

(untitled)

Part I: The Starling

“God help thee! said I, but I’ll let thee out, cost what it will...”

I'm watching the erratic traffic out the window of my dad's pick-up. It's raining - it feels like it's rained nonstop for the last hour of the trip - and my dad keeps looking in the rear view mirror, grimacing.

"Should've thrown a tarp or something over that, I guess, huh?" Dad remarks. He's staring straight ahead now, concentrating on the road, which is three lanes across, with unpredictable on-ramp vehicles maneuvering into the fray.

I check the time on my cell phone and then glance back. All my stuff, packed up, boxed, neatly labeled in Dad's block letters and held in place by thick bungee cords - it's all soaking wet. The boxes are starting to sag, while spots of ink from the permanent marker runs in rivulets onto the black bed of the truck. They crease like a wrinkled old lady who's weeping her mascara off.

Which reminds me of Grandma (or Paulette, she insists I call her, but I insist on resisting) who had come over to see us off and make a suitable show of crying and throwing her thin arms around me, declaring how much she was going to miss having me around. My mom's mom. Daniel Thomas, my grandfather, died of a heart attack when I was ten; Grandma was never really the same. Not long after the funeral, she started dressing like a teenager and smoking (after quitting for almost twenty years) and went to the bars with men she met from what she called “that world wide web site.”

A guy jogging by while we were in the driveway almost tripped over his own feet when he saw her. She wore dark denim skinny jeans and a low-cut tank top. It revealed just the top of an electric blue push-up bra; if I wasn't mistaken, it was the same one she had tried to give me for Christmas last year, but it hadn't fit me.

Miss Thing, as our neighbors called her, had pressed me tight to her electric blue-clad bosom, kissed both my cheeks, slipped two one hundred dollar bills into my jeans pocket, and said, "I'm sure going to miss my shopping gal-pal. Have a good time." When she'd finally let me go, I rubbed at the ruby lipstick she left on my face, while she asked my dad if everything in the bed of the truck would be secure on the highway.

He'd said, "They'll be just fine, Paulette. Just fine."

But now the boxes look dismal, the taped-up cardboard secure – but soggy.

"Yeah, Dad," I say. "Oh well. Can't control the rain."

We had carefully checked the weather forecasts for the drive on the Internet for an entire week prior: warm and humid, with the chance of rain steadily climbing each day. Nothing certain, though, and when we left, it had been sunny.

"Sorry, hon. At least we're almost there." His mouth turns up, trying to look encouraging, when a red Audi cuts him off and he's forced to brake, sending our chests heaving forward and back.

"Agghh, son of a bitch," he mutters, accelerating. "Don't know *how* your mother chooses to live and drive in this kind of...wouldn't do this every day if you *paid* me...*I'm* the slow one, going

twenty over the speed limit to begin with..." and his mouth is really taking off now. He punctuates every three or four heated words with a clenched fist to the steering wheel.

"Calm down," I say, because I'm supposed to, but I can't help a smile. His temper, a harmless expulsion of rapid, angry (and amusing) grouching, only comes out when he's driving. Cut-offs and failing to use a turn signal, he takes as personal affronts of the highest order. I've tried explaining, *It's not about you, it's them*, but he insists it shows extreme lack of respect. There are worse things to complain about, I suppose; he usually gets over it as quickly as it began. His little storms-in-a-teacup keep him from blowing up about the bigger things, anyway; I imagine how foreign that must have been to my mother, how uneasy it made her feel.

"There's the exit," he announces, collected and on-mission once again. The truck veers with the steering wheel, right.

We're very close now; dread starts to cloud over me.

"Excited, Anne?" he asks.

I'm not sure if I should answer this positively. I feel anxious but not excited. I just nod.

The University of Pittsburgh is all wet, the white facades and sides of the numerous buildings are stained with the steady downpour. The humidity is dense – it feels like we're trapped in a soggy, swollen lung. Dad and I already know this is going to be a miserable endeavor. After we park in a big multi-level garage just off to the north of the circular Towers, we walk: down sidewalks, across Fifth, up gravelly steps, through the glass doors, into the Towers lobby. We are met with chaos and a shocking blast of air conditioning. I feel gooseflesh run up and down my arms as we hesitate, trying to figure out what we're supposed to be doing.

Everyone is carrying something – garment bags, backpacks, bunched up bedding – whatever didn't fit in the yellow and blue carts, emblazoned with the Pitt logo and packed to their brims with loaded laundry baskets, shoes, desk lamps, blankets, pillows, TVs, microwaves, mini-fridges, rolled up posters. Stray carts, abandoned wherever the previous user stopped and pushed them away, rattle forward and back, side-to-side, a few inches at a time as people knock into them. Families cluster at an elevator area walled off by glass and a bored-looking security guard. It looks like they can only fit three carts on at a time. I turn to my dad.

