

Syracuse University

SURFACE

Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects

Spring 5-1-2012

Here, From the Passenger Seat: A Novel

Emma June DeMilta
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

DeMilta, Emma June, "Here, From the Passenger Seat: A Novel" (2012). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 107.

https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/107

This Honors Capstone Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects at SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.

Here, from the Passenger Seat
A Novel

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

Emma June DeMilta
Candidate for B.A. Degree
and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2012

Honors Capstone Project in English and Textual Studies

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
Professor Dana Spiotta

Capstone Project Reader: _____
Professor Michael Burkard

Honors Director: _____
Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date:

Abstract

What if a small but growing number of people in your city decided to stop using the Internet? What if this group held seminars, protests, and art shows all to promote their mission and gain a following? Would you argue with them? Consider joining?

This is the central concept of my novel *Here, from the Passenger Seat*, a work with themes of friendship, grief, and growth. Follow recent college graduates and best friends Cecilia and Sibyl as they encounter the anti-Interneters. Watch as Sibyl's Internet boyfriend shows her a little too much affection and as Cecilia struggles to comply with the imposed rules of the anti-Internet movement.

Written in compliance with the Creative Capstone requirements, *Here, from the Passenger Seat* is the final result of several semesters of great exertion and of many lamp lit nights at my desk. There were times when I disparaged my project and myself and there were times when I felt very excited and hopeful after a work session. I hope that you enjoy the novel has resulted.

© Emma DeMila 4/25/12

Table of Contents

Abstract	
Acknowledgements	
Chapter 1: Plus One	1
Chapter 2: WeightWatchers	9
Chapter 3: A Stranger at the Coffee Shop	10
Chapter 4: Home Pregnancy, Late Night Grocery	16
Chapter 5: Delmonico's Fine Italian Eatery	31
Chapter 6: Drunkward Spiral	37
Chapter 7: Down the Rabbit Hole	41
Chapter 8: Further Down the Rabbit Hole	56
Chapter 9: Panera Bread	74
Chapter 10: Work, Play	88
Chapter 11: Attendance	99
Chapter 12: The Time in Between Other Time	103
Chapter 13: The Sollinger Dynasty	105
Chapter 14: Anti-Interneters	111
Chapter 15: Delmonico's Again	131
Chapter 16: Clean Start	134
Chapter 17: Panera Reprise	136
Reflective Essay	145
Summary of Capstone Project	160

Acknowledgements

I thank
my family and Uncle Tom for the sessions of psychic therapy. Dan for listening
to me complain.
the Honors Department for creating this great opportunity.
Michael Burkard for taking the time to read my capstone novel (twice) and for
giving me inspired feedback and advice.
and
Dana Spiotta for the outrageously supportive guidance and straight talk and a
mentorship that was both profound and heartfelt.
I am indebted.

Chapter 1

Plus One

I'm a sour old bitch and a cynic. Still, I have moments where I see something really beautiful, and it makes me feel beautiful, too.

From the back passenger seat of the Bernstein's van, I could see the sun lowering behind the city buildings. The fuchsia-purple lights surrounding the brilliant orange faded gently into the cloud cover. I wanted to put my hands on the cold window and crane my neck with childish amazement to see every moment of those colors strips, the blinking gaps that appeared like a film reel between the urban grayness. Instead I sat paralyzed. Sibyl's jaunty left butt bone dug into my thigh, rubbing itself back and forth on my femur, but every time Sibyl said, "I must be squashing you."

I shook my head vehemently and said, "No. I'm fine."

As the Bernstein family and I drove northbound, up a ridge that took us out of the city to a restaurant in a strip mall, a convivial Mr. and Mrs. Bernstein discussed the ceremony that they had just enjoyed. I listened to their wayward themes shifting and turning the same way a person high up in an airplane watches the ocean currents churn below her.

Mrs. Bernstein said, "White was such a good color choice—they did such a lovely job. It's not the school's color, I know, but I didn't think that mattered one bit, because it made the whole arena seem *so* elegant. Didn't it make the arena seem elegant, girls?"

“It’s called the *dome* dear—” Mr. Bernstein corrected her, “and the white was nice. A real graduation ceremony has got to have the college’s colors. Am I right? Royal blue and orange. Or is it navy and orange? Girls?”

Sibyl said nothing. I tried to picture what decorations they were discussing. Streamers, balloons? Plastic curtains to hide the underbellies of stages? The view of the sunset slipped away from me as we curved around a hill.

“Navy, I think.”

Expelled out into the parking lot, I shivered and stared at the giant red lettering slapped onto an otherwise bare rectangular building. Sirloin, it said.

“6,” Sibyl’s father stepped forth to the young hostess as we all came inside, “George Bernstein.”

“We have reservations,” Mrs. Bernstein added.

Sibyl and I started to lead the family to a back table. My knees shook. I focused on Sibyl’s back to anchor myself, and staring at her sidling hips I grew envious of her body, her family, her graduation dinner. A fraudulent feeling ignited within me.

I almost expected someone to jump out from behind a column to ask me, “What are you doing having dinner with the Bernstein’s? Why are you bothering these nice people on their daughter’s special day?”

The Bernstein family and I were sat in a cozy booth surrounded by a monstrous fake plant. Sibyl’s little brothers happily plunked into the booth, one intently playing games on his iPhone and the other looking all around for any sign of excitement whatsoever. A drink order. Two bottles of Chardonnay. Sibyl and

Mrs. Bernstein discussed Mrs. Bernstein's bracelet. Mr. Bernstein looked around as if he wished there were men to keep him company, instead of his harem. Even though it must have been explained to Mr. Bernstein at some point by someone like Sibyl or Sibyl's mother, maybe multiple times, he asked me,

“And where is everybody? No one came to see you today, on your big day?”

I shook my head.

“I understand, I understand,” he said, with his face showing clearly that he had no faculty for a type of reasoning that could put him in an empathetic situation with parents who couldn't make it to see their daughter's graduation ceremony.

“I understand,” he said again.

Mrs. Bernstein brought up more talk of the ceremony, this time finding a criticism—*and weren't those crowds awful?* I found that I had already finished my wine. Mrs. Bernstein giggled and poured me more.

When Mr. Bernstein mentioned Cleveland, Sibyl began to gush, “Mom and I found the greatest place. I'm just gonna find roommates on craigslist, Daddy. It's completely safe. I know so many people who've found roommates that way, Daddy.”

“I don't know if I like my baby girl doing that.”

I tried to read the menu, my mind fogging with wine and the heat of the room. The only entree that seemed to be vegetarian was a pear bleu cheese

salad. That didn't sound very good to me. Sibyl grasped my left hand's pinky and ring fingers under the table.

The waitress appeared. I had appraised her during the Bernstein drink order as the kind of waitress who would bend over backwards for a Bernstein-type, just to prove to herself that she was a masterful waitress.

"We," Mrs. Bernstein motioned at Sibyl and herself, "are going to share the pear salad. No dressing, please. And can you bring that on two separate plates? And can you make sure that they don't put the dressing on the side, either? We want *no* dressing. We don't want it at all. I just hate to see things go to waste, you understand. Thank you."

The waitress looked at me and I panicked. The heat in my cheeks, it occurred to me now, wasn't from the wine but from being in front of the Bernstein family. When I opened my mouth at the waitress I found one mousy word.

"Um, vegetables."

"Vegetables?"

I tried again, "A side of vegetables?"

"The side of vegetables?"

"Yes," I shut my menu, shoving it forward, nodding and refusing eye contact from everyone.

"That looked good," Mrs. Bernstein encouraged me, "I almost got that." Her bloodshot eyes and spindly frame seemed unfairly ghoulish. Sibyl's little brothers started to fight about whose turn it was to use the iPhone (*This one's*

mine/Mine's battery's dead/You should have charged it/You have to share with me)

When the Sirloin waitress came over smiling, brandishing everyone's dishes, my vegetables—a medley of paysanne carrots and green beans—looked plain and pathetic.

The moment that I was congratulating myself about having made it through the meal without having to talk much, Mr. Bernstein looked up at me and said, “Cecilia, how would you feel if I offered to pay your rent to move in with my Sibyl? Just so I wouldn't have to worry about my baby girl living with total strangers from the Internet craigchat? You're from the Cleveland area, in return for rent you could show her around. Interested?”

I turned to Sibyl, expecting an immediate remark, expecting her to ridicule her father's suggestion using the same kind of charisma that helped her turn down all sorts of proposals from college boys. Instead I saw her expression, heard her saying, “What do you think, Ceely?” and knew that the idea was hers.

“I would have to think about it.”

Mr. Bernstein leaned back in his chair. Our eyes locked. “That's fine, you think on it, but you let us know soon, Cecilia. Before Wednesday.” He wiped invisible steak grease from his mouth before discarding the cloth napkin on the table.

“How did you enjoy the ceremony today, Cecilia?” Mrs. Bernstein broke in, “We didn't see you at convocation.”

I looked into his dark eyes. I swallowed one last cold carrot and shrugged, “It was fine.”

That morning I had woken up tired. Not the kind of tired from drinking too much or from sleeping on a cheap futon, like I did. No, this was the kind of tired that was borne out of discouragement and resistance. Today’s the day, I mumbled, but I was mocking myself.

I forced myself through a shower, washing my body roughly and without precision. I then sat dripping on the end of my futon, breaking the plastic that contained my robes. Sibyl had chosen to sleep in the hotel where her parents were staying instead of our apartment. Sibyl would have the perfect ‘under robe’ graduation outfit, and would spend hours doing her makeup while her brothers bounced on the hotel beds. I put the robe on over my naked body and looked at myself in the full-length mirror in the wall. There I stood, long raggy hair still wet and dripping all over the polyester. A pillow case of royal blue and static cling wrapped all around me, my nipples poking the fabric. Staring at my own face, raw and flush, I almost fell over from a head rush. My robe dropped to the floor. Sliding back underneath the welcoming comforters I fumbled through my phone to turn the alarm off. I pulled my blankets up over my bare shoulders, turned stomach-down, and returned to sleep.

I woke up again and my phone said 12:02. I glanced upside down out of my window at the beautiful afternoon that had begun without me. Light filtered into my room. I stretched my feet out from underneath the quilted tomato-colored comforter. My feet were pale and the metatarsals looked like little lawn rakes.

Humming, I rotated my ankles. Their rustic boniness seemed beautiful to me, they reminded me of my mother's feet. Maybe my mother and I had the same feet. Enormous relief flooded me about no longer having to choose. I had not gone.

The Bernstein's dropped me at the apartment. I flicked on all of the lights. I knew that in a matter of days the landlords would send someone in to clean it up and that would be that. After a quick sweep and mop, they'd shuttle in the next round of college students, to insinuate their lives and clutter among the preexisting clutter. I was glad then, that Sibyl hadn't stayed one last night in our apartment. That Sibyl didn't seem to care about saying goodbye to the apartment told me that the house had loved me more—in its silence, it seemed to want me not to go.

I called my Dad. "What, does he think we're poor?" he kept asking me.

During the past few months, when adults had asked me if I had a plan, they had always seemed to pray that I would say yes. If I could tell them about a plan with a few convincing details and some charisma, they would be taken with me. They themselves would be overcome with relief and the conversation would be saved. Every conversation with an adult in the past two months had been a litmus test to see if I could become an example of a successful young person.

