.

“We started hanging out after he left for New York,” says Chantal. “She was in my global politics course.”

Chantal takes the last pull on the joint.

“How stoned are you?” Natasha asks Chantal. “I think you might be the only one who can drive. As long as you don’t smell like alcohol.”

“I’m fine,” Chantal replies. “I only had two drinks all night, and the weed is weak. I only have a light buzz.”

“Cool.” Natasha holds out the keys to Chantal. “You can drive, then.”

“All right, then,” says Carson. “You have a good night, then.”

He zips up his jacket and starts walking towards Whyte Avenue.

The three of us get into Natasha’s SUV and I am alone in the back seat, listening to Chantal and Natasha talking. I’m worried that Natasha is going to tell Chantal that we had sex tonight three, maybe four times.

The talking stops and Natasha looks out her window. When she does this, Chantal turns and blows me a small kiss.

#

I’m standing in front of the water park. I am in the mall, but I have my sunglasses on so the people in the water park—specifically, the girls—can’t see me watching them. The park isn’t very full. About twenty people rise and fall in the artificial waves of the large pool. Sprays of water fly over the edge of the water slides as bodies shoot down and a guy screaming in excitement flies by on the zip line. There are two thin and attractive girls standing shin-deep in the water. It rises and falls against their legs as the waves roll in. I’m not sure how old they are, but I am guessing they are sixteen or seventeen.

My mother is off shopping somewhere and has left me to find something special to celebrate my graduation. As far back as I can remember, she has believed that I should pick out my own gifts so that she doesn’t have to return something if I don’t like it. I always thought that was fair because I thought my mother never really knew me anyway and would probably get the wrong gift. I am not sure what to get, but I think I should get a watch. It is cliche as a graduation present, but I am okay with that. I also know she is using my father’s money to buy the present, so I am not worried about the amount.

The wave pool stops and the two girls in bikinis start walking out of the water. They go around a corner, where I can’t see them anymore. I leave.

I head toward the watch store on the other end of the mall that sells the high-end watches I am thinking about. Along the way, I cut through Victoria’s Secret to buy a pair of lace panties for Chantal. The ones I select are a light-pink color with small white bows on the hips. I know when I give them to her she will put them on for me and then let me take them off with my teeth. I pay for them with my Mastercard, which my father pays for as well.

“Do you want a bag?” the girl behind the till asks.

“No,” I say. “That’s okay.”

I slide the panties off the counter and into the pocket of my blazer.

“That’s a good choice,” she says. “I have a pair, and it hardly feels like you’re wearing anything.”

“Good,” I say. “Are you wearing them now?”

She smiles at me.

“Have a good day,” she says.

“You, too,” I say.

I walk back out into the mall. It’s not crowded with people, but it is crowded with tourists. My phone vibrates in my pocket. It is a text from my mother, wondering where I am at and if I have found anything yet. I text back that I haven’t but that I have an idea. She texts back that she wants to leave and if I don’t pick something today, then we can come back. I tell her to meet me at the watch store by the mall’s east entrance. A few minutes later, I am in the store trying on watches with my mother.

“Get a Rolex,” my mother says.

The salesgirl behind the counter smiles at my mother’s comment.

“Everyone should have a Rolex,” the saleslady says.

“No,” I say and shake my head while looking in the display case.

I don’t tell them that I don’t want to get a Rolex because I think Rolex is for fat, middle-aged men or the nouveau riche.

“Can I try that one on?”

I point through the glass to a white-gold Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso.

The leather is soft and wraps around my wrist perfectly. I flip the face over and the back is decorated with blue lettering, screws, and stars that are interconnected with rubies to create an imaginary constellation.

“This is the one I want,” I say.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure,” I say. “When am I not sure?”

“All right.”

She pulls out my father’s credit card without even asking what the price is. When she gets the receipt, she raises an eyebrow in my direction.

“Aren’t you going to say thank you?” she asks.

“Thanks,” I mumble.

It’s warm outside, and I have to roll down the window of my mother’s white Cadillac Escalade to release the stuffiness. The air moves through the vehicle and feels good. We drive around the parking lot, my mother uttering curses under her breath as she looks for an exit. Twenty minutes later, we exit from the parking lot onto the wrong road.

“Christ sake,” she says. “Why do they have to build these roads so stupid?”

She pulls a hard U-turn at the intersection, then she drives down the merge lane onto the freeway. I roll my window back up.

“There are cigarettes in my purse,” she says. “Light one and pass it to me.”

I reach into her purse and pull out her cigarettes. They are menthol.

“Does the fact that they’re menthol make you feel better about smoking.”

“Just give it to me.”

I light one and pass it to her.

“I like the smell,” she says as she takes a deep inhale.

When she exhales, the smoky mint smell fills my nostrils, and I roll my window down a few inches to suck the smoke out.

“How are things with Chantal?” she asks.

I look out the window and don’t answer.

“Hey, kid, I just bought you a twelve-thousand-dollar watch. You could at least answer me.”

“Things are fine,” I say.

I adjust the watch on my wrist. It feels tight.

“You two are good together. You need someone like her, Evan.”

I nod and slip my hand into my blazer pocket to touch the lace panties.

“Someone like her?”

“She has aspirations. You don’t want to end up with a leech for a wife.”

“That won’t happen,” I say.

“There will be a lot after you, being your father’s son, I mean.”

“How’s Dad’s new girlfriend? Is she a leech?”

Four years ago, two days after I went to New York for school, my father moved out, into his own condo, as part of a trial separation. He told my mother that she was too controlling and, in her eyes, he could never get anything right. Last year, my mother finally asked for a divorce, and the papers arrived the next day for her to sign.

We curve down the hill and into the river valley. The new song by Lady Gaga comes on the radio as we emerge from the trees and it feels like I am in a movie. My mother turns it up and quietly sings along. I want to sing along as well, but I don’t because I don’t want my mother to think that this is a fun time.

When we get to her home, my mother pulls into the driveway and puts the Escalade in park. She fumbles in her purse for another cigarette.

“Do you have my lighter?” she asks.

I get out and walk into the house without answering her, leaving the lighter on the seat behind me.

I go to my room and close my door. I can hear my mother come in and go up to her room, where I can hear her crying. I light a joint and go onto Facebook to see what my friends in New York are doing. It all looks more fun then what I am doing here. Officially, I am now home. I log out of my Facebook account and log back in under a fake account I have created. I have set it up to be a sixteen-year-old girl named Sam who is attending Progressive Academy, the private school I attended. Sam has just over twelve hundred friends. I scroll through all the postings and look at some pictures from the parties that have happened this past weekend. I think I see a picture with the gym teacher in it but can’t be too sure. I assume it is him because he used to sell weed out of his office and would usually show up at parties to do some sales, at least until Ian started dealing and took away his business. Now that Ian is no longer there, his business has probably gone up. I stop on one picture of two girls kissing while making the peace sign. I add a comment to the photo: *Haha this was so funny.* Within a minute, my comment has two likes. I scroll to a picture of a guy flexing and type *Hot. We should hook up.* I get a message almost immediately from him, asking what my number is ’cause he wants to text me. A second arrives from him right after the first, asking if I am on Snapchat. I’m not surprised he responded so quickly, because guys just want to be told they are fuckable by a cute girl. I lie down on my bed and fondle my watch again. It seems looser now. Tori, hanging on my wall, is looking like she is disappointed in me.

My phone vibrates. It’s a text from Chantal.

#

I’m at ‘Lazia, a small Italian restaurant downtown, waiting for Chantal, Lisa, and Deanna. They wanted me to go shopping with them in the afternoon, but I told them I had already been shopping with my mother earlier in the day and didn’t feel like going again. I agree to meet them for something to eat instead. The sun is going down, shining light through the dark-orange curtains. The server brings me a glass of water, but I really want the vodka tonic I ordered. I leave my Tom Ford blazer in the booth and go outside for a cigarette. I pull out one of my hand-rolled ones I stashed in my Marlboro pack that has some weed in it. The YMCA is across the street, and the windows are floor to ceiling on the second floor. Just behind the glass is a row of cardio equipment full of men and women running and stepping. Down the street, the stores are starting to pull in their sandwich boards from the sidewalk. I know that the girls won’t be much longer.

I go back into the restaurant, and my vodka tonic is waiting for me on a Guinness-branded coaster. I take a drink and put the glass back down on the table. My phone vibrates and I know that it is probably Chantal. It’s either that they are running late or not coming. Since I have my drink, I don’t check to see which. The server comes over. She is wearing too much makeup and her eyes look dopey.

“Is there anything else you want?”

“I’m just waiting for some people,” I say.

She looks at my glass and at the coaster and then leaves without saying anything else.

Chantal, Deanna, and Lisa walk in through the front door. The sun has gone down, and the restaurant has transformed from a pumpkin orange to a smoky red. Chantal sits beside me in the booth and puts her hand on my knee.

“Hi, baby,” she says and kisses me.

Lisa and Deanna get in the other side of the booth, and Deanna runs her fingers through her hair.

“I just love my acid perm,” she says.

Lisa gets up. “I need a smoke.”

“Didn’t you just have one?” Deanna asks.

“I need another one.”

Lisa walks outside.

“Are you coming to my party, Evan?” Deanna asks.

I shrug.

“Seriously?” Deanna replies. “It’s on Thursday. Stop acting like such a dick.”

I shrug again, and she glares at me.

“Some of us are pre-drinking at my place, then going to that new club on the corner of 109th and Jasper Avenue. We’re in the VIP area. I have it booked.”

“It’ll be fun,” says Chantal.

I know the club. It is usually full of douche-bag oil workers in tight Ed Hardy T-shirts and True Religion jeans. They have jobs that pay into the six figures, and they drive big trucks to prove it. I resent them because they can’t string together a coherent sentence, but they make good money. The girls there are equal in their lowly stature. They are fascinated if a guy’s grammar skills are above those of someone in grade six. If they are, then they will put out for you.

“You have to go. We’re all wearing plaid.” She says this as though it is an incentive.

“Yeah, it’ll be fun,” Chantal says.

She leans in and whispers in my ear.

“Think of it as slumming.”

I nod and drink back my vodka tonic.

“Did you invite Nathan?” Chantal asks Deanna.

Deanna looks at her, and there is an uncomfortable pause.

“You’re not still fucking Tony, are you?” asks Chantal.

I’m not sure who Nathan is, but Tony is a mutual friend from high school. He was on the swim team and had probably fucked at least half the girls at our high school by the time we graduated.

“Lisa’s fucking Tony now,” says Chantal. “I only did once, but Lisa doesn’t know. Don’t tell her—it would make it weird between us.”

Lisa comes back in from her cigarette. She smells like pot.

“Did you see the people across the street?” she asks. “They just stare out the windows running on treadmills. It’s freaky. If a treadmill stopped, I bet one of them would run right through the window.”

Chantal and Deanna look at her, then at each other. They both laugh.

“I’ll probably go to the party,” I say.

“You’ll invite Carson, right?” Lisa asks. “I would, but I didn’t get his number.”

“Sure.”

“I’m kind of seeing Tony, but I would ditch him for the night if Carson was going to come.”

The conversation reminds me of an episode of *Jersey Shore.*

The dopey-eyed server brings menus for all of us. One of the entrees is pan-fried salmon and it seems like an obvious choice since it is Pacific salmon and back in New York, most restaurants served Atlantic salmon, and everyone knows that Pacific salmon tastes better because of the cold water. Chantal moves her hand up my leg. I look up, and she is smiling at me. I’m hungry.

#

Natasha and I roll out of the taxi in front of the Oil Can, the club on 109th and Jasper Avenue. She stuck with the plaid theme for Deanna’s party and is wearing a Burberry miniskirt. Guys in the lineup—most wearing Ed Hardy T-shirts, True Religion jeans, and some type of flat-rim baseball hat—stare at her well-defined, thin legs, which are perfect.

“It’s just what I expected,” I say.

I am wearing a white herringbone Calvin Klein button-up with a navy Tom Ford jacket, no plaid. Judging from the clientele in the lineup, it will be a rough night.

“Watch this,” Natasha says.

She walks up to the bouncer and whispers something into his ear. He smiles down at her and opens the red velvet rope to let us in. All the guys in line wearing the Ed Hardy T-shirts are heckling the bouncer for letting us in front of them. I turn back to the lineup and smile, which gets me a couple of fingers back. I want to give them all the finger back and tell them to fuck off, but I know that would result in me getting my ass kicked.

The dance floor is full of people, mostly in jeans, dancing to an AC/DC song that I recognize but don’t know the name of. I follow Natasha through the crowd until we see our group.

“There they are,” she says.

I feel relieved when we get into the crowd here for Deanna’s party. I look around the rest of the club. I know that I hate most of the people here. I resent them for the money they make and the superior attitudes they have.

There are over fifty people in the VIP area, and I only recognize a few of them. I choose to walk through and listen to conversations without engaging in them. One small group is talking about Brandi Carlisle performing at the Folk Festival this year. I saw her twice in New York and instantly liked her style. Another group is talking about the score of coke that is coming in and that it will be the best ever. Another group is talking about a wine tasting that a small restaurant is hosting.

“Hey, Evan.”

I turn and see Todd, a guy from high school who I used to skateboard with. He was never very good, but that is okay—neither was I.

“You finished school?” he asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Commerce degree from Columbia.”

“Good for you. I finished a few weeks ago. I have my BCom from U of A.”

“That’s great,” I say. “I need a drink. Do we get a server or do we order from the bar?”

“We get a server,” he says. “But she doesn’t come around often. How’s the job market looking for you?”

I shrug while looking around for someone who resembles a server.

“Nothing, hey? I just started my position as a junior strategist with Imperial Oil. The salary is sweet.”

“How did a jerk like you get a job like that?”

He laughs, even though I was serious.

“Have you looked around? It’s oil country, buddy. You can write your own ticket.”

“Some of us,” I say.

I see River in the corner, talking with Natasha. He is thinner than when I saw him last. His hair is like greasy straw and hangs down in front of his face. He is wearing a long black trench coat and has on a pair of Ray-Ban Wayfarers. He brings his hand up to his face. I think he just did a hit of coke.

“That’s great, Todd,” I say. “I’ll catch you later. I need to go see someone.”

I push my way through the crowd to River and Natasha. She hands me a vodka tonic.

“You disappeared,” she says.

“Thanks. I got stuck with Todd.”

“Hey, buddy,” River says. “Want one?”

River gestures to the table a few feet away from us. It has over a hundred full shot glasses made up of varying colors.

“Sour Puss?” a girl in a black crop top and mini jean shorts asks.

I drink my entire vodka tonic and then pour four of the blue Sour Puss shots into my glass.

“It’s that kind of night, is it?” she asks.

“Look around,” I say. “How can it not be?”

River is smiling at me.

“How have you been?” he asks. “Made your move into the business world yet?”

I’m about to answer River when I hear Chantal yell my name.

“Evan!” she yells from across the VIP section.

I look over, and she is coming toward me with a small, rectangular, cream-colored box with a brown ribbon wrapped around it and tied into a bow on top. Her hair is crimped and pulled up on top of her head. She is wearing a small black mini and a gray tank top with plaid gray stockings that stop below her miniskirt, leaving a few inches of skin from her thighs visible. It reminds me of the redhead from the frat party.

I look back at River to tell him how I am doing, but he is walking away. Chantal gives me a tight hug, and I can smell the pot in her hair.

“I knew that you wouldn’t wear plaid, so I got you this,” she whispers.

She hands me the box, and I see that it is from Holt Renfrew. I open it up to find a silk men’s camel Burberry scarf inside. She pulls it out and wraps it around my neck.

“Very nice,” Natasha says.

“Yummy,” Chantal says. “Now we’ll have matching scarves.”

I smile.

“Thanks,” I say.

Chantal doesn’t notice that Natasha and I are now matching because Natasha is wearing a camel-colored Burberry miniskirt. I can hear a couple of guys close to us, and when I look over, they are pointing and I hear them say that I look gay. I think most of the guys in the bar now think I am gay since I am wearing a scarf. Burberry plaid isn’t the type of plaid that Deanna was talking about when she said that everyone was going to wear plaid—she meant lumberjack plaid.

“I’m going to get a drink,” Chantal says. “I need one after today. The committee is divided on who to bring in as a speaker for our fundraiser, and we have to decide soon because the election is next year and we need to start raising money.”

I nod and drink some of my Sour Puss. The alcohol has hit me quickly, and I am feeling the buzz that comes with the first few drinks, but I wish I had something more. That is when I see Ian. He is wearing a thin navy three-quarter-length wool coat with a blue plaid Abercrombie shirt underneath. Both sides of his head are shaved to about a half-inch. Bangs hang down in front of his eyes. I feel comfortable because he also doesn’t fit in with the crowd. He looks tough enough to hold his own against any of the douche bags in the bar, though. He glances my way and starts coming toward me, and I am already reaching for my sterling-silver Douglas Pell money clip.

“Hey,” Ian says. “You need a hit?”

“You have no idea,” I say.

He looks around the bar.

“I’m pretty sure I do,” he replies. “Let’s go.”

I follow him toward the bathroom.

“You have to be careful in places like this,” he says. “These douche bags don’t know if they like drugs or don’t like drugs, so they’ll kick your ass for being a drug dealer, then steal all of your stash because they want to get high. They’re hero hypocrites—you know, wanting to look like the hero in public but being a dick behind closed doors. They’re the same type that will hold a door open for the ladies, then date rape her later. You and I at least have the guts to be assholes and not apologize for it.”

I see River again in the crowd. He is pinching the bottom of his nose. His Ray-Bans are now off, and I can see how sunken his eyes look. I want to go over and talk with him, but I want to make sure I am lined up with some coke for the next couple of days. Ian and I get into the bathroom. The line is long, but we cut through to a stall. There is piss all over the toilet.

“See what I mean?” he says. “Any of these guys would call you an asshole for pissing all over the bathroom, but then they come in here and do it themselves. Fucking assholes. If they weren't good clients, I’d want them all to die.”

I pass Ian three one-hundred-dollar bills, and he hands me an eight ball.

“You look like a fag with that scarf on,” he says.

“A gift from Chantal,” I say.

“That doesn’t make you look any less gay.”

I pull it off and put it in my pocket.

“When did you get back?” he asks.

“A few days ago,” I say.

I put the eight ball in my pocket and wipe my nose. Ian pulls out a small glass vial from his pocket and dips his finger in. He pulls a small mound, scooped up with his fingernail, and snorts it back. He rubs the rest of the coke on his upper gums. I do the same. One of the things I have always liked about Ian is that he always shares a couple hits after you make a purchase. It makes him a classy dealer. We do a couple hits each. The high is instant and shoots through my body like an electric current.

“Holy shit,” I say.

“Pure,” he says. “I’ve started mixing some of my other stuff with synthetics. It’s not bad, but the pure stuff is always the best stuff.”

“Organic?” I ask. “GMO free?”

He laughs and claps his hand on the side of my neck.

“You kill me.” He laughs. “You always have. So you’re done with school? Come back for a big-paying oil job?”

I don’t answer.

“You should run for something—you're a born politician. I’ve always thought so anyway. Chantal thinks so, too. I’m sure that’s why she likes you.”

“Not my thing,” I say and he continues as though I didn’t say anything.

“You can get some of these assholes out of office and start getting the right people in. Every time someone wants to do something in this city, the politicians chase them out of town like a good idea is a bad idea. ‘We don’t need it,’ they say. ‘We’ve done fine with what we have.’ They’re all fucking retards. You know how many companies and movie productions and concerts and festivals have gone somewhere else because ‘we don’t need that here’? It makes me so fucking mad.”

He pulls out his vial and does another hit of coke.

“I would be a fucking millionaire in Vancouver or Los Angeles. But not here. We don’t like rich people, so my clientele move somewhere that likes having the rich people around.”

He offers me another hit, and I take it.

“So why are you here?” I ask.

“Don’t know. Call me sentimental.”

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” I say. “I just know that I don’t fit in here.”

“You and everyone else, pal—you and everyone else.”

Ian and I exit the stall. There are five guys waiting who watch us come out together, and one of them looks at Ian.

“Does he suck a mean dick or what?” the guy asks.

“Ha ha, princess,” Ian says.

The guy looks like he is going to take a swing at Ian but then relaxes back.

“Whatever, we’re cool.”

“That’s right, we’re cool.”

We push through the guys and through the door.

“We should hit up the MMA match tomorrow night. It’s going to be bloody,” Ian says. “This little fucker from Mexico is fighting, and I’m going to give him some meth just before the match. It makes him go batshit crazy.”

“When did you start selling that?”

“Recently. Didn’t want to, but River, of all people, wanted it. I try to stay away from that shit, though. Only dirty people do that shit. Cocaine is my drug of choice. It’s sophisticated, like old Hollywood.”

“River does meth?”

“Yeah, a while ago. Something happened to him a few months ago. He won’t talk about it, but he isn’t as outgoing as he used to be. Keeps to himself mostly. He asked for some meth, and I told him that I don’t sell that shit. Then he asked if I knew where to get some and I didn’t like the list of people I knew that had it. They’re a bad group to get involved with, so I got it for him”

“How much?”

“Not much. What are you, his mother? You want to go to the match or not?”

“I don’t know. Where is it?”

“It’s in the West End. It starts at seven. I’ll text you.”

I nod.

Ian heads back into the crowd. I pull the scarf out of my pocket and slip it back around my neck. I do look like a fag, but I appreciate the feeling of the silk against my neck. I head back through the club, getting a couple comments about my scarf from some guys in a group. I just keep walking. I circle through the club and don’t see anyone I know. I stop by the bar and wait in line behind a couple of girls with fruity drinks and long straws. They look over and smile at me; I smile back. Once I get my vodka tonic, I make my way to the black curtain that wraps around the VIP room. I’m about to go through the curtain when a large Middle-Eastern guy with an earpiece grabs my arm.