"Cart?"

He spots an empty one and pulls it over. "Let's get this over with."

We pivot and exit the same door we came in. He guides the cart over to the wheelchair-accessible ramp and with that descent, we begin the long move-in process.

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Marie James, my roommate, never responded to the e-mail I sent when I received the room assignment. She sits on the bed opposite mine, texting on her Blackberry, when we reach the open door, after an uncomfortable, crowded elevator ride. She looks up when we arrive and then watches us without a word as we maneuver the cart through the doorway. We're damp - my dad's hair is wetted down like a schoolboy's before class pictures - and sweaty. We stand before Marie, glance at each other, then back to her. She's a cool blonde, her long, layered hair so pale it's almost white. Everything about her is long, actually: legs, torso, face, eyelashes. Her glossed lips purse into a small pout and her eyes narrow.

"Hello," Dad says, if for no other reason than to break the silence. The word seems to dissolve into nothing.

"Annemarie?" She addresses me as if Dad said nothing, in a voice so full of immediate dislike I cringe. I want to respond in kind, but I don't know these rules.

"Hi," I say, unwilling.

"What do you go by?" She's focused in on me, intent.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your name. Do you use your full name? Annemarie? Or some nickname?"

"I usually go by Anne or Annie," I respond. This is clearly the right answer.

"Good," Marie responds, with a ghost of a smile. She pauses. "I don't want people confusing us."

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I'd had plenty of friends at home. The problem is that after high school, they all moved away for college. I stayed behind, unsure of my future, working at a convenience store and living with Dad. My girlfriends came home to visit for holidays. That was about it. They had stuff to do on weekends, college stuff, or they went to schools in other states. Then they'd dutifully come back to visit, but with each Thanksgiving break and Christmas break and Spring break, I realized how much the solidarity of our high school friendships had cracked. I couldn't relate, not to dorm life or roommate fights or walks of shame or essay writing all-nighters. I could relate more to the old women, the lifers I worked with at the store, the lifers who played the same lottery numbers daily, dreamed of hitting it big, and then let their husbands sleep on the couch all day while they were at work making minimum wage. Two years already seemed like such a waste, sticking around and growing older in less time than my erstwhile friends.

I knew Dad couldn't afford to send me to college. He had used up all their savings and dutifully paid off loans for the last eight years to send Mom to school when she had decided she could no longer go without the college education she put on hold, *ad infinitum*, when she got pregnant with me. But I applied to one school anyway, and made a phone call the night I received my acceptance letter.

I chose the University of Pittsburgh because it was where my mom had gone to law school after she walked out on her husband and daughter. She had abandoned us in her unhappiness, and somehow, she found something better. I, too, would go and find something better, something more substantial. And this time she was going to pay.

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Marie unfolds her legs and stretches, limber and graceful. "I'm going to get a smoothie."

Dad and I watch her go, smelling how expensive she is as her bright, floral perfume hangs in the air. His eyes are as wide as twin full moons. His lips start to move and I stop him.

"Dad. I'll deal with it. Help me unpack."

We work around her things with a kind of reverence, afraid to touch or brush against anything. She has so many possessions. She somehow got rid of the wooden chair that accompanies each standard issue desk and has replaced it with a gleaming burgundy leather desk chair. Countless pairs of shoes line the wall, she's hung three or four Chanel bags from the posts of her bed, and her *closet* – Dad and I stand before the four-foot wide space, stunned. It's actually miraculous how many articles of clothing Marie owns; it reminds me of Jesus and the fish and the loaves, but in textile form – if Jesus' followers had needed designer frocks instead of lunch. I look at my closet, where I've hung a few pairs of jeans and capris, some tee-shirts, some Gap tank tops and a black garment bag filled with a few nicer outfits.

“I think this’ll work out okay for you, kiddo,” Dad says. We’ve barely spoken, just unpacked robotically, setting things where they should seem to go, Dad asking now and then for my approval – *the lamp here? The books there?* He leans against the mini-fridge/microwave unit we chose to have waiting in the room, provided courtesy of a \$200 security deposit. It’s the kitchen for all intents and purposes. I’m wondering if we hadn’t taken that option what Marie might have done instead. Had granite countertops put in?

“I’m sure this is going to be fine.” I’m uncomfortable, sitting on my university-provided desk chair, rapping my fingers on my closed Macbook – a surprise my mother had sent to the house just a few weeks ago. I look out a rectangular window, distracted. We’re on the thirteenth floor and I can see up and down Fifth Avenue, where parents and kids are still pushing carts haphazardly through the slick rain. Every now and then a joyous crack of laughter punctuates the silence stretching between Dad and me. At his voice I turn.