By the time Mr. Bernstein asked me to live with Sibyl, the only self-made plans that I was certain of were that I was moving back home to Cleveland (because I had no savings) and getting a low-stress job (because I couldn't handle any other kind). The fun flexibility of my plan had been deciding when to leave

Syracuse for Cleveland. As I called Mr. Bernstein and hashed out details, I watched the fun flexibility collapse in on itself and smolder. My new life plan was Bernstein-dictated, and I had to move into the rental by Thursday to keep Sibyl company. I guess I couldn't have afforded living with Sibyl otherwise.

Flopping onto my futon in the dark, I groped for my phone and texted Lem. No response. I unhooked my bra and fell asleep in my clothes.

In the morning, I didn't linger. I packed up my possessions and got on the highway, so I could spend a few days with my Dad before the move-in. I sped around cars and took five pit stops and drank three milkshakes (vanilla, vanilla, mint). I created crappy descants to sappy folk songs. The freeway helped me to still feel free. The freeway existed as a limbo between my two cities.

Chapter Two

WeightWatchers

When my mom was in the hospital having surgery, my dad seemed lost without her presence at home. My aunt and mom decided it would be great for him to do WeightWatchers to distract him from being nervous, so my aunt and him signed up together. He'd always been a buff man, working as a garbage collector strengthened his arms and back. I had never seen him without his big, veiny arm muscles. He was overweight, though. Well, until WeightWatchers. The pounds came off slowly at first, then all at once. He dropped two, three pants size within six months. He had gone straight past healthy, in my mother's eyes, right to dangerously thin. The name 'Weight Watchers' became ironic and reversed.

"You need to eat something," my mother would croak at him. She was probably envious of his weight loss. That was a year ago, and he was still a thin man. It confused me as I hugged him, my arms fitting all the way around his body.

"Are you sure you want to go live with your friends?" he asked, without letting go.

"I don't want to be a hassle," I told him, which was true.

Chapter Three

A Stranger at the Coffee Shop

Sibyl, Angie, and I had been living together in Ohio City for two months. We had taken to claiming half of the back room at *Muddy Waters*, a coffee shop on Vine. It was one of the first places I took Sibyl, because I thought it was a cool place and I thought she would like it. I had gone there all the time in high school, and even when I think back, when I was younger—to get sugar cookies with my mom and grandma. We went because all the furniture was broken and because we could slip off our shoes and put them in a pile with nobody caring. *Muddy Waters* had a weirdly soothing bathroom. A one-stall cube, it's main feature was a silly mural wrapped around three of the four walls of a naked wood nymph woman whose feet became roots of an enormous billowy tree. Normally, I sneered at this type of artwork, but for some reason the mural secretly made me feel clear-headed. I liked how it took up the space in the bathroom, dissipating any lousy hygienic feeling that public bathrooms usually have. I could take a breath in there and appreciate how well the past weeks had gone.

When I returned from the bathroom, a stranger was chatting up Sibyl and Angie. Sibyl was making these faces like it was physically painful to listen to this man, while Angie took in every word, uncritically enamored with every idea he put forth. The man seemed to me to be both intrusive and obnoxious—the kind of person who mistook everyone else in the coffee shop for being as amicable and forthcoming as he was. Or maybe even worse, the kind of person who mistook

everyone else in the coffee shop for being as lonely as he was—searching for a chat.

I sat back down intending to ignore them by putting my nose back into *Savage Detectives*, but immediately found that while my eyes went over the lines, I was really just listening to their conversation. The boy was arguing that Cleveland was...

“...No New York, or Chicago for that matter, but it’s up there, man, it’s up there.”

How articulate.

“I mean, and our art scene, man.”

I put my book down at this, “What?”

“Yeah, we have a lot of great art and artists,” He replied with confidence.

I asked, “Are you from here?”

“Listen;” he leaned in, “Have you heard of Derek Sollinger?”

I shook my head dismissing the random name.

“Derek Sollinger or Lucas Mars, or any of the anti-Interneters...” He mumbled.

The guy, Bruce, had slickness on his forehead, the kind of slickness a person only obtains after getting too hot and later cooling off. The slickness from even a small span of time remains on the forehead—it hunkers down and stays put.

“Actually here,” he said rummaging around his old Jansport. I looked at its dinginess and at its iron-on marijuana leaf and looked to Sibyl, who had a

tendency to exchange looks with me over things like iron-on marijuana leaves. She raised an eyebrow. Bruce held a business card in his hands.

“Here, this is a gallery on the Westside. My friends—these guys Derek Sollinger and Lucas Mars are having a joint show there next week in the evening. You should come,” He said, and then, looking to my roommates, he said, “all three of you girls should come. Then you’ll believe that there’s good art *and* good people around here. What do you have to lose? Even if you don’t like the art, you can meet some nice friends of mine.”

“What kind of art is it?” asked Sibyl, picking a cuticle.

“It’s like, well,” Bruce hesitated, “I can’t speak for them, girls, but, it’s like, well, actually it’s kind of hard to explain. It’s all different; since the only requirement is that it promotes the movement, dude.”

Later, Sibyl would mock Bruce to me, imitating his inability to refer to us as anything besides ‘dude’, ‘man’, or especially ‘girls’ for the tiny length of time the four of us spent talking in *Muddy Waters*.

“See, there’s this group of people I kind of know, girls, dudes mostly, well, and some of them I know much better than others, and it’s like an art movement or a political movement, some kind of movement, and a lot of them call themselves ‘anti-Internet’, but what it seems to me they really mean is ‘anti-social media’, I think, or that’s their main gripe, maybe, I guess. A lot of them are on old school methods. No computers, no cell phones, no iPods. Uh, they’re just the anti-Interneters. They’re out there living life naturally the way it’s supposed to be.”

Life the way it's supposed to be.

"Like the Amish," Angie said.

"Not like the Amish," Bruce said, looking out the window as he spoke, "they're just not into the whole check-your-phone-every-five-minutes-to-see-what-time-it-is bag. Listen, girls, I think I gotta take off," Bruce stood up, "but maybe I'll see you next week? You really should come. I think they'll be free beer."

Bruce left us, then. He bounced on his heels as he exited the coffee shop. I couldn't tell if I had liked him or if he had annoyed me or if in my existential boredom I already missed him when his presence slipped from the room.

Sibyl turned to me and said, "I'm glad he didn't say something like 'this exhibit will *expand your minds*'. I thought for sure something like that was coming next."

I looked at the door to the coffee shop that he had just left through, "What makes checking your phone every five minutes for the time any different from checking your watch?"

"He was nice," Angie said, smiling. Sibyl and I scoffed. People like Angie made me feel bad when I couldn't take a person like Bruce seriously. Well, sometimes I couldn't take people like Angie seriously, either. She seemed to go through life being a good listener, working hard, and doing favors for her friends. She was plain and curvy but still somehow attractive, and she had pale-pale skin and reddish blond hair. She was the sweetest girl. The way she had listened to that tool was the perfect example. I wondered, though, thinking of her

attention to Bruce's palavering if there had ever been a person that had made Angie's eyes roll or blood cook. She was a perfectly acceptable, even-keel person, so maybe you understand why I didn't understand her inner workings, me being the in-house crab.

Like clockwork, at a certain evening time moment all the local hoodlums start filling up *Muddy Waters* and someone in a back room switches off the Carter Family in exchange for compilations of Grateful Dead cover bands, and Sibyl and I know that we have to get out of there. We paid for our vanilla mocha latte, our iced a□ai tea (Sibyl saying, "No, a□ai, not *Chai*"), and our black coffee, and Angie drove us home.

That night, we left at nine. I remember that it was at nine because I specifically noticed when I looked at my phone in the car to see the time, because of Bruce. Thanks, Bruce. Too-good-for-phones Bruce. Was Bruce a member of this anti-Internet faux-art cult he described? I figured he was, since he had hyped it. I pictured these friends of his all as men. I could see them sitting in a circle of white resin chairs at a backyard meeting, all using lined notebooks or legal pads instead of laptops, snobbishly agreeing about how much better it was. The Internet had given the world such obvious, beautiful things—Wikipedia, porn, and fashion blogs at the very least.

Am I a bitch?

Angie Angie Angie. She drove a White Corolla. I liked to push my forehead against the window and watch the colonnades of trees and the darks

lawns roll by through the tinted windows like when I was a child. I am a child. I am twenty-two years old this year.

Chapter 4

Home Pregnancy, Late Night Grocery

Our place in Ohio City bordered the city center. All the prices at the bars and restaurants seemed to go up fifty cents a month, but at least we were in walking distance of a grocery store and a set of bars. Plus, finding Angie on craigslist meant an extra couple hundred dollars of spending money for each of us that Mr. Bernstein didn't know about. Our apartment was a beautiful brown square house cattycorner to a Lutheran hospital. Mr. Bernstein paid \$500 per month for Sibyl and me, including utilities. That's how I knew that this town was no New York, no Chicago or whatever that guy Bruce had been trying to insinuate, it was this—inclusive rent at \$500 dollars a month, including utilities.

When we got home, Sibyl disappeared upstairs, maybe to smoke a bowl and take one of her famous hour and a half showers. Angie settled in on the couch right away to work on her lesson plans. She was a second grade German and Spanish foreign language teacher at a year-round Montessori school in Parma. I was sure that she was really good with the kids, too. My eyes slid out of focus, watching her fall into stride, diligently working, messing with the stacks of quizzes on the coffee table, grading, marking, and putting the pen up to her lip in order to think. Thinking about her students made me want to do macramé with uncooked noodles or practice spelling words on a kitchen countertop by writing them in chocolate pudding. I had to stop semi-staring at her, I was just standing

there, so I climbed to my room on the second floor and set my bag on the bed. I looked at my cell phone again. 9:37.

My mother used to say, ‘smart people don’t get bored.’ I put on some Billie Holiday to relax me and read a piece of mail. I stretched out onto my bed. Time had slowed. I had the urge to go to Angie and ask if she wanted to bake something or go for an evening jog, but I knew that I didn’t really want to hang out with Angie or even disturb her lesson planning. Maybe I just didn’t know how to spend time with myself. Is that a skill? Who is supposed to teach you that skill? I lay on the bed and looked at the ceiling for a long time, eyes wide. A fly could have gotten caught in the film of my eyes. Smart people don’t get bored. A lot of my mother’s saying were supposed to motivate me but just left me feeling achy. My mother would have adored a daughter like Angie. She was perfect in a different way from Sibyl. I unpacked one of the books that I had been reading at *Muddy Waters*, flipped onto my stomach, and forced myself to read a few pages. A knock.

“Hey, do you want a ride to work tomorrow?” Angie the Angel.

“Sure.”

“Ok.” Angie had pulled her thick hair up into a loose ponytail on the top of her head and had put on ugly gray sweatpants. An eyesore, these pants.

“What are you reading?”

“Some strife-filled novel. Lots of 25 cent words dashed in to try to prove she can write.”

“So you don’t like it, then?” Angie asked me.

I looked down at the pages bathed in yellow light.

“I do like it. Overall.”

“I see.” Angie said, smiling and taking leave.

