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# Players

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Players

by Philip Probasco

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Fine Arts degree at

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'By' is the word that maintains the most questionable veneer of wordhood. B-y? It looks like someone stuck two random letters together.

- LILLIAN WILSHER

## Chapter 1

Hello my name is Lillian, and you might recognize me from such things as the quote you read before this chapter. If you didn't read it, do so now! It has so much relevance, I promise. If you're interested in complete honesty, I made it up solely for the purpose of having an epigraph because I couldn't think of any quotes. It's basically a placeholder until I can find a better one. I'm not a professional quote-maker or anything, but if you're interested in how I came up with it, I was typing the title page for this book, and between the title and my name, that word 'by' caught my eye. Then I wrote the quote. That's how it came to be. I swear I'll make it relevant by the end of this book. It will be so profound, so revelatory. If you're interested in complete honesty, my last name is Wilsher, and I'm writing this book in my own words to show my friends and mother and possibly the world that I'm a person who has friends and colleagues besides the dark lord Satan himself. He's not even in the top five, really.

Yes, and I'm writing this, my first book, quite simply so far, according to *The Simple Guide to Writing Your First Book*, by Janet Holloway. According to Janet, my priority now is the establishment of my tone and protagonist. (Bonus points if I can get the reader to sympathize with him or her! I can almost imagine Janet as a fiery grey-haired guru over my shoulder cooing, "Extra points Lillian! Extra points for sympathy!")

Deciding on the book to guide you through writing a book is no easy task, as you can probably imagine. It's like marriage! Ha ha! My college counsellor will get that joke, if she's reading, because she always says picking a college is like picking a husband! It's true! Although she's divorced, so I'm sure what I'm supposed to make of it anymore.

One similarity is that I tend to go for skinny guys and skinny books. Biggest red flag: the number of books on writing that warn you if you don't grab your readers from the first sentence you might as well be rearranging letter magnets on a refrigerator. It's like a guy telling you up front if you don't seduce him fully in the first five minutes, he may as well move on. Not the husband for me, nor the writing instructional for me. First of all, refrigerator magnets? That came out of nowhere, didn't it? Second, nearly all of the books with this advice have awful first sentences (I expect the same of these imaginary guys' pick-up lines). Don't believe me? Let's go on a first sentence tour.

1. *The Secret of Writing* by Matilda Noshier: *If you could write anything, what would you write?*

Snooze.

2. *The True Secret of Writing* by Jeanette Welburn: *Write, write, write your book, gently down in ink. Think of this as the mantra for this journey.*

Surprisingly impressive in terms of preserving the original form. Still, it's hard to get away from the suspicion that it's a line she thought up when she was twelve, wrote it in her diary, and used it more as a present to her former self than anything.

3. *Twelve Days To a Novel You Can Be Proud Of* by David Griggs: *In twelve days, you'll have a novel you can be proud of.*

Look, I care as little about sentence-ending prepositions as the next girl, but David *must* know there are people out there who do, mustn't he? That surely such a bold move won't help his sales? And he still went and did it? I'm floored. Hardwood floored. If I wrote a writing advice book, my first sentence would be a delicious red herring like: *Writing a novel is as easy as killing a person, let me show you how!*

Anyway, the first sentence of Holloway's book is bland as they come, but there's a certain comfort and clean-ringing honesty to it: *Writing is about being honest.*

I hope she's proud of me because I haven't lied once, except just now with all the exhibits on the first sentence tour. I don't think those were what she was talking about though. You all probably guessed I was making those up. What was I going to do, go to a bookstore? What Holloway is talking about is the Capital-T Truth. The Great Truth. The courage to dig inside yourself until you arrive at some ugly bloody lump and pull it out and show it to the world. That's what I want to do in this book. I'm no hero or anything, but I want to find the courage to tell the Truth of my descent into madness during my senior year of high school. (Mr. Henley if you're reading, no, I do not think I'm Jack Burden. He doesn't own the rights on capitalizing words, in my opinion.)

I bet Janet would be reprimanding me for doing such a lousy job of the whole sympathize-with-the-protagonist part so far. And in a moment I'll be doing an even lousier job. I'll be generating anti-sympathy, if that's possible. Because I've got a couple of admissions, apart from the whole black magic stuff, which I'll get to later. I warned you. Hopefully we can get past it all in time and pages.

One: I go to a private school right on a fucking river. It's called Bowen School and it's the kind with a sizable quad where students lounge in the sun and wear polos that say *Bowen* on them and also wear khakis or pleated plaid skirts that sometimes get pulled down in the upper balcony of the chapel during lunch if stories are to be believed.

Two: Bowen is a boarding school, so there are dormitories like Crumbine Hall, Tudish Hall, Greer Hall, and yes fair reader, Wilsher Hall. I think you can guess the implications of this (if you don't remember my name go back to the beginning and it'll

become horrifyingly clear). I'm only telling you this so you won't hate me later. I'm telling you this so you can hate me from the start if you're so inclined, and can write it all off as entitled blah blah rich blah blah boarding school blah blah river blah blah pleated skirts blah blah blah. I just don't want you to have liked me from the beginning only to hear this later, in this book or heaven forbid (my mother's phrase) from a newspaper or TV. They love bringing both those things up about me, trust me.

Three: I have a webbed toe on my left foot. I don't know if that affects your opinion of me, but it feels good to get it off my chest.

Allow me to begin with Chemistry. The class, not infatuary emotional interactions, silly. Okay, maybe a little of both. Is infatuary a word? My computer is telling me it isn't, but I could've sworn otherwise. (Mrs. Evans, if you're reading this, leave a note.)

This takes place before I became a Bowen Player, but this is not the Campbellian First Threshold (Eh, Mr. Roberts? Think all I did in Mythology class was shamelessly play tic-tac-toe with Whitney, didn't you?) This is what Holloway calls the *inciting incident*. That is, the thing without with none of this journey to the underworld, the death, the *dran* as in *drama* from the Greek *to do* wouldn't have surfaced like a putrid bubble in a swamp of my life to be my singular goal for senior year: to not think, to not pause, to not wait, and to not split my infinitives. Three out of four ain't bad. Yes, we will begin with chemistry (yes, in both senses) but more principally, we will begin with a girl named Whitney.

Whitney was a breezy girl with thick eyebrows, self-deprecating with no real reason to be and with a self-described *masculine energy* (she'd say it in the drawn-out sort of way where she wanted you to know she was a self-aware individual who didn't

give a fuck about the information about herself that the self-awareness provided). She was my first and best friend at Bowen. She lived in Wilsher Hall too but that too was incidental. The only impact it had was that, in the few lunch periods or free periods I would visit her room to play a video game on her old N64, I discovered (five years in) that the dorm bearing my name is a cramped, stuffy shithole that smells like dried asparagus. Oh well.

We mostly played tic-tac-toe, and once we'd solved the game, we moved on to dots. I don't remember how exactly I met Whitney, but my family was her Host Family--all boarders had a Host Family and Whitney and I were in Mr. Searle's ninth grade English class. She asked me one day and I said sure. I don't remember there being any more fuss about it than that. My mother was extremely paranoid over the two years we were her Host Family that we never did anything for her, but I didn't think *anyone* really did for their host boarders. The one thing we did end up doing was getting her an enormous cookie cake for her birthday and surprising her in the Student Center with it. But I found out later that she got in trouble because she kept the pizza cutter my mom left with it. It was apparently classified under "deadly weapon" in the Bowen Residential Life Rules For Things Boarders Aren't Allowed to Possess.

Back to AP Chemistry though. It was probably my least favorite class in all of Bowen, because chemical bonds are legitimately the most difficult thing to imagine in all of any subject at school. That's not true, there's a bunch of theoretical physics stuff that's way worse, but that has the coolness factor going for it. I know virtually nothing about string theory except that it's awesome. Chemical bonds however aren't remotely



interesting for whatever reason. Show me a stick and ball model or mention the words 'reaction prediction' to me to this day and I will gag in front of you.

Anyway, Whitney and I were in chemistry, which is an AP class, so people in there are automatically at least a little smart and even Whitney is pretty smart. Plus, in some ways a terrible sign and in some ways a glorious sign: Reed is in the class.

It's terrible because if the class has a curve, one that curls away to nonexistence with Reed there. Doesn't matter. Forget it exists. But there is an upside that balances this out, and tips his presence in a class into the positive. That is, you get to stare at Reed. That is, I do. Because I don't think anyone else stares at Reed the way I do. He's not the kind of boy that girls stare at. Which is just another reason I like staring at him. He's skinny, with a tangled mop of dark hair. It's a Jewish look, probably because he's Jewish. And the way he looks at Dr. Mills when she talks about that one bond that has the same name as that Greek style of columns. Blazing, intense curiosity! He looks the way I probably look looking at him! About molecular bonding models! Can you think of anything more endearing? There is a reason too that I get a good view of him, while everyone else has their back to me. All right, prepare for the first of many shoehorned metaphors, but this one was too good to pass up.

The class is divided into pairs, see, like pairs of atoms! Held together tenuously by the electrons of err, academia. But only in groups of two. Some bonds are stronger than others, like me and Whitney (the best friend bond) while others are bonds of necessity, like my cousin James and Madeline, who get along but don't hang out outside class. And finally, when all of the atoms are paired up the way that the indecipherable laws of chemistry or high school have determined, you might have an

ion that doesn't have a pair. This is Reed. He's free-floating. He fills the seat of a student who is sick or skipping or just can't take chemistry any more. But when all are there, he settles into a seat along the perimeter counter where the Bunsen burners are. This means, yes I get a clear view of his profile from the back, and get to see every little movement, like the cute way he rests his elbow on the table and his hand on his cheek, his skinny pinky finger resting above his lips. Ugh.

And as in chemistry, as in life, as in high school, sometimes destruction happens, bonds are shaken, broken, and in the midst of the aftermath, we forget to see that what just happened may not have been the end of all life, but an inciting incident all along.

The destruction I just mentioned happened to Whitney. She got a 46 on her midterm grade in Spanish. This is typical Whitney. If she hates the teacher (most of them she does) and is off her meds, then she'd been known to get a test, hand it in blank, and take the rest of the period off. She usually reserves this act of *panache* for early in the semester when she still has time to pull the grade back up. Because the thing is, Whitney is fiercely intelligent. She's like that boy I read about who got a 0 on the SAT and got accepted into every Ivy League school: she *knows* the right answers, but she sometimes purposefully chooses the wrong ones. She's playing her own game.

The problem is, in high school, great acts of existential *panache* never go unpunished. Whitney's parents weren't happy unless she had a 4.0 GPA, which was basically impossible with a sprinkling of 0's throughout the semester. And so the administration called her parents and her parents called her to tell her they wouldn't finance her teenage rebellion any longer. I didn't know this phone call had happened at

the time. All I knew was the Thursday after midterms came out, Whitney came into the crowded dining hall in a tizzy.

Here I will place a visual picture of the dining hall because Holloway says its how you place a reader (“though don’t go overboard!” she warns, endearingly).

The dining hall is a cavernous room of dark wood and sunlit brick. High above the noise and gossip below hang dozens of flags announcing every country represented by a current international student at Bowen. There are a lot of flags, but you tend to forget about them after a glance around yields nothing but white kids. (How did I do? Too sparse? Not enough sensory imagery? Too much white guilt? Janet, if you ever read this, leave a note.)

“Hey,” I said as Whitney banged her tray down. “Waffle!” I added reflexively, because her plate was full with a gorgeous golden Bowen-dining-hall original. I took my fork from my salad (not for health reasons, I just don’t like waiting in lines) and wrestled a fluffy piece from the corner. Whitney did not say anything about this, she just squinted down at the waffle like she was trying to read her fate in it.

“You make the best waffles. What’s your secret?” I said, putting it in my mouth.

“I wanted a perfect waffle on my possible last day at Bowen,” she said.

I swallowed. “What, are you finally going to steal a Walkabout tent from the Wilsh basement and take it on the lam?” She’d always talked about doing this, when she got down about school. Possibly catching a ride to Wesley Island, an unspoiled oasis in the middle of the river where organic farms and drum circles abounded.

“No,” she said. “My parents just called. They’re on I-59 right now, headed to Bowen.”

“*What? Why?*”

“According to them because I failed Spanish.”

“You didn’t fail,” I said. “We’re only halfway through the semester. You can bring the grade up. Did you tell them about that boy who got a 0 on the SAT? They should be proud!”

“Lily,” she said, finally looking up at me. Her big green eyes were wet behind her maybe-prescription maybe-not glasses. “This is serious. They mean it. You should’ve heard them. I explained it all. They don’t care. They just care about the dumb number. That’s all my whole life here is to them.” She was crying now, her face pale and slick.

“But it’s just a threat, right? They’re always threatening to pull you out. What, they’re just going to *force* you in the car and. . . what?”

I didn’t want to say it.

“Drive me back to Birmingham,” she said quietly.

“That’d be *ridiculous*,” I said. “And I don’t mean moon-landing ridiculous. I mean shape-shifting-alien-reptiles ridiculous.” It was more efficient and humorous to use the Sliding Scale of Conspiracy Theory Outlandishness with Whitney. She’d gotten me into reading about conspiracy theories. She didn’t believe any of them--at least any of the big ones--she just liked learning about them and gauging them by apparent plausibility. Needless to say, shape-shifting alien reptiles who secretly control the world and feast on human blood, while a decent B-movie concept, is low on the list of plausibility.

“I know it’s ridiculous,” Whitney said. “I really don’t know what do. That’s why I got this, in case it’s my last meal.”

She hiccuped and kind of laughed. That's when John Silver and Brett Pollack slid into our table and the conversation was over. They're friendly, but I could tell this was a conversation she didn't want to have with them there. She hurriedly wiped her tears and I tried to keep things light. I gave her a few hidden pats on the back. Because you never know. Whitney's parents *were* crazy certainly. Her mother was a painter for god's sake. And they sent her all the way to boarding school--would they really want to have her back? Because the thing is, you could tell that a lot of the boarders here were sent away for a reason. It was really no wonder that Bowen didn't want them with pizza cutters. I guess the school was working from a starting point of *these are the type of kids even their own parents don't want to deal with.*

We got up and set our trays on the conveyor belt in the steam-filled kitchen window. I said an awkward thank you to the workers, and when Whitney set down her plate and the golden waffle with only the one bite taken out of it, she said thanks Marvin (she was on a first name basis with them), turned to me at the door, ready to burst into tears again.

I had French after lunch, so I went up to the sunny circle that overlooks the river. It being a gorgeous day, I stopped to watch the sun glint off the crinkled surface of the river, and the green trees of Wesley Island reach up against a clear blue sky. Two girls were sitting on the library porch, swinging their feet over a fifty-foot drop down to the overgrown hill that rolls down to the river. I had the sudden urge to go over and give each back a firm push, because don't we all, really, when we encounter people living on the edge? We want to show them where it gets them, don't we? I wanted to push them,

but then I'd have been living on the edge myself, probably much more than them, because I would've committed a double murder.

So instead, I just ducked into the small and old building where I have French. It's one of the oldest buildings at Bowen and was once a dormitory, so all of the classrooms are oddly-shaped because they were fashioned out of a combination of old dorm rooms. I was so distracted thinking about Whitney. We'd sat in the quad after lunch until fourth period, coming up with a dozen valid arguments to confront her parents with when they arrived. We mutually refused to accept or acknowledge even the possibility that she could be leaving Bowen.

Well, it seemed the day was just getting better and better because I sat in the empty classroom for ten minutes before the mousy student teacher poked in to get a stack of papers and gently remind me that we had class in the Keys Hall computer lab today to work on our Famous Figure projects. I grabbed my backpack and hustled back across Lufkin Circle. The girls were gone. I glanced over the edge to see if they'd fallen and were lying mangled at the bottom, but apparently the world was not punishing recklessness today.

The Keys Hall computer lab is basically a cramped attic-like room with a dozen computer carrels and a sloped ceiling, and by the time I got there, everyone was already logged in and working. Madame Lewis gave me a stern look. If you didn't know any better, you might think that the whole class had been raptured, but no, for whatever reason, my year nobody wanted to take French so we have three people in the class. Well, three regular students and two French exchange students. That's right. It's even

worse than having Reed in a class. Their fluency makes us three Americans look so much worse by comparison.

I sat down with a hurried excuse to get to work on the project. My project was on Dennis Diderot. He invented the Encyclopedia or something.

“Lillian,” Madame said from behind me. “Où étiez-vous?”

“My friend, my friend,” I said, breathlessly. I was supposed to be speaking in French, but at this point I didn’t care. There was something about how stupid this project was and how stern Madame’s tone was that made me not care about anything except going and finding Whitney and running away with her.

“Qu'en est-il votre ami?”

“My friend might be leaving, all right, so I can’t really focus right now!” I shrieked. Both the French girls--who were for the record annoyingly pretty--looked over. But I didn’t care about them either.