“Marie seems – ”

“ – like a treasure,” I cut in. Dad chuckles, then grows serious.

“Call your mom, Anne. Thank her for the computer. And all this.” He gestures around the room. “I think she’s trying to apologize. Probably wants you over for dinner some night. Meet that boyfriend or whoever.”

“Husband, Dad. A year now. And I really...I don’t know if I’ll be – ”

“Just – have an open mind.” He stops. “And that one – ” He jerks his thumb toward Marie’s closet. “Keep a sense of humor about her, okay? Queen Frostine there might surprise you.”

He smiles, but it’s sad; he senses it’s time to go, it’s now or never. We stand, and he hugs me, and then holds me back at arm’s length.

“People will always be surprising you,” he says.

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Marie doesn't deign speak to me again until Monday morning, the first day of classes. She is barely around all weekend, coming back Saturday night at three in the morning to throw her clothes off and pass out. Sunday night she brings someone with her to sleep over. My alarm goes off at eight a.m. Monday morning.

“Shut that fucking thing off,” she hisses across the room at my bed. She's wedged into her narrow twin bed against a wall of sinewy, bronzed muscle named Ted; I heard her moaning his name. His shoulders, uncovered by the snow white down comforter, resemble the idealized form of Greco-Roman statues.

I'm already gone, though, my bed made hastily in the dimness before sunrise. Escaped, despite not having class until ten.

“Ugh.” Marie slides from under the pair of sculpted arms, reaches out toward the bleating sound, and slams her palm down on the clock next to my bed. Strong hands grab her butt cheeks when she's back in bed, kneading them rhythmically. They're at it again in moments.

I'm getting coffee in the basement of the Cathedral of Learning after Italian I, and I notice behind me a girl who recognizes me at once from class.

“Oh hey. *Annamaria*, right? ‘*Annamaria d'Erie*,’” she says. The girl is laughingly exaggerating our *professoressa's* thick Milanese accent, which dumbfounded most of us as she opened class by addressing us with Italianized version of our names and hometowns.

“Hi, yes,” I respond over my shoulder, turning back to the Starbucks barista to give her my student I.D., which she swipes and returns. I raise my voice a little when the milk steamer starts up. “*Celestina? Celestina de Squirrel Hill?*” I realize how terrible my accent sounds and blush.

“Yes,” the girl says. She’s still smiling. “Celeste from Squirrel Hill.”

“Anne. You don’t have to call me Annamaria, seriously. Thank you,” I say, as the barista hands me my latte, something new I’ve decided to try since I now live in one of the Starbucks capitals of the world, apparently. I step aside, unsure if I should wait for Celeste or go. She’s ordering her drink: a cappuccino with a triple shot of espresso. Does she have trouble sleeping, too?

“I was wondering,” Celeste turns to me. “Italiano study partners? I can tell right now I’m going to need someone to suffer through this with me. I can’t understand a damn word Valeria says, in Italian *or* English.”

“Yes,” I respond. I’m nodding my head vigorously. “That would be good.”

I wait for her. She’s all curls and freckles, with dark eyebrows, so dark she looks as though her brow is perpetually furrowed, deep in thought. We walk up to the first floor together; our conversation consists of me asking questions and listening. Her voice reminds me of Rosemary Clooney (*mambo, mambo Italiano!* I imagine her bellowing), and her laugh, which comes easily, reverberates off the hollow halls of the Gothic main area, so much so that students already taking the overachiever’s prerogative, intent over textbooks and scribbled notes already, look up at her, wary.

“I have to catch a bus back to Squirrel Hill,” she says, as we push open the front doors and spill out into the sunshine – and I think how funny it is that something like the Cathedral of Learning would have *front doors*, like any old house.

“You commute?” The word feels strange on my tongue, one of the many university-related terms and phrases now entering my vernacular on a regular basis, like *syllabus* and *meal plan* and *office hours*.

“Yeah – I applied to a bunch of schools on the west coast, but my sister got pregnant and moved back in and Mom needs the help – you know how it goes. Thought I’d stick around, see what kind of trouble I can teach my new nephew.” She grins, an impish, conspiratorial expression that jolts me with sudden affection: I want this friendship.

“*Que ora?*” Celeste asks. I stare at her.

“Oh! It’s nearly eleven-thirty.”

“Already? Daaang. All right. See you Wednesday!”

I smile and am about to turn but she stops me.

“Wait – totally forgot.” She pulls out a piece of notebook paper and scribbles on it.

“Easiest way to get a hold of me.”

It’s her cell phone number, and I’ve already got it programmed into my phone before she’s out of sight.