I let the book slam shut and laid it on top of me, and the book and me, we lay on my bed and we stared at the ceiling. I watched the book quiver, going up and down with the breathing movement of my stomach. Side A of my record clicked off and I could hear Sibyl’s French rap music blasting upstairs. My mind went to Lem, who had been easy to leave behind in Central New York but who I now missed. I stood. A behemoth of a moth flew in my unscreened window and started going berserk-o around the branches of the chandelier light. I heard a noise, like a hissing or a whispering. I looked around for movement; for the house’s ghosts, but saw nothing.

I went looking for Sibyl.

On the third floor the bathroom light was cast, glowing onto the several inches of carpet that met the metal threshold under the door.

“Sibyl?” No response.

“Sibyl?” I knocked.

“Come in,” Sibyl was using her eremitic gypsy voice, almost a warble, this voice.

I opened the door and saw Sibyl lying in a twisted salamander position; half up the walls in the corner and half sprawled out on the floor all screwy. Her taupe muslin dress flowed off her body. Hair like Medusa, her solemn hands folded across her stomach.

I cocked my head sideways, looking at her.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

She closed her eyes. She had milky skin, not like mine, with blue veins bifurcating out along her cheek lines. She lay motionless and almost serene.

“I’m pregnant,” she said.

I put a hand on the doorframe. “Pregnant? How can you be pregnant?”

Her eyes remained closed, but I could see the workings of her thoughts caught behind her taut, closed mouth, plucking at the muscles all around her lips.

“I’ve been seeing Greg again,” she confessed.

“I see.”

Greg with curly white-blond-gray hair, the guy she had met on craigslist when we were searching for a third roommate. He bought her lavish gifts and dinners. I had thought that she had broken it off with him for good a month ago. That week she had walked around the house, giggling, relating to me that, “I actually just told him *‘I don’t like you, Greg. You bore me’*,”

Sibyl had said that her “non-attraction was so honest that Greg couldn’t even deny it.”

She had told me, “I know I’m a clinger and a codependent but I feel a weight lifted off my chest. I would get in a bad mood if I knew I was going on a date with him, even before leaving to go!” I wondered now what had made her renege.

“How late are you?” I asked.

Her eyes sprung open and she turned to me, “I’m not! But I’ve had all the symptoms, Cecilia! Food aversion, mild cramping...” She grabbed my sleeve and pulled me down to the tiled floor with her. I sat down and she almost whispered, “I *feel* pregnant. I’ve scared myself with this before, I know, you’ve been there for it, but deep down, I know this time.” Her big eyes were brimming with tears. I realized that she had probably been lying on the bathroom floor since we had gotten home.

She snuffled, “I knew that you wouldn’t believe me. God, it feels good to tell someone, though. I’ve been thinking about this for two weeks straight. I was thinking about it the whole time at *Muddy Waters*. How could I have been so stupid? *I told him* too, Cecilia—it’s my fault.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is my fault,” she wailed.

“It takes two to tango,” I said clumsily.

“Of course, I didn’t want to tell him, but I’ve been so stressed out. I cracked and I called him yesterday crying and told him all of my concerns.” Tears were falling from her stony little eyes now, “He said all the right things, Cecilia, it was very heroic. He’s a good man.”

He’s a good man, she said with such determination, as if Sibyl knew the ins and outs of good men.

“I always do this,” she continued, “You’d think I would learn. If I weren’t pregnant—if I were to get my period, I would never have unsafe sex again. Never.”

“Sibyl, Sibyl,” I said, stroking her hair, her head fallen into my lap, “You should calm down and just wait and see what happens.”

“I know,” she gave me a pleading look, “I can’t relax even though I know I should.”

“Just wait and see if you get period,” I said.

She nodded, wistful.

“These things happen.”

These things happen, another empty idiom of my mother’s, filtering through my voice. Maybe she was pregnant, the thought occurred to me. But, no. Most likely, no. A shudder ran through the back of my spine. It would be a terrible thing to be true. I pictured us in a clinic lobby, Sibyl half passed out from nerves, with deathliness in her face and me, sad for her, paging through a Highlights magazine, looking up every millisecond, and waiting skittishly for her name to be called. I pictured myself, sitting, listening to the doctor say, “The fetus was clearly starved for oxygen because of Sibyl’s cigarette smoking, and clearly starved in general.” Eh, the doctor wouldn’t say any of that.

We sat there awhile on the bathroom floor; I felt my coccyx growing numb. The bathroom floor had upon it the dirt of renters, of a million impersonal dog hairs and skin cells, never fully cleaned and never full cleanable. I stroked Sibyl’s hair. I could have sat there for years; there was something comforting and very low-committal about being Sibyl’s comforter. Occasionally, Sibyl said something to let me know that she was still worrying throughout our silence.

“Don’t tell Angie.”

“Of course not!”

“I’ve been punching myself in the stomach where I imagine my enlarging uterus to be.”

“Sibyl, that’s not healthy.”

“It’d be better than having a baby,” she sighed.

“I bet you’re not pregnant.”

“I wish I weren’t pregnant!”

I felt a tension creeping in. I thought of Angie downstairs, in all her relaxing normalcy.

“Do you want to go to the grocery store?” I asked, as a strategy to get off the floor.

“Ok.”

Getting up in the restrictive space, the trash bin came close to my face.

“Did you already take a pregnancy test?” I asked her.

“Yes, it was negative.”

She went on with some excuse why that result probably wasn’t valid, “The percent of error increases to 99% on the day of my imminent period.”

In my room, I threw on clogs and opened a bottle of Xanax. I took two quickly, hands shaking. There was something contagious about bad moods, wasn’t there?

Sibyl and I strode into the darkness and sliced through two slow blocks of solid night to Steve’s Market. I didn’t spend much time outdoors those days and I felt almost desperate for the healthy feel to the air. I sucked in as much yellowing

stars and purple-black rejuvenation as I could through my nostrils. I liked our neighborhood because I knew I'd find no young boys in bull cuts or baseball uniforms shopping after practice with their overbearing mothers, no people I went to high school with—only full-grown adults, coming in and going straight to and from the liquor aisles.

Sibyl and I walked in and encircled the produce. After ten minutes, we had put one green bell pepper in our blue basket. I saw baby watermelons and tried to picture one growing inside Sibyl, the vines slowly slipping out her vagina like a horror movie. Sibyl wandered around, floating like a head nun on the top of the hems of her habit. Some older man in a dirty white t-shirt and baggy gray corduroys walked up to her and started chatting. I guess Sibyl was something to see in a grocery store at this hour: she was wearing a giant black poncho that constantly slipped off her shoulders and she slouched in impossible heels. She looked beautiful, overdressed. I couldn't hear what they were saying. I picked up a large eggplant, and there, in its smooth surface, I saw my reflection. Ugly, I thought. Ugly-Ugly. Ugly and sad and beautiful and only beautiful because it was so ugly. Sibyl suddenly was standing beside me, and there I had been, for several minutes, vane, morbid, and stoned, looking at my warped features in the eggplant's glass. Put the vegetable down, Cecilia.

We moved to the cereal aisles.

“Did you see that man I was talking to?”

I nodded.

“He couldn’t tell the head-of-lettuce from the green cabbage. He was asking me which was which.”

“He talked to you ‘cuz you’re such a babe,” I said.

“Cecilia,” she said, her nose crinkling, “That man couldn’t *read*. You don’t think that’s *terrible*?”

I said nothing. Sibyl seemed to have forgotten about her pregnancy worries.

“Maybe he just wanted to talk to you.”

“He couldn’t read the labels to tell them apart,” her voice ached with pity.

“Should we buy Tampell’s?” I said, picking up the tangerine-colored bottle, trying to change the subject.

“This stupid state just passed a really strict abortion law,” She snapped, “I read about it online.”

I said nothing; I listened to the Zen-like hum of the grocery store. We floated down the rows; all the foods were sectioned out. All the foods in colored packaging, in bottles, in glossy paperboard. Stacked, lined. The fluorescent lighting made my eyes goes in and out of focus.

We began to make the lightest chatter about Greg, (*Isn’t he, like, ugly-handsome? You can’t tell if he’s ugly or handsome and that rousing intrigue in turn makes him more handsome.*) I could tell her mind was ticking, and she would seem fine and then all of a sudden I would think she was about to start crying again. I doubted that Lem would have taken care of me if I were to have gotten pregnant with his child. He would have freaked out, and he would have

driven home to his mother's coddling arms, and leaving me to be the adult. I guess I could have procured all the necessary rides to the abortion clinic from my college friends.

At the checkout, I stared at the cashier's stoic face as he rang out two packs of pregnancy tests, a man who could have been my Grandfather. He gave none of his thoughts away.

I shifted my gaze downward and my eyes found Facebook's recognizable logo emblazoned on several light blue posters that cluttered the bagging area. The logo had red devil horns growing out of it. In larger typeface above the graphic, it read: Hell is Social Media. A gallery address listed at the bottom provided another slogan: *Anti-Internet is Well-being*. I ripped it down and handed it to Sibyl.

"Hm," she said.

"Don't you think it's weird?" I asked, "It's interesting—do you think it's the same?"

Sibyl said nothing. She seemed to resent me for having enthusiasm over a topic other than her pregnancy worries. To show her that I was irritable too, I said nothing on the walk home either.

At home, Angie sat at the same place we'd left her on the couch. I showed her the poster and she began to clamor about it, "Do you think this is Bruce's friends' exhibit?"

I shrugged, “Sibyl and I didn’t indulge in speculation.” Sibyl disappeared upstairs again. I put the groceries away. It took five minutes. I was shelving cereal when Angie came into the kitchen to fill her tea mug with more hot water.

“It seems like this poster definitely has to be for whatever Bruce was talking about.”

“Maybe,” I said, “Or else, a freaky deaky coincidence.”

Angie put the poster down on the counter, “Is Sibyl alright?”

“What do you mean?”

“She was crying when you guys walked in, I think.”

“Oh, she thinks she’s pregnant,” I adjusted the cans in the cabinet.

“Oh my god!”

“But she hasn’t even missed her period.”

“Well then she can’t worry yet!” Thank you, Angie, for some sense.

“I know, try telling her that,” I said.

“You sound upset.” I was starving.

“I’m not,” I sighed, turning around to face Angie, leaning my ass on the cheap countertop, “I’ve just been around for the time Sibyl thought she had lice, the time she thought her hair was thinning, the time Sibyl was convinced her right hand had a weird shake to it, the time Sibyl went to three eye doctors and they all prescribed her the same Rx for her contacts. But she had found some excuse as to why having gone to all three had been worthwhile...”

I was putting it all together in my head, “And you know, countless doctor trips, I mean a lot. Panic attacks. Weird stomach pangs (“in various arts

speckling my abdomen!” I remembered her shrill voice), autism, Asperger’s. An OCD support group. Our apartment had more stacks of health textbooks than a grad student studying Child Psychology owns.” Each day she came home with one, and I always had thought *What a waste of money*, but maybe that was my mother’s voice. I couldn’t always tell.

“And the time she thought that the extra virgin olive oil I bought smelled like Bananas. I told her, maybe olives just smell a little bit like bananas. And she kept bringing it up, kept having me smell it. Poured it into a white bowl to show me, ‘doesn’t it look really yellow to you, like bananas?’ and then a month later, she was doing the same thing with Vanilla RiceDream: ‘Doesn’t it smell just like pistachios?’ I said to her, I said, well don’t you like pistachios? And to her ‘yes’, I said, ‘well, then what’s the problem?’”