“I’m on the list,” I say.

He doesn’t respond. He just stands there looking me up and down.

“I’m on the list.”

I twist around so I can yell through the curtain.

“Deanna! Deanna!”

I yell loud, and I’m sure he is about to kick me out or take me out back to lay a shitkicking to me when the curtain parts open and Deanna pokes her head out.

“There you are.” She grabs my arm. “We were looking for you.”

She looks up at the bouncer.

“It’s okay, Aziz—he’s allowed,” she says.

We part the curtains and head up a small flight of stairs to a platform.

A server dressed in tight black pants and shirt walks up to Deanna and me with a platter. It is full of smoked-salmon hors d'oeuvres. I take one and stuff the entire thing into my mouth, then grab another as he is leaving.

“You wouldn’t believe the strings I had to pull to get the caterer in here. The bar insisted that I order off their menu. Shitty bar food at one of my events, can you imagine? I had to get them to bring in all the specialty beers as well. I don’t mind hosting a slum party, but that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have good drinks and good food.”

“I marvel at the way you were able to pull it off.”

“Thanks,” she says.

I smile, knowing that she likes the compliment, even though I don’t really mean it.

“The party is okay tonight, but I’m having another one in a couple of weeks. It’s a private party to help raise money for a guy who wants to run for office. Chantal knows him. Don’t worry—it’s all richies. You’ll fit right in.”

“Where at?”

“It’s going to be at a house in Summit Pointe, the richest area in the city.”

“That’s good,” I say. “I haven’t been back long, and I’m already sick of all these douche bags.”

She laughs.

“These are rich douche bags, Evan. The political type.”

She laughs again.

“Like I said, you’ll fit right in.”

“I have to go mingle. Chantal’s been looking for you. You should find her.”

She gives a big smile and heads back into the crowd.

I go and sit down on a leather couch beside a girl I have never seen before. She looks over at me and smiles.

“Hi,” she says.

She is pretty but wearing too much makeup. It’s obvious that her eyelashes have been extended and her cheeks are pink with blush. On her collarbone are two silver studs. She looks like a contemporary fifties pinup girl.

“Hi,” I say back.

“My name is Zina.”

Her name is not what I was expecting but yet fits.

“What do you do?” she asks.

“I don’t really do anything,” I say. “I guess I’m still looking for my thing.”

“Really?” she says. “You don’t have a job somewhere? You’re a rare bird.”

I don’t feel like getting to know her, so I tell her the story I always tell when I am meeting someone I don’t care about.

“My father did well on software stock in the nineties and rolled it all into oil and gas before the dot-com bubble burst. Then he pulled it out before the price of oil dropped. Not sure what his money is in now. Don’t really care, either.”

“So you’re a rich kid?” she asks.

I shrug my shoulders.

“Depends on how rich you are,” I say. “You have studs on your collarbone. Did they hurt?”

She shakes her head.

“I like piercings. I got a tattoo once and then thought, *What if I don’t like this in five years?* It really freaked me out. So now I just get piercings. You can take them out, and it’s like they never existed. Do you have any tattoos?”

“No,” I say, “I have trouble committing.”

She laughs.

“We’re similar, then, aren’t we?”

“I guess we are.”

We sit quiet after that. I see Chantal is on the other side of the VIP section, in conversation with two people I don’t know. One of them looks like the guy from the frat party who was wearing the U of C shirt. They are being friendly, and I assume they must know each other.

“I have other piercings,” Zina says. “Some fun ones.”

I keep looking at Chantal when I ask the question.

“How fun?”

“Depends. You want a drink?” she asks.

“Yeah, vodka tonic.”

“Smooth,” she says. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

I watch her as she walks away, toward the bar. She is wearing a charcoal miniskirt with gray plaid leggings that have perfect round holes cut out. Her legs are pale compared to the leggings. From what I can see, she has flawless, milky skin. I imagine she has short, manicured pubic hair, and I start to get hard. I look back up towards Chantal and see that she is now looking back at me. I smile, stand up, adjust my cuffs under my jacket, and then sit back down. I’m not sure why I did this, but Chantal smiles, then goes back to talking with the two people I don’t know. I pull my phone out and text Chantal that I am going outside to smoke a joint and that I will find her when I get back inside. When I push send, I see her check her phone. She looks over and blows me a small kiss just as Zina returns with two drinks.

“I got you a double,” she says.

Her drink is thick red, a Bloody Mary.

“Party Rock Anthem” by LMFAO comes on over the speakers and people jump up howling and head for the dance floor that we look down on from the elevated VIP section. Someone with a cardboard box on their head, like in the video, ends up in the middle of the dance floor and a group of girls gathers around him dancing. I can see Chantal down in the group, dancing beside Deanna.

“Fucking pop music,” Zina says. “Why aren’t you down there?”

I shrug.

“Not my thing?”

“Do you know what your thing is?” she asks.

I take a drink.

“I guess not.”

“You’re not like the other guys,” she says. “You wear a certain level of disdain.”

“So you’re saying I’m unique?”

“Yeah,” she replies. “You’re different somehow.”

“Thank you.”

I know she is wrong and that I am just like everyone else. She glances down at my crotch, and I hope that she can see that I am semihard. She places her hand on my leg, slides it up towards my crotch, and then leans in.

“Let’s get out of here,” she says.

I don’t say anything. I just drink back the rest of my vodka tonic and then stand up so that my crotch is right in front of her face. She finishes her drink in one swallow and then we head out through the back curtain, which takes us down a short hallway and out an exit to the back alley. There is a guy leaning against the brick wall, smoking a Colt cigar that smells like honey and talking to a girl. She is trying hard to look away. Even in the dark alley, I can see that her eyes are swollen and that her makeup has run down her face.

“I have a place just down the street,” Zina says.

I nod, and we walk the half block to a four-story brick building that was once a saddlery building and has been recently converted into lofts.

“I’m just renting, but I wish I could buy it. This area is becoming the hottest area in the city,” she says.

We go inside and head up the stairs to the second floor. Her loft is clean with very little in it, a minimalist. The furniture is gray, and the flooring is a washed out gray-brown hardwood. By her bed is a crystal vase with bright-yellow lilies. It is the only color other than gray in her loft. She closes the door and slides off her skirt and gray lace panties, leaving her wool knit stockings and gray wool sweater on. She kisses me, then walks to the back of the room, lies down on her bed, and spreads her legs. Her vagina is pierced under her neatly trimmed pubic hair, just above her clitoris. I don’t take my clothes off yet, but I can see that she is getting wet while waiting for me.

“You better hurry up,” she says. “We’ll be missed at the party if we take too long.”

I think of Chantal, and I start to feel anxious. I sit down on the bed beside her and slide my hand up her thigh. She leans up to kiss me, and I lean back. We start kissing and I slide two fingers inside of her, and she moans. I slide in another finger and move them around inside her. She grabs my arm, her nails digging in.

“I want you to make me come,” she says.

I feel uncomfortable when she says that. I pull pack.

“Are you okay?” Zina asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m, ugh, I’m fine.”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t feel well. I need to go back to the party.”

“What?” she says loudly. “Your fingers are in my pussy and you’re telling me you want to go back to the party?”

I pull my fingers out.

“Yeah,” I say.

I stand up.

“I made a mistake,” I say.

“You’re a fucking asshole,” she says.

I lick my fingers off and leave to head back to Deanna’s party.

Back at the club, the lineup is long. I stand in line for a minute and listen to the people around me. Most are talking about how wasted they are going to get tonight or how they have scored some good drugs. I laugh to myself, knowing that they are getting the mid-grade shit at best. When I get bored, I push my way up to the front of the line and flash the stamp on my hand. The bouncer doesn’t look happy, but he lets me in. I head straight to the bathroom and wash my hands to get rid of Zina’s pussy smell.

When I get to the VIP curtain, the bouncer hesitates for a moment; when he recognizes me, he lets me in. I look around for Chantal but can’t see her anywhere, so I find Deanna.

“Chantal was looking for you. I think she went into the back. Something about you smoking a joint.”

I say thanks and head to the back. I get to the alley, and the guy and girl that I saw before are still there.

“Did a girl come out here? You know, after I did?” I ask.

“Yeah, she was looking for someone. We told her that we only saw a couple leave.”

I pull my phone out and text Chantal. She texts back almost instantly that she left because she wasn’t feeling good. I text back that I can come over and meet her if she wants. She texts back that I don’t have to and that she will see me tomorrow. I am sure she knows that I was fingering another girl.

I head back through the bar to the front doors. When I get outside to the street, I hail a cab. On the ride home, the driver keeps asking about what I do for a living. I just ignore him.

#

I wake up to my poster of Tori staring down at me. Her eyes are tired this morning; so are mine. I turn on my smart TV and watch the shopping channel, a channel I can’t believe has survived through the Internet revolution. Joan Rivers is filling the screen and telling me what a great deal she has on costume jewelry. Every time she smiles, her face stretches back in a distortion that resembles the Cheshire cat. I hope that I won’t go as far with my plastic surgery when I am older, as she has. I consider buying some of her jewelry for my grandmother, then decide against it. I get bored quickly and open the Facebook feature on my TV. I scroll through, but it is too early for any interesting updates to have happened.

I climb out of my bed and walk to my bathroom. I stare in the mirror at my nude body. My abs are still defined under my skin, even though I haven’t worked out in almost a week. I make a mental note to start working out again. If I let my body go, I won’t be able to keep up with those younger than me.

I take a piss and I head back to bed and start watching *90210* on Netflix. I have the hots for AnnaLynne McCord and feel frustrated that I don’t live in LA, where I would at least have a chance to meet her. I have convinced myself that if we met, she would love me because I am not like any other man she has met. I know this is wrong, though, because I am like everyone else.

#

After high school, before I left for New York, I took a bus to Whyte Avenue and walked down by Queen Elizabeth Park. My father’s side of the family had annual family reunions in the park. My father’s brother and two sisters would show up with their families. All the parents would cook hot dogs and hamburgers while my cousins and I would run around playing hide-and-seek or tag or even just swing on the swings. Even though I only saw some of my cousins once a year, I had a connection to all of them in this park. When my cousins and I started getting older, some of my cousins didn’t come anymore. They grew into their own families and couldn’t find the time to come. I heard that some were having their own family reunions with their brothers and sisters and didn’t see a need to come to this one anymore. This year, it was just me and my father along with his brothers and sisters. It was obvious that I was left behind, while the rest of my cousins moved forward in their lives. This time, no one else from my family was there, and it was just strangers. I was a stranger now, too.

#

I drive into Laurier, my father’s neighborhood. The trees lining the streets are starting to bloom small, pink flowers and their thick, sweet, floral fragrance will soon fill the streets. His house sits on the edge of a ravine with a yard that slopes down to the creek.

The sun is high, and the air is still cool. I slow my car down to enjoy the feeling and look of spring. I close my eyes while the car still moves forward. I feel a sense of relief that I am not in control and a sense of calm comes over me that I know will disappear when I get to my father’s house. For the last four years, he has been waiting for me to finish university so that I can get a real job, as he describes it. For him, university was a waste of time, and he had the success as a high-school graduate to prove it. I know that he wants me to get a job right away, but he doesn’t know that I don’t want to. He will want to know why.

I pull up beside his red Porsche Carrera 4 that sits in the driveway. His passenger door is open, and I can see a small Holt Renfrew bag on the seat.

He comes out of the house and waves at me. I smile an empty smile and wave back. When I get out, he comes over and hugs me.

“Congratulations, kid,” he says. “You’re the first one in our family to graduate from university.”

I’m not sure if he means it.

He pulls back and holds me at the shoulders.

“Let’s see the watch. Your mother told me you picked up some weird-name watch.”

I lift my arm so that he can see the face of my Jagear LeCoulter. He grabs my arm and pulls the watch up closer so he can look at it. He squints his eyes as he does so, as though he is giving it a thorough inspection.

“That’s nice,” he says, “but it’s no Rolex, is it?”

He holds up his arm to show me his gold Rolex, which is nicknamed “the president” because many US presidents have worn them.

“You should get it engraved or something. You know, personalize it.”

“Our family crest?” I ask, knowing that we don’t have such a thing.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I say.

He walks over to his car and pulls out the Holt Renfrew bags.

“You’re just in time,” he says. “I was just about to put something on the barbecue.”

“I’m not really hungry,” I say. “I was thinking of just lying down.”

“Suit yourself.”

I walk into the house. My father has changed some furniture since I have last been here in an attempt to make his home feel more modern. The updates don’t accomplish what he was going for, and the house looks like a poorly executed mixture of Ikea and Victorian. The large windows open over the river valley and across the river to downtown. I have never asked if he is leaving me the house when he dies, but I hope he does. It will fetch a good price for its location.

I go into my room, which is slightly larger than my room at my mother’s house but is almost identical in its finishing. It has the same bed frame, same bedside tables. The posters on the wall are in the same locations beside the same TV hanging close to the same spot. The lamps are the same, and the Junior Mints box taped to the back off my dresser drawer provides the same spot for me to hide my drugs. The only difference is my toiletries, my clothes that hang in the closet, and the postcard from San Francisco.

My father hated when I decorated my room the same. He wanted me to get something different, something better than what I had at my mother’s house. I told him that I didn’t care that he didn’t like it and that it was my room. He thinks I did it to piss him off. I did it because my room was, is, my only safe spot.

I put on my Sennheiser headphones and switch on my record player. A warm hum fills the headphones. I’m not sure if they sound better than other headphones, but I tell myself they do, and I should feel better for having them. I pull out an old Smiths vinyl album that I found at a used record shop. I used to listen to The Smiths when I started high school because I thought I related to the British music scene from the eighties.

I pull the two pills that Natasha gave me out of my pocket. I can’t remember if she told me to take one or to take both. I know that I don’t want to wake up for a while, so I take both. I lie down and look at my phone. It is just past five o’clock. I don’t remember anything after that.

#

I wake up and look at my phone. It’s blurry, but I can see that it is says three. I’m disappointed that I didn’t sleep through the night. Then it hits me that it is sunny outside. I slept twenty-two hours. My body is slow, like I am drunk. I sit up on my bed and level myself. I should have only taken one of the pills. There are four text messages on my phone. One is from my father, one from Natasha, and two from Chantal. I look at the one from my father. He wants to see me, and he is hoping that he would have had a chance to talk to me the night before. I get out of bed and stare at Tori for a minute. She stares back with empty eyes.

I’m hot in my clothes, and my throat is dry. I peel my sweat-soaked shirt off and drop it on the floor as I head out to the kitchen, where I drink two glasses of water that make my stomach cramp. My head is slow, so I sit down at the table to help me get steady, to provide a sense of balance. I sit there breathing while I can feel my heart beating in my head. When I feel balanced enough, I head back to my room for a shower. My pants are also damp and peel off of my skin. I stand looking in the mirror, swaying side to side. My face is rough and wish I brought my shaving gear because I don’t want anyone to think that I am a hipster.

My shower is uneventful and long since I am still groggy.

I stand in front of the mirror looking at my abs. They aren’t as bad as I thought they were yesterday. I keep my mental note to start doing sit-ups again, but not right now. I walk naked back to my room and let the air dry me off. In my closet are three white, pressed Hugo Boss button-up shirts and two pairs of khaki Calvin Klein semi-casual dress pants. My father must have just had them cleaned because they do not contain the musty smell that clothes that have been sitting in a closet for four months would have. Instead, they smell like clean, pressed cotton.

I slide on the pants and then the button-up shirt, taking care to tuck it in so that the creases in the shirt favor my silhouette. I pull out a cloth belt that I have had since high school and have been unable to get rid of because I think it will always be fashionable and slide it through the loops. When I look in the mirror, I feel like I should be heading out for a picnic. I roll up the sleeves and that makes me feel better about my look.

I head back down to the kitchen, where I open a bottle of San Pellegrino and pour it in a large glass and add a fresh lemon wedge. I pull my phone out to look at my remaining text messages. There are now three from Chantal. The first says that she wants me to come over tonight. The second, sent shortly afterward, says that it is important to her because she wants me to meet her mother’s new boyfriend, who works in government relations and has connections to industry. The third is asking where I am and why haven’t I replied to her yet. The text from Natasha says she wants to go see the highbrow improv comedy group at the Citadel Theatre. I’m not sure which I want to do, so I don’t text either back. I text my father back and he asks if I can meet him at a driving range after work. I text back that I will.

#

I merge onto the freeway aware that my head is still groggy from the pills. Cars weave in and out over the asphalt in an attempt to get further ahead or to avoid the speeding hauling trucks. I am in my new car, and I drive it a little faster than everyone else to feel secure. I like to believe it keeps me in front of trouble.

I change lanes and pull in behind a black Ford F-350 that is almost as wide as the lane it’s driving in. There is a vinyl decal on the back that reads *Your daughter swallows*. From the trailer hitch hangs a pair of metal bull testicles. I think it’s the same kind Oprah received when she came here on her tour. The black truck speeds ahead and a white minivan pulls in front of me with a family of stick figures on the back window—a father, mother, two daughters, and a dog. I wonder if his daughters swallow.

#

I pull through the gate at the Royal Mayfair Golf Club. His Porsche, my dad’s Porsche, is in the parking lot and there is an empty stall beside it. I pull past and go up to the front door. The valet come around in front and opens my door. I get out and hand him my keys.

“I saw an empty stall by a Porsche back there,” I say.

“Yes sir,” he says.

“Charge the valet service to my father’s account,” I say.

“Your father?”

“He owns the Porsche.”

“Yes sir,” he says.

“Take a twenty dollar tip,” I say. “From his account as well.”

He smiles and mumbles something when I walk through the doors into the club. I’m not sure what it is, but I don’t care.

I walk into the lounge and see my father sitting at the bar. It’s early in the day and early in the season and he is one of the only people in the room. He is wearing a thin plaid button-up shirt and tie. His top button is open, and his jacket is folded on the stool beside him. There is a soccer game on the television and he is watching it while talking with the bartender. I don’t think she has slept with him yet because he wouldn’t be talking with her if she had. A Nike golf commercial with Tiger Woods comes on, and my father looks around and sees me.

“You’re here,” he says.

I don’t respond.

He pulls out two twenties and slaps them down on the bar. It’s his tip for her because all his alcohol gets charged to his account to be paid monthly. He turns to the bartender.

“I’ll see you later,” he says.

She smiles back but doesn’t say anything.

He grabs his jacket and walks over to me.

“Order whatever you want. I’ll meet you on the driving range.”

I walk over to the bar. The bartender is still smiling. Up close, I can see that she is, at most, in her mid-twenties. Only a year or two older than I am.

“Vodka tonic,” I say.

She pulls out a bottle of Grey Goose and free pours into a glass, topping it up with tonic water. I drink it all.

“Rough day?” she asks.

“It’s about to be,” I say.

“I don’t think so. Your father’s a sweetheart,” she says.

I laugh.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

She takes a quick look around the clubhouse.

“Come around here—I have something that will help.”

She motions to the end of the bar. I walk around, and she takes me into the back room, which smells like stale, flat beer. She pulls out a small vial.

“Here, be quick, though. If I get caught, I could be fired.”

“You can’t get fired for doing coke. Almost everyone here is doing something.”

I take some coke out of the vial and do a hit.

“No, they wouldn’t fire me for doing coke, just for having you back here. I’m not supposed to be alone with clients. They had a bartender sue four of their members a couple of years ago.”

She took some coke out and did a hit as well.

“The girl said that the four guys came into the back room with her to help her move some cases of rum. She was just closing up and wanted to make sure that all the alcohol was in the right spot for the next day. The four guys, drunk, apparently started teasing her and pinching her ass. She told them to stop, and when they didn’t, she tried to push past them. One of them pushed her down, and her shirt ripped off. Anyway, she says that she was raped by one of them while the other three looked on.”

“Did that really happen?” I ask.

“I don’t know. It was all settled out of court. The club and the four members gave her what she was looking for. I don’t know how much she got in the end, but you never saw anything about it in the papers.”

She does a hit.

“The four guys are still members here.”

I take her vile from her hand.

“Hey,” she says.

“I need it,” I say.

“Don’t we all?”

I snort back some coke. It isn’t very good. It’s what I expect from a bartender in a golf club, though.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Don’t sweat it. Your father is real sweet, you know?”

“It’s because he wants to fuck you.”

She smiles.

“You’re too hard on him. He’s told me about all that he’s done for you.”

My stomach twists when she says this and I make a mental note to call the club manager tomorrow and tell him that his bartender is sleeping with members. If the story she told me about the other girl is true, the manager would waste no time getting rid of her to avoid another lawsuit.

“Have a good time out there,” she says.

I ignore her, and I head outside to the driving range. It is cold, but I don’t care because it feels good against my skin. My father has already hit a couple of balls. I go to the cage, where he placed my bucket of balls, which is the cage in front of him. I think about moving to another stall to avoid the evaluation he is going to perform on my golf swing, but I don’t have the courage to move. I pick up the Ping driver he left for me and feel the soft rubber give way and mold to my grip.

“Remember when we made those clubs for you?” he asks. “A set of custom Pings.”

I don’t respond.

He hits a ball from behind me.

*Whack.*

I place a ball up on the tee and feel him looking at me.

*Whack.*

I pull my club back.

“Correct your stance,” he says. “You know better than that.”

I can’t stop myself from looking down to check the position of my feet. I clench my teeth and wish I had another drink before coming out. I adjust my stance.