“What the fuck? Rude,” Marie snaps at me the moment I step foot inside the room.

I shuffle toward my bed, confused, trying not to make eye contact. “I’m sorry?”

It’s an invitation for her to elaborate, but she takes it as some sort of apology and shakes her head: *that’s not good enough*. Marie’s poise, even when furious, remains impenetrable. It’s more frightening than having someone lose it all the time.

“If you’re going to leave at the ass-crack of dawn, maybe you can try to remember to shut your alarm off before you go?” She’s standing in front of me, confrontational, pointing at the clock like it’s a wretch on death row. I peek behind her for the first time and am grateful that Ted has gone.

“Oh crap, Marie, I’m really sorry.” I set down my bag and take a seat on the bed, drawing my knees up and meeting her hard stare.

“Sorry? Hah. Forgive me for doubting your sincerity. Where’d you go, anyway? Fugly Club?” She’s wearing skin-tight jeans, over-the-knee boots and a form-fitting white tee-shirt that says “Chloé” on it – with no bra. She might as well not be wearing a shirt. I try not to stare at her nipples, especially when she’s openly insulting me, but it’s like being in some glamorous foreign capital city, where the customs and behaviors I’ve known all my life are laughably unsophisticated. I don’t care if she likes me, but I wish she wouldn’t hate me.

Then Marie pulls off her signature move: hitching a designer bag over one shoulder, shooting me a look of disgust and walking out without a word.

I stare at Celeste’s contact information on my phone, wondering if it’s too soon to call her and beg for a couch to sleep on tonight.

Then a familiar song rings out: the theme from *Taxi Driver*. It’s my mom calling.

“Hello?”

“Oh my God, Annemarie. I didn’t know if you’d pick up.”

“Hi. Why wouldn’t I?”

“I – thought you might be in class or something.” She pauses; she’s lying. “Did you get the computer?”

“Yeah. It’s right here.” I look up at my desk, as if she could follow my glance. “It’s great, Mom. Thanks.”

“How do you like school?”

“It’s all right.”

“Do you have a roommate? What’s she like?”

“Kind of a lunatic,” I say, and I’m forced to laugh. “I think she’s bi-polar.”

“What makes you say that?”

“She’s – really nasty sometimes. She might be the meanest person I’ve ever met. No filter on it, especially toward me.” I immediately regret opening up.

“That’s not bi-polar,” my mom responds, her voice flat.

I just nod. There have been moments over the years, when she’s rude or cruel or maybe just being careless over the phone, and I want to say, *How dare you speak to me like that after what you did?* But I don’t. It’s too late.

“I received your first tuition bill.”

What does she want me to say? “Mom, I appreciate you doing this, you know.”

“Don’t waste my money, Annemarie. This is an incredible opportunity.”

“I won’t disappoint you,” is all I can say. Still, she’s quiet.

“Did you pick a major yet? Do you know what you’re going to study?”

I cringe. “It’s really the first day of classes,” I say.

“What did you pick?” she presses me.

“Art history. I want to study art history.”

She goes silent again, processing. “That’s...interesting.” Then she’s thinking out loud, as if I’m not sitting here listening: “Art history...at least it’s not *philosophy*...could curate at a museum... travel opportunities...Lisette had a daughter who majored in that...but that was at Yale...”

“Mom,” I say. “I don’t know, all right? I just like art and history and – God, it could change, in a week. Who knows.”

“When are you coming for dinner?” Mom picks her battles.

“Whenever you want me to, I guess.” This fills me with more anxiety than move-in day.

“I’ll probably have to have Vince pick you up – unless you can get a bus? Have you used the buses, yet?”

“No, but I’m sure I can figure it out.”

“No. I’ll have Vince come get you. It’s easier for him. I can pick something up for dinner on my way home.” Mom never cooks.

“Fine.”

“Jacob might come for dinner, too, if he knows you’re coming. You guys got along at the wedding, right?”

I've wondered for a year how much she knows, what Vince has said. "Hm, yes. That's nice. When is this even going to happen?"

"I have meetings tonight and tomorrow. Wednesday I should be home in the evening."

"Wednesday, then. Six o' clock-ish?"

"Six o' clock. I'll have him park on Bigelow and give him your number so he can let you know when he's there."

"Sounds great."

I hear a woman's voice in the background. "Ella, the prosecutor's motions have come in; I think Simone should start researching some evidence suppression issues."

"Ah. Yes. Can you get her in here first, though?" She addresses me, "I need to go, Annemarie. Don't forget. Do you have a calendar or day-planner you can write this down in?"

I reach for a piece of printer paper, the closest thing at hand. "I have –" I start to say.

"Never mind. I'll get you a nice one. See you Wednesday."

She hangs up.