“So she exaggerates sometimes?”

I had been aggravated but then sought immediately to unweave the characterization I had just put in Angie’s mind about Sibyl, “No...no...she doesn’t try to. She is not like a pathological liar like those 13 year old kids that say they own a tarantula and have been to California when they haven’t. She fixates, is all. She worries herself half to death.”

Angie nodded.

“Like, one time, for instance, she convinced herself she had Cotard’s syndrome.”

“What’s that?”

“Exactly. It’s this very obscure questionably real disease that she read about on the Internet and then became very sure that she had it.”

“What’s the disease like?”

“You think you don’t exist.”

“Oh wow.”

“Yeah, they highlighted it in a Kaufman movie, but Sibyl’s thing was before that came out.”

“Who? Sorry, I’m not well-versed in movies and art like you and Sibyl.”

I shook my head, “Don’t worry about it.”

“So did she really have it?”

“What?”

“Cotard’s syndrome?”

“No.”

“Do you think she’ll be alright?” Angie asked me so sincerely that I thought she might have cared more about Sibyl than I did.

“Yeah,” I said, “I don’t fucking think she’s pregnant.” The harshness in my voice surprised me. I shut the cabinet drawer.

Back upstairs I stretched out on my bed again, but it was like I hadn’t left. Why was I fuming? Normally, her neuroticisms worked twofold to entertain me and to make my own neuroticisms seem small. Normally, I never minded Sibyl’s eccentric auto-theories, her egocentric obsession with her own health. I pictured her red warm, textured fallopian tubes turning blue-white at their wriggling, pulsing circular ends of tissue like jellyfish, rotating slowly at an angle against a

black background of outer space in a high school textbook. How dare she create a false humanity, maybe, was what it was. To make claims about her own body or psyche was fine, but to obsess to the point of creating someone new and theoretical—a white tea seedling, an imagination, a baby small and vulnerable and growing inside her—that seemed almost rude.

My phone said it was 11:12. An acceptable bedtime, I supposed. My eyes searched around the room for something—one last thing that would satisfy me or make the day feel complete. I looked at my phone again. 11:13. I took my shirt off and looked at myself in the mirror that I had attached to my door.

I tipped my head. I got so serious when I looked at myself. If I were ever an author on a book jacket I'd be the kind who doesn't smile.

I looked at my phone. That twat at the coffee shop had been wrong. Technology wasn't oppressive. Or it wasn't more oppressive than anything or anyone else. You made choices about where and when to use your computer or phone that were completely in your control. When I had left Syracuse I had had the urge to text or call Lem every day and I hadn't, and I'm sure that doing that had made him miss me, which made him reach out to me more often. I heard a text buzz and almost leapt to my bed grabbing for my phone, sure that it was Lem.

My dad, "Work tomorrow?"

I held the phone, staring at the message. Maybe I had thought that it would be Lem, maybe my mind seemed determined to miss someone.

I texted Lem, "Visit me," then crashed onto my bed once more, phone near my hand, waiting for a response. My chandelier seemed lonely without any

moths flying around it. No immediate bzz back. My stomach grumbled, I thought about eating something. I thought about waking Sibyl up (for I knew, somehow, that when we got home she had gone right to sleep). I could wake her up to drink red wine with me but I knew she would only talk about herself or Greg or the pregnancy thing. I turned the lights off and waited to hear that bzz. I waited for a circadian rhythm to sweep me away. I wished I liked girls like Angie instead of girls like Sibyl. I turned my phone over so that the light wouldn't shine.

Chapter 5

Delmonico's Fine Italian Eatery

As Angie drove me to work the next morning, I looked out of the window. It was cold. I imagined what it would be like if every house we drove by in our neighborhood was empty on the inside. Some early riser types manage to revel the time before everyone else wakes as sacred, but I felt some sort of resentment about having to be up—I had never figured out how to have a positive attitude in the morning. The resentment passed through me, though, and then I just felt morning-tired.

“What are you thinking about?” Angie asked.

“Why?”

“You had a serious look on your face!”

“Oh,” I said, “I was worrying about Sibyl.”

“The pregnancy stuff?” Besides her radiant positivity, Angie was a find. She was proving to be a good person to bitch to when I couldn't handle Sibyl.

“Yeah,” I said, shifting in my seat, “Well, no. I'm more worried that she's seeing Greg again. That guy is a weirdo.”

Angie and I listened to the Radio DJ give away two tickets to a basketball game.

“How did you and Sibyl meet?”

We pulled off the freeway. I didn't have time enough to tell her the story without rushing. “I guess we met at a house party, Angie. Even though we had

just met, she and I spent the entire night on the second floor balcony, drinking and smoking and making fun of everyone else who walked by us. I loved the way she smoked her cigarettes, letting the smoke curl out of her mouth, and I loved the way she made fun of people. She'd make fun of our friends to their faces about their most obvious flaws but they always laughed it off—something about the way she said things. It was like, behind the teasing, you knew she cared about you. And then we lived together. August to May.”

Angie dumped me in front of Delmonico's. I smoked a spliff out back with this girl—a coworker—Chelsea. I remembered that when Sibyl started talking about being interested in a graphic design internship in Cleveland, I encouraged her to come. “Well you know I'm moving back home” I had pointed out, “and it would be cool to be in the same city as my best friend.” Here we were, but not how I expected. I had planned to move back in with my Dad and sister in the suburbs. Instead, I had spent a couple of nights with them in late May, given back the car, and hardly seen them since.

I handed the roach off to Chelsea and went inside, then I put in my iPod and I washed all these bacon eggs fucking dishes. I thought irrationally, boredly, barely, in gyres that led to nowhere. I picked a fleck of sausage patty off of the crease of my thumb joint and I thought to myself, this is no job for a vegetarian.

At noon I went outside and smoked a cigarette. Charlie let me, because he liked me, I knew, and I saw that my Dad had texted me, “How are you doing?”

I took a drag on my American Spirit, which he didn't know I smoked. Writing back was an art.

I decided upon: “Good, how are you?”

“Good,” he responded, “Julie has band practice tonight.”

“Cool.” I texted back, ‘cool’ being all I could think of to say, but the irony of marching band being far from ‘cool’ striking me. My cigarette was finished.

Then I washed the fucking marinara dishes, the fucking pot roast dishes, and the chicken fried steak dishes. I thought of my job as the job of one who makes entrée tea—let’s add hot water to anything and see what smell it creates.

I got like this, complain-y. I reminded myself while washing that I wasn’t Jurgis from *The Jungle*. I wasn’t like those little children from Dickens’ Coketown, working until all their fingers were chopped off, working beginning in the dark of morning until the dark of night. I reminded myself that I had weekends off, health benefits, and that in the next month I’d have the option to snare dental. I liked the tediousness of the work, too. I just didn’t like how my feet got sore, or how my hair fell into my face and then I didn’t want to touch the strands with my sullied hands. I didn’t like how standard operating procedure inhibited me from being able to just sit on a high chair and wash the dishes. There was this restaurant climate, this paradigm of ‘the bustle’ that everyone had to maintain.

In some ways, life still felt like it did when I was in school. Still living for my moments free, for my days off. The weeks all passed the same.

Thursday Lem texted me, “I will.” He said that he would visit me, but I didn’t believe him. “How are you?” he said. All I replied was, “Fine.”

Friday I only worked a half-day and then Charlie put his hand on my shoulder and sent me home early. Love Charlie. I walked the half hour home, the last five minutes in a drizzle, took a thirty-minute shower and passed out in my wonderful bed. When I woke up it was dark outside. I buried my head half under the covers. I slipped my hand to my clit and felt it there, still there. I realized I hadn't in what felt like a long while, maybe a month or more. I wet my two fingers and sent them back down there, brushing against it, gently. I wondered if Sibyl was home from hanging out with Greg yet. I thought about something that Chelsea said to me at work and wondered if she had meant it antagonistically. I didn't want her to know that I didn't like her. I rewet my fingers and tried to focus on what I was doing. I considered Charlie, but he seemed too sweet for me to denigrate in a worthless two-minute fantasy.

I thought about Lem, getting into his car, putting on his fake Ray Bans that he loved so much, and coming the seven hours to see me as a surprise (that would never happen). I scrunched my eyes closed and rewet my two fingers and thought of Lem more feasibly, more how he actually was or had been—standing, tall and ogreish at 6'7", feet in first position and wearing all black and dark denim. I pictured him coming up behind me, in my ear. What would he say? I opened my eyes. What a forced ordeal. What would he say?

I imagined he said 'on your knees.' The false fantasy mixing with the real memories confused my heart. I picked up pace. I remembered him pulling my hair.

I also remembered his hands falling away when I wanted his hand to be guiding. I wanted his voice to be angry and not passive; I wanted his moans to be sinister and not sophomoric or youthful.

I stopped and repositioned my thinking to some nameless figure of a strong jawed, evil man, and only then did the task become easier. My orgasm, if you could call it that, didn't quiet my fast-moving thoughts as it died. I pulled my hand out of my underwear, smelled it, and got up.

I had slept too long. I flicked on the light and squinted. I ventured downstairs with no motive. On the stairs I heard Sibyl giggling and there she and Greg were on the couch on the first floor, and me with rat nest hair and haggard boxers and a cut-off Pink Floyd t-shirt, and bad orgasms swelled around me so that I couldn't shake a bad feeling.

"Hey," I said, hiding that in my voice.

"Hey, Cecily," Greg said.

I walked into the kitchen to pretend like I had come downstairs for a reason, and I listened to their insipid flirting while I found myself pouring a bowl of cereal.

I came back to the high archway that separated the kitchen and the living room, cradling my bowl. *You guys have each other? Well, I have my cereal. It's good...it has golden raisins.*

"You coming with us tonight, Greg?" I asked.

He looked at Sibyl, "Oh, no, no. Sibyl and I spent the day together and I'm going home to rest," he laughed, "I'm a much older man than you two

bugaboos—I need my rest.” Him recognizing his age to me did not signal an act of contrition at all but rather was a sort of Humbert Humbert glee, an admittance of his carnal, perverse pleasure. His happiness derived from Sibyl’s inexplicable submission to him, her inexplicable choice of him. His salivating tone that didn’t go over my head made me want to be mean, to say something like, “Yeah Greg, you are pretty old, what are you doing here hanging out with us like a pedophile?” but of course I didn’t. Sibyl reached across his lap and pulled the blanket up around her. Greg was actually a pretty nice, un irritating guy, and Sibyl was pretty shitty to him, too. When I could, I picked up his pieces.

“Oh yeah?” I said, “Well, for a bugaboo, I feel pretty old sometimes,”

Angie poked her head in the room from the drawing room, “Are you guys really going to that art installation thing?”

“Yep,” Sibyl said.

“We don’t have anything better to do,” I said.

“I wish we did,” sighed Sibyl, like going out might kill her one of these days. Sibyl and I going out, though, was us at our best.

Chapter 6

Drunkward Spiral

Sibyl came up to my room after saying goodbye to Greg, and we debated on a record to put on, she wanted *Hunky Dory* and I wanted the less classic *Darklands* or even *Bunny Gets Paid*. Angie walked by in the hall and we made her stop and pick between them. She said she didn't know any of them.

"Just pick them based on their covers!" Sibyl exclaimed. She was on the floor and I, cross-legged on the bed.