“That’s better,” he says.

I pull my club back, trying to be mindful of the arc on my backswing.

“Check your grip,” he says.

I ignore him this time and swing. My club digs in under the ball and knocks it up in the air about forty feet in a large loft. It lands about ten feet in front of us.

“Your grip was too tight,” he says. “I told you to check your grip.”

I line up another ball and hit it again. It curves left, but it goes about one hundred fifty yards.

“The clubs were your idea,” I say. “I’ve never liked golf.”

“I know,” he said. “When I bought them, I thought you might take it up, though. Most of my business is done at this club. I guess I thought you might want to follow in my footsteps.”

He hits another ball.

*Whack.*

“I just don’t get it, Evan. I worked my whole life so you could have a good life and wouldn’t have to struggle, and it’s like you resent it.”

I line up another ball and swing. This one curves to the left, like my last one, but goes further than my last ball.

“People come to this region from all over the world to work hard and make money.”

*Whack.*

“You have a lot of opportunities in front of you.”

*Whack.*

“You should meet some of the people I know who have moved here from out east.”

*Whack.*

“Not only are they grateful to have a job, they work hard to keep it.”

*Whack.*

I grab another ball to put on the tee and notice that someone has dawn a happy face in a blue Sharpie marker on the ball. I position it so that the club will hit the happy face. My father and I hit balls for about five minutes, neither of us saying anything. I hear him stop, so I turn around. He is only halfway through his balls but he is standing up straight, looking at me.

“You’re just—”

I cut him off.

“How’s your girlfriend, Dad?”

He takes a step forward. Something he likes to do when he feels that he needs to make a point. He has done it as long as I can remember.

“I didn’t ask you out here so we could talk about your mother and me. That’s in the past, Evan”

“Why am I here, then?”

“Don’t you care about your life?”

“That’s an obvious answer, isn’t it?”

He lowers his head and draws his club back.

*Whack.*

“I don’t want to work in the oil industry,” I say.

“Then what do you want to do? You wanted to go to Columbia to get a commerce degree because it’s one of the best, and I didn’t question it. You wanted a commerce degree so you could get a job as a junior VP. You used to talk about that all the time.”

“That was high school. Columbia was just a way for me to get out of here.”

He picks up his club and places a ball on the white rubber tee.

“Your mother agrees with me,” he says.

*Whack.*

“Do you have anything else to say?”

*Whack.*

Pause.

*Whack.*

“I have to get going.”

I toss my club beside his cage and start walking back to the parking lot.

“Hey, Evan,” I hear him call.

I turn, and he is standing holding the club by his side. He looks smaller than he normally does.

“I can’t do this anymore,” he says. “I can’t. You hardly called when you were gone. You don’t acknowledge anything your mother or I do for you.”

He takes in a deep breath.

“I don’t know what to do anymore. Do you?”

I know he is looking for a reaction. I don’t give him one.

He continues to hit his golf balls as I walk away.

#

I follow the road behind the golf club that winds up the valley and into downtown. I feel better because I did a hit of my coke, better coke than what the slut bartender had. I am not sure where I am going, I just know that I had to get away from my father. I park my car, put some change in a meter, and start walking down the street, and it feels good to just walk. The smell of fresh-baked pizza wafts over me and my stomach turns, reminding me that I haven’t eaten all day. I go into the small pizza shop that sells pizza by the slice. I order a slice of vegetarian feta because it has less fat on it than the other kinds they sell. I sit at the counter against the front window so I can look at the street. I think this will distract me from the anxiety that I am feeling from my meeting with my father. Across the street is a man in a barbershop getting a shave. The straight razor in the barber’s hand gleams from the shop lights and the barber slowly draws it up the neck of the man sitting in the chair in long, smooth strokes, leaving clean, hairless skin where there was only lathered cream moments before. With each stroke, the barber wipes the blade clean before beginning another. When he is done, he wipes the rest of the cream off the man’s face with a towel. He then sprinkles lotion on his hands and pats it gently into the freshly shaven skin.

The barber looks up and sees me watching. He motions for me to come over to his shop. I finish the last bite of my pizza slice and walk across the road. The freshly shaven man is leaving.

“Make sure you ask for a fresh blade,” he says as we pass each other in the doorway.

“Okay,” I say.

“I saw the curiosity on your face,” the barber says. “This will be good for you. It is a real man’s shave.”

He dusts off the chair and motions for me to sit down.

“You need something meant for real men.”

He walks over to a little metal box. When he opens it, a puff of steam wafts out and up toward the ceiling. He comes back with a steaming white towel in his hand that smells of lemongrass.

“I’m going to lean you back so I can put the towel on your face. The towel is to help soften your stubble.”

He holds my shoulder as he leans me back until I am almost lying flat, then wraps the towel around my face, making sure that my nose peeks out through the towel, allowing me to breathe. It is hotter than I expected but not uncomfortable.

“Nice, eh?” he says.

I can hear him muddling around in his shop, and I nod, not sure if he can see me.

“I’m going to raise you up now so I can get the lather on.”

Once I am upright, he unwraps the towel in a slow, continuous movement.

“Look at that—your skin is ready. See your pores? They are bigger now.”

He hands me a mirror so I can see my pores.

“This brush, this is camel hair. I use it only on my best customers. I think you might be one of my best customers.”

He places the fist-sized brush into some water, then into a metal container, and begins to swirl it around. A thick, white foam, like white icing, begins to work its way up the brush. When he is satisfied that there is enough, he spins me around and applies it to my face in long strokes like a finely trained finishing painter.

“You want an even layer all over your face. If you get good shaving cream, it will moisturize your skin, and that is something you should do here. It’s very dry here.”

When he is finished brushing on the foam, he begins to swirl the bristles over my skin in small circles, as if trying to help my skin absorb the foam. It tingles when he does this.

“Peppermint,” he says. “You can feel the peppermint. You need to take care, though. It smells good, but it tastes like shit.”

He blots my chin lightly twice.

“There,” he says. “You are ready.”

He places the brush in a bowl of water near the sink and reaches over to a jar of Barbicide, where he pulls out a straight razor.

“Can I have a clean blade?” I ask. My voice cracks.

“You have to speak louder,” he says.

“Can I have a clean blade?”

He snorts and smirks.

“This is as clean as it gets. You want a new blade, don’t you?”

I nod.

“That asshole who just left probably told you that. He always asks for a new blade.”

He lets out a laughing cough.

“I’ll let you in on a secret. I hate that guy. That guy is a real prick. The first time he came in here he asks for a new blade. It was time for me to get out a new one anyway, so I do. Then he comes in again and asks for a new blade. I’m thinking to myself, *I can’t use a new blade every time for this prick,* so when he leaves, I grab an empty blade box and write *asshole* on it. See?”

He pulls out a box from the drawer. In blue script, the word *asshole* is written.

“So when he leaves, I take the blade off and put it in that box. When he comes again, I grab the blade from the asshole box and change it right in front of him. He thinks he is getting a new blade every time. I put it back in while your towel was on.”

He lets out a thick laugh.

“I’ve been using the same blade with him for almost two months now. It must burn like a son of a bitch when I am done from being so dull, but he won’t say anything; he is too proud.”

He laughs again, then draws himself up.

“That is between you and me, that story. I want to see how long before he says anything. It might be never. For you, though.”

He waves his finger at me.

“For you, I’ll get you a new blade. Look.”

He pulls out a box from the same drawer that had the asshole box in and slides it open like a matchbox. Inside is what looks like a thin piece of paper.

“You want to watch yourself. This will cut right through you.”

He carefully pulls out the thin piece of white paper and unwraps it. Inside is a fresh blade, gleaming in the light like a mirror.

“Perfect,” he says.

He loosens the screws on a pearl-handled straight razor, then slides in the new blade. When he finishes securing the blade, he steps in close beside me.

“Don’t move,” he says, “or you will need to find a new head.”

He laughs and lowers the blade to my neck.

I feel pressure at the base of my neck. It’s faint, barely there, but I can feel it move up toward my chin, accompanied by a thin, scraping sound. He pulls the blade away from my neck. The icing-white lather is speckled with brown specks of stubble like pepper. He wipes it on the towel.

“There,” he says. “Feel that?”

I bring my hand up under my chin to where he dragged the blade. The skin is perfect and smooth, with no hint of hair having ever been there.

“It’s my father’s razor,” he says.

He draws up another scrap and wipes the blade clean.

“He came over from France in the twenties. He was only a teenager then. It was tough to make it as an immigrant, especially a French immigrant. He tried some labor jobs but wasn’t able to find anything for very long. It wasn’t long before he was living on the street and working odd jobs, saving up his money and then getting in fights to protect that money he was saving. Then, one day, he finds a shopfront that was empty, and he went in and rented the space with his savings. A week later, after he fixed things up, he opened a barbershop.”

He lowers the blade back down for another stroke.

“I think people came because my father was a gentleman; he always treated his customers right. That is something I do, too, except that asshole before you—he is the only one. It didn’t take long before my father had some money and he brought in this gold razor. He said he always would look at it in the catalogue, so he ordered it. I like to think it made him happy.”

I feel the scraping this time and the sound is louder in my ears, like fine-grit sandpaper rubbing against porcelain.

“My mother worked at the Singer sewing factory, and so, my father would bring me to work. I grew up in his shop. When I was able, he taught me to do a shave. I was shaving men before I could shave myself. The customers didn’t trust me at first, but my father charged less if the men would let me shave them. It didn’t take long before they didn’t even notice that a kid was shaving them and my dad started charging full price again. After that, he would cut hair, and I was doing all of the shaving at full price. It was a great time. Not a care in the world. I really loved those days.”

The long scrapes up my neck and across my face continue, each followed by a cleaning of the blade with a single-motion swipe into a crisp, white towel.

“I brought my own son here and taught him how to shave. But when he was twelve, he wanted to do other things. He told me he wanted to make real money, make something out of his life. I told him this was a noble profession. That a real man can find satisfaction by putting himself at the service of another. He told me he could get a shave by some girls in a tight shirt and mini shorts at some new place and that most of the guys he knows go there to get a haircut. I was real mad when he said this. I mean, what does a woman know about shaving? The boys go there to look at their tits.”

He stops and drinks some of his tea.

“So when I get too tired for this, this store will close down. A week after I am gone, it will be a Starbucks or a Subway or some franchise shit like that. The old ways are dying.”

He pulls back.

“There,” he says. “You are done with the shave. Do you like Yves Saint Laurent? That is all I use for aftershave in my shop. French, after all.”

He drags the towel up my neck and around by my ears to wipe off the remaining lather. He pulls out a bottle of L’Homme aftershave lotion and sprinkles some on his hands, then pats my cheeks and upper neck. A fresh, clean scent fills my nostrils, and I make a mental note to buy some.

He walks over to the counter and pulls open his top drawer.

“I want you to have this,” he says.

In his hand is a box about five inches long and three inches wide. A coat of arms in emblazoned on the top of the navy-blue box.

“It’s a straight razor, a real razor,” he says.

He holds it out, and I take it from him.

“Thank you.”

“Now,” he says. “You are a man.”

#

I text Natasha. I’m only three blocks from the theater, and I decide that I want to spend time with her. Natasha texts me back that she will meet me at the theater at seven and not to worry about picking up tickets because she already has them. I pull a joint out of my jacket pocket. It is a few days old and dry, but I smoke it anyway.

I text Chantal and tell her that I am busy and will have to meet her mom’s new boyfriend another time. She doesn’t text back.

#

*Natasha runs down the alley.*

*We’ve been drinking at a party at Todd’s house, and some of us go for a walk to the corner store to get something to eat. Natasha and I walk slowly down the alley. The two others we’re with, Natasha’s friends who I don’t know, are ahead of us.*

*I feel nervous, reaching for Natasha’s hand. She opens her fingers and lets my hand slide into hers. I look over at her and smile. She smiles back. We aren't dating—tonight is about something different for us. We had decided that we would lose our virginity to each other and that tonight was going to be the night. Everyone else in my grade ten class has already lost their virginity and I feel behind. Natasha’s reason is different. She wants to lose her virginity to someone she knows and trusts. She confessed that she had a crush on me and thought I was funny.*

*Natasha and I get close to the corner store and the girl who was ahead of us comes running around the corner. It is easy to see her swollen red eyes and wet cheeks. The guy she is with comes running around the corner right after her.*

*For a moment, I think the girl has stolen something and was bolting. The guy yells for us to help him catch the girl, but it was too late—she was already halfway down the back alley. Natasha lets go of my hand to run after them while I just stand there. The guy yells that the girl has stolen a bottle of water and was going to take a bunch of her mother’s pills. I chase after the three of them, back to Todd’s house. I run through the front door. I can see Natasha’s head through the crowd because of her height, so I follow. The music is thumping, and people don’t seem to notice. It is tough to hear anything besides Eminem telling us that we only have one chance.*

*I make it through the crowd and find Natasha and the guy banging on the bathroom door, yelling for the girl to open it. Somewhere, someone turns down the music. Todd comes over wearing his housecoat with a smoking pipe and asks what the fuck is going on. Natasha is now sobbing and yells that the girl is in the bathroom killing herself. Todd yells, not in his fucking house, then he kicks the door in. Splinters fly, and the door slams against the bathroom wall and now hangs by one hinge. Todd, with the momentum of his kick, falls straight into the bathroom and lands on his stomach, looking up at us. From behind me, I hear someone say that the cops are on their way. The girl stands there with her eyes wide, looking back and forth from us to the broken door, tears still streaming down her cheeks. She yells that she is tired of being bullied by haters and that we are all haters, then swallows a handful of pills. She steps on Todd’s back, pushing him flat to the ground, and runs out of the bathroom, back through the front door, and back out to the street. Todd mumbles how he doesn’t need this shit.*

*I get outside. Halfway up the street the girl is yelling at one police officer while a second one circles around the back of the car to grab the girl from behind. The two officers wrestle the girl to the ground, and Natasha stands beside them, yelling at the police to let the girl go. One of the police has the bottle of pills in his hand up over his head while the girl is biting his leg, yelling for him to drop it. The second officer grabs the girl’s arms and jerks them behind her back. She shrieks in pain and Natasha runs over and jumps on his back. Another police car pulls up, and a crowd has moved from inside Todd’s house to the front lawn to watch. One of the new officers peels Natasha off the back of the policeman she was hanging onto and handily spins her around, then gets her into handcuffs. A moment later, she is in the back of the cruiser. The girl reaches up and grabs the officer she was biting in the crotch. He lets out a yelp. The female police offer who came with the second cruiser runs over and picks the girl up by her collar. There is an awkward moment of calm as the two look at each other. Then the girl spits in the officer’s face. In a blur, the police offer rabbit punches the girl straight on the nose and blood spurts out. The girl buckles at the knees and a moment later is in the back of the cruiser with Natasha.*

*Both look out the window. Natasha crying, the girl bloodied, her eyes sockets already starting to bruise a dark purple. A girl beside me tells me that it is pretty fucked up. I say that it is. She offers me some of the joint she is smoking and tells me her name is Chantal. I tell her that I am Evan.*

#

I light a cigarette and stare into the morning sun through my Ray-Bans. I’m still in my clothes from the night before, my face still smooth from the shave.

The improv act I went to with Natasha was okay, but I was too stoned and would laugh a few minutes behind the jokes. Natasha dropped half a tab of acid and giggled most of the way through. Afterwards, she told me about going to the mountains for a photo shoot and how she was going to stay a couple days after for a yoga retreat. When she finished telling me all about her upcoming trip, she gave me head in her car because she loves the way my cum tastes. I told her it’s because I eat pineapples and that, according to *GQ,* pineapples make cum taste sweeter. I remember having a weak orgasm, then her driving me home, but not much after that.

I finish my cigarette and take off my clothes to have a shower. Just before I do, I text Chantal to tell her that I miss her and apologize for not getting back to her last night.

#

I’m downtown sitting on the patio of Sherlock Holmes, a British-themed pub complete with the overwhelming stench of stale, sour beer and a Union Jack flag hanging from one of the roof beams. I’m waiting for Chantal to show. It’s early afternoon and warm, so I don’t have my jacket on. I promised Chantal that I would make up for ditching her and her family event.

I order a vodka tonic and pull out my phone. Across from me are four guys, all four in white T-shirts with oversized, glittery logos. All four have tribal tattoos and are drinking pints of Guinness. I wonder if they know that they are douche bags. I snap a picture of the four of them and upload it to The Chive, a website that I have been sending photos to for over a year now. A moment later, my phone vibrates. It is a text from River wanting to know where I am at. I text back that I am at Sherlock Holmes. He texts back wanting to know what I am doing. I text back that I am waiting for Chantal and that we are going to go shopping. He doesn’t text back.

One of the douche bags at the table by me stands up.

“This is fucking bullshit,” he yells. “Do you know how much money I make?”

He hops over the small, white, wood picket fence, and a second douche bag goes after him.

My phone vibrates. It’s River again, saying that we should hang out sometime. I text back that we should. He texts back telling me that there is a new club on 118th that he goes to sometimes. He knows the owners, so he always has VIP privileges, and we should go to that club. I text back that it sounds like shit because 118th is a shitty area of town. He texts back that it has changed, and clubs on 118th are cooler than when we were in high school. I wonder how cool it will be compared to the clubs I left behind in New York.

He texts back, *l8r 2day?*

It drives me nuts that River always uses text talk instead of proper English.

I text back that it would depend on Chantal. He doesn’t text back, so I flip over to my Twitter feed to browse my #yeg feed that I started following since getting back. Most of the posts are about food or events happening on the weekend, so I browse my #nsfw feed instead.

The icon for a new text message pops up. I click on it.

*It wud b gud 2 c U. sum wer chill. Lt me nO.* It’s like he is fucking illiterate.

I finish my drink and start a second while scanning over the TMZ Twitter feed on my phone. Chantal doesn’t show, and I wonder if she knows that Natasha gave me head the night before. I text her, but she doesn’t text back.

#

I get a text from Ian telling me that I should head over to his place. I’ve been sitting on the patio for three vodka tonics and decide to walk over to his loft, which is only five blocks away. I cut through Holt Renfrew to look at some Gucci loafers. *GQ* said that loafers are coming back in style for the upcoming season and I want to be sure I have a pair before they become too common. Holt doesn’t have my size, but they take my name and credit card number and order me a pair of the sand-brown color that I like. I slip back out to the street. I am aware that I don’t have enough coke for the night, which is the main reason I am going to Ian’s.

When I get to Ian’s apartment, there are two naked girls, one blonde and one brunette, walking around. Ian is in his boxers.

“Come in.” He motions for me to sit down, and I do.

The blonde sits down beside me and leans in close, her eyes red. She smells lightly of lilacs.

“Go ahead,” Ian says. “She’s clean.”

She puts her hand on my crotch and starts to rub up and down my cock. I grab her wrist and stop her. Ian finishes pouring himself a drink, then comes over and sits on the other side.

“It’s okay,” he says. “The owner of the massage parlor on Jasper, you know, the one we went to the night we graduated. He owes me some cash, and when he does, he sends over a couple of his employees to take care of me for a couple days. He still owes me the money, but it takes care of the interest. It’s a great perk of my job. I texted a couple of people, but you were the only one who could come over.”

He looks over at the girls.

“Ladies, this is my friend Evan.”

The brunette comes over and sits on his lap.

“I’m telling you, these two are the best.”

“Of course we are,” says the blonde.

“We have to be,” the brunette says. “Our tuition is outrageous.”

The blonde smiles and kisses me. Even though I am not interested, I still get hard. She places her hand back on my crotch.

“You’re pretty big,” she says and leans back in to kiss me.

Her tongue pushes into my mouth, and I can faintly taste weed. I push her hand to the side again and stand up. She rolls off the couch to the floor, laughing. The brunette starts giggling with her.

“I’m low on coke,” I say. “Do you have any?”

“Whoa, mind your manners, buddy,” he says. “I invite you over for an afternoon to spend some time with these two ladies, and you act like this? Savanna here is just trying to show you some affection.”

“Savanna?”

“I know. Cliche,” he says.

“Yeah, baby, I’m just trying to show you some affection,” the blonde, Savanna, says.

“I just want to be sure I have enough for the next few days. I’m busy.”

“Fuck, buddy,” he says. “You're on a mission.”

He pushes the brunette off his lap. She falls to the floor and starts kissing Savanna.

“You two wait here. Keep yourselves entertained but don’t interrupt us.”

We go to his room, and he closes the door behind us. There is another blonde, skinnier, sleeping or passed out on his bed. He goes into his closet and comes out with a small envelope.

“I should charge you double for being such a dick to the ladies. If they tell their boss you’re treating them like shit, he may not send them over here again. He’ll likely start sending over his newbies and, trust me, newbies suck. I had one once. She started crying five minutes after I started fucking her and then started talking about her parents.”

“I don’t want Chantal to find out. She’s starting to get really involved in the political scene. She wouldn’t need something like this coming out.”

“Look, buddy, if you’re worried that I’m going to tell her you’re sleeping with escorts, don’t be. It’s between you and me.”

I just nod, and Ian does a line of coke.

“Have you had a chat with River?”

I shake my head and do a hit of coke. It blends nicely with my alcohol buzz.

“He’s not getting meth from me anymore, and I sure as shit know that he didn’t stop using. No one stops using that shit unless they’re dead.”

He hops on the bed beside the sleeping blonde. He drags his hand up and down her back, then slides it down between her legs. She doesn’t move.

“There are a lot of bad meth dealers out there. There are even worse meth addicts.”

I knew what he meant by that. A guy back at Columbia started doing meth. Three months later, he had picked away most of his face and left school shortly after the first-term exams. No one knew what happened to him after that.