Madame frowned at me. She was the one teacher I could never fully read, could never figure out whether she loved me or hated me. It was usually one or the other with my teachers, and I could usually tell from the first day which it was going to be. But with Madame, who’d been my French teacher for three years, seemed to switch by the day. I was a better speaker than the rest of the class (Frenchies excluded) but sometimes I think she hated me. This was one of those times.

“Two MRs,” she said. “And see me after class, Lillian. You’d better get a lot of work done today. Henry and Kate are much further along than you on their projects. And Camilla and Édith finished theirs last week.”

You know Madame is mad when she starts talking in English. It was such a rare occurrence that it sent a chill down my spine, which I guess was the effect. Also, two MRs was very harsh for mere lateness, *especially* when class is taking place not in the regular classroom. Also also, Madame neglected to mention that Camilla and Èdith had already completed their project because they were allowed to do it together and didn't even have to do a PowerPoint because they were going to just bring in posters of glamorous French actresses they had right in their dorms and saying a little bit about them. "We should take advantage of the access to French culture that was provided to us in Camilla and Èdith!" was what Madame said.. So not only did they get free 100s, they didn't even have to work for them. It made me want to go to France, take English classes, and rather than doing a dumb project bring in pictures of Audrey Hepburn (swoon) and maybe read some Sylvia Plath (double swoon) and collect my As.

But of course I didn't say any of this. I just said, "Oui madame," all red-faced and opening up PowerPoint and Wikipedia to get the best information on Dennis Diderot. I also opened Bowen's email client in the background, and two minutes later a ping informed me that Madame had already submitted my MRs.

Subject: Misconduct Report Action

This is to inform you that you have received (2) Misconduct Reports, submitted by Jeanine Lewis. You have a total of (2) Misconduct Reports on your record as of today. They will be wiped clean in 30 days. If you receive (2) more, then you will receive a Detention Notice.

Reason(s) Given: Late, shirttail untucked



I was shaking by this point. I didn't get much done on my project, but then, halfway through the period, something crazy happened. The door opened, and we all looked over to see the kindly face of Mrs. Turner in the doorway. I her recognized only because she was the mom of a girl I used to hang out with in sixth grade. She worked in the Residential Life Office, which, as a day student, I did not ever visit. Mrs. Turner didn't even walk over to Madame and confer with her like messengers usually did, she just turned right to me.

"Lillian," she said. "Would you mind coming with me?"

I looked to Madame Lewis, who looked like she'd never encountered anything like this in twenty-plus years of teaching. I stood up numbly.

"You can bring your backpack," Mrs. Turner said. "If it's all right with Madame Lewis, you'll be excused for the rest of the class."

Madame Lewis looked like it wasn't okay with her at all, but she didn't say anything--I think she was just as confused as me--and I didn't stick around to watch her seethe. I logged off, grabbed my backpack, and followed Mrs. Turner out of the lab.

"Whitney is leaving, Lillian," she said as we walked down an endless row of lockers. And the weird thing is that I was most shocked by the fact that Mrs. Turner even knew we were friends. "She's out in front of her dorm. She requested that you two be allowed to say goodbye. I've got to get back to my office, but I did all I could to convince her parents that this isn't right."

I barely heard the last part. It seemed so unbelievable. What about the speeches we'd come up with? Had Whitney given them already? I walked down the steps beside

Keys, to the enormous parking lot right in front of the McGinnis Hall, like a gaunt brick onlooker to the proceedings.

The moment I saw Whit standing by her parents' car, I remember being surprised by the first tear falling off of my cheek, and wiping it away. I'm not usually a crier, but there was something about the shock of this all happening so fast. The day before I had no idea her parents were *thinking* about pulling her out of Bowen, and five minutes ago I didn't think they *would*, but now I could see there was no stopping it.

"You're not leaving!" I shrieked, but it came out wet and helpless.

When I got there she hugged me fiercely as her parents got back in their car, unable to stand in direct sunlight for very long lest they melt like the Wicked Witch of the West.

"It's ridiculous," she whispered. "I'll visit. I'll visit."

"You're not coming back?"

"They're putting me in a public school in Birmingham."

"You'll visit?"

"I promise. I might run away if I can," she said lowly. "Live on Wesley Island. Come across during the day and eat in the dining hall. I have my uniforms, you don't think they'd notice would you?"

I laughed because I couldn't help it. The image of a muddy-shoed Whitney standing in line at the sandwich bar, sitting inconspicuously with twigs poking out of her hair at our usual table by the windows. What else could I do? I reached up and brushed her hair back, revealing the streak of dye I'd helped her reapply two weeks ago. Originally bright purple, it had faded to a brownish red.

“At least you don’t have to worry about getting in trouble for your amazing hair any more,” I said tearily. She stepped back. For the first time I noticed that two other people were there. John Silver and *Reed*, of all people. Reed gave her a firm handshake, and John hugged her. It was their free period, and Reed was good friends with John, and John and Whit dated last year for a little while, but it ended badly, so he was dead to me. You know how it goes.

But now, we all had a common enemy. And really, I wanted to talk to her parents, to tell them my family was her Host Family and so we were claiming her now, and they had forfeited rights to her when they mistook a number on a piece of paper for the education she was getting a Bowen. It *was* ridiculous. There was no way she’d get a better education in Birmingham. But I never got to say those things because they’d apparently already packed, and Whitney, with one last significant look at me, said, “Have a senior year for both of us.” We hugged one last time, hard, our moment interrupted by a honk from her parents. Then she got in, and the car pulled out of the parking lot, the chemicals of the universe having triggered a reaction well and truly out of my control, and now I didn’t know what to do.

But I did know what I didn’t want to do, and that was go back to French. So we stood there, the three of us. John was upset, and we comforted him, until my own shock and sadness spilled over when I realized I wasn’t going to see her tomorrow or the next day and that I didn’t actually have any friends other than her and that there would be no one to play tic-tac-toe with in Chemistry. There would just be a vacant seat beside me now. One day its filled and the next it’s not. And I’m alone.

“I can’t even process the ramifications of this,” I said. “If a butterfly can cause a hurricane, then what does the hurricane cause?” I didn’t know what I was talking about. I was crying. I didn’t want to cry, but I couldn’t help it. I watched Reed and John both stand there looking, typical boys, like they were trying to decide which one was going to comfort me.

I didn’t need them. I needed Whit.

But then Reed put a hand on my shoulder.

“Hey,” he said. “Now I have a seat in Chemistry. You’re better company than the Bunsen burners.”

I looked up at him and my heart swelled, the emotional storm turning for a second to passion. And so, some bonds are broken, and others, other free-floating, positively-charged, gorgeously dark-eyed ions, find a fixture.

## Chapter 2

Okay, here it is fair reader: I know you're not expecting this because I've set this up so far in a very *boy-meets-girl* kind of way, a very *the-boy-I-idolize-from-afar-never-notices-me* kind of way, but this is not some neat story where certain things are fated to happen. This is not some drama where one plot point leads into the next, tracing a shapely narrative arc before your eyes. This is my life. Sometimes life borrows ideas from narrative, it's true, but it's not all written out beforehand. Or maybe it is if you're a determinist kind of person, but if there is no free will then the story was not written by an experienced author whose written an entire successful first chapter thank you very much, it was written by a monkey.

("Get to the point, deary, all this philosophizing will be cut later," I can hear Holloway saying quietly at my shoulder.)

Okay here it is: Reed and I had been on a date before all this happened. Yes, it's true. I feel like such a withholding narrator!

Note: I am not withholding the truth or the Truth, I just didn't think this information would fit in with the arc of my first chapter. Real life is so frustratingly bereft of narrative, isn't it? There's no overarching arc, just a hundred little messy zigzags and spirals that mean nothing and eventually dissolve in memory. Everything I'm saying now, every word, will eventually dissolve. For example, I'm seeing Reed the very night I'm writing this, two years removed from this horrible ordeal and nearly everything that happened has dissolved, and some of it literally.

Now, this date I'm referring to, which happened last summer, was a *real* date. It wasn't one of those *I-orchestrated-two-people-to-drop-out-of-movie-plans-so-it-would-be-just-me-and-him* kind of dates, nor was it the casual kind of *oh-is-this-a-date-or-isn't-it* kind. It was clear (and I'm actually proud of this), because the word *date* was uttered by myself when I asked him. Yes, *I* asked him. I had to. He was never going to like me if I did nothing, and you might say, ha! You shouldn't want to be with someone who doesn't want to be with you! I say, that is the most b-u-l-l-s-h-i-t (I spell it so kids reading might not understand. Shh, don't tell them. Though I realize I've used fuck quite a bit ... oh well. I'm worshiping the truth through writing. There can be no going back on words that have been truthfully etched into the book of my life) thing I've ever heard in my entire life. Downright detrimental advice, really. Because there are people like Reed in the world and maybe everyone else who don't know what they want, who don't know who they want to be with until they are with them. I'm not one of those people. I knew exactly who I wanted to be with.

Of course, I didn't get Reed to like me on this particular date. No no no no no. It was the most promising date and it was a fantastic, brilliant disaster. See, Reed and I *were* friends and have always been in that vague way you are when you share a best friend. To be clear, I was better friends with Byron than he was (we leveled out eventually, then after Bowen, I went back to being better friends with him). But that's how we originally got acquainted. The easiest way to explain it is Byron lives near me on Scenic Mountain and feels practically like a childhood friend even though we only met in sixth grade after he moved from Mississippi. But our mothers play tennis together and participate in the same garden club (what, am I sounding too obnoxious? It's True, I

didn't ask for it) and organized to have us carpool when I was just a wee little thing, bony-kneed and quiet and he (as far as I remember) still had a jaw chiseled by Michelangelo and the curly hair of Marcus Aurelius. Byron was a prescient name for him, come to think of it because he's vaguely Byronic in everything he does. He will deny it, but I swear he was reading *Don Juan* when we first met on the bus to Wesley Woods for Bowen's sixth grade trip. Flagrant narcissism, in my opinion.

Then I learned the other side of the story: That *he* had to sit next to that weird, kind of quiet girl who lived on Scenic Mountain and always wore that pink shirt from Chicago. For the record, it was a well-washed red. And I've never been to Chicago, my parents have. Does this count as a lie? I often wonder this.

We became best friends somewhere along the line. I will admit to it. I had a crush on him, my first long-term crush I would say, spanning seventh and much of eighth grade. But it was more of a crush in the way you'd want to date Michelangelo's David if that makes sense. You knew it would never work out, you being a human and it a statue, but it's a nice idea. Byron seemed perfect to me. He was Mr. Extracurricular, and much smarter than me, salutatorian of our eighth grade class. I'll give you one wild fucking guess who the valedictorian was.

That's how Reed and Byron knew each other, as far as I can tell. Because they were in all the same classes from the beginning, because they're both hyper-geniuses and somehow, I truly believe my friendship with one and relationship with the other was part of the hand that molded me into someone who is capable of thinking about things other than black magic and witchcraft. Because those are things you don't really think about. You just *do*. I'll get there.

So Reed and I met through Byron. That is to say, we inhabited the same large group of friends that gradually through freshman year and sophomore year gets winnowed down. I'm speaking of Amanda and Alex and Travis and Maggie Turner (daughter of the darling Mrs. Turner who pulled me out of French), and Whitney, and a handful of boarders. And Byron and Reed and me.

Amanda had frequent parties at her house on the rival mountain in the city and those took up most of my freshman year social life. My sophomore year social life was radically different, strangely enough because that's when Byron introduced me to Reggie. A senior to my sophomore at the time. It was also the first Bowen play I'd ever seen. They were both in it. Don't worry, this'll come back around to the date. It's all interconnected in a way. It's impossible to understand my mindset asking Reed out on a *date* without understanding Reggie.

The play was *Dark of the Moon*. Yes, how convenient! you might say, if you're familiar with the play. Life imitates narrative sometimes. And this is one of those times. Because I truly believe it was a coincidence, but a remarkable one, that the first Bowen play I saw was about witchcraft.

I didn't stand a chance. To the sway of theater, not witchcraft, silly. I must've seen plays before then. I must have. But I'd never seen one like this. Reiter Theater is a black box theater. Quiet and empty, and oh so deliciously intimate. That was what got me. The stage was on the same level as me, from where I sat in the front row. I could reach out and touch the actors, touch Witch Boy, and I wanted to, to feel the dark felt of his costume because he was so believable. I couldn't believe that this was a student who went to classes and took tests on this very campus. He *was* Witch Boy, and the girl, the



gorgeous with the bright stage-eyes who was Barbra Allen was so lifelike that it was hypnotic to watch alongside . . .

Yes, Reed. Reed and I went to the play together. This was *not* the date. No, not even close. This was a mutual show of support for Byron and Natalie, who was more Reed's friend, also a very good actress, and for me, Reggie, who Byron had introduced me to. Interestingly enough this was the only play in high school that Reed was not in. He had a very short-lived stint as the coxswain of the crew team because he was skinny and smart. I don't know much about what goes into being a coxswain. I think you have to not weigh very much and be able to yell row.

When Reggie first emerged from the dark maw of curtains I nearly clapped my hands together in glee. Because Reggie, you have to understand was a barefoot kind of fellow. He drove around a silver Jeep, the trunk of which was permanently covered in a thin film of gripping chalk. He had his own kayak and threw frisbee on Ramsey Field in his bare feet. So to see him, his hair tamed by hairspray and in what looked like a scratchy suit, and during the dancing scene, watching him kick his heels on the wooden floor of the stage which had been transformed from the black stage I remembered from freshman year circular theater, I had to cover my mouth in joy.

Reed took off his shoes in the middle and curled up his feet into a cross legged, leaning forward. Typical. Adorable.

"You were wonderful," I said afterward, as Reed and I braved the mob of people and body heat on stage to congratulate the actors. I threw my arms around Byron and Reggie in turn, and in turn got an intoxicating whiff of hairspray and mothball fabric. The whole thing had taken hold of me in an unexpected way, the kind of shock-of-cold-water

way that you just can't describe. It seemed so unbelievable. How did they do it? How did anyone do it? What did they feel on stage? Did they feel like themselves or someone else? I could've asked them these questions, but I suspected I wouldn't get real answers. I'd have to find out for myself. That's what caused me to come to the play every single night after that, all five shows.

The second I focused on the faces, the third I tried to resist being sucked into the illusion and instead see it as merely ordinary people in funny costumes saying lines coiled into their brains. The fourth show I watched repeated large sections of dialogue under my breath.

"Witch booooooy!" the two witches and I said in unison, them walking through the fog on stage, a pale green light settling over them, me on the front row. I wanted them to see me, I wanted to be part of this magnificent illusion. That's another reason I came to every show (apart from the matinee for the seventh graders. Sadly I couldn't slip out of class), that I wanted to feel as part of the show as the actors, because I wanted to see the way they were informed by the exact number of times they'd done it before.

For the fifth and final show, something was different. The lights went down, as always, but a spotlight came up in the center this time, and a girl, swaddled in rags came out, a young girl, one I didn't recognize from any of the other showings of the play.

She spoke in a raspy, rattled kind of voice as she addressed the crowd, or as it seemed, as I was attending alone that night and sitting front row center, addressed me alone.

"If ya'll have any of them magic rectangles, we'd appreciate it if you get them gone for the length of the play," she said, and then she snapped her jaw like she was

biting the air. She seemed genuinely deranged. Then her voice sung through the theater, a loud keening voice ... "Witch boooooooy."

A chill wormed down my spine, like the words had cut in at the back of my neck. The girl hobbled away, and I didn't realize it then, but it would turn out to be an almost symbolic introduction to that particular girl.

*Dark of the Moon* ran in the spring, so it was Reggie and a lot of the senior Players' last play. And two weeks after that, after the rigamarole of awards day and senior luncheon, they were off to the great outdoors, otherwise known as senior trip (told you Bowen loves this stuff, and they really go all out for senior trip too. And when I say all out I mean they really strip you of everything you know and love from modern society).

The only thing left of him was his silver Jeep in Reiter Parking lot. So we, being lovely mischievous friends, Byron and I decorated his car with an number of haphazardly-cut printed pictures that all loosely led from one to another, tenuously, but the connections were there, right around from his passenger door to his driver's side door in exactly the way that this story doesn't.

I know, Janet, I know! These sorts of metaphors are as tenuous as the first connection we drew between Reginald's name and a picture of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*. That is they're forced, but just like that connection, isn't there a charm in slapdash metaphors? We need to talk, maybe, because I feel this second chapter has gone a bit off the rails, like a small frog that you take as a pet, save from drowning in a puddle on the Lower Fields and then it engorges and turns into a much larger frog than

you expected and can't hide it into your glove compartment any longer and have to set it free.

Anyway, the point is I was feeling a bit loopy and daring because it was my last day of sophomore year, and it was blazingly gorgeous out, Ramsey Field was spread out like a, um, large flat green sunbather, slumped in the sun as I walked across it, toward the art building, coming off of doing something whimsical and thoughtful to Reggie's car. I think I also had new sunglasses that were in front of my eyes, seeing the world with a brand new view in which I was the Reginald, which happens to mean king in Latin. I was the king of Bowen and the world maybe.