"Why don't you come?" Sibyl offered. She had a good mood cooking from the attention Greg had given her.

"I have volunteering tomorrow," Angie smiled and moved along, as the first cracklings of Thomas Morris emitted from the tinny speakers.

*"I heard God took Adam
'an made Eve outta his one rib
I don't get
How God done made Eve
All outta bone."*

Sibyl and I worked to change our clothes into something we liked and put on makeup.

"How's Greg?" I asked.

"Fine," she said, unexcited, "Greg-like."

"You seemed pretty lovey-dovey on the couch there," I said.

“Cecili,” she paused and looked up at me from the carpet, “You know I don’t really like him. I didn’t even kiss him goodbye when I walked him to the door.”

“Well, don’t you like him a little?” I asked.

Sibyl shook her head, “I mean, not really.”

Xanax one, wine swig.

Xanax two, wine swig. My teeth were getting wine stained as we sat around, and we were supposed to have been *improving* our appearances. I lay on the bed, with a drink in my hand that flopped off the side, thinking and talking. Sibyl wasn’t close to being ready to leave our house. She took four times longer than me on average. My mother never wore makeup. I didn’t pick up those skills.

“Greg wants to get a tattoo with my name on it.”

I almost spit. Sibyl shrugged, like she was revealing an intimate secret, and I knew I shouldn’t outright bash it.

“He wants a heart with my name in script superimposed on top.”

“Where?”

“Over his heart?”

“Is it...” I struggled for polite words, “...unethical to let him get that?”

“Absolutely,” she said to my relief. “The man is Looney Tunes.”

I laughed.

“I kind of want to let him do it,” she said, softer, “It would be like an homage.”

“Yeah.” Solemnity in the air. Sibyl and I were women when we were together. Old souls, but don’t roll your eyes. Sibyl cut an addie with her library card and snorted it.

“Greg probably has a wife,” she said, abruptly.

“And 18 kids,” I added.

“Maybe 9 of those, illegitimate...” We keep up with this thread of imaginary Greg lives to keep us away from the solemnity. We took Greg and with our words we made him unintimidating, instead of a psycho Sibyl-sycophant from the fucking Internet.

“Fucking internet,” I joked.

“I hope Bruce is going to be there.”

“He’ll for sure be there.”

“I’m going to fuck him, and film it and upload it to Facebook,” Sibyl said, “and he would never know.”

I laughed, “What point is there in forsaking the Internet?”

“We could not go at all,” she said, “and get high and watch Fantasia.”

“No, let’s go,” I said, suddenly fearful that we’d never get out of my bedroom, and I’d spent yet another night watching Sibyl smoke weed, “I want to go.”

Leaving the apartment for the evening—meeting new people—meant an opportunity, however slim, for something good to happen.

This was how we operated:

We would leave when the other one wanted to leave. We would scoff at the same things. You might think that our friendship was insubstantial. Sometimes I think shallow friendship is all there is in life. If life is God's pet project, well then, I'm just a reactionary as all this fucking shit hits me, it all comes flying at me, and I'm not to be blamed if I don't love that many people, or if I can't hold on to that many people.

Angie chauffeured us. My head was already spinning a little, but I had thirty dollars, gum, two more Xanax if I was feeling good about it, and Sibyl. I put my head on the window. Sibyl and Angie in the front were chatting but I chose not to listen. I was impatient to get there, I found, and I hated the car all of a sudden, the White Corolla. I especially hated the pop songs puking out of Angie's car radio at an all too reasonable volume. While getting ready, my albumens had looked infected—jaundiced. In the reflection of the mirror my makeup application had looked juvenile and Lesley Gore had entered into my ear, saying "*Maybe I know he's been cheating, maybe I know he's been untrue, but what can I do.*" Had Lem already found a new, petite sweetheart, as loving as me but without the feminist rants, sarcasm, and tears?

Chapter 7

Down the Rabbit Hole

We arrived and stumbled out and at the sight of the hanging sign for the gallery we waved off Angie. Inside there was no one. Just the curator, the artist, and taupe hardwood floors. The curator, Beatrice, and the artist, her friend Mildred, both introduced themselves. They seemed pleased to see us, and they were eager to know how we had known about their humble exhibit.

“What’s the connection, here?”

Sibyl and I exchanged glances.

“Through a friend,” Sibyl said.

“Well, we’ll let you look,” Mildred cracked a sad smile, sensing our unfamiliarity with her exhibit, sensing our error. The ladies retreated to the back of the small gallery space, and Sibyl and I poured some free Franzia and moved near the front of the gallery, appraising the art and talking under our breath to one another. The exhibit/installation (I don’t know the difference) was called *Down the Rabbit Hole*—how generic.

“This is lame,” Sibyl whispered, giggling.

“Yeah,” I agreed at low-volume, glancing back at the nice ladies, “Are we in the right place?”

“The art is blah.”

The art wasn't poorly done. Just dull. Paintings of cogs. A watercolor of the Cheshire cat. Black slashes that looked like bare trees limbs in autumn. With Sibyl, I remained young and I let the art pieces seem uncool to me.

"That's the name of the gallery, *Chaos* gallery, and this is the time and date that was on the flyer...Sibyl," I said in a whisper, "What should we do?"

She hissed back at me, "What am I, the emperor of France? Do I always have to decide?"

"Let's go."

We chugged our wine and made for the doors, throwing a pair obsequious smiles at the sad little artist and curator and then racing out of there.

"Do you have Bruce's cell phone number?"

"No," Sibyl frowned, "Would he have one?"

"Should we call it an early night?" We both light up cigarettes. I watched the smoke obfuscate the bright red of Sibyl's lipstick.

"Wanna just go home?"

"Yeah," I sighed.

Sibyl was the one to call Angie, "Hello?" She said, "Hey—uh, oh sorry, no, no, don't worry, sorry. Uh huh yeah bye," Sibyl hung up and grimaced.

"We woke her up."

"My phones says its 11:11," I said, "that is not late enough for a person our age to be sleeping."

"I know," Sibyl stuck her gum on the inside rim of a trash can, "I guess we could take a taxi?"

“Bummer,” I said. For some reason, I felt like this night was my failure, even though we both had decided to come. The sky was preparing rain. I could smell the electricity of the impending storm. I looked at the few stars visible through the murky clouds and it calmed me.

“Hey!”

Our Best Bud Bruce. Sibyl smiled.

“Hey!” I replied, not faking my smile.

“You girls go in yet?”

We looked at each other.

“Um, no,” Sibyl said, the smoky words dripped off her tongue, licentious, “we were just out here,” she motioned, “smoking a cigarette first.”

“Ah,” Bruce said, and he pulled out his rolling tobacco and started a cigarette. He bounced on his heels—too much energy for me—“Light?”

Sibyl lit his cigarette. I thought about poor Greg.

“Where is it actually? The installation?” Sibyl asked, masking our failed attempt to find it.

“Oh, it’s around the other side,” Bruce pointed, smiling ear to ear, “Man, I am so glad you dudes are here. To be honest, dude, don’t get mad at me for saying this but, I didn’t expect you girls to come.” He was a spastic little dog.

“Dude,” Sibyl smiled, smashing her cigarette butt against the cement sidewalk with her heel, “It was probably 50-50.”

I placed a mental bet that in fewer than two hours I’d see him humping Sibyl’s leg.

Bruce led us around a corner. In front of us, a haggard panhandler materialized who had been leaning his back on the brick. He had sallow eyes and a droopy face full of liver spots and deep, pinchable ruts. The panhandler came forward, like a slow-moving zombie attacking Player 1 in an Arcade videogame, mumbling for ‘a dollar’, mumbling a lot of mumble but we strode right past him and that was the only intelligible word I picked up: “Dollar.”

I guess Bruce led us into the gallery then, but while he introduced us to people I stared off at the white walls. We’d passed the man without so much as a recognizing nod. I closed my eyes and saw him still standing outside, alone. I couldn’t picture myself initiating a conversation with him, but I would have liked to chat with him, and with the older ladies, too, to be friendly. The people around me continued talking. My mother used to say, “Love one another,” but that was always perfect and vague, enough to evade any real kind of analysis into who was who. I mean, who was more important? All the strangers in the art gallery or the one stranger out there?

“Cecilia—Cecilia!”

“Huh?” I shook a hand with my wet fish handshake.

The night was beginning finally, somewhere in the back of my mind.

A bad feeling lingered with me. Did that make me moral? Probably not.

“Cecilia!” Sibyl shouted at me, “Space cadet. Spacee Cadet. Do-you-want-a-bee-ye?”

My smile waxed, “Ok, alright. Yes.”

Light, fluffy, fun, young, drinking, out on the town—

We dug into the ice bins.

I looked around for the first time, my eyes adjusting to the harsh lighting like eyes watching sunlight hit snow. The past 10 minutes I'd been all thoughts. PTSD.

Bruce rubbed and patted his goatee as if he was making sure that the hairs were all still attached, "Where do you girls want to start?" he asked. I saw him eye Sibyl.

"Here," she said, self-assured, picking a piece against the wall in front of us.

It was a glossed wooden bookshelf, lots of knots in the bright reddish wood, and one of its four little shelves was shoved full of thick books.

The little placard said:

"All the Books I Have read since I Stopped Using the Internet."

Moby Dick, good. I judged. Mostly classics, good. David Sedaris not as good but I guess you need something to break up the dense stuff.

"What do you think?" Bruce asked eagerly.

Sibyl said nothing so I felt forced to speak.

"It's okay. I like that reading is shown as important, but it doesn't exactly leave anything to viewer interpretation, does it?"

We shifted to the next work, a large impasto with a tangerine red background. The shoulders and head of a round peachy-faced boy. He had something attached—superglued—to his ear. I realized that it was a mobile

phone. From it, these black spirulina-looking things were crawling into his ear and head and corroding his face and before Bruce could say anything I said,

“Again, pretty well done, but it doesn’t leave much ambiguity...”

I wanted to find one that I liked so that Bruce wouldn’t think I was a bitch but he got called off. Sibyl looked as bored as she would at Easter mass.

“This one is actually beautiful,” I told her, when we were alone. “It works on me. But the message is still simplistic and its chastising someone isn’t us—we don’t overuse our phones.”

“Do you like that one?” A man’s voice said behind me. A skinny guy holding two plastic cups of wine motioned at a small platform close to the floor. The piece appeared to be a candelabrum made out of four or five candlestick phones.

“Intricate soldering work,” I said, tired of being mean, “It’s kind of cool.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“It’s yours?” Glad I didn’t trash it.

“Yes,” he said, holding out his hand, “I’m—“

“Hey man, I see you’ve met Derek Sollinger, I mean Derek—dude you’re famous—this is really Derek’s movement. He does all the work. This is Cecilia.”

Bruce was back. Sibyl had wandered somewhere, leaving me alone with these people.

I smiled and put out my hand and we shook.

“Hi. M’Cecilia.”

“The anti-Internet movement, we’re really doing some interesting stuff. Derek, she doesn’t know anything so start at *the beginning*, dude. Look, it’s like this: Derek ran into the coffee shop, and he was acting super crazy, like, cracked out, and he’s spitting out all this stuff about *his phone, his phone!* Totally incoherent, Cecilia, and—do you wanna tell it Derek?”

Derek shook his head, “Go ’head, Bruce.”