Ian slides his hand from in between the sleeping girl’s legs, up her back, and into her hair. She still doesn’t move.

“This one only started a few months ago. She’s not a newbie, but close,” he says. “She’s shy and needed an extra hit. Passed out right after I gave it to her. The poor thing.”

“How bad is River?”

“I don’t know. Barely see him. That’s why I’m asking you.”

Ian looks down at the girl sleeping on the bed.

“I hate when they pass out. Listen, buddy, I won’t tell Chantal. She doesn’t have to know anything and this little lady sure as shit isn’t going to tell anyone. She’d sleep through anything right now. You could probably fuck her for over an hour before she started to come to.”

He slides his fingers back down between her legs.

“She’s a bit dry, but I have some lube.”

“No,” I say.

He just nods and passes me the envelope. I slip him money and head out the door.

#

The sun is setting, and Natasha is lying on the hood of her Mercedes in the park. She is texting someone.

“Why is it so hard to get a hold of a dealer when you need one?”

She tosses her phone up and through the sunroof. It lands on her passenger seat.

“He’s supposed to be good and will even do deliveries.”

“Why don’t you just text Ian? I’m sure he has some pot.”

She doesn't answer me. She lights a cigarette instead.

“I can’t wait to get out of here,” she says.

“To where?” I ask.

She shrugs and leans back down on her car.

“Doesn’t matter.”

I lean against the side of her Mercedes and pull the coke I got from Ian out of my front pocket. I tap the envelope against her leg. When she sees what it is, she smiles.

“Well, aren't you like Santa Claus? Coming in with the right present at the right time.”

We each do some coke, and she lies back down. The coke is good. I can feel my heart pounding. I am glad the sun is going down.

“I used to like it here,” she says. “Remember when everything was just the same? Nothing changed. It was one of the things I liked. Every time I would come back after a shoot, I felt like I was coming home. No new buildings, no new streets, no new asshole drivers. I used to really like this place. Now it just seems like everything is in such a hurry. Everyone has money. Everyone is doing drugs. It used to just be us rich assholes who did drugs, but now it’s the norm, even for kids in junior high. We were at least in high school before we tried coke.”

She goes quiet, looking up at the sky, then rolls her head to look at me. Her eyes are moist.

“I just don’t feel like I’m at home here anymore, and this is my home.”

I don't say anything. Instead, I place my hand on the side of her face, and she begins to cry.

“Do you want to come back to my place?” she asks. “I want to watch *Pretty in Pink*.”

“Yeah,” I say.

#

Carson is hosting a party at Hundred, a club we used to sneak into while in high school. The club is not as cool as it was two years ago. Treasury has opened across the street since and has taken a large chunk of business, but Carson is sentimental. I take Chantal and am glad that she has agreed to go with me. The night is warm, and she is dressed in a silver sequined, backless minidress. Ray-Bans sit perched on her nose.

“I hate how bright the lights are when I’m on mushrooms,” she says.

“I think this will be lame. No one comes here anymore,” I say.

“I know. He wanted to have a party like we used to have.”

We pass the bouncer our tickets and walk in. There are a bunch of people in the club I don’t know, and I wonder who they are. Across the street, there is a long lineup for The Treasury, and I can’t help but feel old. Carson comes up and puts his arm around me. He stinks like beer and pot. I know he is trying to dress like a rocker, but tonight, he looks like a junkie.

“Everything living up to what you thought it would be?” he asks.

I nod.

“We just got here, but I’m sure it’s fun.”

“Yeah,” he replies. “It’s fun. Like old times.”

“Except we’re older now and don’t have to sneak in with fake ID.”

“You’re an asshole sometimes,” he says.

“You’re right, I am an asshole sometimes.”

“That’s okay,” he says. “I still love you anyway.”

He looks over at Chantal.

“You look like a fucking stunner,” he says.

“Thanks,” Chantal says.

She pushes her Ray-Bans up to cover her eyes.

Carson pulls me off to the side and is breathing heavy, thick beer breath in my face. I step back, nauseous from the smell.

“I need a drink,” I say, hoping that he will leave.

He lifts up his arm and motions for a server. A tight, short blonde, about five feet, comes over and takes our order.

“I’ve been hanging out here a lot since getting back,” he says. “We had sex last night, her and I. She’s acting weird today.”

I see Chantal standing, talking with two girls across the room. The tight blonde server comes back with our drinks. She is cold and shoots Carson a glare. I grab my drink off her tray.

“I’ll catch up with you later,” I say.

“We should catch up,” he says. “It’s been a crazy couple weeks.”

I nod and sip my vodka tonic, then walk over to Chantal. The soft lights shine down the back of her dress, and I can see the top curve of her ass. They are talking about dresses that were worn at the Video Music Awards and when they expect that they will come on sale. I didn’t see the Video Music Awards, but they are talking about a red dress that had a cut up the side of the hip. I take another sip of my drink as I slide my hand inside the back of Chantal’s dress just above her ass. She looks over at me and smiles.

“Hey,” she says. “You’re back.”

I smile.

“This is Jenny and Jen,” says Chantal. One has red hair that looked brown from across the room. She is wearing a see-through silk blouse with a black bra and a gray tweed miniskirt. I wonder about her pubic hair and wish that one of the escorts at Ian’s was a redhead. I might have stayed. The brunette is dressed in a hot-pink minidress. You can see the tape on the top of her thigh that she is using to hold her dress down.

“Can I call you both Jen?”

They both smirk at the same time.

“No,” they both say, again, at the same time.

“I’m Jenny,” says the redhead. She holds out her hand, and I shake it.

“And I’m Jen,” says the brunette. She doesn’t offer to shake hands.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” says Jenny.

“Yeah? What’s that?”

They both give a feigned smile. I feel like I’m missing a piece of the conversation and wonder if this is what it is like to be married. Chantal reaches over and touches my thigh.

“I’ve only told them the truth, Evan,” she says and smiles.

I drink back the rest of my vodka tonic and look around for a server. I can see Carson chatting up the tight blonde. She has progressed from looking cold to looking angry. He sees me looking over and waves his friendly drunk wave. I hold my drink up and shake my glass to show that it is empty. He slaps the tight blonde on the ass and points in my direction. She looks pissed but starts coming toward me.

“Your friend is a real dick,” she says.

“You picked him,” I say. “Just bring me two more vodka tonics, both doubles.”

She does a quick turn and walks toward the bar.

Chantal, Jen, and Jenny stand talking for what feels like an hour to me, even though it is probably only ten minutes. The conversation moves from the Video Music Awards dresses to the latest Kardashian news to the upcoming election. The angry tight blonde finally comes back, and I take both of my drinks and finish them fast. Chantal is now talking about a trip to Europe. I’m not sure if she is talking about a trip she went on or a trip she wants to go on. Jen, or Jenny, whichever the redhead is, starts talking about Spain. She has never been there but has always wanted to make love on a beach in Spain. The other Jen says that Spanish guys are pigs and that she liked the guys in Italy and that Italy had better shopping because Armani is one of her favorite designers. My stomach does a couple quick flips, and my mouth starts to taste metallic. I can feel vodka coming up the back of my throat. I excuse myself and head towards the bathroom. I walk through the door, and the accumulated smell of warm urine causes me to gag. In front of me, a crowd of guys waiting in line. I push past them to the sink, turn on the water, and lean over. Spasms shoot through my body, causing vodka-flavored vomit to shoot through my mouth and nostrils. I spasm again and heave; more comes up. A couple guys behind me have started to cheer me on. I hear another guy calling me an asshole for puking in the sink. The vomit washes down the drain with the water. I pull up with a deep breath and steady myself against the wall.

“I’ve never seen that much fluid come out of a guy this early in the night,” I hear.

“Yeah,” I say, not sure who I am saying it to. “I’m just getting started.”

I hear him laugh.

“Sounds like we have a tough guy here.”

I push back through the crowd and back into the bar. Chantal sees me, points to her wrist, and then toward the door.

#

Chantal and I stand outside the club. The evening has cooled off, and Chantal’s nipples are hard beneath her dress.

“Let’s go to the Delta,” she says. “I want to spent tonight in a hotel.”

I don’t say anything. I just grab her hand, and we walk the two blocks to the hotel. When we get to the front counter, Chantal pulls out her credit card. I pick up a postcard. In block white letters, it says *Welcome to Edmonton* in the bottom corner over a picture of West Edmonton Mall, the city’s largest tourist attraction.

“I want a deluxe room,” she says. “Change the sheets to silk sheets.”

The bellboy nods his head.

“Yes ma’am.”

He picks up a walkie-talkie and walks into the back room behind the counter.

Chantal turns and kisses me. She rubs my cock at the same time, and I start to get hard.

“I love fucking on mushrooms,” she says.

The bellboy returns.

“Your room is on the eighth floor,” he says. “Eight twenty-five. The room will be ready for you by the time you get up there.”

“Thank you,” she replies.

We walk around the corner and stand in the dim yellow lights waiting for an elevator. The smell of leather and fresh-oiled wood are strong.

Finally, there is a ding and the doors open.

When we get inside, Chantal grabs my hand.

“Rub my pussy,” she says.

She holds onto my wrist and pulls my hand up the front of her miniskirt. Her panties are thin, and they are moist.

I pull her in and kiss her, our tongues lightly touching. I use one of my fingers to slide her panties to the side and slide a finger inside her. She moans and pushes her hips down, so my finger goes deeper inside her.

The doors to the elevator open and we hurry down the hall. She fumbles with the card but manages to scan it through the reader and the door clicks open. We get inside, and the curtains are open, looking down into the shopping mall that lies below. I go over and look out the window. People below us are filing out of the late-night showing of some movie. Chantal leans against the window and looks down.

“I bet they can’t see us,” she says.

She looks over at me, curves her back, and pulls up her dress. Her panties are nude-colored lace, still pushed to the side. She twists her ass toward me.

“What are you waiting for?”

I walk up behind her and slide my hands down her hips. I don’t bother to take my pants off. I pull my zipper down and pull my cock out. It slides inside her slowly, and she pushes back against me in a grinding motion, so I am deep inside her.

“I love you,” she whispers.

I watch the people still coming out of the movie theater while we fuck. Two people look up in our direction. I don’t think that they can see us. I don’t care if they can.

#

I wake up in the middle of the night. Chantal is lying against me with her arm around my chest. I lift it off of me and fall back asleep.

#

*I pick up Chantal in a taxi at her house. We are going to a party at Ian’s. He has moved into a small apartment downtown and is having some people over. His drug dealing has been going well, and he decided that he would be in a better position to increase his sales if he moved out of his parents’. He was right—when his parents found out, they tried to get him to stop and even called the cops. When the cops arrived, there was nothing they could do because he was under eighteen. The next week, he moved out, and why wouldn’t he if business was good?*

*Chantal and I are bringing an unopened bottle of raspberry-flavored Grey Goose from her parents’ liquor cabinet. It will be the first time we will be drunk together. It is the night I plan to ask her to be my girlfriend.*

*The party is full. Some people I know from school; the rest I assume are Ian’s connections. Ian is working the room like a politician, making sure he is mingling with all the right people. I am surprised at how many people he knows, and how many are doing drugs so openly, and the variety of drugs they are doing. I knew Ian sold pot because that was what he kept trying to sell me, but I didn’t know until now that he was selling coke and ecstasy.*

*Over in the corner is Natasha. She is beautiful. We haven’t talked much since she started modeling. That is how it is with her. Sometimes here, sometimes gone doing a shoot. I tell Chantal I am going over to say hi. Chantal says okay and tells me not to be gone long while waving the bottle of Grey Goose beside her. I tell her that I won’t be and go over to Natasha to say hi. She says hi back and asks me why I’m the only guy that will ever talk to her. I tell her it is because she is a model and that she is too good looking for these guys She asks me why I’m not intimidated, then. I tell her it’s because I knew her when she was an awkward tomboy and used to walk into things, like door frames. She laughs at this, then tells me she has just signed a modeling contract with an agency in LA and that she is going to be working more often now. We stand quiet for a moment, then she says that she is sorry she ruined the night we were supposed to sleep together. I tell her that it is okay. She tells me that she is still willing to sleep with me if I want to. I smile but don’t say anything.*

*I look over and see that Chantal is talking to a guy in his twenties with dark-blond hair and True Religion jeans, the kind with thick white stitching. He is overweight and unshaven, I think early twenties. He says something that makes her laugh. Natasha asks me if Chantal and I are anything serious and I say that I don’t know, even though I want to say that we are. The dark-blond-hair guy pulls out a small bag of white powder, and I see Chantal shake her head. I want to go over, but I don’t. Chantal looks over at me for a moment, her smile disappears, and she looks down. It’s something she does when she’s embarrassed. The guy laughs harder, and I feel like I’m not funny enough. I go over because I want to get her away from him. I get there and he says hi, pauses, then, kid. He asks how old I am, and I tell him that I am fifteen. He laughs again and tells me that Chantal is sixteen. I tell him that I know. He looks over at her and asks if she likes going out with boys or is she looking to go out with a man. He says that booze is a kid’s way to have fun and that she should try coke. I look over at Chantal, and she asks if I want to. I shake my head, and she tells me that she wants to, that she heard coke was good, and that she has friends who do it. I remind her that we have raspberry vodka to drink and that she shouldn’t do coke. She tells me that booze is for kids and that she is the only one who hasn’t tried coke yet in her group of friends. He laughs and says that if she wants to do it, then she just has to do it. Then he looks over and asks her why she needs permission from this little boy, meaning me. I twist inside and feel helpless as I watch him and Chantal step back into the corner. I look back at Natasha, hoping that she is coming over and can help. Her eyes are closed, and she is bouncing up and down awkwardly to the music. I look back, and the dark-blond-haired guy is kissing Chantal. She pulls back and says something that I don’t hear. He puts his fingertip into a small paper envelope and then under Chantal’s nose. She puts one finger against her nostril and snorts the white powder up her other nostril. I grab the Grey Goose and leave.*

*I’m about ten minutes away, a quarter of the bottle Grey Goose is gone, and I don’t feel well. Chantal texts me wondering where I have gone, saying that she is looking for me. I text back that I left and that she can hang out with the blond douche if she needs company. She texts back that he made her kiss him for the coke. I don’t text anything back.*

#

Chantal is still sleeping, her minidress crumpled on the floor by the window. I think about leaving a note thanking her for the night. I don’t. Instead, I put my clothes on, taking care to be as quiet as I can. When I am done, I slip out the door. In the hall, there is a cleaning crew preparing to clean up the remnants from the day before and I think how great it would be if a cleaning crew could follow me around cleaning up my life from the day before.

I reach back into the room and grab the placard that says *Shhhh* and has a black and white hand-drawn picture of a finger in front of lips. I place it on the door handle so that Chantal won’t be disturbed for a while.

I get outside and am surprised at how cool the air feels, and I wish I had brought my Burberry scarf. On the corner just outside ‘Lazia, the Italian restaurant, is an old man in a torn jean jacket and wool gloves. His face is unshaven, and I can smell him from where I am standing, about ten feet away. His beard makes him look like a homeless Santa.

He lifts his head toward me.

“If you stand there any longer,” he says, “I’m going to have to charge you for loitering. You better keep moving.”

“Moving is my specialty,” I say.

“You have any money for me?” he asks.

I touch the coins in my pocket.

“Why’s that?” I ask.

“I’m down on my luck, mister. I just need a hand getting back on my feet.”

I pull out a quarter and throw it at him. It bounces off his leg, and he doesn’t see where it goes. He gets up on his knees and starts looking around for it.

“Why don’t you have a job?” I ask. “Don’t you know where you are?”

He looks down. I wish I hadn’t said that because I sound like my father.

“I had a job,” he said. “Didn’t like it. This is better.”

“You don’t like your job? Who does?”

My phone vibrates and it is a text from Chantal. She tells me that she woke up to pee and that she was sad that I wasn’t there. I text back that I forgot that my mother wanted me to do some things today. She doesn’t respond. I look back at the guy who looks like an old Santa. His eyes are soft.

“Whatever,” I say and give him the rest of my change.

#

The cab ride costs more than I anticipated and I have to use my credit card because I don’t have enough cash.

“Thanks,” I say and walk away, up to my mother’s house, after the payment goes through.

I open the front door and step carefully past my mother’s room and up to my room. My bed is made with fresh sheets. The dirty clothes I left on the floor are now clean and folded on the foot of my bed. Tori stares down at me, smiling. I undress and crawl into bed, where I fall asleep.

#

Carson texts me in the early afternoon. He tells me that his party was great and that it was too bad I left. He thinks the blonde would have been up for a threesome, a roaster, as he calls it—one guy on each end, so she looks like a pig getting roasted on a stick. I don’t text back. He texts me back that she might be up for it again if I am interested later on. I don’t text back. I know that if I am going to get my life in order, then I need to start playing it cool and lay off other women. I’m not sure where we will end up, but Chantal started telling me a year ago that we were going to be one of the city’s power couples. Me in industry, and her in politics. We would be the envy of most other couples, she said.

Carson texts again and asks if Chantal and I spent the night together. I text back that we did. He doesn’t text back. I text Carson that maybe we will end up being a serious thing, a power couple.

I feel bad that I left and text Chantal that I miss her. Chantal texts back that if I miss her, then I should stop leaving.

I flip on my TV and start watching *Dexter*. It’s a rerun, and the actor who plays Dexter is talking to Julia Stiles. She is crying. I watch even though I have seen it before because I have always had a crush on Julia Stiles since *10 Things I Hate About You*. I wonder if she knew that Heath Ledger was going to kill himself one day when they filmed together. Then I wonder which leading actor she liked working with the most and which ones she has slept with. I hold her in high regard, so I don’t think that she slept with many of her costars, if any at all. She is different than other celebrities, who purposely show their pussies when they get out of cars, or make porn movies with douche-bag boyfriends, only to act shocked and surprised when the movie gets leaked on TMZ. She is classy, not like the reality stars that flood our TVs today. I wonder how long it will take for the reality-TV-show fad to disappear and if it ever will. I hope it does, because supporting good plot has been sacrificed for making dumb fucks and rich bitches famous, and we are all taking part, including me.

I get bored of watching *Dexter* and click the smart TV button that brings up the apps on my TV. I click the Facebook app and look at the stream of activities from my friends. It used to be friends would just post vacation pictures or drunk pictures. Now they share so much shit and so many philosophical sayings that it becomes hard to creep on anyone the way I used to. I scan down until I see a friend from New York who has attended a destination wedding in Mexico. They have at least a hundred photos, and I lie on my bed and click through them with my remote. I wish I had gone to Mexico, or anywhere, for that matter. Another friend has pictures of hiking in the Appalachian Mountains. He is with a small group of people, and they are smiling in each picture. I flip back to Mexico and find a picture that has a girl in it who I think is cute. She has been tagged in the picture, so I click on her name, and it takes me to her page. She doesn’t have her security setting on, so I look through her pictures. She must have over a thousand photos from the past few years. It looks like she uploads a photo from every event in her life. I work back from her most recent photos, the ones from Mexico. They show a girl who is fun loving and carefree. There are three photos of her attempting a cartwheel in a bikini, twelve of her parasailing, seven of her zip-lining, twenty-four of the wedding, three of her meeting her friends, two of her on the plane, three of the plane’s wing and backdrop view, one of her boarding pass, two of the taxi, one dropping her off, one picking her up, one of her packed luggage, one of her full closet, then it moves into pictures of her new puppy.

#

The sun is creating an orange glow on the horizon as it sets, like a massive fire. My parents sit across from me at the restaurant they brought me to for my high-school graduation. When we came, I mentioned that I liked it, that I thought the rack of lamb was good. I now regret saying that because they always want to bring me back here even though I think it is stale and dated on the inside. I order the rack of lamb.

“Let me see your watch again,” my father says. “I didn’t get a good look at it the other day.”

I take my watch off and hand it to him. He holds it up in the light and twists it around in front of his face, examining it from every angle.

“It was originally designed for polo players in India,” I say. “It’s designed to flip over, so it won’t get damaged.”

“What do you mean it flips over?” he asks.

I take it back from him and unclasp the watch, flipping it over. A thin glass back protects the precious gems that create a constellation.

“They normally have smooth metal backs,” I say.

He nods.

“I see,” he says. “I still think you should have gotten a Rolex. A gold Daytona or something. Gold is coming back into style, you know.”

He smiles and looks over at my mother.

“I like this one,” I say.

“Yeah, for how long?” he asks.

“Don’t be like that,” my mother says. “He likes the watch.”

“Don’t be like what? I can ask my son a question.”

My mother looks down.

“Can’t I ask him a question?”

“I’ll like it as long as I like it,” I say.

He snorts a laugh and leans back.

“Your father is just tense. He, we, are wondering what you’re going to do now that you’re home. You haven’t looked for jobs, and you haven’t spent much time with either of us.”

The server brings our food.

“Vodka tonic,” I say.

Neither my mother nor my father ever cared what I really did. In high school, neither came home very much because they were trying so hard to avoid each other. When the divorce finally went through, it could be up to a month sometimes before I heard from either of them. I thought about telling them how I really felt about the entire thing and how it hurt me to watch them pull our family apart and how I don’t want to be here. I want to tell them how I belong somewhere else, but I can’t. I never do, and I don’t know where I want to go anyway.

I cut a small piece of lamb and start to chew in a slow, deliberate manner.

“That’s it?” my father asks. “You can’t say anything except that you want a vodka tonic?”

My mother leans forward and puts her hand on my father’s forearm.

“Don’t be like that. He just got back, and it’s a big transition moving home.”