I clambered down through a thick-leaved path tucked past the back road behind the art building. It led to a small concrete dock that jutted pitifully out into the murky waters of the Tennessee River. But there was something so peaceful down here. A couple times I've come down here on free periods, brought music and unsuccessfully skipped rocks. A light wind whipped the pungent smell of sun-heated water toward me and wet reeds around. I felt so good. Exams were through and this was the last day of school before graduation, which I'd be going to. Byron and Reggie were coming to Foley Beach with me and my family. I was on top of the world. But I was missing something. And I'd miss it all summer if I allowed myself to.

I wasn't going to take that. This was a time for *doing*, not *thinking*. Though to be fair, I did not take that advice. I sat there, sinking rocks and thinking thinking thinking, like my past and current self was and is so horridly good at. I wanted to be like Reggie and Byron and the older actors in *Dark of the Moon* though. I couldn't imagine the girl who played Barbra Allen, a senior named Elyse Cavicchi had any trouble asking boys

out. If they didn't jump on her first. I heard a rumor that the senior that played Witch Boy had a crush on her and that all the songs he played (yep, plays the guitar and sings) in the Winter Showcase in Reiter were about her. There was something so appealing about that. Characters on stage, lovers offstage. I wanted to be her, even though I didn't know it. I wanted to act like someone who knew what she wanted, like a girl confident enough to ask a guy out, I wanted to play the part of Reed's girlfriend. I wanted it.

So I dialed his number. *Ring*. I knew he was in the art building. He was finishing his self-portrait for art class. *Ring*. I had the sudden and distinct urge to hang up. But immediately afterward, I suppressed it as I imagine the actors suppress the urge onstage to be themselves instead of the character they'd be given. I'd given myself my character. *Ring. Ring.* And halfway through the fifth ring—

“Hey.” His voice set my heart pounding.

“Hey, uh, Reed?” I said.

“Hey Lillian.”

“Hi, listen, can I talk to you about something?” (That's four variations of 'hey' if you're keeping count. Clearly we've done this a lot. Thinking about it, I think that might've been the first time I talked to him on the phone.)

“Sure, what's up?”

“Can you come down to the dock behind the art building?” Muffled rustling.

“Uhh, can we talk on the phone? I'm really close to finishing this project. I've been really slow about it all semester, and I'm really close.” I closed my eyes. What would Elyse do? (Elyse, if you're reading this, I have two questions: 1) is this really what you would've done? and 2) on a scale of 1-10 how weird is it that I'm channeling you

like a spirit guide even though I never talked to you in my life? Leave a two part note, and let's get coffee sometime.)

We both laughed. "I'd really prefer to talk to you in person, it won't take long. Plus it's gorgeous out." (I think he caught on by this point. Reed is nothing if not sharp.)

"All right," Reed said. "Yeah, of course. Give me five minutes and I'll see you down there."

"See you then," I said, and hung up. I swear the hot sun burned away the next five minutes in about two seconds, and two seconds later, I looked up to hear the crunch on gravel and Reed Henson coming down to meet *me*. My nervousness, my shakiness evaporated, burned away in a startlingly similar way to the way I later learns happens when you get out onto stage, under the bright glare of stage lights. The sun was just an enormous stage light and Reed's flip-flops and khaki shorts and black shirt were just his costume and his was just another entrance. I knew what I had to say.

"Hey." (All right, I didn't say this vignette was written by Beckett!)

"Hey Lily," he said, which *cemented* the fact that we were reading from a script. He'd never called me Lily before. It's weird, isn't it, how much narrative influences life in small ways like this? I'm sure he was doing this unconsciously, but there are scripts out there for hundreds of situations that we so easily fall into. Break-ups, first meetings, small talk, nervous high school first date requests. I realized I had a rock in my hand. I smiled at him and looked out to the river and tossed it, thinking that nothing could go wrong. My life was being written by one of the greats, and for an irrational moment, I thought it would just skip on the surface forever, off into the lapping heat, an unbroken symbol of what the beginning, by my own hand, and skimming across the water in a

manner that threatened to go under at any minutes, but kept skipping up despite what anyone thought or the laws of physics or anything, for the rest of our happy lives together.

But of course, it didn't even skip once. It sunk with a loud *plunk*.

The illusion was broken. The uncanny valley was revealed. I saw the actor sitting next to me through his costume and make-up as just another classmate, nervous to be on stage as I was, thinking about only his next lines, how convincing his facial expression was, and if so-and-so was here tonight, eyes trained on him at this very moment.

But then again, real life can be charming just as shaky metaphors can be, just as it can be just as appealing to watch the play and get sucked into the characters, but it can be just as enjoyable to watch them as actors, like a documentary on social factors and cognitive dissonance on the stage.

Reed reached down and picked up a rock and flung it, and it skipped once, twice, and leapt magnificently for the third time.

"Want me to show you?" he asked, grinning. I slipped out of my flats and sat cross-legged on the concrete dock while Reed showed me how to throw it just right.

I know, Mrs. Holloway. skipping rocks has been done before. I just read your section on *Being Original!* It was contained in a nice little box that was decorated with flourishes and dapples of ink, and I'm sure if you had more money, like I want to do, you'd have made it all different colors to really drive home how creative and in-your-face originality can really be! Listen. I'm not being snarky, even if it sounds like it. It's just, what order are we supposed to follow your guidelines in? This is something that has

been bothering me lately as I arrive at the point where I'm not sure if it's better to be truthful or not, because Reed really *did* teach me to skip a rock. I didn't do it perfectly in the end, but I suppose a rough-around-the-edges cliché is even worse than a neat one because it shows you know what you're doing is cliché and are trying to cover it hastily up. But your first sentence still rings in my ear: *Writing is about being honest*. This is honest, if nothing else. I'd like to talk with you about this if you have the time. I might write a letter and ask. If you tell me being original is more important than being truthful, I'll come back and change it. Maybe a kayaker can get carried by a wave ashore on the small plot of land and it can crack and we can have a whimsical time patching it up for him. I'll bestow Reed with the skills to do so though in truth he'd have no hope, and we can let the kayaker go, he'll assume we're a couple and then we can joke about it afterward and work my way around to asking him on a proper date. Which reminds me:

"You want to have dinner with me tomorrow night?" I asked after a silence. Now I have to interject one more time here to talk about narrative, and I know you're tired of hearing it, but this is important, because this has happened to me a few times in life and this is one of them. They always seem to happen with statements like this. Like the words, after you've spoken them, literally *hang* in the air. I'm convinced this has to do with narrative and our expectations. But this pregnant (NPI, hopefully) silence in which you can faintly *hear* the slight static from the television or the movie and play-goers shifting around in their seats for a moment. You feel like you've got an audience because you've only seen moments like this on a soundstage or theater stage.

Thankfully it's always over in an eyeblink:

"Yes," Reed said. "I would." Heart flutter.



“Great. Well, I was thinking Signal Point. That okay?”

“Perfect,” Reed said, looking at me so intently, like I was suddenly Dr. Mills talking about chemical bonds. (I know this is anachronistic! This happened before chemistry, but that is the only way I can think to describe it! He looked at me the way he looks at the teachers in class! It was wonderful! I’m too happy to apologize or think about timelines!)

“Well, you better go finish your portrait, mister,” I said probably a little too playfully, and even punched him gently on the shoulder. Cringing writing that, but it’s true. Reed got up and brushed himself off.

“All right,” he said and turned to go back up, and then when he was two steps away, he turned back and said, “I’ll call you.”

If my heart was still intact by that point, it sure wasn’t after those three gorgeous words. I felt like we were dating. Already. He left and I stood up because I couldn’t sit, but I didn’t want to leave this spot just yet, where something so life-changing had happened.

I went over to the small inlet of woods, and found a stump. I wanted for all the world to do the cheesiest thing and find a knife to carve a giant lopsided heart and write LW+RH, but I had no knife. If this had happened two years later, I’d have my personal blood knife on my car keys, but I was still probably in a back closet in Marion’s house just then, waiting for a night, maybe a little too coincidentally, exactly one year from this one.

But I sat on the stump, and when I felt myself drooping, *physically* drooping, I laid down on the stump and felt one of the two best feelings that I’d ever felt in my life. My

heart is beating so fast right now writing it, just thinking about that feeling. The leaves shuffling above me looked like they were moving in physical orchestration for my life, just for me, like props, like everything in this world had been carefully set out by a stagehand, fitting around dressed in a blanket of green leaves somewhere in the woods, committed as they were to delivering everything I needed for my life to go perfectly. They'd set out each of the rocks and the three kayaks that had been lying out coming down here, and they'd planted this stump so I could lay on it and feel the burgeoning rays of love radiate outward from my stomach, a pleasurable throbbing in and out as gentle as the small waves that were licking the pebbled shore.

I got that feeling out of it, and I think Barbra Allen would've said it was worth it for that alone. It sure wasn't for the date, which was perfect, or the three days afterward when I called him and he didn't answer or the meeting four days later at Matisse, where he said that he doesn't answer calls that didn't leave a message. I knew he didn't like me because if I ever got a call from him I would return it a million times over. But never let it be said that I don't follow through. I asked him if he wanted to be my boyfriend, and he said he wasn't ready for a relationship, and I discovered then there is a pleasurable kind of melting feeling and another that is harrowingly painful.

### Chapter 3

It's a new year! Well, it's still the same school year but it's a different calendar year. I'll take any sort of artificial symbol of rebirth that I can get, thank you very much. Because I may still be a junior, but I decided one thing after Whitney left and the shock of it dulled into a vague melancholy for a few weeks. I decided I'm trying out for the play.

"You're doing what?" Whitney's voice said from over the phone, from five hundred miles south, down in the bowels of the country. I guess globally, that's where I'm located too. I promise it's nice, people reading this. I've been to New York and it ain't all that.

"I'm going to try out for the play,"

"What play?" I repeated it partly because there was bad service and also partly because in my head I imagined starting the scene in the book of my life with Whitney saying *You're doing what?* and I wanted my readers to hear what exactly I was doing, because it was going to be the inciting incident in the story of my life. It turned out it wasn't, at all. It was the full on First Threshold. If you need to know the difference, go read Holloway. She touches on it. (I expect free advertising money, Holloway, if this book ever becomes more popular than your beloved one. Also go read some of her books. All thrillers, as far as I can tell and maybe one romance. *Dead O'Clock* by Janet Holloway. *Over Your Dead Body* by Janet Holloway and *Tying the Noose's Knot* by Janet Holloway. I haven't read them yet but I'm sure they're wonderful.)

"Lily?" Whitney said. "You always take long pauses like that. Are you thinking of digressions for the book of your life again?"

“Oh, sorry, what?”

“Live your life!” Whitney said. “You can’t live in stories! You have to live for both of us now!”

“See, but you’re making it hard by saying something I’ve literally only ever heard said in fictional stories. *Live for both of us*,” I said, smiling.

“Point taken,” Whitney said. “But it’s awful. I really miss Bowen. Has John talked about me any?”

“Yeah, he was sick yesterday actually. I think he’s depressed.”

“That’s sweet,” she said wistfully. “All the guys at my new school are slobs. I can already tell. Cargo shorts are a telling sign.”

“I’m sure there would be just as many at Bowen, were the boys not forced into scratchy khakis.”

“Want to know something weird? I actually wore my skirt to school last week.”

“Eww!” I said.

“I know! I miss those ugly plaid things more than I thought I would.” We laughed for a good solid few minutes, joking about how she could wear them as short as she wanted without worrying about Coach Hammond with his trusty ruler in his back pocket that seems like an excuse to bend down and brush young girls’ bare legs.

“Be good, Lillian. Are those MRs from the devil woman gone yet?”

“Almost. I’ve got one more week to avoid getting a detention.” This detention was the worst one too, because I occurred after winter exams, when everyone else would be on break.

“Wait, you never told me the play you’re trying out for,” she said.

“Oh, I don’t know what it is yet.”

“Is Reed doing it too?”

“He’s trying out.”

“Ooooh.”

“Shush, you.”

I really did try to follow Whitney’s advice, to *be good*, to not get two more MRs. It should’ve been so easy! It should’ve been a cake walk! What are cake walks? What is life? Who are Bowen teachers to decide what separates simple conduct from *misconduct*? Here’s how I got each of them. The third was on December 6th, the fourth was on December 12th, which was one day--one day!--from having them all erased! Oh cruel fate! Oh wretched destiny! Why do you send me down, like a blazing star to Earth, like a second inciting incident to scorch my life!

Sorry for the Elizabethan lament, we’re reading Othello in English class. Which is coincidentally where I got my third MR. I got the December 6th MR in English class. My misconduct was being proud of my friend! That’s all it was. See we’d gotten a batch of freshly photocopied essays from a bunch of practice SAT essay questions that the grade had taken, and I suppose they gathered the four best and were passing them around to all the English classes, as a model for how to write a good essay.

To all you aspiring SAT-takers out there: here is what I learned from the practice. Eighty to eighty-five percent of the battle is having cool handwriting. I’m not kidding. And yes, I could segue that into a brief treatise on the superficiality of the world, but I’m not going to go there, because my heinous crime is neigh. When we got the papers,

Brandon Haik, a boy who's pretty smart but hangs out with the jocks, exclaimed: "Check out the *Lord of the Rings* handwriting!"

I was overcome with pride for my best friend's handwriting, what can I say? It's awesome, and sophomore year I even endeavored to change mine to look more like Byron's it's so cool to look at. It's got the swoopy-ness of Elvish, so go look it up if you don't know what the hell I'm talking about. A lot of it is in the 'n's and the 'h's, swooping in a delicious arc down past the line. My project to change my handwriting eventually trailed off, but to this day, I write my 'd's and 'y's differently because of it (yes, another lay-up, not gonna take it).

"That's Byron Yorke's handwriting!" I said.

"Lillian!" Mrs. Evans snapped. "We went through special pains to remove all the names from these papers."

"But they all did well, it's not like they're going to be embarrassed," I said.

"People who are this smart with such neat handwriting are also typically very modest!" she said. "So that's one MR for you, and I hope none of you will tell anyone else that Sample Essay #3 was written by Byron Yorke."

"I'm sure they had plans to tell *everybody*," I said under my breath.

"What was that Lillian? Want to make it two?"

"No ma'am," I said. I didn't, I didn't! So why on December 12th did I during the Chemistry exam, why did I wear a skirt and blouse! Why!

"MR," Dr. Mills said simply, like the clean swing of an executioner's axe from behind. I spun around.

"What?"

“Your shirttail is untucked, Ms. Wilsher.”

“It’s free dress!” I said.

“Yes, but you’ve chosen to wear a skirt and blouse. There are no exceptions. You’re free to wear anything you like, as long as it’s reasonable.”

“Madeline is wearing sweatpants,” I said, pointing to a girl hurriedly flipping through a binder to get some last-thirty-second studying in.

“And it’s *not* reasonable to tuck in shirts to sweatpants, but it is expected that Bowen students follow the basics of dress etiquette, even in free dress.” I suspected that this had some metaphoric connection with loneliness.

I tried not to argue because Reed was there. He’d taken the outside and left the desk we shared to me, because he’s considerate like that. I wanted to run over to him and ask if he thought Dr. Mills was being unreasonable and I’m sure he’d say yes and kiss me passionately, but I sat down at the desk he’d left me, and with my head swirling with ions and reactions, and with other chemicals, the lovey-dovey variety, I gave him a small wave, and tried to push the fact that I was going to detention from my head until I’d nearly failed the Chemistry exam. One dreadful thing at a time. It seemed like I could control nothing. Not school, not my transcript for college, not Reed sitting there, who’d rejected me six months ago at Matisse with the excuse that *he wasn’t ready for a relationship with anybody*, not even the sacred break after school was safe. Even that was invaded now, by detention. What college would want a girl who’d been to detention? Did that show up on your record? What boy like Reed, too sweet for teachers ever to think of giving an MR to, would want to date a girl like me?

I stared at the first problem which I had no idea about. Write a reaction for the following: 1) A concentrated solution of hydrochloric acid is added to powdered manganese dioxide and gently heated.

Why not just get the reaction over with? Why not burn it up, burn it up quickly so the manganese dioxide doesn't have to suffer? Maybe if I went over to the bunsen burners and did a practical chemical reaction of 2) A horrid chemistry exam printed on paper (sodium sulfide) is gently heated, and burned in an excess of oxygen ( $O_2$ ) and sweet cathartic existential metaphors (MIL2S) that Dr. Mills would be so impressed she would give me a hundred on the spot and take away my MR and force Reed to go on another date with me, one in which I would make myself *irresistible*.



## Chapter 4

Subject: Detention Notice Action Date: December 17

Dear Student,

This is an automated email alert to inform you that you have received (4) Misconduct Reports in a 30 day period, which has earned you (1) Detention. Your Detention will take place on Thursday, December 20th, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. in the Field House Film Room. There will be no films shown, however.