“I couldn’t make sense of a thing he was saying nor could I calm this dude down. Then, he brandishes his iPhone. When I say brandishes I mean he held it up in the air like Excalibur or some shit, man. This new, 4G iPhone that Mrs. Sollinger—Derek’s mother—bought him. Derek used to love this phone; he spent hours downloading different apps when he first got it. So imagine our faces when he throws it straight down into the floor. It doesn’t break, so he picks it up and he *smashes* it again onto the same spot on the floor. This time I see bits of the screen fly off,” Bruce indicated the screen bits flying off by making an explosion-like gesture and bouncing on his heels enthusiastically. Bruce’s rendition of the event seemed to involve a lot of yelling. A few people approached to listen.

“It’s toast, man, but he takes the heel of his boot and digs it into the phone, anyway. And I mean the thing sounds like a big, digital cockroach. Everyone in *Muddy Waters* is looking at him.”

Derek shrugged and smiled.

“But that’s just the beginning, Cecilia” Bruce continued, placing his hand on my shoulder, “Derek, here, he takes his *Mac book air* out of his book bag next. I mean, Derek loved his laptop before doing this. Loved. Nice fucking laptop,

too. Lightweight. And he places it on the floor, balances its fragile wings into a teepee V. And...” He looked at Derek.

“And...” Derek said.

“And he, he fucking smashes it into the ground, too! To pieces, man. ‘No more of this 1984 bullshit’ he said. I remember his words verbatim. He was foaming at the mouth. Jesse came over and was like ‘sorry dude but I gotta kick you out of my coffee shop.’ Fair enough—we all thought he had gone crazy. But now,” Bruce gestured around, “we kinda get it.”

“Still can’t go back there,” Derek said.

“Last time I was in there, I noticed that they still have to fix the splintered floorboards,” a guy added. Bruce drooled in awe of Derek.

“Wow,” I said, lifting a brow, “I know those splintered floorboards. You *are* famous.”

I could tell from my tone that I was being friendly.

“It wasn’t trying to make a show of it,” Derek said, “I was trying to embrace an epiphanic moment.”

“So this is your” I waved my hand, “Luddite group thing?”

“It’s a movement. We’re anti-Social Media as a form of communication. But we’re also kind of anti-Internet. We’re anti-text. Some of us have quit cell phones, some have for a while and some are just trying it out recently, and they’ve turned them off, turned the addiction off. I’m really happy to see how it’s all grown so rapidly. We believe in living, the real kind of living. We’re anti-Tin-in-your-ear. We’re anti-cotton-stuffed-in-your-ear. We’re anti-image and

advertising. We're people. We believe in listening carefully. We believe in art and books and knowledge and kindness and letter-writing, and all these sorts of meaningful interactions and communications that technology nowadays tries to destroy."

"Do you bully your friends into not using them, is that it?" I guessed that my niceness was more fleeting than I had supposed.

"Naw, girl," Bruce said and ooh, the way he said 'girl' rubbed me wrong. Worse, I had been wrong earlier on a crucial speculation. Bruce was pursuing me, not Sibyl.

As Derek walked away, Bruce stepped closer to me, "People choose to do it. They agree with us," He put his hand on my shoulder again, "Derek is definitely a leader, but as a movement, we try to be democratic. I've done quite a bit of planning and organizing myself. It's inspiring work, dude, that's what all these pieces are about; they've all stemmed from the joy of folks like ourselves having righteous 'offline' experiences. You should do it, Cecilia. Even if you just try it out, start small. Baby steps. Dude, I'd love it if—dude, could I invite you to one of our meetings?"

I shook my head, "I don't know. Hey—excuse me for a minute?"

I fled. From across the gallery, I watched as Derek gave a girl the second wine cup he had had in his hand. She was wearing porn makeup (purple eyeslick, cat eyes). I told myself it was a good thing that Derek had a probable-girlfriend—it would make me act more normal (less nervous) around him and maybe we could become friends.

Bruce found me again, “Want to see my contribution to the exhibition?”

“Hold on,” I said, my voice remaining calm, “let me get another beer.”

Worse than a frat guy and twice as unwelcome. He created the challenge of remaining polite. I escaped him once more. It was the truth that I need another beer, too, though. The drunker I was around new people the better.

I set my bag down to grab a beer and wiped it with a napkin and when I did I saw my phone lit up inside my bag. I looked at its screen, trying to be inconspicuous.

My father had called five times and texted me once. My first thought: *An emergency*. My second: *I'm too drunk to be helpful if there's an emergency right now*. My heart jumped up into my ears; my face turned red. I looked all around the gallery. I sped-walked outside. I called back while walking out to the brick front of the other gallery, being sure not to look in the front windows. Listening to the ringing, I tried to calm my heavy breathing. Over my shoulder, I saw that no one had come out after me.

“Dad?”

“Hey Cecilly Wheelie.”

“What’s wrong? Is everything all right? What happened?”

“Oh, everything’s fine,” he said, but he cracked into tears on the ‘fine’.

“What’s a matter?” I said. I looked down at the large black bags of garbage resting against the brick wall. Because my dad worked as a garbage collector whenever I saw garbage, I thought of him.

“It’s really nothing,” he said, “I miss you. Let’s get lunch tomorrow. Do you have plans?”

“Okay, Dad,” I replied and my eyes watered. I could see an unwashed can and a juice bottle peaking through a rip in one of the bags. Waste Management called my dad’s job a ‘frontline operations position.’

“It was just a rough day,” he said.

I heard someone slam the door to the gallery.

I felt ashamed to be drunk while talking to my father.

“I’m gonna go, sweetie. I’ve gotta help Julie Wulie with her math homework.” I heard Julie shout something playful in the background.

“Ok,” I said, overwhelmed. Footstep grew nearer, so I let him go.

“Ok, bye sweetie.”

“Ok, bye, Dad. I love you.”

“You too.”

“Hey, what are you doing?”

I spun around to face Bruce. He looked down at the cell phone in my hand, and said “Were you talking on your cell phone?” His face split into a wicked grin.

I nodded, staring.

“Can’t give it up for even for a few hours, see?” he said, hitting on me and admonishing me at the same time, “you are *addicted*. Dude, don’t worry, a lot of people don’t realize it about themselves...”

I scrunched my eyes closed and shook my head.

“What,” he said, “What is it?”

I shook my head with more force.

“Are you okay?”

“Please do not patronize me!” I hated the masculine boom of my shout.

“Dude, I’m just trying to—”

“Fuck off!” I stormed around him at a near run. Inside, I rushed up to Sibyl chuckling it up with some chucklehead and interrupted.

“Hey,” I said, slinging my chunky arm through the right angle of her tiny arm and catching my breath, “Can we go?”

“What?”

“C’mon, let’s get out of here?”

“Um,” She looked longingly at the guy, “Can you hold on a second?” He nodded.

We walked to an uninhabited corner.

“What’s up,” she said.

“Nothing, I feel like leaving.”

“Do you think its lame?”

“No—there’s some pretty cool people here, but—” I glanced around, “Bruce won’t get off my dick.”

“Oh,” Sibyl said, “Oh-oh-oh. Well, just ignore him?”

“No, Sibyl, I want to punch this guy. Two minutes ago I told him to F-off.”

“Please let’s stay a little longer, this guy is really cute and nice.”

“What about Greg?” I said. She scowled.

“Ok a little longer,” I said, “like twenty—fifteen minutes! Then let’s go to Shenanigans and get hit on by boys with muscles who play darts and like sports.”

“Ok,” she laughed and left me again.

I turned and looked at another exhibit piece, a high pedestal of meshing, interwoven cords of phones. One lone receiver fell off the precipice and hung motionless. Little black flies were all over its mouth. I shuddered and looked closer. What I had thought were flies were just the little speaker holes. How had it looked so much like houseflies? How had I been convinced? I felt unnerved. I squatted down to stare closer.

“Like it?” A familiar voice. I looked up. The founder of the movement. The boss man. Derek.

“I don’t have my glasses on,” I explained, embarrassed, standing back up straight.

“Why not?” he asked, a grin hovering around his lips.

“Well,” I replied, “Well because I don’t have an updated prescription anymore—its buried somewhere in my parents’ house—so wearing them seems futile.”

“Are your eyes bad?” he asked. The piece was called “Party Line.”

“They’re terrible,” I cracked up, feeling like crying, having uncontrollable laughter, “My vision—haha—is—the worst. Really quite bad.”

He laughed.

“So what are you doing over here all by yourself?”

“Oh,” I said, looking around for Sibyl, “My roommate—who I came with—she’s talking to some guy she likes or something,” I gave a small laugh and shrugged.

“And I,” I said, studying this guy’s face and deciding to trust him, “am avoiding that friend of yours, Bruce.”

He laughed again, “Is he bothering you?”

“I may have just yelled at him. I didn’t mean to…” I looked down at my stupid black pumps.

“I see. Well, you know what is a great excuse to avoid people, don’t you?”

“What,” I said, “I have no idea.”

“Not having a cell phone number.”

I laughed, “I forgot.”

“Forgot what?”

“That you started all this stuff. That you believe in techno-celibacy.”

“Techno-celibacy,” he said, “I like that. You want to be our Slogan girl?”

“It’s dumb,” I said, but I felt his warm smile. More than that, I felt his warm smile at the same moment I made eye contact with a disgruntled, jealous-looking Bruce from across the gallery, and suddenly, I felt happy. Very. I wanted to pirouette in a tutu across the wooden floors and mash all the artwork on the ground and lie on the floor flapping my wings amid the wreckage as if I were making snow angels.

“Excuse me,” I said, “I have to go the restroom.” The restroom? Oh lord.

When I pulled my skinny jeans down to pee, my eyes zoned in on a big splotch of brown in the bridge of my underwear. Fuck.

I fumbled through my bag until I found my Birth Control packet. I had skipped four days and accidentally started getting my period. I wrapped toilet paper around the bridge, and I sighed, looking at my mummified panties. Would I ever be a grown-up?

I stared at myself in the mirror, guessing how Derek might perceive me.

I sighed.

Back outside, once I had mustered up the courage to leave the bathroom, Sibyl found me.

She said breathlessly, “Hey, the gallery’s closing for the night but Lucas wants to know if we want to go over Derek’s and have some more drinks. Te parece?”

I looked at my hands, for a moment afraid that I had missed a spot of blood.

“I’ll go for you,” I conceded. “For a little...but I’m getting pretty beat.”

Chapter 8

Further Down the Rabbit Hole

Hedonism. The pursuit of pleasure. My mother used to say: “Nothing good happens after midnight.” Everything good happens after midnight!

“Where are you parked?” Sibyl yelled at Chucklehead. We stood under the awning, smoke drifting from the ends of our cigarettes and colliding with wet fog. The rain had begun its downpour, thick, and the roads were filling up with drainage.

“All the way down at the end of this street,” he said.

I groaned. We stared off in that direction.

“Nobody has an umbrella?”

“We have to make a run for it.”

This was debated for several long minutes, not by me; I would do what the group would do. I was too busy drunk, too busy staring at the giant drops plopping, so huge, and falling from the sky, so unaware of us, so peaceful. Leave me with the raindrops.

“Ready?”

“1-2-3!”