I always appreciated my mother’s ability to make excuses on my behalf.

I cut off another piece of lamb, drag it through the sauce, and chew it slowly. My mother takes a gulp of her red wine. I know she wants me to stay at home, but she doesn’t want me to resent her, so she is always careful when we talk about my future. She told me once when she had been drinking that she felt guilty for the divorce. A heavy responsibility, she said, like it was her fault that my father was sleeping with other women. If I had only been the woman your father wanted, she told me. I asked why she wasn’t and it made her cry.

“I’m lining up a job for you,” my father says. “I have a friend who owns a construction company. He’s going to be looking for someone to come in and work on some strategy documents for them. It’s a good job—they’re in the front running to construct the new arena. That’s a half-billion-dollar deal. That’s a company you want to work with.”

“I don’t know why he can’t come and work with you. Your company is big enough. It would only make sense for him to take over from you one day.”

He leans back in his chair and downs half his glass of bourbon and looks over at me.

“You know as well as I do that he won’t work for me.”

My mother looks down.

“Should be right up your alley,” he says. “This construction company.”

“I can help, too,” my mom says. “I have a lot of contacts from the hospital. All of them are big companies that donate a lot of money to us. Surely there will be one that you want to work for.”

My mother places her hand on my hand and lets out a sigh.

“We just want to help get you off to a good start,” she says.

I put my knife down and scoop up some garlic mashed potatoes.

“Is that okay?” she asks.

She picks up her utensils and cuts into her rare steak. The truth is, I don’t know what is wrong with it. I just know that I don’t want it.

“We’re in one of the richest areas in the world. I know eighteen-year-old kids who are making over a hundred and forty thousand a year for sitting in a truck all day watching wells,” my father says. “You need a job now so you can make money now. The economy won’t always be good.”

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I say.

“What?” my father says.

“I’m going to the bathroom.”

I stand up, unable to make eye contact with either of my parents.

“Sure,” says my father. “Take your time.”

My mother shoots him a glare.

“That doesn’t help,” she says.

“We spoiled him, and you can’t see that,” he says back.

“You can’t resent him for having a better life than you do. You wanted him to have a better life than you.”

“It can’t be our fault,” my father says. “His attitude can’t be our fault.”

Their voices fade and become inaudible when I push my way through the bathroom door. There is an old man at the lone urinal, so I go into a stall and sit down. My hands are cool and clammy. I rub them together to warm them. After I hear the old man leave, I reach into my pocket for my vial of coke. My fingers search through each pocket, when I remember that I left it in my car. I don’t want to go back out to the table yet, so I sit there, rubbing my hands together.

#

When I get back to the table, it is quiet. My parents’ plates are gone, and my half-eaten meal still occupies my place at the table in front of me. We sit for a while, no one saying anything. I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket, and I wonder who texted me, but I don’t check. I pick away at my lamb. My mother puts her hand on my shoulder.

“It’s okay, honey. We can talk about this another time.”

Another drink arrives, and my father swallows back half in one gulp.

“Whatever makes you happy,” he says with a strong emphasis on the *you.*

I lean back and put my tablecloth over my food. I look at them both and nod. My mother smiles. My father snorts.

A moment later, my plate is taken away.

My father gets up and goes to the bar. He exchanges some words with the bartender, then hands him some money. He grabs his jacket off the back of his chair as he walks by.

“Let’s go,” he says.

For the first time I can recall, he sounds disappointed.

We get outside, and I check my phone. There is a text from Chantal. She wants to meet up, and I need a reason to leave.

“Thanks for dinner,” I say. “I have to go. I’m meeting Chantal.”

“Is she still seeing you?” my father asks.

“Yeah.”

“She was in the paper last week. Part of a committee that’s organizing the premier’s upcoming fundraiser. You better pull up your socks if you want to keep a girl like her.”

I just walk away.

“Christ,” I can hear my mother say.

“Evan,” she calls out.

I just keep walking.

#

I text Chantal back, asking where she wants to meet. She texts back that she is still in the same hotel room as last night. Before I can text anything back, she Snapchats me a picture of her ass that she has taken in the mirror.

It doesn’t take me long to get there. It is only four blocks from the restaurant, so I walk. I get to the room and knock. She opens the door wearing a light-cream camisole and no panties. The room if full of candles and I can smell that she is wearing Chanel Number Five. Neither of us says anything. She just pulls me in through the door and we start kissing.

#

I wake up in the middle of the night. Chantal is lying against me with her arm around my chest. I brush a strand of hair off her forehead and back behind her ear. Her face is soft. Her mouth is open just a bit, and her breathing is long and slow. I lie my head back down on the pillow and fall asleep.

#

*We are standing in the back alley behind Ian’s, and Chantal is crying. I’m high from some pot that I got from Ian. It’s been three weeks since she kissed the guy at the party for a hit of coke. She is telling me that she wasn’t thinking and that it was only a kiss, that she didn’t mean to hurt me. Rumors went around that she slept with him in the bathroom, and I don’t know what to believe, so I ask her about it. She tells me it didn’t happen and that she didn’t sleep with him, that it was just stupid rumors. I want to believe her, but I don’t. I writhe inside and don’t know how to handle my feelings. Chantal hurt me bad, and I just want to get back at her. I want to hit her and make her hurt. I know that I can’t, so I just stand there. The tears continue to stream down her cheeks, and I feel more and more angry with each one. It is like she is trying to make me feel bad for something that isn’t my fault.*

#

I wake up. The room is empty. The smell of Chanel Number Five lingers in the air. I find myself surprised that I feel sad that I am waking up alone and wonder if that is what she felt yesterday when she woke up and I wasn’t there. I have an urge to text Natasha and tell her what happened with my parents, but I don’t. Instead, I lie there staring through the window, out into the mall. My phone vibrates and it’s Chantal. She wants to know if I would like a croissant. I text back that I do. She doesn’t reply, but five minutes later, I hear the beep of the card lock and the hotel-room door swings open. She is wearing her camisole from the night before with a cropped jean jacket over the top, a pastel-pink miniskirt, and a big smile.

“Hey,” she says. “Take this.”

She hands a large paper bag to me and places a tray holding two coffee cups down on the bedside table.

“It’s still cool in the mornings,” she says.

She slips off the jean jacket and slides the miniskirt off, then sits on the bed cross-legged. She is naked except for her camisole.

“I grabbed the croissants and fresh fruit from the market and some cappuccinos from that little Italian place beside it. You know the one?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I know the one.”

She smiles at me again, then reaches down into her purse and pulls out a pill bottle. She opens it and drops a small pink pill into her hand, then swallows it.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Celexa,” she says. “I started having panic attacks a few weeks ago. It helps.”

We sit quietly, eating our food and sipping our cappuccinos. I want to say something to fill the space, but I am not sure what to say. The silence doesn’t feel awkward, though, so I decide that it is okay if I don’t say anything. She leans back against the headboard, her legs still crossed. She looks beautiful. Her hair is tussled and messy, and the camisole drapes over her like poured cream. We stare at each other for a moment.

“Are you going to come to the fundraiser I’m helping out with?” she asks. “There are going to be a lot of people. Maybe you’ll meet some contacts. Not that you need to. Your dad is plenty connected.”

“When is it?”

“In a couple of days. I was going to ask you earlier, but I wasn’t sure if you would want to go. Ian’s going.”

“Ian?”

“Yeah, can you believe he’s a card-carrying member of the party? I would have never imagined.”

“Me neither,” I say.

“I know it isn’t your thing, but it’ll be fun. It’s important as well. This election is going to be close, and we need as much support as we can get.”

I don’t want to go, but I know that it is important to her and that we are supposed to be a couple.

“Yeah,” I say. “Black tie?”

“Tuxedos only. At least the main sponsors wear tuxedos. The politicians always wear suits. It makes them look more humble and accessible.”

“I’ll go,” I say.

We sit silent again, finishing up the rest of our food. When she is done, she reaches over and runs her fingers through my hair.

“I love you,” she says in a soft voice. “I wish you knew that.”

“I know you do,” I say.

I look down. I want to love her back. I should love her back.

#

*We go back to Chantal’s house. Her eyes are still red from crying. Chantal tells me that she loves me and that she wants to prove it. I tell her that she better. We are quiet when we walk through her house. There are no lights on, and she says her parents should be sleeping by now. When we get to her room, she turns on the lamp by her bed. She looks down at the floor and tells me that we are supposed to be together, that she can feel it. We start kissing awkwardly, like only teenagers can. Everything about the moment is foreign to me. She pushes me back and pulls her T-shirt up over her head. She is wearing a pink Victoria’s Secret bra with white sequin polka dots. I stare at the top of her breasts. She grabs the bottom of my shirt and pulls it up over my head. I sit looking into her eyes, wishing I hadn’t smoked so much pot, because then I might know what to do. She reaches her hands behind her and unsnaps her bra. It slides off, exposing her breasts to me. Her nipples are light brown and soft. She moves closer to me and kisses me again. The feeling of her warm skin and breasts against my skin excites me, and I get an erection. I reach down, undo my pants, and slide them off. She pulls me down into the bed on top of her. She tells me again that she loves me. I can feel her raise her hips, then she pulls me inside of her. She lets out a gasp. I feel a rush of sensations through my body as she moves her hips up and down. It doesn’t take long until I feel my body begin to tense. I tell her I am going to come, and she tells me to pull out because she’s not on the pill. I do and my cum shoots up onto her stomach. We lie silently holding each other. The sex was good, but I feel empty. Only two weeks before, I felt like I loved her, and after this, I feel empty. She grabs my hand and places it on the side of her face. I look over and see that there is a tear running down her cheek. She says that we should do it again, that it will make us closer. We do it three times that night before I thank her and leave without kissing her.*

#

I wake up at 3:34 in the afternoon. I watch my phone turn from 3:34 to 3:35 to 3:36 before moving to get out of bed. I can hear my mother singing downstairs and wish that she were out. There are texts from Chantal and River on my phone. Chantal says that she loved the other night and that we should do it more often. River wants to know what I am going to do later tonight. I don’t reply to either and take a shower instead.

I turn the water on hot and let it run over my head and down my body. I take time to cleanse my body with Dermalogica body wash, a brand I like because its smell is based on eucalyptus and lemongrass and it reminds me of a spa. I breathe it in deep. My head clears a little, and I draw a face in the steam on the shower door. The water collects at my fingertip, and the right eye starts to cry when I push my finger against the glass.

When I get out of the shower, I wrap a towel around my waist and go stand on my balcony. The air is cool, and I can feel my skin tighten. The blood starts to pump, and I am feeling even more awake. I decide to text Chantal back, but when I open her text message and see the conversation history, I can see that I was the one who started the conversation and told her first that I loved the other night, and that she wasn’t waiting for a reply. Het text was the reply. I open River’s text message and tell him that we should go out tonight. That we haven’t seen each other in a while, and it would be good to catch up. He texts back that it is a good idea and that we should meet at the club on 118th. I text back that I’m not sure I want to go there. He says that we have to go because he wants to show me something.

I turn my phone to silence, take my towel off, and go hop into bed.

#

I am standing on 118th just before midnight. I know that I am early, but I am not worried because I want to scope the place out and have a drink first. I am wearing a charcoal Hugo Boss jacket, a white Lacoste polo with Armani jeans, and charcoal desert boots. I look great and feel even better. I realize that I am the only one who is dressed up like this and I don’t care. Most of the people milling around are dressed in hoodies and baggy jeans. Some have horn-rim glasses as the starting point in an attempt to look nerdy. However, none look nerdy.

I head inside and see that the clientele is a reflection of the people milling around outside. Horn-rimmed glasses and baggy jeans on the guys. Skinny jeans or jeggings or leggings or tights or whatever the women can fit into that highlights their asses. The shirts vary slightly in style, but all are quite fitted. There is one oddball group of three girls at a corner table. They are dressed in mostly black and gray clothes and are paler than the rest of the crowd. Their eyes are heavily lined, giving them the appearance of raccoons. They all have horn-rimmed glasses on as well. One of them is Zina from Deanna’s party. She sees me and gives me the finger and mouths what looks like the word *asshole.* I don’t acknowledge that I have seen her, and I go and sit at the bar. I order a vodka tonic and sip it when Zina slides up onto the stool beside me.

“It was a real asshole thing, what you did, you know,” she says.

I turn on my stool to face her. Our knees touch.

“It wasn’t you,” I say.

“Oh, yeah? What was it, then?”

“I don’t know.”

I finish my drink.

“Can I get another?” I ask the bartender.

My drink comes quickly.

“This isn’t your kind of crowd,” she says. “What’s a dick like you doing here?”

I look around the room.

“Opposed to a douche bag?”

She smiles.

“I’m waiting for a friend,” I say.

“I see.”

“Look,” I say. “I got freaked out. I’m supposed to be in a relationship with someone. A serious relationship. I shouldn’t have left with you.”

“Was she there that night?”

“Yeah.”

“You *are* an asshole.”

“It was a mistake?” I say.

“I doubt it,” she says.

Zina raises her arm and flags the bartender down. He sees her and comes over.

“Palm Bay cooler,” she says.

I laugh.

“Palm Bay cooler?”

“What about it?”

“It seems very pedestrian for you.”

“Whatever,” she says. “They taste good.”

The bartender nods and grabs a Palm Bay from the fridge below the counter, popping the tab before handing it to her. She slides a five-dollar bill across the bar.

“I just never made anyone feel like shit with my mistakes,” she says.

“That you know of,” I say.

She takes a drink of her cooler.

“You missed out,” she says.

“I could tell,” I say.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You pierced your pussy,” I say. “That’s not for the faint of heart.”

“It has benefits. When I’m stressed at work, I rub my legs together and it makes me come. I love doing it at work, and that is more than you need to know.”

She hops off the stool.

“See you around, dick.”

I don’t say anything back. She just turns away and goes back to the table with her friends, who are now laughing.

I sit at the bar, flipping through my phone.

#

It’s just before two in the morning. River texted me just after eleven and asked if I could wait. I had nothing else to do, and I didn’t want to go home, so I said that I would. I drink slowly and catch up on Facebook. I am able to find Zina. Her settings are only moderately secure. I’m not able to see full albums, but I am able to see images she is tagged in. There are some from what looks like Hawaii. She is wearing a dark-gray bikini and a floppy light-gray straw hat. Her skin is creamy pale but becomes darker over the next few photos. There is a picture of her in Chicago in front of a piece of public art that looks like a giant, shiny jelly bean. Some of her info is available, and I am surprised to see that she has a degree in education and teaches a grade-five class.

Most of the people in the club are starting to leave and are slowly being replaced by a new group of kids with cheap plastic Kanye West sunglasses and glow-stick bracelets. The music is also changing from pop-hip and gangster rap to electronic. My phone vibrates and it’s a selfie picture of Chantal with a big smile, along with the words *good night.* I text back a happy face.

The lights dim and the place is darker than it was before, so the people fade to silhouettes and the glow bracelets and glow sticks stand out. The bass feels as though it has been turned up. The dance floor is a sea of disembodied glow sticks bouncing around to the rhythm.

River walks in wearing sunglasses, Tom Ford, and sits down next to me while picking at a scab on his cheek. He says something and smiles. I didn’t hear what he says, so he leans in close to my ear.

“Let’s go to the back room,” he shouts. “Follow me!”

We walk the length of the bar, where River leans into the bartender and says something. She nods, hands him a beer, and we go behind the bar and through the back door. There is a girl doing coke in the hallway. She stops and looks at River.

“Hey,” she says.

River doesn’t say anything and keeps walking.

“I’ll see you later,” she says as we pass.

The hallway is short, and there is a door at the other end. River pulls a key out of his pocket and unlocks the second door. He holds the door open for me, and we go inside. The room is small with a bad paint job and cheap furniture. On one side of the room is a couch. A desk sits in the middle of the room with a couple of video cameras lying on top. A third camera sits mounted on a tripod beside the desk. On the back wall, there is a fake window beside another door. The room is quiet, almost silent, despite the club only being ten feet away.

“Soundproof,” River says.

He opens the door on the back wall.

“Check this out.”

The door is real, but there is a brick wall about two feet behind it.

“It’s to make it look like someone is coming in from outside.”

He closes the door.

“What’s the point of that?”

“When a girl comes in for an interview,” he says, “she stands in the little space between the door and the wall, swings the door open, and walks in. I film casting-couch porn here.”

I smirk, thinking he is joking, but he continues.

“You know, a girl pretends that she wants to get into the porn industry, so she responds to an online ad that brings her here. I convince her that I have to try her out first and film it. I film it like the girls don’t know what’s going on, but they do. I mostly film strippers traveling through the city who need a couple extra bucks and don’t mind being on film. A couple times I’ve gotten lucky and picked up a girl from in the club. The club girls aren’t very good, though—they just lie there. The camera freaks them out.”

He laughs.

“One of the club girls came back the next day after realizing what she had done. She wanted me to delete the video, but the video was already up and had been viewed a few hundred times and had spread to over fifty other sites.”

He flops down on the couch and takes a drink of his beer.

“They all want the same thing: instant recognition. More Twitter followers. So for a couple hundred bucks, they get fucked on camera and become the casting-couch girl of the week. If they’re good, they might get picked up by someone else. One girl last year who I filmed ended up doing over two hundred scenes with an LA company. She made a lot of money. Even won an award down in Vegas.”

I look around. I pull a desk drawer open, and it is empty. I wipe my hands against my pants.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “I have someone wipe down the room after the scenes are done. It can get pretty wet in here.”

“Let’s go back out to the bar,” I say.

“What’s wrong?” he says. “I thought you had a poster of a porn star hanging on your wall.”

“That’s not the point.”

His eyes narrow. River reaches into his pocket and pulls out a glass pipe. From his other pocket, he pulls out a small Ziploc bag. He taps it against the pipe, and a white rock the size of a small pea falls into the bowl.

“Want some?” he asks. “It’s good.”

I shake my head.

“Suit yourself.”

He puts the pipe to his mouth and holds a lighter over the rock. He gives me another smile, then lights it. The flame gets sucked down into the pipe as River inhales. The rock glows and a sweet smell fills the room. He holds his breath for as long as he can, then finally exhales.

“There’re some people who think I’m fucked for doing this, but it makes me feel good. Real good, you know?”

“Meth?” I ask.

“No. Salts. You tried it?”

“No.”

“If you do, let me know. A bad batch can kill you. Mine’s good.”

He shakes his head up and down as he says this, then leans back on the couch and takes another pull from his pipe. He pulls out his phone and punches in his pass code.

“This is my favorite scene.”

He tosses me his phone.

“Check it out.”

The movie starts and shows River standing in the room with a girl. She is laughing and seems playful. The two of them start kissing.

“I was on a bad batch of salts when I filmed this scene,” he says.

The girl pulls her skirt up and squats down. She isn’t wearing any panties and starts to finger herself while sucking on River’s limp dick. She keeps sucking for a few minutes, and River isn’t getting hard.

“This is lame,” I say.

“Fast forward to around the ten-minute mark. She tried that long,” he says.

I drag my finger across the screen unit I get to the time mark he told me to go to. She is still sucking while massaging his balls, then pulls away. She looks up and says something. River looks angry and responds. She says something back, then laughs. River slaps her, hard. She falls to the ground and pushes herself back. Her eyes are wide and she is yelling something while jabbing her finger into his chest. River has rage in his eyes and steps towards her. She braces herself and kicks up towards his dick. He turns in time, and her kick stops against his thigh. He twists and kicks the side of her stomach. She falls back and tries to scamper away, but River grabs her by the hair and pulls her back. He is yelling something, and she spits on his face. He stops and shakes his head. She spits again, and he head-butts her nose, causing blood to flow down her face. Her eyes change instantly from angry to scared, and tears stream out. She looks like she is asking something, to be let go, maybe. He doesn’t. Instead, he pushes her down to the ground. I can see that he is hard and his face is red. He climbs on top of her and pushes her flat to the floor. She swings her arms and hits the back of his head, so he kneels up and punches the back of her head while yelling something. She tries to crawl away, and he punches her again in between her shoulder blades and forces her back down. I can see him reach down between her legs and shift slightly. She raises her head and looks like she is screaming. He pushes her face down, and I can see his hips keep pushing into her. He yells something again and pulls out of her. He reaches down between her legs and I can see him position his dick. Then he pushes in hard. This time, her body goes rigged and her face distorts in pain and fear. Her arms flail around behind her. River grabs one of her arms and twists it up behind her back. I see him yell something, his hips still pushing into her. She is crying, but River keeps going, and when she tries to get away, he twists her arm more and raises up her back. She lifts her head and screams again, her face red. He lets go of her arm, and it falls to her side. Her other arm keeps flailing, and when he grabs it, she stops and lies still, crying. River keeps going until I see his body tense up. He pushes hard into her and then his hips stop, and he lies limp on top of her. When he stands up, blood runs down the front of his thighs.

I look up at him, his eyes deadpan and an empty smile.

“The slut liked it.”

I don’t say anything.

“This isn’t high school anymore,” he says. “No more *Twilight.”*

#

It’s late afternoon, and my mother and I are having an early dinner at a place on Jasper Avenue. The food is crappy, but there is a small group of palm readers in the back who will tell you your future while you wait. That is the reason my mother comes here. I keep thinking of the rape video River showed me and wonder if the fortune tellers will be able to tell me about it.

The restaurant is empty except for us and one other table that has a guy in a charcoal suit and cobalt-blue skinny tie sitting with two girls in pencil skirts. He is talking to both of them. One girl is politely laughing; the other is playing with her phone. The effects of the pot I smoked when I got home after meeting River have worn off, but I still feel strange, like something inside me isn’t connecting with my surroundings the way it is supposed to. I don’t want to think about the video, but it seems to be the only thing I can think about.