In rare cases, the date of detention can be moved to another, more convenient date. However, you probably shouldn't try unless you have a sports event and you're a really skilled athlete that has appeared at least cursorily in Bowen Magazine. Especially swimmers. As you know, Bowen's swim program has been named the the number one high school swim program in the country, so if you're a swimmer, email us and we'll certainly talk, champ. If not, do not email. You know what? This isn't even an address that can be replied to. Don't waste your time. This is a automation. So don't reply. Especially if you're untalented and out of shape and if desirable boys don't give you the time of day. If they won't, why should we? You have to admit it's a convincing argument. See you December 20th in the film room, where again, there will be no films shown. See reasons for the Misconduct reports below.

Reason Given 1: Late

Reason Given 2: Shirttail untucked

Reason Given 3: Being a proud friend, which I, Mrs. Evans, am incapable of

Reason Given 4: Fuck you, that's why

[The above email was edited by your humble author, to bring some of the underlying meaning to the surface.]

And the deathly day would have taken place on December 20th, the day after my last exam (pre-cal, eugh, don't even ask), so I was all prepared and braced appropriately for the one two punch of pre-cal exam and then detention the next day, only like a stay of execution, I got a dreaded ping from BowenMail right in the middle of celebratory lunch at the Terminal downtown with Byron and Natalie, who was also in *Dark of the Moon* and who I'd begun hanging out with (we asked Reed, but he was going to lunch with his sister, year older, typical).

I glanced down at my phone to see the gruesome stay of execution.

From: David Hammond

Subject: Detention

Hey folks!

As you probably know, I'm on duty to give detention on Thursday night. As you probably don't know, my wife and I are going through a divorce. I've got my first date as a single man on Thursday night, which I scheduled having forgotten about detention. I told her it was okay, though, that there were only three students and they were all highly

accommodating. So can you guys make it December 21st instead? I would appreciate it!

Regards,  
Coach Hammond

[The above email was not edited at all, believe it or not.]

I wanted to reply that it was not at all okay, but Coach Hammond wasn't the smartest apple. I mean, he clearly doesn't understand what a win-win is. So I groaned and told Byron and Natalie that I'd be available tonight instead of tomorrow, but they weren't doing anything tonight and weren't going to move it to tomorrow, because that's when the new Oscar bait movie was coming out with a name like *Down Deep* or *Hopscotch Lane* or something, I can't remember. So lovely.

On Friday night I told my dear old mother--bless her heart, if she's reading this--that I was going to the movie, because it was honestly just better for her blessed heart not to know. I did it for you mother, and the easiest thing in the world would be to lie about it here, but I will not, you hear that Holloway? I will not!

I forgot to eat dinner. That was my first mistake of the night. I guess a part of me assumed that they would have something to eat, you know, like not anything nice, but maybe Coach Hammond would make the rounds half an hour in and ask politely if we wanted peanuts or pretzels and then hand them to us with little napkins printed with *Last Bowen Dentition of the Year!* neatly on them in cheerful Christmas colors. What?

I'd never been to a detention before. And I'd barely ever been to the film room in the Field House before, only once I think during the eighth grade lock-in. Yes, it was a Bowen-original, a night were we're all locked in the Field House and slept there and played games set up on the courts of the gym and ran around the locker rooms playing tag. I fell asleep at 8 pm in the film room because it's where all the wusses went. But I think there was a lot of sex happening outside the room, and possibly inside, in the dark, come to think of it.

The film room is a stark white room with desks in tiers down to a giant projector and chalkboards at the base. Coach Hammond was writing on the board when I walked in. One other student was there, a nervous-looking freshman, but the kind that I immediately knew I could never be friends with. Why? Because of the streak of bleach in her hair. Hate me if you want, but I guarantee she thought the same of me when I entered.

Coach Hammond wrote across the board: NO TALKING. MY DATE WENT GREAT LAST NIGHT, I KNOW YOU WANT TO ASK BUT ARE FOLLOWING THE FIRST RULE.

Okay, now I run into the problem of describing a new character, both in my life and in the narrative of my life (not necessarily the same thing). Because just as Coach Hammond was pulling up an enormous analog clock on the projector up front, I guess to tease us with how tortuously slow the seconds were going to pass in detention, when the third detentionite swung the door open, a backpack swinging from her back. She glanced from me to blondie and apparently decided I was more her style because instead of passing like I assumed she was going to, plopped down right next to me.

She was also a freshman it looked like, with black hair that swung across her blush-red cheeks and pale milky skin. She looked familiar somehow, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"I'm Marion," she hissed.

"No talking!" Coach Hammond's deep southern voice echoed up to us. "I hope you all brought work to do!"

"What work, we just had exams," Marion said dully.

"A Bowen student's learning is never at an end!" Coach Hammond said, as if it were some official saying, but we all knew he'd really just made it up on the spot.

Detention commenced. I had nothing to do. I'd brought a book but left it in my car, and when I asked if I could go get it, Coach Hammond said I would have to live with my choices. I grabbed Marion's notebook, wrote my name on the first page and passed it back to her. And then it clicked. I knew where I recognized her from: the Bowen play. *Dark of the Moon* last spring.

I had to stifle a laugh when Marion raised her hand and asked rather earnestly if there was a movie being shown. I even saw blondie smile behind her paperback, the cover of which showed a blood-stained clock, its face sprung open showing its gear-clogged guts, springs leaping dramatically forth.

Coach Hammond even seemed to get a small chuckle out of it, because he didn't punish Marion. For the first half hour, he seemed to think he was a warden at a high security prison. He paced around and eyed us like we might jump up and shiv him at any moment, then I suppose he remembered we were high school girls and not prison-hardened criminals, because he relaxed and began messing around on his computer. It

was still hooked up to the projector, so the giant clock disappeared and we got front row seats to him painstakingly composing his formal *bequest* (which I guess he thought was a fancy word for *request*) to this woman who he'd moved our detention so he could go on a date with.

He got a call from her an our in and went to take it, with the stipulation that we were only allowed to go to the restroom for a few minutes at a time.

Marion immediately got up.

"You coming?" she said.

"What?"

"Out to the vending machines. I'm starved." I realized I was too. Blondie didn't look up from her book while we got up and made our way for the door, because after all, Coach Hammond didn't say we weren't allowed to go together. That's something girls did, right? I felt like such a girl at that moment, weirdly enough, like we were about to go lean into the mirror and dab on eye shadow and talk about boys.

"So what's your name?" she said.

"Lillian," I said.

"What're you in for *Lillian*," she said it in the ironic kind of way you do when you're trying to tiptoe around saying hackneyed contrived things, like she was reading a script but making fun of it at the same time. She batted her mascaraed eyelashes when she said *Lillian*.

"My teachers hate me," I said. "Well, about half of them. Which is apparently enough to get enough MRs to get you incarcerated. And I'm not sure about Madame Lewis, really, she seems to switch from liking me to not liking me daily. Hourly, really."

“Do you care a lot about who likes you and doesn’t?”

“No,” I answered automatically.

“Don’t lie,” Marion said. We’d reached the vending machines, and she dug around in her backpack and pulled out a few crumpled bills. “When you lie you prove that you care more than anything.”

I thought about that. I did care who liked me and who didn’t. I cared a lot, probably even more so than the average person. Marion began smoothing the bills on the side of the vending machine, feeding them in, and tapping buttons. Half a dozen colorful baggies rained down.

We dined on processed food sitting the bleachers of the darkened basketball court. I went for a Pop-Tart first.

“I saw you in the play, by the way,” I said, unwrapping it. “You were great.”

“Which play?” Marion said. “I was in two over the summer and the *Skin of Our Teeth* this fall.”

“You were?” I said, amazed. “No, I was talking about *Dark of the Moon* from last spring.”

“Oh,” she said turning directly to me, her eyes twinkling. “Were you the one in the front row, the one who came to all the shows?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m going to try out in the spring. Natalie got me to do it.”

“She’s my mama!” Marion said, bouncing up and down. Off my confused look, she explained: “She played Isabelle and my mom in *Look Homeward, Angel*, so now we call her mama.”

“Cool,” I said. Glancing into her backpack, I caught a glimpse of the book with the shiny gold letters. *The Theory and Practice of Witchcraft*. Weirdly, I wasn’t surprised. I realized she must be a kind of pseudo-goth, the closest Bowen could produce. I could tell she saw me see it, so I figured the best thing to do was to jump on board, pretend to be interested.

“Witchcraft?” I said, smiling as if to say *that’s kind of interesting and cool*. What I was really thinking was, *come on now*. But I fooled the actor, because she smiled softly and said, “I know, embarrassing, right?”

“Not at all,” I said. “It’s not for your role is it . . . ?”

“What? Oh, no,” she said. She took it out and flipped through the pages. “No, I’m just interested in this stuff on a scientific, non-supernatural level.”

“You’re interested in *witchcraft* on a non-supernatural level?”

“I guess that sounds funny, doesn’t it,” she said. “But think about this. Wait, do you know what the placebo effect is?”

“Yeah,” I said through an orgasmic mouthful of strawberry filling. Whitney had taught me about it. “It’s like, when you think your headache goes away after you think you’ve taken a pill.”

“Right, but you don’t just *think* your headache goes away,” Marion said. “It actually *does*. Just as surely as if you’d taken the pill. Well, in about twenty percent of people. Another twenty percent aren’t affected by it at all, and the remaining sixty percent report varying degrees of the effect. Scientists call it the ‘meaning response.’ The point is, the body responds not to the physical reality of the treatment but to the *meaning* behind it. It’s like literal evidence of magic.”



Maybe it was the fact she was talking about scientific studies while flipping through a book of witchcraft, maybe it was that she reminded me of Whitney, or maybe it was just the sugar buzz. But whatever the case, I was on board. In retrospect, I realize that makes me a part of the twenty percent of highly-suggestible people, but I didn't realize that at the time.

I looked down at the page she had the book open to. A dozen small icons were crammed tightly onto the page, each one labeled with a word, like *Sword*, *Wine*, *Friendship*. *Rebirth* was a spiral.

"What are these?" I asked.

"Glyphs," Marion said. "You want to get out of here? I can craft a spell to get rid of Coach Hammond."

I snorted. "Yeah," I said. "We should banish him to the nether realm for the rest of time. Then we wouldn't have to suffer the vague sexual assault of having him bend down to measure the length of our skirts."

"I know, right? I'm sick of having to worry about my skirt length. I'm sick of MRs, and I'm sick of detention." This all came out in a ragged wail which I felt the heat of like being in near a shotgun going off. It reminded me of the involuntary broken noise I made when I first saw Whitney standing by her parents' car. A broken scream at the universe.

"I know what you mean. It's like, we're just as mature as Coach Hammond and his *formal bequest* in there, but society doesn't care. He gets to reschedule detention, and we have to go along with it."

“You understand then. I saw it in you, that’s why I sat beside you. I saw the mad gleam of witchery in your eyes.”

“Oh,” I said. What do you say to that? I was flattered, I guess. Whatever I thought about Marion’s weird beliefs, there’s no doubt she had *panache*. “Get rid of Coach Hammond, huh,” I said.

The air felt thicker around my body, like a lead apron at the dentist. It was like it was bracing itself for what I was about to do next. I was a little loopy from my first detention and the emptiness of such a large building and the possibility that Coach Hammond could see we were gone and his voice could rip through the air at any moment. People are highly suggestible under stress, and I was under a lot of it.

And so we cast a spell. It was less involved than I thought it was going to be. Marion took my hand and instructed me to imagine in abstract terms, Coach Hammond disappearing, and--this was key--to believe at some fundamental core of my body that it would happen. And I did it. I cast myself adrift on a sea of madness, and for some measurable space of time, I believed, truly believed, that Marion and I were real witches, that we had supernatural powers, and the world was a game we could cheat at or a play we could rewrite.

And then it was over, and everything was normal again. I do not believe that Marion and I caused what happened next to happen, but the moment after we cast the spell, I felt weirdly serene. I ate some Bugles. Marion and I returned to the film room. Coach Hammond came in a bit later and announced that Julia was upset and he had to go comfort her and that as an early Christmas present to us he would let us go but only if as an early Christmas present back, we wouldn’t tell anyone he let us go.

The three of us--me, Marion, blondie--agreed to this deal. And as blondie packed up her book and Coach Hammond erased the board, I turned to give Marion a look of disbelief. She tucked her black hair behind her ears, and her blue eyes which had gotten bluer since I'd met her were not wide and amazed like mine; in fact, she looked like she'd known this was going to happen all along.

## Chapter 5

After that night I didn't see Marion again until the first day of auditions for the spring play. In the interim, the events of my first detention became the most retold story of the first few months of the year. I got a *lot* of mileage out of it with Byron and Natalie and Reed. I hesitated to tell it at first, because I was afraid I'd come off deranged in it. But then I realized I could tell it like I'd just met a crazy person and here's the insane coincidence you you would've never expected!

But then, because I hadn't read you, Holloway, I hadn't learned the primacy of truth in all things yet, I embellished it and cast Marion into more of the kooky out-there role and myself as the unassumingly attractive one who anticipates and exhibits the audience's reactions. I asked her every question that I know my friends would've asked her, and got increasingly vague and hand-wavy answers. I left out the part about the blood and the way I felt, I replaced it with a small chant and then the end.

One day in mid-February (post Valentine's day) we were in Chemistry of all places (got a solid C on the exam, in case you were wondering), when I saw her again. She was delivering notes from the office, as Bowen usually made all freshmen do. When I was a freshman I had to be the note deliverer twice because they started A-Z and at the end went back through. So I had to do it twice in two weeks, but it's actually great because you get to skip morning classes. You also get to deliver notes to all your friends, only you have to make them look official, because you have to give them to the teacher first, and they hand them out. The only time it gets awkward is when the teacher is passionately in the middle of a lecture and you have to stand there for an excruciating

few minutes because usually the teacher prioritizes their knowledge over whether a student needs to go see the dean for grades or their grandmother died or some shit.

So I was surprised to see Marion slip into Chemistry, her hair now up in a ponytail, looking distinctly more Bowen-ish than she'd looked the night in detention, I suppose because she was wearing a red B-shirt and pleated skirt, just like every other child in a twenty mile radius, unless their wearing the white B-shirt which I think I might've been rocking that day.

She stood there while Dr. Mills explained about how a jumble of capital and lowercase letters equalled another jumble of different lowercase and capital letters and how we'd have to remember the exact letters for the AP exam, only actually, no! The formula was right on the AP exam when I took it in May. Right there! Thanks, Dr. Mills, if I hadn't had to memorize that formula which I've now purged from my brain for good, I might've gotten a 4 instead of a 3 and maybe I would've been able to memorize my lines better for the play that wrapped a week before the exam and not have forgotten the whole chunk on the Friday performance!

(Holloway: was that too blunt an approach to your suggestion of foreshadowing? I mean, what I did there wasn't so much a foreshadow as it was a forefigure, and it wasn't even a shadowy figure either, it's one that probably looks suspiciously like the girl standing awkwardly with the note while Dr. Mills went on and on and on.)

Dr. Mills finally stopped with a final flourish on the board as if she'd just pulled the veil on the secrets of the universe by explaining that  $PV=nRT$ . I'm pretty sure only Reed understood the universe a little better, based on his scribbling to the right of me--way more scribbling than was required to write the equation down.

Dr. Mills acted like she'd just noticed Marion and plucked the outstretched note from her hand, holding it at arms length to read it. Marion muttered something I didn't hear and left without making eye contact with me. I briefly entertained the notion that our rendezvous in detention had never happened, or that it was a different girl, or an astral projection or something (okay, I read up a *little* on witchcraft over the break, for the most part just to see, maybe a leftover habit of gauging the feasibility of outlandish claims, like Whitney always did with conspiracy theories. We exchanged missed calls over the break and ended up texting. Her new years resolution: visit Bowen and possibly escape to there. Mine: I was never a big new years resolution person so I settled for the lame answer of trying out for the play. I didn't get to ask her about witchcraft, and I couldn't find anything on Marion's version of it as a scientific endeavor of consciously manipulating the brain to believe it).

So, it was with much anticipation that I watched Dr. Mills weave through the desk to me, and with shock that I watched her drop the note on the desk in front of me, right in front of Natalie. Dr. Mills didn't even stop talking, droning as the note fluttered down like a wounded bird.

Natalie was one of Reed's friends, partly because their older brothers were in the same class two years above us at Bowen, and were friends, so they strung along tenuously with that friend group at each other's houses. But we'd all been hanging out. I hadn't hung out with her alone yet though, I was still in the transitional period between hanging out with John Silver and Brett Carlson in the computer lab and with this new group my only in for which was Byron, because they all did theater. They were way

cooler than me, all of them, all Players, so I thought maybe if I joined them, they'd incorporate me more. It felt like a semi-shameful step up the social ladder.

I craned my neck and saw that, from being an expert note-forgery myself, it was definitely a makeshift one. The writing and date and all was good, in cursive and all, but the paper was too white for what the office used. Natalie opened it.