“Ahhhhh!” We ran, even I ran, it was pouring. At the car, Chucklehead fumbled for his keys and we all pulled at the doors, yelping at him, I was screeching and I wanted in that car. We shoved in and slammed the door. He turned on the engine and our body heat steamed up the windows. I shoved myself

as center as possible in the middle of the backseat, only then to stare down into my lap, thinking, *Who has wound up sitting next to me?*

I was sandwiched between Bruce and Derek. As the car began to roll down the street, ferocious windshield wipers pumping, I re-closed my legs as tight as I could, my knees rubbing Derek's black pants and Bruce's corduroys with each rolling bump of the patched downtown roads. Lordy lordy lordy was I happy for all the Xanax in my system then. I sat there, focusing on having eyes relaxed, half-open half-closed, straight ahead. I wanted to lean my head on one of their shoulders, or just back onto the top of the seat and sleep. I pictured myself doing so: boisterous snoring, mouth open, drooling, and head swaying with the movements of the car.

"Guess who was outside of the gallery using her phone and thinking nobody would notice?" Bruce announced to the car. At this comment, I saw Derek glance at me. I saw his disappointment.

"It was an emergency," I said, hands crinkling into balled rage-fists. A better version of me would have leaned over and given Bruce a titty twister. Lordy thank god for the Xanax, I tell you. The drive took us over a bridge.

"I think it's up here," Chucklehead said.

We slowed. I wanted to ask Sibyl what we were doing. The rain had let up, but I could see nothing out of the windows. I wanted to tell Sibyl that she had promised me we were going to someone's house, and that that didn't seem to be what was happening. Chucklehead pulled up against the curb and the boys all leapt out of the car. Bruce had a breaking plastic bag full of cans. Sitting on the

hood of Chucklehead's car, Sibyl and I split a cigarette and watched the boys. I alternated between watching Bruce spray 'This is Real Social Media' with blue paint on gorgeous red brick for canvas, and Chucklehead spray Facebook and Twitter icons with more devil horn adornments alongside him. Chucklehead was clearly the talent, I thought, as he added shaded layering to the boxy icons. I also alternated between glaring at Sibyl out of my periphery, and looking around expecting the police to show up. When the work was done, the boys exchanged haggard high-fives. We got back into the car and plunged deep into ancient suburbs, without anyone acknowledging what had just happened. I gave a last look out the back window, for trailing cops. Sibyl laughed with Chucklehead in the front seat. My head was underwater. Sibyl and Chucklehead had the look like they'd been dating for months, not like they'd met an hour and a half ago. Bruce rubbed his paint-stained fingers together. I wished that Bruce would disappear—that my head was in Derek's lap and he was stroking my hair as I slept, exhaling dewy baby breathes out over his crotch. I wasn't well acquainted with the Westside, and after what felt like an hour's drive, an hour of bumping and rubbing 3-way knees, we finally parked someplace in a residential neighborhood. When we got out, the car doors slamming, Bruce said, "This is how the other half lives."

We crossed the street, murky puddles pooling in its uneven lowlands, tar bowls, and I ascended and descended the rough tilted sidewalk block like a choppy sea, looking at the old Victorians, guessing which would be Derek's. I tripped.

“Is she okay?”

“Cecilia, are you okay?” Sibyl...

“Fine,” I said, mud and grass all over my hands. Bruce and Chucklehead pulled me up and let me hang on them a long moment, “Just embarrassed.” Humiliated. Passing time with bad graffiti artists. Delinquents. I limped inside. Everyone took to shedding extra wet layers, ditching shoes. I stood in the front hall, my red scratched palms out like I had stigmata, mud drying into the life lines of my hands.

“Where can I wash my hands?” I asked Derek.

“Oh here, I’ll show you,” he said.

I looked down at my heels also covered in mud and turf, aware that I was in a complete stranger’s apartment. I was sick of wearing my black pumps and my feet showed it with red rubbing irritations on their backs and sides. I hopped, sliding my shoes off, and then I padded through the archway of the living room into the kitchen following him. While I washed the stinging cuts, he ripped off a couple of paper towels. For reasons of fear, of shyness, of avoidance, of stress, I shirked his gaze and dabbed my palms.

Hair soaked through, clothes soaked through. Bloody, muddy. .

“Don’t worry,” he said. Bottles ssssted open in the other room, loud clamoring and chatting could be heard, the door opening and closing as people arrived.

“Do you want a shower?”

“No, no, no,” I said. “I’m fine.”

“I have clothes you could borrow.”

“No really I’m fine.”

“Sure?”

“Oh yes.”

“Alright then. You should really wear your glasses,” he joked. *You can see his crow’s feet when he smiles like that*, I thought. Eager not to be alone with him, I bolted to the living room.

In the circle of chairs and couches, I took the available half of a loveseat. No one acknowledged me or offered me a drink, so I sat there contemplating good and bad posture, an inward line of thinking caused from the combination of social boredom and sitting on a backless loveseat. The living room was large. Its canary yellow walls, nice white furniture—country home decorating—made it seem like a grown-up place, as though Derek had stolen it from its original adult owners and re-appropriated it for his wild monkey friends. It reminded me that I wanted to feel like an adult, but I didn’t.

On the other half of the loveseat sat a girl I had noticed earlier because of her beauty and stylishness. She wore a croqueted dress and a sandy brown smoke ring scarf. Having anticipated her iciness, I stumbled when she turned and introduced herself to me, “Hi, I’m Marian,” and passed me a beer. Marian was an aspiring painter.

“Cool,” I said, but I meant ‘boring’. “I’m Cecilia.”

“Cecilia,” she said, tucking her long blonde strands behind an ear, “what do you do?”

“I work,” I said. Delmonico’s being the very last on my list of desirable conversational themes, I didn’t elaborate. Instead, I asked, “So what’s your part in this?”

“The anti-Interneters? You’re the only girl I’ve talked to tonight who seems nice so I’m going to be really honest with you,” Marian said, “I slept my way in. Have you met Bruce?”

I nodded.

Marian began shredding a cocktail napkin, “Bruce and I were seeing each other and I attended a meeting or two. I got attached to the cause as I learned more. At first, I gave up only my social media accounts,” She said, “which was Facebook and LinkedIn, for me. But after about three months I gave up my computer and cell phone, too. I started orchestrating events and activist training sessions. I wasn’t dating Bruce anymore, but it didn’t matter—I was in.”

“Cecilia, I’m drunk,” Marian said.

“Um, that’s okay.”

Marian lowered her voice, “Do you want to know a secret?”

“Okay.”

“Bruce and I broke up because I saw him going through his email at the computer lab in the Cleveland public library.” She rested her head on the futon, “He doesn’t even know that’s why I dumped him! He just thinks—I’m a bitch.”

“No one thinks that...”

“I don’t know even know,” she talked on, “if he still does that. I never told Lucas or Derek or Joe or anyone. I couldn’t rat him out...the anti-Internet

guys are Bruce's best friends..." Marian closed her eyes and put her head back on the futon, "Every time I see Bruce he's trying to sleep with another girl."

"I don't really know him," I said.

"And you?" She turned to me, "Are you offline?"

Sibyl swooped in saving me from that deadly question.

"Yo, chiquilla," She said, "Derek wants to know if you want to shower 'cuz you fell."

"Yeah, I already told Derek I was fine."

"Oh, you don't want to?" She asked.

"No why would I want to shower in a stranger's house in the middle of the night?" I scowled, "What I want to do is leave."

Sibyl shrugged, "A little bit longer?" She sauntered over to Chucklehead before I could answer. Together they disappeared up a cherry wood stairwell. My right eyelid twitched from tiredness.

Derek took her seat.

"So do you have Facebook? I didn't hear what you were telling my accomplice Marian."

I thought back to the last day I'd had Facebook. I could picture the blue well-branded layout, the representative square photo icons next to all comments, and the scrolling list of messages plaguing my Wall. My aunt's message didn't even seem directed at me. It read: *Your mother will be missed* and had achieved forty-five 'likes' from my Facebook friends. A girl who I didn't like because she made out with Lem at a party once posted a message, too: *I'm so sorry*. That was

‘like’'d by fourteen people or so. The display on my Wall had made me nauseous, made me lean back in my chair to get away. Without skimming the rest of the comments, I deactivated my account. I had never been a frequent Facebook user, anyway.

“No,” I said.

“Why not?”

“Didn’t want it anymore.”

“Twitter?”

“No,” I shook my head, choosing not to mention an aborted twitter account of mine, floating out there on the Internet somewhere with sixish posts, the most recent dated in year 2006.

“Sounds like I can work on you,” Derek said. After what seemed like eons, Sibyl hadn’t reappeared. I got up and went looking for her.

I found her in the kitchen, pushed up against the counter with Chucklehead between her legs.

“Whoops,” I said. They scrambled to a PG position.

My best friend looked gorgeous, while I knew I had makeup running all over my cheeks, mussy hair in a big humid mess...

“Can we go, please? The drinks are giving me the spins.”

“Oh, hey,” Sibyl said. She walked over to me, grabbing my wrist, “Can I talk to you for a minute?” She led me out to a quiet part of the house. I looked back and saw Chucklehead twisting his head around the kitchen like ‘what just happened.’

“The boys offered if we wanted to crash here? Isn’t that nice? They thought it’d be easier, and then we can make the trek back tomorrow when we wake up.”

“I’d rather go home,” I said, “I like sleeping in my own bed. And I have to get up to get lunch with my Dad tomorrow.”

“Well,” Sibyl’s face cringed, “Cecily,” she was sweet talking me, “I already told them that it was okay. Derek and Lucas both seem really tired and I don’t think either of them want to drive us all the way back to the Eastside tonight, it’d be like, kind of rude.”

I said nothing.

“You know?” She said.

“Why would you tell them ‘ok’ without asking me first?” Pissed. Furious.

“Well, I didn’t know where you were and I didn’t think you’d mind and,”

“I just don’t understand why you wouldn’t ask me first...If that was okay. Because you know I’m particular. And you know I don’t like doing that, sleeping other places, you know I...” I kept talking but my head was elsewhere, enraged. I was acting like Sibyl’s daughter, not her best friend—I heard the whiny angsty upsetness in my voice. Growww up.

“...And you obviously just want to stay because you,” I hissed, “want to hook up with this rand-o guy.”

“First of all, he’s not random,” She said, irritated, “We’ve been talking all night. Second of all, I didn’t know where you were when they asked me.

Someone said you were *sleeping*. Third of all, so, I'm sorry. I'm sorry Cecilia." I felt bad. "Fourthly, what about this Derek guy, weren't you guys talking?"

I sighed.

"He seemed into you," she said.

"You're just saying that because you want to hook up with this guy."

"No I'm not," she said stubbornly.

"Don't lie to me."

"Look," Sibyl said, "I might be pregnant and this could be one of my last nights to have fun and be distracted before I have to deal with all of that!"

"Come on," I said.

"What?"

"That's not fair."

"It's the truth. How is that not fair?"

"You're not pregnant, Sibyl."

"Excuse me?"

Time slowed the moment before I responded.

"Don't use your neurotic excuse to fucking make me miserable, Sibyl. There's nothing growing inside you, no fetus—no baby. You aren't pregnant, you're just an asshole!"

Chucklehead appeared and I shut up. He slung his hand around Sibyl's waist. I averted my eyes as if it were an obscene gesture.