My mother lets out a quiet laugh. I don’t look up. Instead, I look down at the menu and read through the palm-reading options. I might get a tea-leaf reading because that is easy. I don't want a palm reading because I don’t like strangers touching my hands.

“Are you going to get something?” my mother asks.

I shrug.

“I don’t know,” I say.

There is a long pause, and she drinks back some of her Bloody Mary.

“It’s only for fun,” she says. “Your father and I came here a few times when we started dating. It’s hard to believe it’s been around that long.”

“Did they get your fortune right?” I ask.

“For the time, just not forever.”

I look back down at the menu.

“I wish you would let me in. I’m your mother—you should let me in.”

“There is no *in*,” I say.

“I know you’re not happy here. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” I say.

She finishes her drink. I order another vodka tonic.

“Are you and Chantal spending quality time together since you’ve been back?” she asks.

I nod.

“Did you see her at the party the other night?”

I nod again.

“I’m not sure why you broke up. You guys were always together in high school. She would stop by sometimes after you moved away. She and I would go for a walk through the river valley. We would share stories about how you were doing. She would tell me the things you told her, and I would tell her the things you told me. Together, we could piece together what you were doing. Not everything, of course, but enough to get an idea of what you were up to. Let’s be honest, though—it isn’t like you told me much anyway.”

“She wants us to be a socialite couple. Like you and Dad used to be.”

“There are worse things, you know.”

“Are there?” I ask. “It didn’t work for either of you.”

“Evan—”

“No, everyone wants something from me and last night—”

I stop.

“What?” my mother asks. “Last night, what?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say. “It’s just a dream.”

I get up and walk over to one of the fortune tellers. I can hear my mother order another Bloody Mary behind me.

#

*I sit at my desk and put my headphones on. Voxhaul Broadcast is playing. I light a joint, inhale, and hold my breath. I hold it as long as I can before I finally have to exhale. I don’t like high school anymore. I don’t like it here anymore.*

#

Chantal texts back at two in the morning. I’m still up, creeping on models on Instagram. She wants to know if I want to go to an art gallery opening. I ask her which gallery and she texts back that it is a small artist-run gallery. I think about it because I prefer internationally known artists. Chantal prefers local artists. I text back, asking how good it will be. I tell her that I don’t like looking at local artists who are trying to emulate more famous artists. She tells me that she wants to catch the show by Jinzhe Cui before it is over and that he is great. He is unlike any artist she has seen before and all her friends are talking about it and that there is only a couple of days before it is closed. She tells me how the show is about dreams and how she heard that it was good. I text her back again that I will go. I do this to keep her happy, not because I actually want to go. I make a mental note to smoke a joint before going, just in case it isn’t very good. I go back to looking at models on Instagram.

#

Natasha texts me. It is early morning and I am planning to spend most of the day in bed, but she wants to hang out before she goes to the mountains for a photo shoot. I text her back that I would be up for it but that I want to grab some breakfast, nothing fancy, just bacon and eggs. She texts back that we can go wherever I want. She says she is coming down from mushrooms and isn’t hungry. I take a quick shower, making sure to exfoliate my face and body with a coffee-based cleanse to help wake me up, then head out the front door to wait for her. She pulls up, and I hop in. I can see that her pupils are dilated.

“Are you still high?” I ask.

“Just a little,” she says.

“I’ll drive.”

She hesitates before hopping out of the driver’s seat.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. I started tripping on the road lines on the way over.”

She walks around the car while I slide over the center console to the driver’s seat and move the seat back to make room for my legs.

“I’m not sure where to go,” I say. “It’s been awhile since I’ve been out for breakfast here.”

“There’s a good place just off Whyte Avenue,” she says. “It’s gluten free.”

I look over at her.

“I know you’re not celiac, but gluten isn’t really good for anyone,” she says. “That’s what they say anyway.”

“You sound like an idiot,” I say.

“Well, then, let’s just grab a breakfast sandwich at some drive-through, then.”

I keep driving toward Whyte Avenue. We spend most of the drive in silence. Natasha stares out the window in awe, like a little kid seeing the city for the first time. I make sure to drive slowly so that she can take it all in. It is still early, and only a handful of people have woken up and headed out onto the streets. I always thought people who woke up early on the weekend were doing it to get the world ready for everyone else.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” she asks.

“What?”

“That every morning is a new chance to make a new life.”

She looks over at me with a big smile.

“It’s like magic,” she says. “A gift.”

I smile back, and her smile gets bigger. She closes her eyes, puts her hands up and out the sunroof.

“How have you been?” she asks.

I shrug. She doesn’t see.

“I’m okay,” I say.

“I was hoping to hear from you. I’ve missed you these last couple of days.”

“I was busier than I thought I would be. I saw River.”

“Oh, yeah? Did you guys have fun?”

I don’t answer.

When we get to the restaurant, we sit in silence while we wait for my order of gluten-free waffles, eggs, and bacon to arrive. I take a sip of black Brazilian coffee. It helps to wake me up. Natasha and I don’t say much for the entire breakfast. She spends most of the time looking out the window, watching men in skinny suits and women in pencil skirts walk by on their way to work.

“Poor fools,” she says. “Could you imagine waking up five days a week and doing the same job over and over again? I would slit my wrists.”

I shove a piece of poached egg into my mouth.

“We all can’t be models.”

She looks down.

“Yeah. I guess,” she says. “Is that you? Five days a week?”

“I hope not.”

We sit in silence for the rest of the breakfast. Every few minutes, she looks over at me and, when she sees that I am there, smiles.

I drive us back to my mother’s place, and Natasha grabs my arm when I try to get out of her SUV. She leans over and kisses me. Her lips are soft, and she is gentle. I kiss her back, then pull back.

“I should go,” I say. “You have a good time in Banff.”

“Do you want to come?” she asks.

I get out of the SUV.

“I can’t,” I say. “I have to figure out what to do with my life to make my parents happy. They’re letting me take my time, but it’s only a matter of time before the money runs out.”

She doesn’t say anything and just slides over to the driver’s seat and drives away.

#

Chantal is wearing a black mid-thigh skirt with gray thigh-high argyle socks that stop just below her knee. Her top is a loose silver silk that clings to her braless breasts. I stand behind her and stare at the thin strip of skin between her skirt and her stockings while she tries to take in the art exhibit. I made sure the joint I smoked before coming was mostly weed and not a hybrid tobacco-weed mixture. I know that I should be looking at the art—frames of pictures that hang near the ceiling all the way around the room with light behind them, creating the atmosphere for the room—but I can’t take my eyes off the strip of skin that keeps flashing out from in between her skirt and her stockings. Even though I have seen her naked, even though I will see her naked later, that strip of tan skin holds my attention. She walks over to a single-sized white bed in the room against the wall that I assume is supposed to represent the artist in a dreaming state. On the bed is a large glass jar surrounded by white slips of paper and a single sharpened yellow pencil. Above the bed in vinyl letters there is a phrase:

*I am dreaming that I am having a beautiful exhibition in a gallery. I draw my dreams on canvas and hang them in front of the lights. The visitors write and draw their dreams on the paper and place them into my jar. This is such a sweet dream.*

I stare and read the passage over and over again. I don’t notice that Chantal has moved to a different part of the exhibit. I reach down and pick up a white strip of paper. I am not sure what I want to write on it, but I feel compelled to put something.

Chantal comes back to me just as I am finishing up with my sheet of paper.

“I’m done, and I know that you aren’t having fun, so we can go,” she says.

“Just give me a minute,” I say.

I finish writing my dream on the piece of paper. When I am done, I carefully fold the piece of paper perfectly in half and toss it into the jar.

“Why didn’t you get a degree in fine arts?” I ask. ”You’ve always liked visual arts.”

She laughs.

“Are you kidding? No money in that. I love art, but I like buying nice things more.”

When we get back to the car, I get a text from Natasha. She says that she is really drunk and that she misses me, which is unusual for her, then she texts a picture of her in white panties and asks me if I want to see more. I click the screen off and slip the phone into my pocket.

“We should go,” she says. “I have to get ready for tomorrow.”

#

I get a text from Ian. He wants to know if I have any money for him. I text back that I don’t owe him any, but he replies that I didn’t pay for the coke I got when I picked up some last time. He’s right—I forgot that I ran out of his place in a hurry. I text him back that I will pay him tomorrow. He texts back that tomorrow is fine as long as I don’t turn into another River. I feel a twinge in my stomach when he says this and hope that people really don’t think I am like River. He follows this with a text that he is just joking and says that he heard from Chantal that I am going to the fundraiser she helped with and that it is a big deal because all the provincial heavyweights will be there. I ask what he is doing at the fundraiser and her replies back that he will be raising his own funds and that he has a vested interest in this party. He wants the lady running to be the next premier. He says that she is a bit of a redneck bitch but that some of the people attending are good clients. I let him know that I will be at the conference center about seven. He says that seven is fine and that he will meet me at the main doors.

I text Chantal and ask her if it’s all right that we meet Ian at the main door. She texts back that I can, but she has some last-minute stuff to do with the silent auction and that she is so excited because she has a new dress that she has been dying to wear. I tell her that I have to swing home to put on my tux and that I will meet her in the main room shortly after seven, when Ian and I get there. She texts back that I should bring some coke because she loves listening to political speeches while on coke—she can get into it easier.

I go home and have a shower. It’s hot, and I make sure to exfoliate so my skin will be soft later for when Chantal and I have sex. I want to masturbate, but I just don’t feel into it. I do it anyway so I don’t come too quickly later on.

When I get out of the shower, I dry off and throw the towel down the laundry chute. I take the extra time to rub in a body moisturizer. I do this because my skin has become dry since returning home and I don’t like the tight feeling when it dries. When I finish moisturizing, I check my phone and see that Ian has texted. He asks if I am wearing a tuxedo; I text back that I am. He says that is good because he is, too, and he doesn’t want to hang out with someone who looks like a slob all night.

#

I pull up in the limo that I called because I thought it would look good when I arrived. Ian is standing outside the front doors with the blonde who was passed out on his bed when I was there a few days ago. She is in a long, white, sequined gown and looks more glamorous than I would have expected from her. I can tell by her eyes that she is stacked on drugs.

“Say hi, dear,” Ian says.

“Hi.”

Her voice is soft and drawn out.

“This is Ariel. Ariel, this is Evan.”

“Hi,” I say and extend my hand.

Ariel puts hers out as well, a few inches below mine. I lower my hand to meet hers and give it a brief shake. Her grip is limp, barely there.

Ian grabs Ariel by the arm and starts walking into the conference center with her.

“Let’s go,” he says, then turns to look at me. “Are you ready for tonight, buddy?”

“Oh, yes,” replies Ariel.

Ian looks over at her and laughs, then looks back at me.

“Can you believe this?” he says. “She’s a lightweight. I made sure to bring her because she was sleeping when you were at my place. I wanted to bring one of the others, but I didn’t want them to get too drunk and slip anything out that would get you in trouble with Chantal,” Ian says.

“That’s kind of you,” I say, making sure the sarcastic tone is obvious.

“Don’t be a dick,” he says. “If you want, I can distract Chantal later and you can fuck Ariel in the bathroom. She already knows that she’ll have to fuck a few of my clients tonight.”

“An extra service you provide?”

“Some of these guys are pretty high profile. They don’t want to risk being caught in a massage parlor, so I hook them up. Ariel is getting a flat fee. My top, best, horniest clients get a perk for the night. Think of it like upselling.”

“How many guys does she have to sleep with?”

“As many as I tell her to. Don’t worry—I’ll keep it discrete so Chantal will never know.”

We go inside and head down the escalators, Ian holding Ariel on his arm. He is dressed in a tuxedo, and his hair is long on top with shaved sides. Light gel makes his hair look wet. He looks good, and I feel jealous that he’s always had the ability to look better than I could. When we get to the main room, there are at least six hundred people walking around in a version of high couture. Most of the men are in tuxedoes. A few stand out, wearing cheap black suits with black ties; security guards, I think. Others, the politicians Chantal must have been talking about, are in off-the-rack suits.

I feel uncomfortable with the amount of people and the expectation that I am supposed to network with them and can feel my hands getting clammy. I wish I had done some coke before leaving the limo. I feel anxious to find our table, where I can sit while I wait for Chantal. I can’t find the table, so I walk around aimlessly, looking to see if there is anyone I know. When I can’t find anyone, I start scanning the room for the restrooms because I need a place to do some coke and I really want some right now. Chantal comes up behind me and grabs my arm with a small squeeze.

“Hey,” she says. “You look fabulous.”

“Thanks,” I say.

She is in a backless white evening gown.

“You do, too.”

“Thanks,” she says. “It’s Pucci.”

She pulls my arm in and gives it a squeeze. It’s one of our signals—it means she wants me to stay close to her. I reach up and touch my nose, a signal that I want to sneak away and do some coke. She smiles.

“Later,” she says. “I just want to show you some stuff. You wouldn’t believe some of the last-minute items that came in for the silent auction. You have to see them.”

“Now,” I say. “I need some now.”

I leave her side and walk into the crowd. Ian catches my attention and taps his nose. I think *great* and follow him and Ariel to the bathroom that is down one floor and at the end of a hallway. We are the only ones in there, maybe the only ones on that floor. We go into a stall just in case someone comes in. Ian pulls the glass vial out of his tuxedo pocket.

“This is the good stuff,” he says. “I can’t get away with subpar drugs here, not with these conservative types, anyway. They always talk about fiscal responsibility, but yet they spend the most for the best. I went to a New Democrat convention once, and they all had to pool their money like a bunch of high-school kids. Pathetic.”

Ian does a hit, then gives me and Ariel a hit. It is good, and I feel I will be able to last through the night, for the rest of the fundraiser, on one hit. I would have had to do two or three hits with the stuff he sells me.

“You better take your panties off,” Ian says to Ariel. “You have to start working soon.”

Ariel bends at the waist and slides off her white silk panties from under her gown.

“I don’t have a pocket,” she says, her voice slurred.

Ian takes them, places them up to his nose, and sniffs them audibly.

“Don't worry—I’ll hang onto them.”

He slips them into his pocket, and we ride the escalator back up a floor to the main room. I see Chantal chatting with some guys in tuxedos; one looks familiar. I know they are hitting on her. I catch her eye, and she half smiles at me; I smile back. The room is loud and full of chatter. Ian and I find our table and sit down to avoid conversations. The rest of our table is full of oil execs, most conservative or pretending to be conservative so they can pull political favors later. My father’s voice flashes thorough my head, saying I should make a good impression so that I can increase my book value, a stock term he used sometimes when speaking about relationships. I was never sure what my book value was with him. I always suspected it was low.

A woman at the podium I don’t know but recognize from Twitter as a local news anchor gets everyone’s attention.

“If everyone can be seated,” she says.

The crowd shuffles through the room. It takes about ten minutes for everyone to get back to their tables. When the room has settled down, she starts again.

“Thank you all for coming tonight to help support our next premier.” Her voice rises in excitement.

The room erupts in applause.

“I have some housekeeping rules to go over with you, and then we will say grace for dinner. First off, the washrooms are out in the hall; men’s on the left and women's on the right.”

She tells us what to do in the event of a fire and then goes on to explain the rules of the silent auction, including the fact that the items have to be paid for tonight and that they can be picked up until tomorrow at noon. I get distracted by Ian texting on his phone. He stops and looks around until he sees a guy who gives him a subtle wave. Ian nods back, then leans over and whispers in Ariel’s ear. She gets up and starts walking towards the door. The guy who Ian had acknowledged moments before also gets up and heads toward a different set of doors that lead to the same room. I assume he does this so he doesn’t look conspicuous.

Ian looks over.

“That’s how it’s done, buddy.”

I think of the video that River showed me, then try to put it out of my head.

“Yeah,” I say, “that’s how it’s done.”

I tune back in to the MC just in time to hear her say that we will start dinner, and then she invites some old man up who I don’t recognize to say grace. He takes a moment to give thanks for our prosperity and good leadership and says that with God’s support, we will win the next election, to which the room gives a loud amen, then erupts into applause again. The old man pumps his fists into the air and the lady takes the microphone again and thanks everyone for coming while the first course makes its way out of the kitchen and into the room.

Chantal gets to the table and sits down with two drinks.

“Here,” Chantal says, “I got you a drink.”

It’s a vodka tonic.

“Thanks,” I say.

A small bowl of soup arrives. I can’t tell what it is, so I taste it and recognize it as creamy potato soup. I don’t really like it, but I finish it because I don’t want to appear rude. A seared duck breast with a mandarin-orange glaze is next and I find it refreshing and filling. The dessert is a maple creme brûlée that fills the room with maple scent as the servers emerge from the kitchen with trays of it. I push the raspberry that sits on top of the caramelized crust to the side and push my spoon through. A light yellow cream oozes out.

The lady gets back up to the podium. She tells us how important our future is and that we need to ensure that we are in good hands. Then she introduces the main speaker. The room erupts in applause, and most of the people in the room, including Chantal, stand and give an ovation. A lady dressed in a navy jacket and black pants sitting two tables away from us gets up to head to the front, shaking hands with everyone along the way.

Chantal looks over at me.

“I love this,” she says. “This is what it’s all about.

She gives me a squeeze.

#

I wake up in the middle of the night. I can see that it is three in the morning. Chantal is sleeping on her stomach next to me, and her back is rising and falling with each breath. I get out of her bed and step out onto her balcony. The cold puckers my skin immediately, and I can feel my penis shrink. The view she has is one I usually I appreciate, but not tonight. Tonight is overcast, so the sky is dark, with no moon and no stars, just the mechanical yellow glow from the city that lies below.

#

I drive to the condo Carson is renting, and the tight blonde waitress from Hundred answers the door. She is wearing white bikini bottoms and nothing else.

“We were just about to go tan on the rooftop patio,” she says and puts on a pair of Ray-Ban Wayfarers.

She notices me glancing at her boobs.

“I don’t like tan lines,” she says.

“Hey,” Carson says as he comes out of his bedroom.

He has an erection in his shorts.

“How was your night?”

“Okay,” I say back.

“Same political bullshit?” he asks. “If you ask me, those two chicks who are running sound the same to me.”

“I didn’t really pay attention,” I say. “It’s not my thing.”

“I got some coke up on the table by the patio door. You should join us for some tanning. It’s a great day out.”

“Yeah,” I say.

I take my shirt off, and I head up the stairs to the patio door that leads out to the rooftop patio. There is a small mirror on the table by the door with four white lines about three inches long.

“Have a line,” he says. “It’s good. I got it from your friend Ian.”

“He’s everyone’s friend,” I say.

Carson shrugs his shoulders like he doesn’t care what I said and then whispers in a hushed tone so the blonde server won’t hear.

“He should be. He hooked me up with an escort that blew my mind.”

He nods and gives the thumbs up.

“I’ve never experienced anything like it. I thought she gave me a hernia.”

I do a line of coke. It is good, and I feel a little clearer after I do it.

“I’m going outside,” I say.

“She’ll bring up some drinks. Grab the chair on the left. The other two chairs are ours.”

I nod.

I step outside, and the sun feels good. It has been awhile since I have tanned and my pale skin gives it away. I didn’t bring sunscreen but knew that Carson would have some. I look back to ask if he has any and see the tight blonde and Carson kissing. He is pushing her down at the same time, so that her face is in front of his shorts. I know that I will be out here alone for awhile, so I lie down on the lounger.

I close my eyes and wonder how Natasha is doing.

#

Deanna and I sit quietly. Lisa lights up a cigarette.

“I think I’m going to go back to school to get an MBA,” she says. “I want to go traveling, but my father landed me a position with an imperial. I can intern there while finishing my masters through the university at night.”

“What kind of position?” Deanna asks.

“Community relations with a focus on local aboriginal groups.”

She takes a long drag of her cigarette.

“Do you have to work on a reservation?”

“Fuck, I hope not.”

“What will it be like?” I ask.

“I don’t know. But they’re going to pay for my school, so I’ll take it. Even if I can get some experience and then move on to something else, that would be great.”

“What’s the company like?” Deanna asks.

“It’s all oil workers,” she says. “No marriage material. Probably good in bed, though.”

“Assholes always are,” says Deanna.

I know that she is looking for the rich executive type. The problem here is that the oil workers who are rich are not the executive types.

“What if I get pregnant from one of them?” she asks.

“Fuck, can you imagine?” Deanna says.

“No,” Lisa replies. “I’d have to abort.”

“Just use a condom,” I say.

“No way—it doesn’t feel as good,” she says and looks up like she is thinking. “I’ll make them pull out. I don’t mind when a guy shoots his cum on me.”

We all go quiet again. I pick at the sweet-potato fries that were served with the bison burger.

“Holy shit,” Deanna says and turns to Lisa. “Did you hear about Chantal?”

I stop eating and look up.

“No,” says Lisa. “What?”

“She’s on antidepressants.”

I go back to eating.

“What?” says Lisa.

“Yeah. She just told me. We were talking about stress, and I said that I want to go start working out to help, and she told me that she just takes Celexa.”

“No shit?” says Lisa.

“Yeah. It’s not like it’s a big deal. I know lots of people taking something. I just didn’t expect her to be. She always seems so put together.”

Deanna looks up at me. Her face changes when she sees mine.

“Did you know about it, Evan?”

I lick my lips and try to say something, but nothing comes out. I take a drink of water and try again.

“Yeah,” I say.

Deanna is right. Chantal has always been put together and in control. For her to be taking antidepressants doesn’t give me much chance at being happy. I get a cigarette from Lisa and light it up.