"Psst, Nat," I hissed to her. (Okay, I tapped her on the shoulder, my life just seems like it would be more interesting if I'm hissing *pssst* in class all the time. Does anyone really do that anymore? I feel like it must be done exclusively ironically at this point. What makes the word particularly effective for getting someone's attention anyway?)

Psst, guys, I've got a secret. This next section, this exchange between me and Natalie happened on the very note she'd just received. My handwriting looked vaguely Elvish and highly forced because this happened during the time I was trying to consciously change my handwriting to make it cooler. So I tapped her on the shoulder and got her to give me the note. First of all, here's what the note itself said:

*You Can't Take It With You* in thick black ink, like the person who wrote it did so with the pen clenched tightly in her fist.

I wrote, beneath it: *Ominous! What does it mean? Secret code? Who is that girl, she's the one from detention*

Natalie: *Marion Van Morrissey. She was the one in detention?! You didn't tell us that. She's our director's daughter. P.S. it's not ominous. It's the spring play. Inside info. She found out from her dad, and promised to tell me when she did. It's a comedy. You ready?!*

Me: *But I'm not funny!*

Natalie: *Every comedy needs a straight woman!*

Me: *Is Marion going to try out?*

Natalie: *She was in the fall play, and a lot of small roles even when she was in middle school, so yes. So you'll already know someone other than us! She's going to get leads as soon as she's a junior, I bet.*

At this point, Reed was looking conspicuously over to see what I was writing. At first I thought it was disapproval, but it turned out to be just curiosity.

"*You Can't Take It With You?*" he said under his breath. I felt a thrill pass through me. He was talking to me while Dr. Mills was going on and on. Was I more interesting than chemistry briefly? Or was it just the play that was more interesting? "That'll be a fun one. You're still trying out, right?"

"I guess so," I said. "Do you know Marion Van Morrissey?"

"Sure," Reed said. "She had a small part in the fall play. Kind of crazy, but I think that's what Spiro likes. All the players that are graduating this year are kind of crazy too, and we're well. . ."

"What?"

"I don't know," Reed said. "I think it probably happens every year, but they just seem so much better than us." I thought of *Dark of the Moon* and *Skin of Our Teeth*. It was true. Natalie was good, but everyone else in our class seemed meant for supporting roles. I felt a thrill. Maybe I could get a lead role before Marion Van Morrissey rose up and started starring.



“I’m glad you’re trying out,” Reed said, smiling. “Maybe we can change that. Gotta start somewhere right?” I smiled, and for the last ten minutes, we held the note hostage and played a rousingly romantic (to my mind) game of tic-tac-toe.

I’d been into Reiter before, I’d even met Spiro before, freshman year for Curricular Theater. He had the special honor of giving me my first B, because I guess I wasn’t a good enough actor or improviser, and it’s ironic because I only took that class because people said it was easy. It was all downhill from there, grades-wise too, trust me.

I’d been to Reiter to see productions too, but I’d never entered it with something more at stake than wasting an evening on a mediocre play or a letter grade. I walked over with Byron after school. Auditions were split into underclassmen and upperclassmen, who went first, meaning we had to wait. I felt like I was crossing a threshold. Or maybe I’m projecting that onto my past self because it turns out I *was* crossing a threshold. Outside the double doors to the rehearsal hall in untucked Bowen uniforms sat Natalie and Marion Van Morrissey and a boy with dark curly hair that had to be another freshman, all in a tight circle, talking, and then on the other side were Reed and two boys that I kind of knew. One was in my English class and wore corduroy blazers and when we read *Hamlet*, he brought a full Shakespeare anthology that must’ve weighed ten pounds. Every day!

The final kid was named Oliver, and he was from North Carolina, I think. I recognized him from *Dark of the Moon*. He was the only person there who I hadn’t had an interaction with who I’d also seen in a play. So it was weird, to see him. I almost expected him to be talking like his character. He had blond hair (not usually my type) but

he was cute and vaguely exotic in that he was a native of that far-off land of *the stage* which was both right on the other side of the hallway, and so far away.

Just as we were deciding where to sit (I was going to follow Byron's lead), the door to the rehearsal hall flew open, and they might as well have been eight foot tall giants for how intimidating the seniors were to me. Their shirttails looked more rebellious untucked, and out they came, the leads first: Witch Boy, who looked so handsome in a grey Bowen polo and Barbra Allen cackling about a joke.

"Byron!" Barbra Allen shrieked as she got out, and the rule of Byron held, but I remembered that he got an advantage because he took AP Biology last year, the only one to take an AP class his *freshman* year, and so he met a lot of them. He told me he and Barbra Allen sat next to each other.

She didn't pay me any mind, I just ogled her until more people spilled out, trying to place them, trying to divine some sort of hierarchy, to discern the webs of friendship for no other reason than they seemed like B-shirt clad aliens. There seemed to be some artificial construct where the number of lines corresponded to your social standing, but there were also boarder/day student delineation.

I led the way into the rehearsal hall, followed by Thad and Marion Van Morrissey and the boy with curly hair, while the rest I guess did what they did best, acting like they all liked each other, even though I could already tell it was more fragmented than a giant, throbbing, courteous mass of Players.

Spiro, old and regal, sat in a wingback green chair in front of plywood shelves with props littering them. He looked like a king with the artificial, paint-chipped spoils of

fictional worlds. Chairs and benches and boxes were scattered through the room like a vaguely conceived set.

“Hey Lily,” Thad said coming over to sit in the couch that I’d plopped down in, and sunk into because it was a deep pea green, ripped maw of a couch and seemed like the kind of casual thing that Barbra Allen had no doubt done when she came in here (Barbra Allen, if your reading this, did you? Leave a note.)

“You trying out for the first time too?” I asked.

“Yep,” he said. “Oliver convinced me.” He nodded at the blond boy who flitted over to us with the buoyancy of a smiling bumblebee.

“We need to fill our ranks with good actors so we aren’t stuck doing a two man show next year,” he said, grinning so earnestly must’ve been a mask. But the rest of the auditioners came into the room, collectively rivaling the boisterousness level of the seniors two minutes ago. It seemed suddenly like the group had expanded, even though only one girl in glasses from our class had joined. Now, along with us four already seated, Natalie and Byron came in together, and out of nowhere I saw them as a potential old married couple, with some gray in their hair, like the stolid pillars of the stage, the kids that play up because there’s something more mature about the way they move and speak and confer, without any sort of fuss, the kind of children that likely take their coffee black, which I already happen to know is how Byron takes his.

Thad looked like the kooky old grandfather or firework-obsessed basement-dweller. Emily could probably fill the role of a small child or a grandmother-type. Marion Van Morrissey, who hadn’t really given me a second look could probably be anything she wanted to be, to be honest. And Reed? Probably a small role, the cute child, the

paperboy, the young bright navy child returning home, as he had been last fall in *Look Homeward, Angel*. He was double-cast with Oliver. Look at me, typecasting! I get to because I'm writing a book so I'm well versed at casting people into roles and we all are, aren't we, used to typecasting people in our lives. The too-friendly burly man with a southern accent is probably the character with the decomposing body in his shed, the boy you met in high school is the romantic lead of the stage play of your life and it's as impossible he won't come to love you as it is that Mr. Darcy ends up passing on Elizabeth or that Jack and Gwendolen don't end up together in the end. It's all typecasting, and we all know how dangerous typecasting is, because my life is being written by me now, according to Holloway's guidance, but when it was originally written it was not written by someone with such a facility of language, with such poignancy of tone and fucking badassery of metaphors, no, no, it was written by a monkey named Steve, and only named that to anthropomorphize him a little more, because really, Steve the monkey had no idea what he was doing.

Speaking of a monkey writing things, (segue, Holloway, are you watching how smooth this is going to be?) it very much seemed like a monkey wrote our scripts for the audition! Yes, because they made no sense whatsoever. None at all. It was all a bunch of gobbledygook. We separated into two groups and read through a five person script (there were only nine of us, so one person had to read two parts). I'm in the group of five, along with Tyler, Natalie, Oliver and Thad.

"Can you make change for this?" Thad said, holding out his hand. (We weren't given any instructions, Spiro just handed out the scripts, worn almost to pulp, with a big

number at the top, indicating which character you play. No names, just numbers. I'm number four. I guess the idea is we're suppose to make our own characters.

"Blue!" Natalie said.

"Look, it just got off its leash," Tyler said, pointing to the other group (Reed, Marion, Byron, Emily) and Emily had to stifle her laughter. Spiro sat stone still in his wing-back chair, a stone statue, only his eyes alive and bright. I tried not to look. Only then did I realize it was my turn, and I'd already practically screwed up. I looked down at my script and choked out my line. "Sorry, I don't have enough."

Oliver followed quick on my heels, as if trying to pick the pace back up: "I saw footprints!" Back to one, and it went through like that (see what I mean about the monkey?)

"My father will hear about this!"

"Or was it green?"

"About *this* big," Tyler said, throwing his hands out widely.

"Are you going to go barefoot?" I said, channeling best I could the tone of my mother when I swear she's said this exact line, when she's told me to go get the mail.

"Four of them, I'd swear on my mother!" Oliver shouted and leapt onto a box that was there, holding out four fingers to the group, like a crazed old coal-miner suffering from some sort of lung disease. He was doing a voice. Was I supposed to do a voice? Was this a test of how fully we could commit to a character?

"I saw something in the shadows!"

"Oh, I remember the sunset."

"It's going to kill us all!"

“Are you going to go barefoot?”

“Shoes! Elephant shoes!”

“Are you sure you can’t make change for this?”

“Oh, no, it was orange!”

“Grey!”

“*This* big!”

“You had *what* on a leash?”

“My mother was killed tragically!”

“Change, change, change.”

“Grey, you’re right!”

“It felt all. . . slimy.”

“Barefoot!”

“Someone has blood on their hands!” Oliver shouted climatically, leaping off the box.

That was it. It was a silly little scene, and made no sense, and I think the idea was that we were supposed to make sense out of it. This really just amounted to, from what I could gather, seeing who could do the most ridiculous voice and jump the highest, in Oliver’s case.

I watched the other group go, expecting Marion to have some complex and nuanced character ready, but as far as I could tell, she did it just like me, with appropriate inflections and certainly the best projection, but other than that, it was disappointingly ordinary.

Spiro doled out, loudly and authoritatively, specific notes for each of us then, and I realized that *this* was probably the biggest test. To see how well we could take notes. To see how much we changed. My note was to be more robotic. I stopped just short of extending my arms and letting one drop limply on the hinge of my elbow.

The really weird thing was the more I heard the same repeated scene over and over the more it seemed to form a cohesive story. But I suspect that the story is different for everyone, so I'll not say what my version was. Maybe you need to have people perfuming it too, but that was one thing that took me by surprise. (Obvious metaphor alert). That and the fact that in the scene inside the rehearsal hall, with props as props and boxes meant to be representative of something else were right now both ordinary boxes and representative of ordinary boxes, if we're thinking of this as a scene in a play, characters began to emerge slowly, like people painted to resemble a backdrop coming to life and revealing that they each have a separate a role to play. Marion was the brooding, mysterious girl who for some reason has a grudge against the main character and who you half-expect to curl up and emerge as a demon with wings and fly up on wires to rain imaginary fire over everything, Thad was equally inexperienced, yet slightly inferior to the main character. Emily and Tyler were ancillary characters, there to take up the stage and make the world seem more alive. Natalie was the motherly figure, taking the main character under her wing, Byron the father, the cool, detached father who you knew would be loving when you were back at home. And what the whole play seemed to be about, when all the window dressing was tossed away? A love ballet, between the main character, and ...

Oliver. I was surprised too, like a subtle twist but one that makes the narrative so much more complicated and messy. Because sometimes stories, through their Steve-penned chaos make some strange, unexplainable sense, and sometimes there are parts of that that just seem to throw the whole story into question again. Like my line about it feeling all slimy! If only it had said, "It felt all, sandpapery," then it would've made so much sense! The puzzle would be completed. And if only it had been Reed and I do that dance that day on my first rehearsal, my first journey through the threshold, with the threshold guardian watching and taking notes, and I can't focus if Spiro is taking notes, not knowing what story he's writing about me, and if it involves me and Reed or me and Oliver, but if only it had been us, if only it had been Reed and me! But Reed isn't friendly or something as Oliver. He's so friendly! He looks like he wants me to succeed, to be in a play, and Reed for moments in there didn't exist. He didn't exist! Do you know how much of an accomplishment that is? The romantic lead of my life disappeared, he was recast momentarily.

And after the short vignettes, we had to pair up, and Oliver was right there, I suspect not by accident because he'd been through auditions before and knew Spiro was going to call for us to pair up at the moment he did, and so Oliver could turn and casually look at me, just like he did, and not say anything and have me nod.

And then, we had to line up with our partners, and the first two in line had to recite an exchange. Oliver and I were first.

"I love thee not!" I said.

"Therefore pursue me not!" he said. And we went to the back of the line.

"I love thee not!" Byron said.



“Therefore pursue me not!” Emily said, like Shakespearean pros. Like she needed a torn dress and he a rapier.

“I love thee not!” Marion said.

“Therefore pursue me not!” Thad said. And because there were five boys and four girls, I found out we had to switch, until we’ve said it with everyone in the room. A chemistry test, maybe? That’s what they call them in movie auditions, I think, I don’t know about stage auditions. But I ended up with Reed a few minutes later, hearing the room be filled with that single exchange so many times the words were stripped to just empty sounds.

He gave me a brief grin. “I love thee not!” he said, in his most grandiloquent, projection.

“Therefore pursue me *not*,” I squeaked, finding the emphasis on the last word. I found myself not acting. Not acting for a moment, but finding the truth in the words and believing them, because I’d found something so tenuous and fragile, that I didn’t want him to spoil it in any way. Like, how about *don’t* give me a brief fucking gorgeous smile before we say our lines, all right Reed Henson? I don’t care if you mean it like that or not. You’re a sharp boy. You must be aware of how I feel for you. What’s that? Oh I don’t know, maybe because I asked you on a date last spring and let you win constantly at tic-tac-toe? So you know *at least* the effect it has on me. Don’t make me think you’re pursuing me. I turned, swishing my hair and walked to the back of the line, while Oliver recited with Natalie and joined us.

“I hope I get a part,” I said in front of Reed to Oliver.

“You’re *getting* a part,” Oliver said, and I realized the smile was not a mask. It was him. He was fucking great, and for the first time I realized also that Reed didn’t have a mask on either. He wasn’t pretending not to hear me flirt with Oliver. He just genuinely did not care who I talked to, because why would you care who a female friend who you sit next to in chemistry and hang out with on the weekends, only in groups, why would you care who she talked to unless you liked her?

## Chapter 6

Well, I wanted to recount the first threshold crossing, which really happened the following Sunday afternoon when the cast list was posted, a picture of which I received via text from Byron. Apparently it was originally disseminated by Marion, who'd conveniently gone with her father to post it in the rehearsal hall.

There were no grand upsets in the casting. But I *might've* squealed when I saw I got a role at all. And not *too* small of one, either, I was in two scenes, and I got my new name: Miriam Kirby. And I might've squealed louder when I saw who Oliver was playing: Anthony W. Kirby. We'd been spontaneously wedded! In one world, we'd met and after a weekend, parts of us in another world were married to each other.

I'm not going to painstakingly recount the production of this play, in some ways because it's a blur even though I'm writing this the summer after it happened, nestled snugly on the porch at Foley Beach, obstinately refusing to be driven back by the heat. This may seem like a strange decision, and one that I can nearly hear Janet tut-tutting about backstage, I mean, over my shoulder (Reminder for when I glancing back through this, to procrastinate from writing new things: Remember to bring up you-know-what with Holloway at the end of this chapter.)

This is not to say that these few months of my life were not important. I went on stage for the first time, which was an experience like no other and said lines to my dashing husband, bright-eyed and with thick age lines that couldn't make him look any older to me up close, because I could see the young spark leaping in his eyes.

No, the reason I'm skimming over this is because it felt more like a preamble, really, to the summer and the fall. It felt, even after we were properly rehearsed and opening night was upon us and my mother and father sat there, along with Madame Lewis and others, to perform this comedy for what I was told was the biggest turn-out for an opening night in years, even with the make-up the costumes, the lights, out on stage saying words written for me fifty years before, it still all felt like rehearsal in a way, or like, if this were a story being told, nearing the closing of the first act. All that's left was the heroine kissing someone who wasn't her leading man, some additional seeds of drama with a mysterious character, and then a final, *what-will-happen* moment that inevitably disappoints.

It felt like rehearsal and it also felt like the induction to a cult where you're just taking in the strange customs and learning the rules so you can one day teach them to new recruits. Because alongside inhabiting Miriam, I was also inhabiting a new role, an all-day role in a way, the role of a Bowen Player. It seemed to me if it was manifested as a person that person would be a host of contradictions. Experimental and yet traditional. Pre-show rituals included a male-dressing room light show, performed by Witch Boy himself, or should I say a hundred Witch Boys with two hundred glowsticks, in the infinity hallway of the facing mirrors while the dark sonic artillery of Idioteque by Radiohead pumped through the room like dark rough heartbeats.

Waffle House was attended by all members of the cast, no exceptions, after every performance. This was where the fragmentation of the Players really showed itself. The seniors all sat at one table, while the rest of us sat where we could. I sat with Oliver a lot. He offered, very kindly to accompany him and Thad in his car after opening

night (Thad didn't have a car there, being a boarder), and even though it would be longer for me because it was right outside Bowen campus and on my way home, I did, and I got to sit in the passenger seat and look over at him in a t-shirt and make-up, while Thad called his dorm parent in the back and got permission to be out.

God help me for what I'm about to say, but I gravitated toward hanging out with Oliver and Thad during Play Week because I think somewhere unconsciously I am still intimidated by Natalie and Byron and Reed, as a collective at least. Any of them on their own is fine, and Byron is my best friend, but there's something about the way their brains work together (particularly Byron and Reed) that nudges me out of a conversation. I feel myself playing the role of the fool, the dummy, who has to stop and ask for clarification, because every conversation requires full attention, and I'm not always-on in that way. Plus their conversations aren't philosophical or theoretical where I can at least bullshit my way into knowing what I'm talking about--they're political and environmental and you know. I think subconsciously I'm also scared that I'll be even less appealing to Reed than I already am. What are you, dear reader, my psychologist? I need to stop this. This paragraph is getting cut, cut, cut.

I really like hanging out with Oliver and Thad! They're great! And, over the course of the play, I made another new friend too, a certain pale, raven-haired girl who I've been calling by her first and last name so far signifying I don't quite know how to deal with her? Yes, I made proper friends with Marion (Van Morrissey).

Marion and I didn't interact much at first. I'd see her coming out the the rehearsal hall, and she'd raise her eyebrows at me as if daring me to bring up that night. I wasn't

going to. It was like we were playing an unspoken game, like we understood that whoever broke first lost, and I wasn't going to lose.

But then during tech week, the game came to an unceremonious end. Everyone was lounging on the carpeted risers in the theater while Oliver and I perused the framed playbills in the back hallway. The Kirbys don't come on until the second act, and with how slowly things were going in there, we'd be lucky if we got there at all today; apparently there was a catastrophic problem with one of the lights.

"Wife, come see this!"

"What is it, Husband?" I said, sailing over to him (all right, I'll have you know this has been my primary method of flirting since elementary school when I proposed to Jose Barnes as a joke, and he accepted as a joke and we jokingly dated for an entire year. It was great, so I ain't stopping that train now. Look at me, using folksy phrasings just thinking about it. It's what he does to me, that Oliver).

He pointed to a yellowing playbill behind a glass frame. I didn't see what he was on about--it was a playbill for *The Crucible*. I ran down the list of names until--jackpot--I got to the girl who played Abigail . . . Jeanine Lewis.

"Do you think. . . ?" I said.

"It's definitely her," Oliver said. "I know she went to Bowen. What I wouldn't give to see *that* production."

"Madame Lewis as Abigail?"

"Abigail with a French accent? I bet she was just as feisty back then too." Oliver was in French 2, and as it happens, Madame Lewis was the only language teacher who taught every French class at Bowen. So she actually did a kindness to me, allowing

Oliver and I to bond over our hatred of Mercredi quizzes until we adopted the Husband/Wife routine, at which point our flirting material was written out for us for weeks and weeks.

“That’s great,” I said. “Now how do we decide who gets to ask her about it?”

“Oh wifey, I couldn’t forgive myself if I didn’t give you the honor.”

“But hubby,” I said. “She likes you better! And I don’t know the word for ‘crucible’ in French.”

“Point taken.”

“So. . .” I said, swaying my arms side-to-side in what I hoped was an adorable manner. “Let’s just drop in subtle hints to it. Mentions of pagan rituals, drawings of witch hats on the board before class. You know, the normal, rational response to finding something like this out.”

“Now I remember why I married you,” he said, snapping his fingers.

Then, a couple things happened at the same time. Spiro shouted something from inside the theater and the far door banged open. A stage manager poked his head around the corner and asked Oliver to come into the wings, some question about one of his props. I was about to follow when I saw who’d opened the door: it was Marion, beelining down the hallway, like she was hot on some mission.

She halted abruptly in front of me and folded her arms, like she’d just now noticed I was in the play and it was my fault for not telling her I’d been here all along.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hi. Marion, right? Do I know you from somewhere? Time-bending ritual magic or something like that? Vague recollection.”

“Funny,” she said. “Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Behind Reiter. Follow.” She led me outside, and as we past the stage door, I was able to hear what Spiro was shouting about: some light wasn’t working.

“Freeze!” he said, and it felt like he was saying it to me. But I didn’t, instead I passed through the door Marion was holding open, out to the somewhat sad yellowing patch of grass in back of Reiter.

“Did you know Madame Lewis was a Bowen Player?” I said because it was getting too quiet and I had nothing better at my disposal.

“Yeah, listen,” she said, “they’ve got big problems in there. John is doing all he can, but we’re still on the first scene. There were apparently some problems with a light that they spent thirty minutes on ...”

“Okay,” I said.

“Which *means* we’d have to spend dress rehearsal tomorrow reprogramming it all. Are you prepared for the stop-and-start hell of that? How comfortable are you with your character? You’ve never done it with your furs, have you?”

“No,” I said. I was having a hard time adjusting to this new Marion, who was acting like her months-long cold shoulder had never happened.

“So let’s *do* something about it.”

“Something being. . . ?” She gave me an impatient stare, like we were a pair of retired thieves and I was unwilling to reunite for one last heist. The only problem was we weren’t even friends, much less a team. Our relationship consisted of one mildly philosophical conversation, one a make-believe ritual, and that was it.



"You know exactly what that something is," Marion said, her eyes blazing.

"Look, Marion," I said. "I enjoyed our discussion a few months ago. It really did get me thinking. But something tells me you really believe in all this stuff. And I don't."

Marion kicked a rock, which skipped down the gentle slope of grass and into the dense foliage bordering the river. "Fine. Hey, you like Oliver, right?"

I'd come to expect the unexpected from Marion, so I just went with it. "Sure," I said noncommittally.

"Listen, I don't want to be weird or anything, but Natalie told me about your crush on Reed."

"She--*what?*"

"Well, not willingly," she said. "I hypnotized her one day and I asked. Then I performed a spell. I'd never done a love spell and I wanted to try it, so I went for a very low-level kind. I figured you two were as good as anyone, plus you did seem like you'd make a good couple."

For some reason, I'd imagined that Marion wasn't doing this, that our night together was a one-off experience. But she was casting spells?

I found myself unexpectedly in the midst of being weirded out, oddly touched. Maybe Marion's aloofness wasn't cruelty, maybe her way of showing warmth was casting black magic spells in an attempt to improve my life.

"The materials from the book I was using called for a document with the subject's name on it. I used the playbill from *Look Homeward, Angel* for Reed, but I couldn't find anything for you. I was going to give up when one day in class I opened my notebook and a scrap of paper fluttered out with your name written on it."

"From detention."

"Right. The spell called for an *official* document, but I reasoned it was kind of official, in that it was written for a purpose--to give me your name, I used it."

We were silent for a few seconds. "Then . . . It didn't work," I said.

"But it *did*," Marion said, her burning blue eyes on me. "What I forgot in all that worrying about your name, when I burned it, was the playbill. The intention behind the printed name matters, and if you remember, in that play Reed--"

"--was double cast with Oliver," I finished, and thunder sounded from up above. It was getting ready to rain. I looked up at the clouds and saw a whitish blue light, like a slinking, powerful monster dwelt up in the grey mass. I felt, irrationally, like the rain gave me some kind of cosmic permission to cry, even though this was not a situation where crying was called for.

And so I started crying, and if I had to attribute a reason, if the crying police made me fill in a blank box marked REASON, I could hurriedly scribble something like *Reed doesn't like me* or *This girl keeps presenting me with anecdotal evidence she's a witch*, but those would be cop-outs. The real answer would be a cop-out too, in the sense that all answers to inexplicable questions are cop-outs, but mine would be this, in my own handwriting, *I don't understand high school, and I'm afraid that means I won't understand life afterward as well*. People leave with no explanation and logic, and then you find yourself not thinking about them for a whole week when months ago they were your best friend. You have no say in the matter. You have no control.

Except when you're casting a spell.

Marion sat down beside me and touched my shoulder gently. “Why are you crying?”

“Because nothing makes sense!” I said. “Why did you not say anything to me for six months? Am I just that undesirable as a potential friend?”

“What are you talking about?”

“No,” I said firmly, determined to not wipe my tears. “I want to know right now if you’re just playing a game or if you really believe all this shit.”

“We’ve had this conversation,” Marion said.

“I know, you both believe and don’t believe it!” I said. “Fucking great!”

“It’s true,” she said softly.

“How can something that makes no sense be true?”

“Because we’re sometimes not equipped to understand truth,” she said. “It’s *true* that there are hundreds of radio waves and ultraviolet waves and infrared humming through the air right now, right in front of us, but we can’t see them.”

“We can *detect* them.”

“Just an example of how we’re limited.”

“Don’t give me the overarching truth, then,” I said. “Give me the illusion, the immediate, practical truth that may or may not be more true because it’s more readily understandable.”

“Okay,” she said. “The truth is I was embarrassed and scared.” A massive wave of relief broke over me.

The rain never came. Suddenly, the whole thing seemed funny.

“So, we’re going to cast another spell?”

She smiled. There was something so appealing about Marion. She was so different. And yes, I realize that's cliché. And I realize that pointing out one's own clichés and justifying them because *they're cliché for a reason* or some shit is cliché. And I REALIZE THAT RECURSIVE SELF ANALYSIS GETS TIRESOME AND LEADS BACK TO LANGUAGE AS AN INEFFICIENT VESSEL FOR THOUGHT, BUT CUT ME SOME SLACK BECAUSE I'M A LITTLE EMOTIONAL RIGHT NOW, BOTH IN THE PAST OF THE STORY AND NOW AS I WRITE THIS.

Yes, I helped Marion cast the spell, and no I don't want to write about it in detail. Go back to Chapter 3 and read my description there if you want to know how casting my second spell felt, go back to the dentist apron and branching poison stuff, I was pretty proud of that.

Afterward, I went back into the theater, which was dark and cool and filled with 1920's wit and elegance. I stretched out on the second riser beside my husband, resting my head on the next riser up, where Reed and Natalie were talking.

"Wait!" John Silver shouted from up in the sound booth. "That's weird, the spot just came on. I guess the board was malfunctioning."

Ah, yes. There it was. A malfunctioning board! Tis but a coincidence. The run-through chugged forward, with only a couple small hitches, and we got out by dinner time. I wasn't convinced that anything supernatural had happened at our hands, Marion, no I was not. I was on to you even then. But if you fancy yourself in this shroud of mystery, if you feel more confident wearing it the way I stand taller in that one purple top I own, then I will play along. I will admit it suited you, you drew me in, the months of ignoring me, the sudden choice of me and not your bestie Isabelle to cast the spell, your

simultaneous believe in magic and not magic, like an optical illusion, like a play, and the way you came through the wings and on your way up the risers, brushing my shoulder and flashing a wicked smile at me in the dark. You were something.

## Chapter 7

By Play Week, the days were long and wildflowers were blooming all over campus. It did a lot, along with the promise of summer and the affection of certain boys, to assuage the horror of taking a fierce round of AP exams.

“Lillian,” Dr. Mills said to me after I handed in my exam. “You can’t take it with you.” I didn’t understand, and then I did. I looked at the equation sheet I still had clutched in my hand. In my daze, I’d forgotten to hand it in. I wondered what the harm would be in delivering unto the world more numbers and letters that anyone who saw would surely not be able to apply to any use. “Thank you,” Dr. Mills said curtly as I placed it in the pile of other equation sheets.

As I left the classroom I physically felt the thunk of all the knowledge I’d never need again drop out of my head and onto the floor. I felt light as a balloon, letting all those little equations go. Who cared, who cared, who cared if I’d never get to sit next to Reed again probably because the only way that happened was a fluke joining of an ion. *You can’t take it with you*, had Dr. Mills said? Had she really said it just like that? Or had I been hearing things in my test-bludgeoned state?

Either way, you couldn’t. Take it with you, I mean. The play went well. Strike was last week, and a bunch of the seniors cried. Barbra Allen was the worst, but I suppose she earned it. I wanted to go up and pat her on the back, and say in the most earnest way, “You can’t take it with you, honey.” But I didn’t do that because I didn’t know her well enough.

But I did sign her costume card. It's another Players tradition. After the set has been torn down and swept away, the Players take the cards which hung in the dressing rooms partitioning our costumes, mine being LILLIAN WILSHER / MIRIAM KIRBY, for example, and spread them out on the carpeted risers to write overly wry or overly sincere messages for your friends, depending on the type of person you are.

I signed Elyse's thusly:

*Seeing you in Dark of the Moon made me want to try out for the play. I think of you kind of like a celebrity and you and Witch Boy as the perfect couple. Hopefully I didn't embarrass myself too much! Ha ha! -Lillian*

Not necessarily my best work, but when I got home that night I was going over mine, because you kind of just leave the cards out for anyone making the rounds to sign, a procedure fraught with social politics, because what if you don't deem someone important enough to write more than *You were great! Acting and stuff, you know?* - Lillian and then they write a really heartfelt note on yours?

But then of course, I found something written in, you know, the type of obnoxiously neat script where you just hate the person because they must be awesome (maybe better than Natalie's, which I'd just read, snarky).

*Lily — (She called me Lily!) I wanted to approach you, but you seemed so cool, so in your own space that I might've been a tad intimidated. Witch Boy is great, and I even call him that sometimes, believe it or not. You'll find your own. Oliver is cute, isn't he?*

*Relax, everyone knows. The seniors approve. Carry on next year, I have a feeling you might be the next Barbra Allen.*

*- Elyse*

Need I react? Need I, reader? Need I engage in the rigamarole of capital letters, straying into bold this time, maybe? Need I ask a dozen rhetorical questions And try to compose myself only to break off in the middle out of jo--SHE WAS INTIMIDATED BY **ME**? The seniors have the same obsession with our relationships that we do with theirs?! And, the closer. ME? Not Natalie, not Marion, who've all done a hundred plays before. Me? The queen actor saw something in *me*? I'm having trouble breathing, maybe because it's a hundred degrees and I'm on a porch, or maybe because it's incredible. So incredible I almost forget to scan through the rest of the notes.

*Wife,*

*It has been a pleasure being married to you for these six weeks. It's a case like this I wish you could take it with you. Cheesy title drop: Check. In all seriousness, I'm really glad you tried out. I told you you'd get a part, and I lucked out being able to do it with you. What are you doing this summer? Call if you get bored. XXX-XXX-XXXX.*

*- Husband (Oliver)*

[Phone number withheld, because I'm afraid you'd call him and ask him out, and he's mine.]



I was beginning to understand the nature of the ritual. So many things came out! It was like the moment the teacher leaves the room and the tone changes and everyone relaxes into a more honest state, these cards.

And then I saw Marion's:

*Lil —*

*Thanks for the help. Let's hang out this summer. How about a sleepover monday after graduation?*

*— M*

The most cryptic and clearly the most to-the-point. Glaringly bereft of the exultation that so frequently creeps into every single one of these comments. But after I thought about it, it was simply boiled down, because it was the most decisive of the notes I got, and also the most specific and thus the most dated, I'm sure when I look back on it in ten years, and I bet for that, it'll be the one that'll finally make me cry.

We did hang out on the first official night of summer vacation. Shall I go straight into it? Natalie ended up coming too. So, we went to Marion's house on that Monday night. I spent the day--you know what, okay okay okay, I can feel you clamoring for it, which is probably just a projection from me to my reader. I project lots of things onto you. I hope you don't mind. But right now I'm projecting the clamoring desire to see what Reed wrote on my costume card. Here it is, for your consideration, pardon the interruption, I need to figure it out I need to why why why:

*Miriam/Lillian,*

*What can I say? You're wonderful. You're as masterful an actor as you are a tic-tac-toer. As much as I wish we could take it with us (corny title drop) we're both off to better things. Like a life without chemistry! Fuck chemistry. Even though it did have the best desk partner of any class. See you this summer?*

— *Reed*

He signed his name with this swoopy 'R,' like only the infallible Reed who also curses and happens to be really laid back can do. Did I ever mention he's the reason I started cursing? I was deathly afraid of it up until probably freshman year. And perfect Reed who looked and acted like he never cursed in his entire goddamn life, casually said, when asked about a movie, *It was fucking great.* And I'd seen it too, and it *was* fucking great, I realized. It was the first time I've ever not been disgusted when hearing that word, because I was--sure! I'll say it--a prude! And also Reed, when asked if he would have sex before he got married, said (and I have a very clear memory of this: "you have to test drive the car before you buy it." This, from REED FUCKING HENSON.