“It’s not a big deal,” I say.

I finish my fries. Lisa and Deanna are debating the easiest way to go crazy, but I am not really listening. I finish my last fry.

Ian texts me and asks if I want to stop by. I am running low on coke, so I text back that I will. He texts back that he want me to grab some chips and popcorn on the way over because he just finished downloading the new Batman from a torrent site and is having people over.

#

I stop at a corner store a block from Ian’s and grab two big bags of chips and a bag of white-cheddar popcorn. I think that is enough and then realize that everyone will be high, so I grab another two bags. When I get to Ian’s, the air is already thick with the smell of weed. Two guys on the couch see me walk in with all the food and then, as though they were synchronized, stand up and walk towards me with their arms out.

“Hey, buddy,” Ian says. “Thanks for getting this stuff. Everyone already has the munchies. We’re only ten minutes in.”

He points to a chair.

“Grab a seat.”

I smoke a joint through the opening scenes. Everyone is really high, so no one says anything while we sit and watch the movie. I can’t seem to focus, but I do my best to try and keep up with the story. By the time the movie is done, the food is all gone, and one guy is passed out on the floor. Another guy, with short bleached-blond hair, speaks slowly while moving his head from one side to the other.

“Do you guys think that the Joker was crazy or that he was sane, and everyone else was crazy?

Someone laughs, but I’m not too sure who. I think the question is stupid.

“We’re all fucking crazy,” says Ian. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Where?” couch guy asks.

“Let’s go to the Leg grounds,” Ian says.

The Leg grounds were a favorite spot for us to go in high school when we wanted to ride out a high that we were on. People from downtown and Whyte Avenue would go there after the bars would close. There would sometimes be over a hundred people who were stoned or drunk or both hanging out on a Friday or a Saturday night, usually with three or four people splashing naked in the fountains while small crowds cheered them on. It was too early for that tonight, though. The crowds usually gathered at two in the morning, and it wasn’t even midnight yet.

It doesn’t take long to get there and, just as I expected, it is quiet. The grass is a deep green and starting to collect dew, but the night is warm enough to lie down on the grass. We all lie in a circle with our heads close and our feet pointing out. I imagine that we look like a starfish. It makes it easy to talk, but no one says anything.

My eyes adjust, and I can see the stars start to appear in the sky. At the same time, I can feel the dew seeping through my clothes. Someone says something about the movie. I don’t catch what it is, and no one responds. I decide that I don’t want to be there anymore, and I get up and walk home without saying goodbye. It takes me three hours.

When I get home, I walk quietly through the house, so I do not wake my mother. I lie on my bed, still coming down from my high. I want to take something to help me sleep but don’t want to waste the high. I close my eyes and feel the room move in subtle waves. The waves feel good, and the night feels like it is sinking in. I roll over and plug my phone into the charger, and it lights up the room. There is a text message from Natasha telling me to call her no matter what time. I press the button and my phone dials her number. She sounds sleepy when she answers.

“Hey,” she says. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Early.”

“My photo shoot is fun.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. The photographer isn’t trying to fuck me and the other girl I’m shooting with is new to the business. She’s pretty young, and you can tell she still has a good heart.”

“What makes you say that?”

“She still says ‘sorry’ and ‘excuse me’ and ‘please.’ I asked her if she wanted some of my coke and she looked really scared when I did. It was sweet. I didn’t do any coke around her because I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable. We did get drunk and go dancing, though.”

“I didn’t think Banff had any dancing hot spots.”

“Oh, you know, the usual small tourist club. It was fun—she kissed me. That was sweet as well.”

“You kissed a girl in public?” I ask.

“Yeah. You don’t think it will end up on TMZ, do you? I don’t want to end up on TMZ.”

“I’m sure you’re fine. Besides, even if it did, two models kissing? Your popularity will only go up. Hers will skyrocket if she’s new.”

I can hear her sigh.

“Sometimes,” she says, “I don’t think you know me at all.”

“You’re right. I know better. Nothing on camera.”

“That’s right,” she says. “I do enough of that for my job.”

She starts laughing.

“It’s ridiculous, isn’t it? I know how ridiculous I sound.”

I smile but don’t say anything.

“I missed you when you went to New York. I always wanted to call you when I was there, but I was scared. I didn’t know the New York Evan, and I don’t think I would have liked the New York Evan. I guess that doesn’t matter now; there is no more New York Evan. How are you doing? You and Chantal, I mean.”

“I guess we’re doing okay,” I say.

“That’s good,” she says. “You need someone who’ll make you happy. I think, anyway.”

“She’s on antidepressants,” I say. “She started taking them a week before I came home.”

“Really?” she replies. “I would have never expected that from her.”

“Me neither,” I say.

We sit silent for a moment. Her breathing gets deeper, and I wonder if she has fallen asleep.

“You deserve to be happy, too,” I say.

“Yeah, one day,” she says. “One day. Do you think things will change between us if you and Chantal get more serious?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Married, maybe. I’m just saying that things don’t have to change, between us, I mean.”

“I can’t promise that,” I say. “My parents are pushing me to get a job. I don’t think I can fuck around much longer, although I don’t know what to do.”

“Fuck around? That’s what everything is to you, isn’t it? Fucking around? What do you think happens in the real world? This life you’re avoiding, you put on a suit and go to work, come home to a warm dinner and enjoy watching *Jeopardy* on TV before going to bed for some cuddles? What world do you live in? Look around, this is your life.”

“Where is this coming from?”

“This is your life,” she says.

“I’ve got to go,” I say.

“Of course you do,” she says.

I go to hang up and see that she has already done so. I don’t want to risk talking with her again, so I turn it off. I lie in my bed for awhile, I’m not sure how long. I imagine that I am floating and that makes me feel better.

#

The next day, I am walking down Whyte Avenue with Chantal. She wants to go to some ceramic studio and paint a ceramic vase for her mother. I know that she is angry with me because I didn’t respond to her texts earlier in the day. I don’t tell her that I turned my phone off after talking with Natasha, just that the battery died and I forgot to plug it in. When we get to the ceramic studio, I see a girl I recognize but can’t recall, and Chantal goes over to her.

“Hey, Chantal, don’t you just love this place?” The girls voice is high and bubbly.

“I’ve never been here before,” Chantal replies.

“Really? I just love it. I come here at least once a month, then sell it on Etsy.”

“It looks fun.”

I walk over and touch Chantal’s lower back. She looks over at me.

“Hey, Lori, this is Evan; Evan, this is Lori.”

I nod.

“I’m here because I want to make a gift for my mother,” Chantal says. “She’s into handmade crafts right now, so I thought if I painted something for her, she would like it.”

“Of course she will,” says Lori. “I’ve given away at least five of these things as presents and everyone loves them. I’m thinking of starting my own studio downtown. I should ask if they franchise.”

“That’s a great idea. It would be great in the High Street area. That area is very up and coming,” Chantal says.

I leave the two talking and walk around the store. I run my hand over some of the ceramic pieces. They are white and chalky and are rough to the touch.

“Please don’t touch the pieces,” a voice from behind me says.

I turn around. There is a skinny girl, maybe seventeen, standing holding a plastic cup full of brushes. She is cute.

“The ones that you touch will be ruined,” she says. “From the oil in your hands.”

I smile.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“That’s okay. Like I said, though. Don’t touch anything. You’ll ruin it.”

#

Chantal’s vase is complete. At least according to her. It is painted in an intricate pastel blue and orange damask pattern and stands on the table in front of us.

“I chose those colors because my mother loves our hockey team.”

“The colors are really chalky,” I say.

“That’s because they have to fire it in a kiln. Once they fire it, it’ll melt the glaze and look shiny.”

I remain expressionless and think to myself that it looks ugly and will probably look uglier when it’s shiny.

“It looks good,” I say.

We leave the store, and I have nothing else to do, so I just follow Chantal around while she looks in shops. I think she likes this. She grabs my hand and we walk down the street looking like a normal couple.

#

I wake up at 3:12. I know because I look at my phone. I was having a dream about Chantal. In the dream, she was slowly walking into a lake. I tried to go out with her and ask her to come back, but I couldn’t. My feet were deep in thick mud, and I couldn’t walk. She was singing as she walked in. I couldn’t hear the song, but it was familiar.

I don’t feel well, so I get up and go look in my bathroom mirror. I don’t look sick, but I look tired and a little rough. My face has a few days’ growth, and I look like I am trying too hard to be cool with a five o’clock shadow. I turn the light off and go back to bed.

#

I am driving downtown when I get a call from Natasha and put her on hands free.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey.”

“I’m sorry about the other night. I didn’t have any right to go off on you like that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say.

“Yeah, well. Who am I to judge?”

I don’t respond.

“It got me thinking, though.”

“About what?”

“About what I want.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m coming home again for about a week and then have to leave again for two weeks down in San Francisco. I was wondering if you wanted to come with me for a couple of days?”

I think of telling Chantal that I have gone to San Francisco with Natasha and don’t see it going well.

“What are you doing in San Francisco?” I ask.

“I got a call. I have a bikini shoot for *Sports Illustrated*. They want to do it on Alcatraz. It’s a little twisted, but I have to admit that being a swimsuit model for SI was on my bucket list.”

I laugh at the irony of putting a bunch of models in small bikinis on an island once inhabited by prisoners who would have raped them given a chance.

“I’m surprised, given your disdain for your modeling career.”

“It was on my list before I became a model. It’s on most girls’ bucket lists, or dream lists, anyway.”

“When are you leaving?”

“I get home tomorrow, and then I fly out in six days,” she says. “I’m going to be busy for most of the time, but there are two days in the middle where I’m not scheduled. You could fly down then, and we could hang out and look around.”

“I’m not sure I could go. I don’t think it would fly.”

It goes quiet.

“I’m moving there, Evan.”

I don’t say anything.

“I always loved San Francisco. Remember that postcard I sent you?”

“Yeah, I still have it,” I say.

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit, Evan, you know as much as I do that you aren’t going to be happy. Do you really want to be half of a power couple?”

I know she is right, but it is hard to believe. My entire life, I was raised being told to appreciate how good we had it in our city and how every place suffered again and again through hard times, but we didn’t. There are obviously other opportunities out there. I just don’t know what they look like outside the oil industry.

“I don’t know what I want.”

“Who does? But what you want doesn’t lie there. Anyone can see that. If it did, you would already be doing it.”

“I don’t want to talk about this right now.”

“Evan.”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Whatever.”

She hangs up.

#

I arrive at Ian’s condo and some guy I don’t know answers the door. He motions to Ian’s bedroom door and I can hear a mix of giggling and moaning coming from behind the door. I’m not sure how many people are in there but think that I can hear at least three different voices. It sounds like they will be awhile, so I sit on the couch beside the guy I don’t know and scroll through my Twitter feed. There isn’t much exciting, so I search for the #nsfw feed and find some decent pictures. The guy beside me turns the volume up on the TV and we sit there without saying a word to each other. Half an hour later, Ian comes out of his room wearing only his boxers. I can see two thin blondes on his bed. I don’t think either of them is Ariel.

“What’s up?” he asks.

“Just stopped by,” I say.

“Cool. Let me get dressed, and we can go downstairs and grab a drink.”

He walks back into the room and comes back out with some white shorts and a navy Lacoste polo shirt on that has thin white horizontal stripes, giving him a nautical look.

“Let’s go,” he says.

The elevator door is about to close and a hand reaches and flicks the safety bar that cause the door to open up. One of the blondes who was in Ian’s room steps in and the three of us ride the elevator down without anyone saying anything. The doors open and the blonde hurries out.

“I think she’s newer,” he says. “She wasn’t bad, just wasn’t really into it when I made her eat the other girl’s pussy. She didn’t mind it when I made the other girl eat her pussy, though.”

We step out of the building and onto the street. The sun is warm and summer feels like it has finally come.

“Where do you want to go?” he asks.

“I’m not sure,” I say. “Somewhere we can just hang out. I don’t want to feel rushed.”

“Let’s go to the coffee and wine bar up the street,” he says. “It just opened and is full of some hot fluff artist types. They’re good to look at.”

We walk in, and the place is full of people in skinny jeans and plaid shirts with horn-rimmed glasses. Most of the girls are wearing white sheer shirts with the buttons open down to their bras and the sleeves rolled up.

“It’s funny,” he says. “They all think they’re unique and look at them. It’s like a fucking photocopier exploded in here or something. It’s like that quote, ‘“I’m not like every other girl,” said every other girl.’”

I look around and feel old, even though most of them are around the same age as I am. I’ve never been one to be on the bleeding edge of style. I followed it, I just didn’t live it. I was rich; I didn’t have to.

“I cut River off,” he says.

“Why should I care?”

“You were his best friend.”

“He’s got something going on,” I say.

“I don’t care. Besides, we all have something going on. At first it was just some coke, like we did in high school. No big deal, right? But then, about a couple of months ago, he disappeared for a couple weeks. I didn’t hear from him. At first I thought he was on holiday or something, then I thought he found a new dealer. Can you imagine that? Then, out of nowhere, he shows up looking like shit with big bags under his eyes and tells me he hasn’t been sleeping and that he wants to get some meth. I didn’t even think about selling that shit ’cause I didn’t want fucked-up clientele, you know what I mean? With coke, I can at least sell to suits and politicians. Trust me—crystal meth is a one-way trip down to fucked-up town, and I didn’t need that around my life, even if it was River.”

He motions for the waitress.

“Have you seen chicks who do crystal meth? It’s fucking gross. They pick their skin all the time and get these scabs that they eat because it contains meth that’s working its way out of the body. It’s fucking dirty. Anyway, I decided that he’s an old friend, so I asked around and got him some. It wasn’t that hard. Then he wanted more. I stopped selling crystal meth a few months after that and only sold him coke, but he must have found someone else to get him meth. Now I only see him when he can’t get anything from his other dealer. Look, man, this city is getting big, but make no mistake, it’s still a small town. Even I know that. That’s why I only sell to reputable clients. You start taking on the bottom feeders and life can get ugly pretty quick. River needs to understand that. Any chances he had are slipping away if he keeps doing that shit. No matter what happened a couple of months ago.”

#

That night, I go to Deanna’s private political fundraising party. I want to avoid the crowd, so I walk through the room, giving a false smile to the people I know and ignoring the people I don’t. I make it through the crowd without having to engage with anyone and continue out to the patio that looks out over downtown. The sunset reflects off the buildings and casts a red glow into the river valley, making it look like the trees are on fire.

I watch the sun go down and the river valley gets dark while I sip my vodka tonic and listen to MGMT playing inside the house.

“So, you find a job yet?”

It’s Chantal.

I shake my head and take another drink.

“Carson told me that you don’t want to be here,” she says.

“The party’s okay,” I say.

“I don’t mean the party,” she replies. “He said that back in school you would talk about how you didn’t want to come back. How you had nothing here.”

“Whatever,” I say.

“You should come in. I want to introduce you to some people.”

I shrug.

“I don’t feel like it. Who’s this party for, anyway?”

“Laurie,” she says and looks down.

“Who’s that?”

“He’s running in the next election for a federal seat.”

I turn and look back on the room.

“He’s in the corner.” She points. “That’s him in the navy suit with the striped tie.”

The guy she points toward looks familiar.

“He graduated from U of C two years ago with a degree in poli sci,” she says, still not making eye contact.

“He was at Bobby’s party wearing a U of C shirt. I remember. You were talking with him.”

“Yeah,” she says.

“How long have you known him?”

“A few years now. He spoke at one of my classes in university. We’ve kept in touch since.”

“Another asshole,” I say.

“What do you mean?”

“They’re all assholes. Self absorbed, vote for me, I’m your voice in government. They all sound the same.”

“He just wants to make things better.”

“For who?”

She doesn’t answer, and I down the rest of my drink.

“What does it matter anyway?” I say.

Chantal walks over and sits in the lounge chair next to me.

“Do you think I’m stupid?” she asks.

I shrug again.

“You’re a dick. You have no clue how much I want to love you. How much time I’ve spent thinking about our future, and you treat me like shit. When you left for New York, I had no one. So I would go over to your mother’s house just to remind me that you were alive because you wouldn’t ever contact me. Your mother told me how she would text you or Facebook you and you wouldn’t get back to her, sometimes for weeks. Over four years, you drifted in and out of my life and to you it was no big deal. No big fucking deal. For me, it was waiting.”

I look over at her.

“Waiting for what?” I ask.

She snorts a laugh.

“You are so self absorbed.”

She stands up.

“I would cry because you would sleep with me, then leave for New York without even saying goodbye.”

She sits down and lowers her head. Her voice is shaky.

“I’ve been waiting for four years since you decided to go away to business school, even though you could have gotten the same education here. You told everyone that you wanted to get a real education and that when you got back, you would get a career as a strategist for an oil company. You hardly came home, and you never contacted me, even though you kept promising to. And I was dumb. I didn’t want to lose you, and I can’t even tell you why. So, then you come back and when I finally think that we both can start a life together, you ignore me. All that stuff you’re looking for is right in front of your face, and you can’t even see it. You hide and turn yourself off like you can get something better somewhere else, and you know what? You can’t.”

Chantal is leaning over, looking down, her eyes swollen and wet, but not crying.

“It’s not my fault,” I say.

My voice is quiet.

“Can’t you see what you have?” Her voice cracks.

“No,” I say.

“Fuck you,” she says. She starts to cry.

I start walking back to the door so I can get another drink.

“I slept with him, you know.”

I stop. My stomach sinks inside of me.

“Slept with who?”

“Him.”

Her head motions towards the poli-sci grad from U of C.

“It was the morning after the fundraiser. We were picking up some unclaimed auction items, and he asked why you weren’t there helping me. I started to cry, and he asked me what was wrong, and that felt good, to have someone ask me that.”

She walks by me, pushing me aside as she does, and disappears into the crowd inside.

I can’t see where poli-sci U of C guy has gone, and my mind starts to wonder where he is and what he is doing. People are looking at me, and I wonder how many of them knew that she slept with him. I stand there looking at all the people, hoping that someone will tell me what to do. When I can’t figure it out, I walk through the crowd, ignoring everyone, and head out the door.

#

*River and I are walking through the shallows of the stream. It is spring and chunks of ice still clutter the side and keep the area cool despite it being warm. He asks me if I am afraid of going into high school, and I shrug. He tells me that he has been waiting for over a year to be able to meet high-school girls and have real fun. I ask him what he means by* real fun, *and he says the kind of fun high-school students have, that it isn’t junior high anymore. I’m not sure what he means by that, so I just say yeah. We keep walking through the shallow side, our shoes in our hands and our socks tucked into the toes of our shoes. He says that we should take big risks in high school. I don’t know what he means, so I say yeah again.*

#

I’m driving away from the party, slightly drunk, and hope that I don’t get pulled over by a cop. My phone flashes and it is a text from Chantal. She says that she didn’t mean to tell me like that and that I should come back so we can talk. I don’t text her back. I text Natasha. When she doesn’t reply, I text River. It takes him a few minutes to respond, but he finally does. He tells me that he is just waiting for a girl to arrive and then he is going to film a scene. Then he asks if I want to come and watch. I don’t know what else to do.

River meets me at the door, his sunglasses perched on his forehead.

“Club is busy tonight. If I didn’t come to the door and meet you, you wouldn’t have gotten in.”

We head down the stairs and stop at the bar. He points to the bartender and then to me. She comes over. I have to shout my order, a triple. She makes it right away, and I slam it back. She smirks at me and gives me another. River points to me, then motions for us to go to the door, and we head back through.

“The club owner got wind that a shipment of ecstasy came in yesterday, so she decided to hold a rave tonight.”

We go through the second door, and when River closes it, it becomes almost silent.

“It’s amazing how it can get so quiet in here. It’s good for sound, though.”

A girl sitting on the couch looks up at me.

“Ariel, this is Evan. Evan, this is Ariel.”

“I know you,” she says. “You were at that big party.”

I don’t respond and take a drink of my triple vodka tonic.

“I made a lot of money that night from your friend.”

She looks over at River.

“Are we going to start soon?” she asks. “I have to get back to work in an hour.”

“Sure, baby,” River says. “You know what to do.”

He turns to me.

“She’s new,” he says. “She moved here from out east with her boyfriend and he dumped her after being here a month.”

“Yeah, he’s a real dick,” she says.

She gets up and does a line of coke that is on the desk, then starts to take her clothes off.

“I just want to make enough money to go home. You know?”

“We already filmed the intro scenes,” says River. “Now it’s time to fuck. You know what to do, baby.”

Ariel strips down to her underwear and pulls her panties to the side. She reaches into her purse and grabs some lube, then rubs some on her vagina.

“I’m ready,” she says.

“You want a go?” River asks me and gestures towards Ariel.

I look over at him.

“I’m serious, man. How can it get better than this? All I do is film this shit, and it’s a great way to live. Tell you what—you can fuck her and I’ll film it, so the camera doesn't get your face.”

“No,” I say. “I’m not interested."

“You’re not?” he asks and takes a step toward me. His voice lowers. “Then why did you come?”

I slam back the rest of my drink and my stomach burns.

“Seriously, it’s no big deal,” he says. “She knows what to do. Watch.”

River drops his pants to a semierect penis. He walks over stroking it, and when he gets hard, he slides it in her and starts fucking her. He turns back and smiles at me.

“See? No big deal,” he says.

“No big deal,” she says while her head taps against the back of the couch.

He pulls out of her and pulls his pants back up.

“I’ll finish that later,” he says and kisses her forehead.

“It’s okay,” the girl says, looking at me. “I’ve fucked lots of guys in the last few weeks. I’m used to it.”