Why, Reed! Why do you have to leave a note like this! Why can't you leave me to bask in the glow of Oliver. Why must you cast into sharp focus what a perfect note looks like! If you hadn't I would've thought Oliver's note was the most flawless piece of costume card literature I'd ever seen! I might've kissed it with lipstick, even though I don't own any! I might've bought lipstick just to kiss the note, that's how amazing it would've been without you!

It's funny how context informs the attractiveness of someone. Looking ahead to the summer, yes, Oliver and I had a good time, and maybe if Reed didn't exist (or Whitney hadn't been pulled out of school thus allowing us to bond as desk partners) I wouldn't have ended it so soon after coming back to school. You can build certain people up ceaselessly and gloriously and carry them around for a while, but that's just numbers and letters on a piece of paper you've written out meticulously, that only you understand. You can't take that with you everywhere, because you'll inevitably run into someone who isn't just the empty numbers and equations but the meaning itself, who you don't need an equation sheet to love. When I started this paragraph it felt important, but now I've run out of steam. I've lost the thread. Is anything coming across here or would you prefer for me to stick to the action? Do you think that I think any of this is deep or profound in any way, because I hope not, that is my greatest fear. Leave a note. I feel so buoyant and lovely I will read and cherish them all.

## Chapter 8

I ran with Byron a lot that summer. His repeated invitations to run were the mark of a true friend, because that boy could run marathons, so I'm sure it was torture for him to have to slow down and walk with me after a mere mile. I think sometimes he even worked out a second time after our run, which really just boggles the mind because his days of insufficiency are mine of sweat-soaked pain and eventually, after a cold shower, triumph.

But I know why he does it. It's because our conversations while running, something about the format, are just so good. We're not looking at each other, we're engaging our bodies physically, in sync. You know, highly sexual undertones if you describe it that way, which is funny to think about because that will never happen.

We mostly talk about philosophical concepts, because that's the only thing I can keep up with. And sure, a fourth of a mile in, we've inevitably devolved into talking about how difficult philosophical concepts are to talk about and that's philosophy adjacent I suppose, but we really get our heads up our own asses on these runs, and I love it. And I've never asked him, but he must too, if he's willing to parse his workout into two in a *single day*.

I've also always assumed he has special insight into Reed which either doesn't actually exist or he just won't tell me. I feel like it's the former, because if it came down to it, Byron would be on my side. We're best friends, did I mention that? I feel like I'm being defensive. But I also feel like you should be defensive about your best friends. It's like marriage! Ha ha! Mrs. Marnser, if you're still reading, you've been rewarded for it!

But I do think it's kind of true with best friendship. If more people looked at it like soulmates, there would be a lot better friends out there. Too many people these days just shack up in the same study room and cover up all their compatibility issue with gossiping, and then the playful banter goes, and what's left? An empty husk of a person who used to be your *best fucking friend*. But this is the high school high talking, I'm sure. Do adults have best friends? (Adults, if you're reading this, leave a note. With my editor. This book is going better than expected, and I've decided I'll probably be too busy with all the fan mail, and I've also asked a lot of people to leave notes. My editor, did you find it annoying when you got to this point in the book to find me referring to pre-hiring you and calling you my editor? Leave a note.)

*Anyway.* The cast party took place on the evening of August 21st. I'd talked to Oliver a lot before that, but I hadn't seen him. As I referred to earlier, we had a seven hour conversation this summer. I don't remember what we talked about, not a single thing. It was a bleary nighttime ramblefest, but there were no silences, except for the intentional ones that were planned beforehand, because when you talk to someone that long, you need mini-intermissions. Here's the thing though. I wish I'd known him more before we started flirting and calling each other husband and wife. Because what I've decided with my puny high school-sized brain is that the person I'm going to marry I'll have to have been obsessed with from afar for a while prior to getting together with them. It's just the way my brain is wired, I think. And I think I *could've* been obsessed with Oliver, is the weird thing. I could've just as easily been saying Oliver Oliver Oliver as Reed Reed Reed in different circumstances. Actually, I don't believe that. I changed my mind mid-sentence. Forget it. Loose end paragraph.

I arrived at Byron's earlier than the rest because that was my duty as co-party-planner. I got there a little later than I'd planned because it took a little longer for me to sneak past my parents back to the laundry room to grab some beers from the laundry room fridge and get them into my car inconspicuously. I had a mild headache, so I didn't really feel like drinking anything, but I knew that it would be a failure of a cast party if there wasn't at least the option on the table.

And the option was literally on the table, because I set the beers out in a nice triangular arrangement on the coffee table in Byron's guest house. Then I got out the board games, arranged them next to the beers, and craving an ice sculpture, I carved a quick one of Byron to stand in the corner. I went modest on the delicate areas.

Then, I went across the porch to the real house and let myself in the kitchen door.

"Tea?" Byron said as soon as I did.

"Earl Grey," I said. I don't usually drink tea, but Byron just loves doing things like standing in front of a boiling pot of water, so I let him have his fun. And Earl Grey I only picked initially because it seemed like a very Byron type of drink. I still don't really know what it tastes like though because without fail, whenever I have hot tea, I burn my tongue and the roof of my mouth immediately because I don't wait long enough to take the first few sips.

So it was. I burned my mouth, but it was still lovely as we moved over to the guest house and Byron admired my aesthetic taste and was only mildly alarmed that I'd snuck in unseen and unheard. He didn't mention the ice sculpture because it didn't exist.

Natalie arrived first, which was the first big surprise of the evening. She parked and we watched through the guest house window her get out, with a bag in one hand and something else in the other, and walked up the stone path toward the front porch.

Byron and I played a quick, efficient round of best of three rock, paper, scissors and I had to run out on my bare toes to bring Natalie to the correct door. I raced back to the couch inside, where Byron had taken to cracking open a beer in my absence.

Natalie walked over to the side counter and dropped her keys where they made a loud jingle because she had so many things on her keychain. I wish I'd taken the time to see what was on that keychain, what individual pieces of her, trinkets and whatnot she'd deemed important enough to suffer the eternal finger-bleeding hell of threading them through one of those torturously uncompromising metal rings. These are the things you think about always after the fact. Right then I was not interested. I was interested instead in the other thing she put down. A cast of drinks which did a fair amount of clinking themselves.

"Cider?" I said.

"Hard cider in the house," Natalie said, with a raise-the-roof gesture. "All the way from Vermont." Natalie visited Vermont with her parents, as you might've been able to tell from the dialogue.

"Is it good?" She looked at me.

"Lillian, you strike me as a very cider-y kind of person, if you don't mind me saying so. I think you'd like it. Can we swap?" She walked over and picked up a beer.

"From the Wilsher back fridge, I presume?"

“Yep,” I said, and my headache wasn’t doing any better, but I took a cider and it was delicious. Far better than whiskey or the beer that I’d only taken a sip of.

I’d forgotten how much I liked it being just the three of us. We talked for two minutes before the fourth of the quadumvirate showed up, right on time. Reed. We played two out of three, and it was Natalie who had to go save him from the front porch, barefoot, to bring him to the real door. He came in with a backpack slung over one shoulder, hair appropriately mussed as if he’d driven with the window down through a hurricane, the Reed look. He smiled like only Reed could, wide and bright, rolling up the sleeves of his plaid shirt that didn’t quite fit him in an adorable kind of way.

“Hey guys,” he said.

“How was Oregon?” Byron said lazily. “Bright?” Reed went to Oregon. We basically covered the U.S. with our trips. Spoiled fucking assholes? You be the judge!

“It was great,” he said, sinking into the armchair by the window. “We went to this house concert downtown on a whim, and it was amazing.”

“Is that where bands play at your house?”

“Yes,” Reed said. “Well, usually at someone else's house and you go there. Small bands, small shows.”

“What were they called?” Natalie asked, crossing her legs and taking a casual sip. Is that how people drank? How did you drink so casually? Natalie knew the most obscure bands imaginable.

“The Monicanas?” Reed said. “They have a lot of songs about food.”

“Heard of them,” Natalie said, raising a triumphant finger.



“Can I offer you a drink, Reed?” I said, getting up. It seemed like the polite thing to do.

“Sure,” he said, then looked at me for maybe the first time that night, the first time I noticed anyway, with big eyes. I think they twinkled. “What are you having?”

“Cider,” I said, holding it up. “Compliments of dear Natalie. It’s good.”

“Sign me up,” Reed said, and I brought it to him with a small cocktail napkin from the pack I’d taken from out kitchen. They had witty quotes beside painted pictures of women in polka dotted dresses for some reason.

“Thank you!” he said, and that’s when a pair of headlights shone in through the window, ruining our moment.

Oliver and Thad emerged from the car and a quick rock, paper scissors double elimination tournament sent me sailing back into the humid outdoors, barefoot to guide the two men up to the real door.

“Hey!” Oliver said, going in for a hug. I stood on my tip toes and hugged him and looked at Thad, and we both just went for it, since it would’ve been weirder if we hadn’t. They both looked strangely older. I think it was how they were dressed. I’d scarcely seen either one of them out of uniform. Thad, always in oversized B-shirts and Oliver in undersized ones. They looked somehow more congruous, more like real people I was meeting for the first time in decent button downs. Then Thad lumbered off to the guest house, as if they’d talked about it in the car, and I took a chance with half a bottle of cider in me and brushed Oliver’s hair to one side. He looked pleased and confused at the same time.

“Good to see you again,” he said. “I missed you.”

“You too,” I said, and turned around because I didn’t want the questions to start about what we were doing out here alone. The room after Oliver and I entered was full enough to feel like the party was pregnant with people. A gentle chatter arose as conversations got underway.

In fact, so lively was the atmosphere that we almost didn’t notice the two cars, one after another, that pushed into the driveway, and had to do a speed round — Thaddeus, barefoot, did not even bother running, but walked, nay *sauntered*, as Thaddeus is wont to do as I appraised from the window, Marion and Tyler were already at the front door when he intercepted them to show them the real door.

For some reason the logistics of which I can’t work out, in the most incongruous moment of the night up to the point, Marion and I gave each other light pecks on either cheek when she came in. One of us initiated it ironically, but by the end it felt like we were just the worst people. Maybe we were spontaneously channeling Madame Harris. They tasted fruity, her cheeks, “Did you find it all right?” I said like a fussy southern housewife. I’d given Marion directions earlier in the day.

“We followed each other up,” she said, pulling a clump of wet hair around her neck and indicating Flynn.

“She only got us lost twice,” he said. “One was a dead end luckily or we might’ve been an hour more.”

“Drinks!” I said. “If you want, of course. No pressure. No peer pressure here!”

“Yeah, I’ll have something,” Flynn said, and then, a whisper to me: “Do you have anything *other* than beer?”

“You’re in luck,” I hissed back, bringing the cider from behind my back and tapping it with a long fingernail. “If you hate beer, you’ll love this. The Lillian guarantee.”

*The Lillian guarantee? Who am I?* Yes reader, allow me to acquaint you with Lillian-on-three-fourths-a-bottle-of-cider. It’s shocking, really, isn’t it? Like chaos theory. A gentle flapping of butterflies in the belly causes hurricanes of giddy narcissism and the summiting of tables. Hey look, I’m on one now!

“Someone needs to go intercept Isabelle!” I said, and just as I did, the glare of headlights flared up from outside and I felt momentarily statuesque and made of ice. I felt like doing something that people would talk about the next day. But I didn’t. I hopped down. I think I found a moment of prescience in that moment.

“How did you just know that?” Natalie said.

“Okay, okay, I am a witch,” I said dryly. “You got me. I can see the future.” I said the last part with a slow, affected kind of nonchalance. I shrugged.

“Then why didn’t you see my rock coming last time!” Byron bellowed.

“Maybe I *wanted* to lose,” I sneered at him jumping down, and gave a quick look at Oliver, who looked bewildered, and I realize he didn’t recognize that comment as a flirt. Then I looked to Reed, because *he* would have, if he’d been looking. Instead he was sitting on the right arm of the chair talking to Marion, who was leaning over the armrest of the couch. What oh what could *they* possibly have to talk about? I would’ve liked to have found out, but I caught Marion’s eye and did a rock paper scissors motion in the air, and she did it back, lost, and got up. She was better friends with Isabelle than anyone else anyway.

She ran out the door barefoot.

I went and took her place. The vacated seat, because there was only one free-floating ion in the whole room, one not locked into an ionic or covalent conversation. Focus, Lillian! Chemistry is over forever. No more metaphors relating to it. Okay. But he was forever the free-floater. I took the seat.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” he said (our trademark greeting). “How was Foley Beach? I didn’t get a chance to ask you.”

“Oh, you know, gorgeous,” I said. “It’s so nice, isn’t it to have had a place like that? A perfect, unspoiled place that still has childhood memories attached to it, but seems so far away from everything, like the real world can’t touch it? Is that what Oregon is for you, or am I crazy?”

“No, that’s exactly it,” he said. “I couldn’t have put it into words like that.”

“Hey!” Isabelle has arrived. She is carrying in either hand two bottles of wine.

And this is how it was. This was the whole party. Ten players. It wasn’t all the players, of course, and so in a way the was the first sign, the herald of Byron and I failing the goal he voiced after our run back in June. To integrate and destructuralize, to decliquify the players. But I guess this is how things go, don’t they? We always want to be better than those who came before us and rarely are because we’re all the same, in a way. The best we can hope for is to be somewhat better, just a little bit, just a modicum, and I think we achieved that in a fashion. The seniors might not have taken Tyler into their fold, the players might not have invited everyone like we did, but of course, that was only half the battle. The real battle was incorporating them from the start. The reason the rest didn’t come is likely because they felt they weren’t welcome,

that they were invited by mere courtesy and weren't really expected to be there or would be exiled if they did. And maybe that's true, in a way.

And I guess it's a good thing that there was no ice sculpture in the corner, because come to think of it, who wants to watch something melt all night, who wants to bear witness to a thing of beauty melt away into something you might slip on? It's a reminder of death, and tonight, none of us players would've thought at all about the concept of death had it not been for Marion, because we were young and spry and very far from the precipice empty abyss we would all one day tip over. But tonight, we had more important things to consider, like charades.

It was a particular kind of charades that I forced everyone to play. Well, not forced. I believe as a host, that people like being shepherded from one fun thing to another, you need bouts of structure at a party, little games or rituals. Reverse Theatre Charades was first. We made Isabelle be first because she'd arrived last. So she sat on the couch while we made up a scene without.

Then we played a rousing game of Superlatives, where you write down as many *Most Likely to*. . . that you can and then all put them in a bowl and then it's a free-for-all to dole them out. Then you go around reading them. It's always an interesting social experiment not only to see what you get and what others get, but considering the meta social context and dynamics of the groups, because there's typically a lot of inside jokes and such and the ones that the outermost person gets are always interesting. I take the position that it's best to give those people the most gruesome, ruthless ones because those paradoxically make them feel more comfortable than if we were all too politically

correct to give them to someone we don't know. Which is why I gave Tyler *Most likely to accidentally kill a hooker and, in Panic kill the investigating officer as well.*

As to the writing process, I consider mine the best, but I suppose everyone does. They all appeal to my sense of humor, which I don't know how to explain. You probably have a pretty decent grasp on it by now. Byron cranks them out like nothing. He must have fifty by the end. He's our reliable supplier of *Most Likely to fuck \_\_\_\_*. I tend to focus on quality over quantity. I think it's just my personality. I honestly would change it if I could, or maybe switch it up. But everything I do is tortured. This sentence right now probably went through twenty drafts. Ugh. Anyway, here are a sample of the ones I wrote (these are hurriedly scribbled through the haze of alcohol so not promising the brilliance of Tolstoy!), and who they went to.

*Most Likely to secretly believe everyone else is a shape-shifting alien reptile*

(This one predictably came back to me. It's a conspiracy.)

*Most Likely to read Walden in College, immediately drop out and never shower again* (Natalie)

*Most Likely to frequently misinterpret friendliness for sexual advances* (Oliver)

*Most likely to find a tree/plant so beautiful they end up having sex with it it*  
(Byron)

*Most likely to secretly be a tree in disguise* (Thad)

*Most likely to identify with Hitler* (I'd like to point out that I was drunk and roughly half of all superlatives are written for shock value alone. These are typically distributed with the goal of getting the best laugh out of it, or offending the least amount of people. I

go with the former usually, some go with the latter, like the person who actually distributed this. Because it went to Reed and he's Jewish).

Here's the ones I got:

*Most likely to talk to themselves constantly when alone*

*Most likely to fuck Reed*

*Most likely to make a short-lived yet meaningful friendship with a dive-thru attendant*

*Most likely to take her superlatives too seriously and make a serious life decision based on them* (You can tell *he's* writing for someone in particular when *he* uses a gendered pronoun. I have little doubt this was written with me in mind. But I like this person's style, coughByroncough.)

*Most likely to overthink everything*

*Most likely to be alone with 27 cats by forty*

*Most likely to write a tell all book (Hmmm. . .)*

*Most likely to kill self in a tortured poetic act*

*Most likely to unsuccessfully kill self in a tortured poetic act*

*Most likely to try an initiate a three way tonight*

*Most likely to die alone*

*Most likely to have head lice*

*Most likely to launch an unsuccessful rap career*

*Most likely to make a bad pun about her superlatives*

*Most likely to cry based on the amount of negative superlatives they got*

*Most likely to be committed one day*

*Most likely to be really into palmistry when they're 40*

*Most likely to kill someone*

*Most likely to cross-dress*

*Mostly likely to drunkenly crash an ex's wedding*

How about that book one, right? I'm not lying about that, and the weird part is, I wasn't even a well known writer. Head lice was uncalled for, frankly. It was targeted one, because everyone knew I had lice in sixth grade. It was so long ago!

I was sitting on the couch with Marion and Byron. Marion and I were mirrored, each with a drink in our hands, me right handed, her left. She seemed a little miffed after Superlatives ended, because I guess they weren't all to her liking. I didn't really remember what she got, though I seem to vaguely recall something about black magic. What was it ...

It was decided by someone at that point that we should go outside and everyone agreed that they could use some fresh air, so we exited the house, and half the group filtered down, led by Natalie, to see the pool, all of whom hadn't been to Byron's house before. Which left me and Byron and Marion still on the porch, for whatever reason, in a line, looking out on the black sea of yard, watching the others go down.

"You guys want to build a fire?" Marion asked.

"It's summer," I said. "The world's a fire." I guess I was feeling seasonably poetic.

"It's pretty cool," Byron said.

"Plus, fires aren't about warmth anymore. It's about the ambiance."

"All right," I said. I was a sucker for ambiance. Just the word got me unnaturally excited. So we trekked together over to the opposite side of the house, where we found



an overturned metal fire pit and Marion carried the base, and I the top, back over to the driveway where Byron was a tall silhouette before a wide rack of wood. He was moving his hand around on it like he was blind.

“It’s all wet,” he said. “Well, mostly. Help me out.”

It was like playing Jenga. You know that game? Where you have to extract a wooden block of a tower without the entire thing coming down? We eventually wiggled out three relatively dry pieces of wood.

“Hey,” a voice said, and Reed emerged, all dark except for his white teeth. “Just wanted to see what you all were up to.”

“We’re pyromaniacs!” I said kookily waving the piece of wood I’d won from the pile.

“All right, settle down there Wilsh,” he said. “Can we get anything flammable away from this one?” *My clothes are flammable*, I thought. (Lillian, if you’re rereading this, you just wrote that. Care to explain yourself? Leave a note. Preemptive follow-up: Really, that’s what you’re going with? *Really?*) He took a sip of beer. He looked so out of place drinking a beer. I don’t know why either. I guess it was like hearing him say the word fuck for the first time years ago. He was a walking contradiction, he was in two camps, he wore nice clothes like Byron, but less flamboyant and didn’t tuck his shirt in. He didn’t comb his hair like Thaddeus, but it didn’t look like it’d be greasy if you touched it like Thaddeus. And Oliver ... well, he was quieter than Oliver. Oliver’s the kind of person that’s effortlessly the life of the party, but Reed is the stealth life of the party, I think. He carries the most interest weight around with him, like a gravitational force. He’s witty and his laugh. His laugh is the best. It’s the best because it’s like empty air, he’ll

laugh so hard and long, but it doesn't get annoying like some people who do because his real laugh is like he's exhaling really happily for thirty seconds. Oliver laughs like a normal person.

The wooden log, my prize log was snatched from me by Byron who threw it over his shoulder like a lumberjack. Then, weirdly, as weirdly as Thad had just walked away from me and Oliver earlier, Marion and Byron headed back for the porch.

Which left me and Reed. Let me explain the dynamic here, if I could. You know about the date at the end of sophomore year. That was a little over a year ago. Reed and I don't do things alone, really, I mean we have but it always feels weirdly different from hanging out with Byron. More like a date. I guess that's because Reed is straight, maybe and that's how it always is with boys and girls when they hang out alone no matter what. I wouldn't know. I only hang out with Byron and when I hang out with boys alone (see: Oliver) the only way I tend to be able to relate to them is by flirting (see: the Faux High School Marriage That Is Masquerading for Two People's Mutual Crushes Effect).

So I didn't know how to relate to Reed without flirting. Though if we go by good ole Freud, then every social interaction is basically flirting. So no big deal right?

"Hey."

"Hi," I said. I swear this is what really happens. Does this not sound like either two people who are awkward as hell together or need to get together ASAP? This is not a normal interaction! We'd been at the same party all night!

"That cider was really good," Reed said. "And my compliments on the hosting duties. You marshaled the shit out of Superlatives."

“Anyone could have found Byron’s parent’s crystal glass bowl and cut paper into tiny uniform rectangles.” I blushed on the word rectangles. I’m not sure if it was a delayed reaction to the compliment or the fact that the word rectangles sounded weird coming out of my mouth, like we were suddenly talking about something unimaginably uninteresting, like the patterns in trees or if the basketball goal in the driveway was regulation height or not. But come to think of it, I wanted to talk about those things with him. I wanted to discuss the divots in the pavement and the relative photosynthetic ability of the wet leaves hanging over us and count the pieces of gravel wedged in the tire wells of all the cars in the driveway with him. Was this what love was? Wanting to do unimaginably dull things with someone? After all, I liked Oliver. I wanted to kiss him, sure. But kissing is already so interesting in itself, so is that really saying much?

But we were still standing here. Didn’t it mean something that Reed wasn’t going back to the party? It was so silent I could clearly make out Isabelle’s screechy laugh from down by the pool. I wanted to discuss how well the gutters and the eaves were doing on the guest house looming over us.

But no, instead we did something mildly more interesting. We played a quick round of basketball. I don’t remember whose idea it was, it seemed as natural as talking to pick up the ball, and soon we were playing. We were talking and I was laughing and when I missed wildly, sending the black ball into the choked shadows past the logs, Reed laughed too, an empty, gorgeous laugh, bent over with his hands on his knees. Scarcely two baskets had been made, and that seemed like enough, so we found the ball together, and I put my hand on his back when we found it there in the damp grass, like a fat baby. And he didn’t make both the baskets, I made one of them. It was equal,

and both of them we hardly noticed when we made them because we were engaged in another game, a game within a game, the game became not winning, as is usually the case with me, but the game within the game was to keep this going for as long as possible, forever, if I could manage it. And it worked for a while, because we agreed best to five would win, and we were both playing horribly. Maybe because we didn't have our eyes on the top corner of the box they taught us to look at in elementary gym, if you know what I mean.

But then, then the magic was cracked by a hot orange glow from down by the pool, like a flare from the group signaling us to come and join, and we obeyed.

"Are you going to be able to contain yourself?" Reed said on the way down and for a fleeting second I thought he meant us, was I going to be able to contain myself from kissing him in front of everyone else. But I was just lucid enough to bob against what he really meant.

"What around the fire?"

"Twenty minutes ago I heard you're a pyromaniac." I smiled at him. The only use I'd have for fire right now is to illuminate his dark face.

"What can I say, I'm a fan of exothermic reactions. What do you get when you add an oxidizer to a solution of—"

"Nope!" Reed said. "Nope! Not going to let you get away with that one. I'm proud to say I haven't thought about chemistry once since the exam, and you just ruined that streak."

I smiled, but he couldn't see it. Doesn't this say something too? Smiling in the dark even though you know other people can't see it? I think we smiled so often for other people, it's rare to find someone who would make me smile at them in the dark.

"But you were so good at it. Dr. Mills even *said* herself that she expects you to be the only one to get a five."

"I don't know," Reed said quietly.

"How are you so good at school?"

"It's just a talent," he said, shrugging. "It doesn't have much to do with intelligence. I think you're just as intelligent as me, if not more."

"Of course it has to do with intelligence," I said.

"It has to do with discipline, sure, but not intelligence. School is like a game. Or an instrument. Eventually you can get by on muscle memory. Figuring out what teachers like, how tests work. You play the violin, don't you?"

I hadn't told him that! It wasn't exactly a secret but I couldn't think of how he would've known.

"Interesting," I said, and I meant it. He made me think about something in a different way, in the small interim to the pool. I opened the creaking gate. I didn't want to get to the pool, but we were closing in, the echoing voices occasionally peaking with what sounded like an Oliver story with back up vocals provided by Isabelle—which sounded so rousing. Oliver the performer. Had I expected him to be sitting glumly with rolled up pant legs, his feet in the pool wondering where I was because I was the center of his world? I don't know. That question can probably be answered by looking at the specificity with which I'd imagined it.

It felt like we were on the outskirts, probably because we literally were. Byron's pool is notoriously difficult to get into. And by notoriously I mean in my head, because he just moved to this house last year and I'd only been to the pool once in the evening for him to show me. So we went up and down the length of the fence, looking for the gate and not finding it because it was dark. On the far side, farthest from everyone, everyone inside laughed, and for some odd reason, some odd odd reason, I might need a therapist to tell me what this says about me, but I felt such a strong bond with Reed that we were the only ones there to witness the laughter, but not here the joke. It was almost better than playing basketball and flirting. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that hearing people laugh at something is invariably annoying on some level, less so when they're your friends, but still. I looked over at Reed and in the flickering lights, he smiled.

We eventually just hopped over, because the enclosure was four feet high and rejoined the group and there was no fanfare made of the fact that we were alone together, because we weren't celebrities, there were no inevitable paparazzi shots, nobody cared. We weren't the couple on TV that you agonize over, wondering whether they will get together. Byron passed me Isabelle's bottle of wine, a fourth left that everyone was drinking, and Natalie did give me a look, and I gave her a look back. What these looks contained is anyone's guess.

The fire was smaller than it had looked from up in the driveway. I looked across and Marion's face, lit from below looked suddenly so grotesque, like a witch stewing over a brazier.

And then I noticed that people were throwing things into the fire, tossing them like the fire tossed off flecks of bright flame which burned up to nothing on their own.

“What are those?” I said to Tyler, who’d just thrown one in.

“Superlatives,” Tyler said. “Marion says if we have to burn the ones we want to come true.”

“That’s stupid,” I said.

Tyler smiled. “Are you just saying that because you didn’t get any good ones?” he said.

“No,” I said. “I did.”

“Here,” he said, and took the wine bottle from me. He splashed it into the fire and the flames leapt brightly up and burned hot my skin for a few seconds so I felt mildly scalded.

“Hey!” I said.

“Tanawakara!” Everyone chanted in drunken unison. I saw Marion take a pinch of something and throw it on the fire, and it glowed green for a second.

I walked over to Byron. “Uh, what’s going on?” I asked him. “I was gone for twenty minutes and you guys go all voodoo?”

“Marion started it,” Byron said.

“Of course she did,” I said. “She wants to be a cult leader. Did she talk about the placebo effect?”

“How did you know?” he said.

“Just, just why!” I said.

“Why do you care? We’re just having fun. I didn’t do it.”

“But you got most likely to be a millionaire by age 25.”

“See! Now you’re buying in.”

“Am not.”

“Implicitly.”

“Well, maybe there is something to those self-fulfilling prophecies,” I said.

“How can it fulfill itself if you don’t believe in superstition?”

“You know, we can hold two contradictory beliefs in our head at the same time.”

“Yes.”

“Actors better than anyone.”

“Bowl’s over there,” Byron said, sensing what I was going for, and I went to the bowl, sorted through it until I found mine. I passed over *Fuck Oliver*. I found *Fuck Reed*. But I hadn’t gotten that one. Had they said it would work if you hadn’t gotten it? I remembered what Marion had said about intentions. They mattered. I would ask her but I would feel like a fool doing so.

So I took it anyway, but I kept looking, for the one I started out looking for.

*Write a tell all book.*

I took them both, and grabbed the wine, which sloshed around with only one sip left in it, stumbled over to the fire, where the smoke was blowing in my face, and wheeled around and Reed was there. Almost by reflex I tossed them into the fire, both of them. Both meaning, both papers, not the papers and Reed.

“Back!” I said, and poured the wine into the fire, which leapt like a malformed orange-black hand reaching for the sky.



“Tanawakara!” everyone but Reed said rousingly, and I followed them like a double image of the word. as if they weren’t really paying attention and it was just a reflex at this point. I guess they’d done this before. I tried to think of the best ones people got, but couldn’t remember. But then I saw Marion look at me.

“Water time!” Isabelle said, leading Thad and Oliver over to the pool. They stripped down to their underwear, Oliver had a great body, even in the firelight. Well, especially in the firelight and they jumped in, causing as big a splash as they could to me and Byron and Natalie and Marion and Tyler and Reed who shuffled out of the way. We drifted over to the pool, sitting around it, and I went and sat by Marion who had her feet in the water, looking at the bubbling intently.

“Does burning the Superlative work if it wasn’t meant for you?” I asked.

“No,” she said, as if it were obvious. “Did you try one?”

“You should have waited for me,” I said.

“Sometimes you miss your chance,” she said. She seemed annoyed.

“Which one did you use?” she asked.

“Fuck Reed,” I said under my breath. “Who got that one?”

“I did,” she said. I paused.

“So ...”

“It doesn’t matter who puts it in, it just matters who it was given to,” she said.

“So, what, you’re telling me your going to fuck Reed?”

“I don’t want to really,” she said shrugging. “But it’ll happen, I guess, if you’re telling the truth.”

“That’s reedicrous,” I said, then giggled over what I’d said, momentarily in the throes of language until I came harshly out of it, remembering what was happening in the world outside of Lillian. “Reedicrous, I mean, ridiculous. You can’t just pull things like this and get away with it. What if I just burned them all, huh? What about the contradictory ones? This is madness.”

“It’s suppose to be. It’s *magic*. I don’t know what would happen if you did that, but something.”

Just then, water splashed against my face, causing me to wince backward.

“Hey,” Oliver said. “I feel like I’ve barely seen you all night.” His face was glistening wet and cheerful. I had a vague sense of Byron and Natalie and Reed off in the fringes somewhere, in the dark wings and I wished they were on stage.

“Are you having fun?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s great,” he said.

“What’s your take on the whole—“ I looked at Marion. “The whole superlatives thing. Kind of weird, right?”

He laughed. “No weirder than anything else the players do. Maybe this can become a ritual. We can play superlatives in the dressing room before the show and then burn them out back.” I thought of the fire pit out back of Reiter. “You know,” he went on, “and just give each other superlatives like *Most likely to play the best Mrs. Kirby in a decade!*” I smiled.

“Sure, that sounds good to me.”

“Won’t work,” Marion said. “You have to play without knowing you’re going to transfigure them.”

“Well then I’m starting my own school of mysticism,” Oliver said, punching the water and spraying off behind him where Isabelle squealed. For some reason she was on Thad’s shoulders, like a shadowy two-person monster.

“You can try,” Marion said, like it was some sort of threat, like the king talking to a subject, placating him because it was kind of pitifully endearing to hear someone set their sight on something they would never ever achieve.

Isabelle and Thad crashed into the pool with a hard smacking sound that sounded like they’d hit something harder, and maybe it was actually blood spraying up instead of dark water. That’s how it looked, or I imagined or willed it to look, anyway. I was mad. The fire waned off to the side. Reed and Natalie and Byron were cloistered off in a corner, at the mosaic-tiled table Byron had shown me and told me he helped pick out when he and his mother were shopping for pool furniture. They were talking about the world’s problems, I assumed. It was obvious from their posture, and I could see each of them being really intellectual drunks in their own way. I did not feel that way. I did not feel in a million years I could walk over there and join them, even though I was friends with each of them, even though one was my best friend. Because I wouldn’t have much to say, and even if I did, the world’s problems were so great and many of them so deeply embedded in us that I don’t think I’d get much done anyway. Not unless I could wave my hand and make things happen. Make world hunger go away. Make Reed like me. Close the wage gap and give everyone an equal opportunity. Give myself a good role in the fall play. Get myself into a good college.

“Marion,” I said lazily.

“Yeah?” she said.

“Don’t make fun of me for this later,” I said. “But is there a way I can stop the Superlatives from coming true? Or one of them in particular? Safe than sorry and all that.”

“I think so,” Marion said. “There’s a counter spell for nearly everything. Newton’s law, binaries, dark matter, you know. There’s never anything that doesn’t have an opposing force. That goes for magic too. You just have to find the opposing spell and enact it, and it will nullify the first. I’ll have to do some reading. But couldn’t be from me. It would have to be from you. You’d have to perform it.” She said this like it might be a deal breaker. Maybe it was. I didn’t want to give in, to become crazy, but I felt tipsy and I looked over at Reed who was laughing, laughing, and suddenly the universe seemed to open up for a second, showing all the math underneath it, like it had that day in Chemistry, lines like threads from one thing to another. Fourth dimensional trippy shit, where everything was manifestations of everything else and everything made sense in the context of everything happening around it and everything that had happened for the past millennia leading up to it. And I felt like it was my path to do this.

“All right,” I said. “You’ll have to show me where to start.”