The alcohol sinks in, and I feel my eyes get heavy. Ariel lies in front of me fingering her pussy. She raises her foot up and strokes my cock through my pants.

“Are we going to get to work or not?” she asks. “I only have an hour.”

#

I text Carson and he agrees to meet me for lunch. A fire is raging in the mountains west of the city. Even though it is far away, the scent of burning forest hangs in the hazy air. While I wait, I scroll through the @CBCEdmonton Twitter feed to see what the latest news is. A lady who had found her three-year-old child dead in her car was being charged with negligence leading to death; the police found two bodies that had washed up in the river. The bodies are unidentifiable because of the state of decomposition and mutilation. Police suspect they are the bodies of two MBA students from U of A who went missing just before final exams. DNA testing will prove that to be true or not.

I put my phone down and see Carson across the street. He is waving at me and comes over.

“Hey,” he says. “I want to see you before I go.”

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“Calgary,” he says. “I know your dad got me that job, but there are better exec positions down there.”

“I suppose,” I say.

“Yeah. I got a job offer with Shell. I get to travel internationally. I appreciate what your dad did in trying to get me a job, but I want something more global.”

“I thought you liked it here.”

“I thought I did, too,” he says. “But it’s hard. People like to work here. You ask anyone here how they’re doing, and all they can say is that they are busy, and then they tell you how busy they are, running here, running there. It gets tired quick.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about. In any conversation, people often talked about how busy they were, not realizing that they could stop being busy any time they wanted to.

“Hey, check this out.”

He pulls an unopened original copy of the *Into The Wild* soundtrack from a plain white plastic bag.

“Where did you get that?”

“That place on Whyte. The guy tracked it down for me.”

“You loved that movie,” I say.

“We both did,” he says. “We must have watched it at least twenty times through university.”

“Yeah,” I say.

“And we said we’d never sell out.”

I nod.

“Yeah, well, that didn’t turn out to be true, did it?” He winks at me.

I smile.

Carson puts out his hand.

“I can’t stay for lunch. I start in two weeks and have to go find a place. We’ll keep in touch,” he says. “That’s what Facebook is for.”

I shake his hand and think that I won’t see him again.

#

River’s eyes are sunk in with dark circles and his skin is pale. He looks more tired than when I saw him a couple of days ago.

“Are you glad to be back yet?” he asks.

“I haven’t decided yet,” I say.

“Of course you haven’t.”

He scratches at a scab on his chin.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“You never fit in. Here, I mean.”

I order another drink. We sit for a couple minutes, neither one of us saying anything.

“Remember in high school how we would get high in first break, then coast through classes for the rest of the day? The only thing we had to worry about was getting to the end of the day, then having enough weed for the next day. It was easy.”

He laughs.

“It was hard then, too,” I say. “Just as hard. I had to keep my grades up to make sure that I made it into Columbia.”

He laughs again.

“Give me a break, man. You’re smart. Not like the rest of us. You just had to show up, and your grades would be high. One semester, I tried hard, real hard. I stopped smoking weed during the week and studied at least an hour a night, most nights, two hours. You know what that did for me?”

“No.”

“Two percent. Two percent higher. That’s it. Fucking waste of time.”

He downs his drink and orders another.

“I think about high school a lot,” he says. “Those were easy days.”

I finish my drink and order another.

#

It’s mid afternoon when I meet Chantal for a drink. I’m still buzzing from my hit of coke, but I won’t let her know that. I see her sitting in the sun at the edge of the patio overlooking the river valley. The sky is bright blue, and the valley is flooded with lush green below us. It smells like cut grass and finally feels like summer.

Chantal is wearing aviator sunglasses. They don’t do a good job of hiding the redness surrounding her eyes. She is drinking a mimosa, and I tell the waiter to bring me one of the same, then walk over to sit with her. A breeze kicks up, and I catch the smell of her perfume. It’s Opium. She reaches over and pulls my hand up and rests her cheek in my palm.

“Thank you for coming,” she says.

“I said I would,” I reply.

“I suppose.”

She pulls out a cigarette and lights it, pulling a long drag before slowly exhaling.

“I didn’t want to tell you, but I couldn’t keep it from you.”

“Was it only once?”

“I slept with him again last night. He spent the night.”

She takes another drag of her cigarette.

“We’ve been through a lot,” she says. “But sometimes it feels like we’ve been through nothing.”

The waiter arrives with my mimosa, and I drink half of it immediately.

“What do you want?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she says.

“Of course you don’t.”

“You’re one to talk. I know what I want more than you do.”

I don’t respond, and she shakes her head.

“I don’t know,” she says. “Maybe I just want to stop planning my future and start working on my future.”

“What does that mean?”

“How long can a person wait? After all we went through in high school, I thought I knew what love looked like. I thought I loved you. But after I told you that I slept with someone else, I felt this weight lift, like I didn’t have to pretend anymore.”

“Like you didn’t have to pretend?”

“I used to call it hope—hope that you would want me, hope that you would come home to me, hope for our future. Then I realized that I was just pretending. That I was a fool. I slept with someone else, hoping for you to be the kind of person he is. Kind, loving, but that isn’t you. I tried that night in the hotel, tried to be caring and open, to take another shot, but you were still cold. You always have been.”

I finished the rest of my drink and motioned for the waiter to bring me another. Chantal takes off her glasses. Her eyes are swollen and red, and she looks like she is going to start crying.

“Was it so bad here? Was it so bad to be with me?”

I shrug, and she leans back in her chair and puts the sunglasses back on.

“What will you do?”

I take a moment before answering.

“Something has come up,” I say.

“Something has come up? How articulate.”

“I don’t want to let it end,” she says, “but I don’t see how we can go forward.”

I lean in. My voice low.

“Then you shouldn’t have fucked some other guy.”

A tear runs down her cheek.

“Can’t you say anything like a normal human being? I’m sitting here, and you can’t even think of what it must feel like for me. To be with someone so cold. You’re a prick. I mean, after all we’ve been though?”

“We haven’t been through much,” I say. “A high-school crush, that’s not even an original story. There was nothing special about us.”

More tears roll down her cheeks.

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” she says.

“Yeah.”

Neither of us says anything until she clears her throat.

“I don’t want you to go,” she says.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It won’t be the same.”

“It probably won’t.”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

I pause for a moment.

“I never loved you,” I say.

I get up, throw ten dollars on the table, and leave. I get to my car in the parking lot and slide inside. It is hot inside from the sun, and I feel cold. I want to tell her that I did love her because maybe it would make her feel better, but I don’t. I don’t think it is a good idea. I do a hit of coke and drive home.

#

I’m in a cab and keep looking at my phone to see if Chantal has texted me. She hasn’t. I’ve texted her four times since this afternoon, and she hasn’t replied to any of them. I get out of the cab on Whyte Avenue and start walking towards a club that I heard was easy to pick up in. I tried texting River and Ian as well. River didn’t reply, but Ian told me to meet him at a club on Whyte Avenue. As I walk by one of the pubs, I see Natasha with a girl waiting in line to get into the club Ian told me to meet him at. Her eyes are closed, and she is swaying back and forth to the music from inside the club. People behind groan and mumble when I get into line beside her.

“Hey,” I say.

She turns and looks at me.

“Hey. It’s good to see you,” she says. “I missed you.”

Her speech is slurred.

“Enjoying the weather back here?”

She smirks.

“I wish you would ask me a real question one day,” she says. “You always ask the easy questions.”

She grabs for my hand and misses it, then grabs for it again.

“I know it’s hard,” she says. “But I’m a big girl; I can handle tougher questions.”

I want to tell her about Chantal, but I don’t.

“This is the girl from the shoot I was telling you about, Monika. I invited her to come back and visit me for a couple of days.”

“Hey,” I say.

She smiles.

“I texted Ian a while ago. He’s inside,” she says. “And I need some coke.”

She looks at me. Her eyes are half open. I think she is either on Quaaludes or a stack of Ativan and alcohol.

“How did you like Banff?” I ask Monika.

She shrugs her shoulders.

“The mountains were really neat,” she says. “And the job was fun. I got to run around in lingerie and let someone take my picture. It’s a great way to make a living, and I love being in front of the camera. The photographer tried to sleep with me, though. It’s too bad—I thought he was nice until then.”

I hear a guy in line behind us say that he would like to sleep with her, too.

I turn around and see a guy with a tribal tattoo down his arm and an Ed Hardy T-shirt staring at Monika’s ass, which is barely covered with a ruffled Gucci patterned miniskirt.

“Besides, I’m going to follow Natasha’s rule,” she says. “No photographers. That’s now my rule, too.”

Natasha smiles.

“It’s a good rule.”

I nod.

“That why I like you,” Natasha says. “You don’t even own a camera.”

She leans in.

“It’s different when we do it.”

We finally get inside. I look for Ian, but I can’t see him anywhere. An Arcade Fire song is playing, and people are crammed on the dance floor. The air feels thick and smells like sweat. I make my way over to the corner and pull out my coke and do a hit. The lights flash in sync with the music. Natasha is standing a few feet away, dancing while Monika bounces close to her.

I watch as Natasha sways her hips. There is a smile on her face, and I wonder why she is here. She keeps coming back to this city even though she complains about it. But I keep coming back as well. I see a girl who looks like Chantal and I pull out my phone to text her again. I type in the word *hey* and hit send. The girl who looks like Chantal doesn’t pull out a phone, so I know it isn’t her. I check it ten minutes later, and she hasn't responded. The guy at the door with the tribal tattoo down his arm and the Ed Hardy T-shirt is standing by me. He notices that I notice him and steps closer.

“She’s that model, hey?” he asks while motioning to Natasha.

“No,” I lie, “she just looks like her.”

“She sure does. You guys dating?”

“No,” I say. “I’m not dating anyone.”

“Too bad. She’s a sweet piece.”

I have an urge to punch him in the throat but do another hit of coke instead.

“I would have no problem tapping that,” he says.

“She’s a lesbian,” I say back. “That’s her girlfriend.”

“That’s what they all say until they meet the right guy,” he says and then walks away smirking.

I look up and see Ian across the club. The lights are flashing around and light his face from straight above, giving his face the look of a hollowed out skull. He is talking with a couple of guys, then looks over and notices me. I walk over to Natasha.

“Let’s go outside,” I say. “I need some fresh air.”

“I want to finish dancing,” she says. “Besides, I have to find Ian.”

“He’s over there,” I say, pointing to the far corner.

When I get outside, I see a couple girls laughing and smoking. I bum a cigarette off them and smoke the whole thing, making sure I take slow drags. I thought going out would make me feel better, but I don’t. The girls are talking about the Kardashians and how they are so shallow compared to the guys on *Duck Dynasty* and that maybe the Kardashians should do guest appearances on *Duck Dynasty* to make them more real. I tell them that they shouldn’t waste their time with mindless shit like the Kardashians. They look at me, and I can see the word *asshole* in their eyes. When I am done with my cigarette, I go back into the club and do another hit of coke. Natasha is talking to the guy with the tribal tattoo and Ed Hardy T-shirt. I can tell she is playing with him. I’m not sure if he doesn’t know or just doesn’t care. I feel an arm slide around me.

“Hey, buddy.” It’s Ian. His other arm is around Monika. “News travels fast. You and Chantal are done, hey?”

“I guess so,” I say back.

“Whatever, man. You’ll find someone,” he says. “There’s lots of chicks out there, and you’re a catch. The fact that your mom and dad are prominent in this city and you’re a good-looking smart guy, you’ll find someone.”

He pulls his arm away, then turns around and walks away with Monika.

I feel anxious, so I look for Natasha. I can’t find her in the club, so I look outside. When I don’t find her there, I go back inside and check the bathrooms. She isn’t there either.

I do another line of coke and check my phone. There is a text from Natasha. It says that I should come to Hawrelak Park. That they are going to drop some ecstasy and hang out until the sun rises so they can watch the sun come up from in the river valley. I text back that I am not feeling good and that I am going to go home. She texts back saying that she will come back to go home with me, then asks me if I am okay. I tell her not to bother, that she should watch the sunrise.

After I leave the club, I go into the back alley and throw up most of the vodka tonic that I drank. I wipe my mouth and do another hit of coke. I stand in the back alley, I think for twenty minutes, before catching a cab home.

#

I don’t sleep all night. Instead, I lie in my bed, flipping through Facebook on my TV. I find the profile for the guy Chantal slept with. He wants to be a politician, so he has no privacy settings on. I assume it is to make him more accessible to his constituents. Most of his photos are of him and his family: his grandparents holding him close at his university convocation; his parents and sister eating dinner, all smiling; a picture of his condo that he bought downtown and then pictures of him decorating it, so it feels warm and inviting; some of him speaking publicly; others, with famous politicians. I hate him and his life for being better than mine.

I puke two more times. I keep closing my eyes and breathing deep when I feel nausea coming. It seems to help. The TV helps, too. I watch an infomercial for the shake weight that is supposed to be shaken by a person to help develop arm strength. It makes me laugh a bit, and that makes me feel better, too. I know that I will be tired soon, so I go back to Facebook. My phone vibrates. I ignore it, but it vibrates again and I realize it’s someone calling me, not texting me. I look and see that it is Natasha calling. I still don’t feel well, so I don’t answer it. Instead, I scroll through Facebook. I read an article about twelve traits that happy people have and my phone vibrates again. I look, and it is Natasha calling again. I swipe my finger across the screen to answer the call.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hello?” the voice says on the other end.

I don’t recognize the voice.

“Is this Evan?” the voice asks.

“Yeah,” I say. “Who’s this?”

“Natasha’s mom. This is Natasha’s mom.”

I sit up right away, and my stomach drops.

“Where’s Natasha?”

“At the hospital. The university hospital.” Her voice cracks.

“What’s wrong? What happened to Natasha?”

“She was found in the park.”

“What?”

“She was pretty beat up.”

“What?”

“Last night, this morning, I mean.” She pauses to take a breath. “She was at a park with some guy. I don’t know much. Some joggers came across them. A couple chased the guy away while a third tried to get video with his phone so they could identify the guy.”

I hop off my bed and start pulling on some pants while holding the phone to my ear.

“She’s doing okay,” she says. “She’s sleeping now. The doctors gave her some medication to calm her down. She said your name before she passed out. I think she wanted me to call you. The police were about to dispatch some officers to your house after she said your name, but I told them it wasn’t you. I haven’t seen you in years, but I knew that it wasn’t you who did this.”

“I have to call a cab,” I say.

“We’re on the fourth floor.”

I put my phone down. The house is silent, and I wonder if my mother is home. I want her to drive me to the hospital but know that she is sleeping. I feel weak and call a cab.

#

My Twitter feed is updating at a frantic rate as news spreads through the Twitterverse that Natasha was found assaulted. Some say that she is a slut and probably deserved it. Most of them, though, are sympathetic. The tweets continue to flow, most being retweets. Her greatest fear of becoming an Internet sensation is unrolling in real time right before my eyes. A tweet from TMZ pops up in my feed offering exclusive video and warns that it is graphic in nature. I hold my breath and press play, then stop. Instead, I click on the link, and it brings me to the TMZ website. The article is short. It mentions that she was assaulted, almost raped, and that joggers discovered her and that they obtained the footage from one of the joggers, who wants everyone to see the video so they can catch the guy. There is a large still frame from the video of a guy running away and Natasha lying on the ground with a faint play button overtop. I feel nauseous. I don’t want to see it.

We pull up to the university hospital. I throw cash at the driver and run inside.

#

I arrive on the fourth floor, and the nurse points me to Natasha’s room. Her mother is there, and she stops me at the doorway. Just over her shoulder, inside the room, I can see Natasha lying motionless under a white blanket, an IV going into her arm. Her head is bandaged up.

“Evan,” she says. “Thank you for coming.”

I want to throw up again.

“How is she?” I ask.

She looks up at me, her eyes swollen. I’m sure that I look like shit and smell even worse.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“Am I okay? Is she okay?”

“It’s not good,” she says. “They think she might have a concussion and . . .”

She stops and takes a deep breath in.

“He was going to rape her. If the people didn’t come along, he was going to rape her.”

She puts her head down into her hands.

I want to hug her, but I don’t

I walk to the bench in the hall and sit down. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want her to be here, and I know that if I had met up with her, this wouldn't have happened. I would have been there, the guy wouldn’t have tried anything, and she would be telling me how she is supposed to go to San Francisco in a couple of weeks to do her photo shoot.

After a few minutes, I walk into Natasha’s room and up to her bed. I can see there is matted blood in the hair that is sticking out from under the bandage. The blanket is rising softly with each breath. I reach out and grab her hand, giving it a small squeeze. There is nothing back.

“Two of the joggers chased him, but he got away,” her mom says from behind me.

I look up from Natasha to her mother.

“She did ask for you,” she says.

She lowers her head and begins to cry.

“I can’t be here,” I say. “I’m sorry, I just can’t be here right now.”

“Evan?” her mother says.

I walk out of the room.

#

I see Ian on Whyte Avenue. He sees me and waves. I wait for him to get over to me.

“I heard what happened,” he says. “It’s all over the news.”

I stop and turn to look at him. He walks up about a foot away, and I can smell the pot on his breath.

“You don’t look so good,” he says. “You need something?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“I got some stuff that’ll take the edge off.”

“No,” I say. “I just want to be alone.”

#

Natasha and I are sitting in her hospital room. We are sitting quietly while we watch *The Simpsons*. I snuck her in a little bit of weed and a pipe, and I notice that she relaxes after having a hoot. She doesn’t say much when I come, but I know she appreciates it when I come and visit. Tomorrow is her release date and the media are camped outside waiting.

“I’m not going to be in *Sports Illustrated*,” she says, her voice low.

I turn and look; her face is still.

“You can be the model with the bandages on,” I say, trying to be funny. She doesn’t laugh.

She looks over at me. Tears begin to stream down her face, and she pulls her pillow up in front of her and pushes her face into it, sobbing.

I stand up and place my hand on her back. I can feel her tense as soon as I touch her.

“Don’t,” she says into the pillow.

It is muffled, but I understand, so I pull my hand away.

I stand there silently while she cries. After awhile, she begins to soften again.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I just don’t like being touched.”

She looks up at me.

“I feel so dirty, Evan. I feel so fucking dirty inside, and I can’t get rid of it. The worst part is, I can’t even remember it. I was so fucked up. All I remember was that I was going to meet Ian to score some coke. I don’t remember you there, going to the park, nothing. I wouldn’t even remember what the guy looked like if they didn’t flash him all over the news all the time.”

She cries into the pillow again.

“I feel so fucking stupid.”

I place my hand on her back again. This time, she lets me.

#

Natasha looks out the window, down to the street.

“There’s a lot of media here,” she says.

“They’ve been waiting for a couple days,” I say.

Most of the media are from out of town and don’t know that on the fifth floor of the hospital is a connection to the student medical building that connects to the main campus. It will allow us to sneak out so she doesn’t have to give any interviews. I zip up her bag.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

Natasha is wearing sweatpants, a baggy Nirvana T-shirt, and a dark-brown wig. We take the elevator up to the fifth floor and cross the pedway to the student medical building. We get a couple of glances from some med students as we pass, but they don’t care who we are. We ride the elevator down and head to the back door. Her mom’s white Range Rover with tinted windows is waiting outside. I open the passenger door to let Natasha in.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” her mom says. “I was worried they would find you.”

“It’s okay, mom,” Natasha says. “Let’s just go. I just want to go.”

Natasha turns to me.

“Thank you,” she says.

I give a weak smile and close the door. They pull away.

I take a deep breath in and pull the San Francisco postcard out of my pocket. The picture is of the Golden Gate Bridge with a fog rolling in. San Francisco is written in a pink script, giving the appearance of being handwritten. I flip it over.

*Evan,*

*I love it here. I’m so scared because it’s my first real photo shoot, but I love it here. People are so nice, and it is so warm. The only thing I miss is you.*

*Natasha*

#

I get a text from River. It says that we should meet up later. I don’t text him back. Instead, I go into my settings and block his number. I don’t feel bad for doing this.

My bed is made and would be that way if I came back. I grab my suitcase and take a moment while standing in the doorway to look around my room. There is a dirty pair of socks on the floor. On my wall, the television is surrounded by posters: The Killers, Eddie Vedder, Damien Rice, Leonard Cohen, Daniel Johnston, and Tori Black. On the corner of my bed is my Coach luggage set with a note for my mother on top. *This is for your next church garage sale,* it says. I place my straight razor into my Louis Vuitton Keepall that Natasha bought me. There isn’t much that I have to take. I have enough money in my account to buy whatever I need, for a while, at least. If I run out, Natasha has more than enough money for both of us. She's texted me three times so far to tell me how happy she is that I am going to go to San Francisco with her. She says that we will have fun. I don’t pack much more into my bag. I don’t need to.

I do a hit of coke and a wave comes over me, and then I don’t care anymore. I don’t care that I am twenty-one and that my parents want me to find a job. I don’t care that Chantal and I will never see each other again. I don’t care that my mom cried when I told her that I was moving to San Francisco with Natasha and that my dad took the BMW back and threatened to cut me off. I don’t care that I won’t know anyone when I arrive and that I still don’t know what I want to do. I tried to tell my parents, but they just wanted to talk to me about getting a job. A job is easier to talk about—a job is always easier to talk about—and I’m sure that my parents would rather talk about that than my drug habit, than the empty feeling I have inside sometimes when I think of my future. Nothing matters to me right now except that I need to call a cab. Not the silence in the house, the smell of cherry blossoms coming in the window from the trees that line the street, or the blue sky that is now open for summer. I am leaving to start my life somewhere else, somewhere warm.

The End