"C'mon, Sibyl, I'll help you get some pillows and blankets and stuff to sleep with," he said, looking at me.

They left me there.

I returned to the living room and let myself fall back on a couch. Everyone had vanished. The ashtrays, empty and half empty wine glasses, and beers remained.

My phone said 4:34. Tired. I felt like a wide-eyed kid awake at sleep away camp, wishing he were home. No one came for me. Only the house was there, buzzing, all its lights on, forgotten also.

Trying to parse out the catastrophic details of the night, I was falling asleep when Derek came downstairs.

“Sorry, Cecilia, you don’t have to sleep on the couch. Come upstairs, let me get your some blankets.” I had been fine on the couch. I couldn’t sleep with Derek, anyway, or Sibyl and I would really seem like prostitutes.

I walked upstairs and we went into his room. A wet towel slung over a chair—his wet hair—he had just showered. A writing desk with no computer on it, several book shelves, a bed, a futon, eight fucking Persian rugs, a perfect room, in short, in that it was crammed full but it didn’t feel cramped—lovely.

“You can have my bed,” he said, “I’m going to sleep on the couch downstairs.” He was rifling through papers on his desk, seeming way too industrious for the hour and for our state of waning inebriation. Didn’t he know that once you began drinking nothing productive should come of the night? Or was he one of those artistic types who only is productive under the influence? I had never understood people like that. Sibyl, for instance, always got high and then painted in college. I would get high with her and sit on the couch and stare at her paint like a sack of potatoes.

I sat down; back erect, on his bed, noticing for the first time my stomachache from all the nerves. “I can sleep on the couch –I mean I was fine on the couch. I can go back to being fine on the couch,” irritation showed in my voice.

“No,” he said, still distracted with his rifling, “I prefer it. Good for my back.”

“I can’t imagine that’s true,” I said. He made eye contact with me for the first time, and smiled. He held a few papers. He started taking some notes on them,

“Are you tired?” he probed. Was it a come-on? Answer honestly.

“Yes and no,” I said, “past tired. Kind of awake.”

He twisted the chair and faced me, “because I’m not tired at all,” he said, “Do you want to stay up and pass the time with me a bit?”

“Sure,” I said eagerly. Not a come-on. Not a gross guy. An interesting guy. I judged people based on their ability to not rub me the wrong way, which very few people succeed at. Marian had been okay, too. *I could stick around with Derek and Marian long enough to see if we all could be friends*, I thought. *I could stick around to get to know them a little, especially if I’m losing Lem and Sibyl.*”

“Perfect,” He took a baggie out of a little Russian nesting doll on his nightstand and looked up, “Do you want...?”

“Oh, no,” I shook my head, but with imperceptible hesitation. I could do anything I wanted now, in recent months. Still, abstaining proved to me I still had

some sort of will, and therefore a path and an identity—a good girl trajectory. He searched my eyes for disapproval, trying to figure out my ‘no’ really meant.

He seemed to change his mind and put the stuff away. He made some more notes on a paper.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, I have an event tomorrow for the movement,” He said, “I’m delivering a little rhetorical speech to get ‘em motivated, the whole schpeel, in Best Friends Diner. Open invitation. You should stop by if you can.”

“Mm, maybe. When is it?” I asked, “I have plans during the day.”

“It’s at night, at 9.”

“Expecting a lot of people to come?”

“Yes,” he smiled, “People are really picking up on what we’re trying to do.”

“And what are you trying to do,” I challenged him, but in good humor, I was smiling, I was being tough, like my mother. People liked this side of me.

“We,” he said, and also smiling, “are trying to show people the health benefits of cutting out some of the white noise that we exalt so.”

“I see.”

“And you know, I also, personally, try to avoid major chain stores, not use so much plastic, etc, too. You know, what’s best for me and the world.”

“Uh huh.”

“So are you going to join us?”

“Excuse me, what?” I asked.

“Are you going to go offline?”

“I can’t,” I said, feeling like a person who doesn’t have a single suitable guess for a hard trivia question.

“Why not?”

“Well, I could do without my computer on a trial run, but I need my cell phone to communicate.”

“You could write letters.”

“I need the immediacy.”

“For what?”

I said nothing. He backed off, realizing he was making me angry: “You know, you probably have a good reason. I’m sorry, I don’t even know anything about you, Cecilia. You’re a smart girl, I can tell, what are you doing with yourself these days?”

I turned red, “Nothing, really.”

“Nothing?”

“I work.”

“Where? Around here?”

“I wash dishes at an Italian restaurant.”

“Oh,” he said. We were both silent. My nervous stomach let loose a loud grumble. How humiliating!

“Hungry?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. Why would you allude to it!

“No,” I said. Then I sat there trying to figure if I was. I had eaten a Caesar salad doused in dressing at Delmonico’s around 2...and...the bowl of

cereal...and it was four thirty in the morning. I supposed that my body was hungry.

“You know what, I’m hungry, come to the kitchen with me?”

“Ok.”

We traversed back down the stairs and in the kitchen I watched him open the fridge (which wasn’t stocked), stare, and then open many of the drawers and cabinets.

“We don’t really have much.” He put a hand on his stomach. “Do you want some tea if I make some?” he said, grabbing the teapot and filling it with water.

“Sure,” I said, “I’d love some.”

Tea sounded perfect, soothing, calorie free. Something to hold and sip and distract from any moments of awkward conversation. Standing in the kitchen I felt myself sleeping on two feet, sleeping standing like a horse. I looked toward the other room, at the couch where I had been passing over the threshold into sleep when Derek had woken me less than an hour previous.

Practice makes perfect, Mom said, but when it came to dating I seemed to fall deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of shitty guys and confused mistakes. Watching the steaming kettle, I was sick of wondering if Derek liked me or if he didn’t or if Sibyl had told Chucklehead about our fight, and about how mean I was. I longed for the solitary simplicity of the couch. Alas, Derek handed my tea and we trudged back upstairs.

I watched him pour honey into both cups. No! I wanted my tea with *no calories*, but I said nothing. He handed me the plain red mug.

“Guess how old I am,” he said, sitting on the bed.

“How old are you?”

“Guess.”

“76.”

“Close, 28.”

“See, I don’t think that’s old,” I said, and desperate to make him see that age mattered so much less to me than quality of personhood, I launched into a saga attempting to explain Sibyl’s Greg. Yet I heard my reedy voice and I saw Derek’s brow furrowing, sleepiness setting into him, and I knew that I only sounded like I was some insipid girl, gossiping. Despite his weariness, he nodded, showing he was listening, and waited and when I had finished, he took the still mostly-full cup of tea out of my hand and put it down next to his at the end of the bed on the floor, and he took his right hand, and put it up to my brow, and he said, almost as a question,

“Cecilia, I’m going to kiss you now.”

I closed my eyes and let myself focus for it. It was nice, I thought. It was ok. His tongue wasn’t disagreeable and his mouth tasted like wine and tea. We kept kissing and I found myself still thinking of bed, of what time it was and how tired I would be tomorrow with my Dad, of remembering to bother Derek to ensure I made it to my appointment with my Dad, of Sibyl and if she was angry, if maybe our friendship was ending, or how I had the urge to drink the discarded tea

and chat more (how that would be simpler), and I wanted to know who was that girl he gave the wine to, and was it his girlfriend and what kind of man was he, anyway?, but I closed my eyes and tried to enjoy our kissing, and I did for a little bit. Swiftly, effectively, he sort of lifted me in the air via my legs and there, I was, with my head on his pillow and him on all fours on top of me, kissing me. I peeked an eye open mid-kiss, he was swinging his head into the kiss. People look so funny when they're kissing. I thought of my stomachache, of the tampon I had in that probably needed changing, of a million awkward moments that could go wrong. As he went in for another (unrelenting kissing) I pushed my head back,

“I'm, uh,” my face turned red, “I want to go to sleep.”

“Ok,” he said.

“Not because I, well because, you know...” I said, oh god, I was drowning.

“Ok.” He nodded.

“Because...”

He nodded. Exhausted, he fell off of me onto the side of me where the bed pushed up against the wall, “you want to sleep?”

“I could sleep,” I said.

“Ok, let's sleep,” he said, and gave me a kiss.

“Alright,” I said standing up.

He gave me a funny look.

“Do you have blankets?”

“What?”

“I’m going to sleep downstairs,” I explained.

“You are?” he said, “I mean, you want to?”

“Uh.”

“You don’t want to sleep up here?” He asked.

My head hurt. I thought of Sibyl, pacified, sleeping peacefully for hours now in the other room.

“I guess I could sleep up here,” I said.

And now he jumped up too. I thought, to kiss me, but he lit the fringe lamp on his nightstand and flicked the light off. He pulled out his sheets (his bed was made, how strange), and he grabbed me and pulled me gently back into bed.

Our faces close together, he smiled.

“Do you need anything?”

I needed to brush my teeth, to know if my breath had smelled while we were kissing, I needed Sibyl not to be mad at me, I needed my own bed...

“I need to be in Willovale on the East Side by one tomorrow.”

Chapter 9

Panera Bread

I woke up in an unpleasant jolt. Covers swirled around my legs. I'd been tousling. I heard clamoring surely coming from everyone hanging out downstairs in the kitchen, and music. I looked around his room, wiping the corners of my eyes filled with 'crusties' (as my mother called them). The artifact remnants of the night, our two coffee mugs, were gone from the floor. I lunged for the cell phone in my bag, heart palpitating me awake. I was sure I was running late for meeting my dad. 8:00. That meant I had only slept...God I didn't want to count the measly hours in my head. No text messages from Lem. I dropped my phone in my bag.

Not eager to join the others, I glanced around Derek's room. I looked at his bookshelf and saw small hardbound philosophy texts I'd never slogged through. Some tall paperbacks with neon covers too flashy for my taste, with titles like *The Internet Disconnect* and *Always On: A Story of Mobile USA*. I scanned for anything that seemed important. With care, I tugged a leather-bound notebook with papers from one shelf and undid the strap, glancing at the door. The papers were his speech. I set it aside.

Below them, was his tall, messy script on recycled paper. I flipped through, catching a few words. I found the most recent entry.

Installation seems to have been successful, successful by my standards. Of course, not too many unfamiliar faces, but still a good show of support...

I shut it. I didn't want to read through his journal. I quickly wrapped it up with the papers once more and stuck it back where it'd come from.

Chucklehead, Bruce, Derek, another guy, and Sibyl all hung around the kitchen in pajamas still. Chucklehead and Derek were manning the stove, making French toast. Sibyl looked beautiful and energetic, bouncing barefoot. She owned her curves and long legs in the little boxer shorts of Chuckleheads that she somehow sexily made her own. She wouldn't look at me.

Everyone else offered me some muffled hellos.

"French toast?" Chucklehead offered me. I stared at the bright ceramic plate of yellow brown breakfast food. I shook my head.

"No thanks. I'm going to eat with my Dad."

I watched Sibyl chew an egg-soaked piece and I couldn't say anything.

"Um, Derek, could you...?"

"Yeah, course," he said, sticking his plate in the dishwasher, "Just let me grab my keys."

Derek drove a Ford Explorer, a huge vehicle, so high off the ground. My mother had always refused to drive anything larger than a four door. SUVs, Mom vans, trucks, all didn't fit the bill.

"A kid could be standing in front of one those things and the driver wouldn't even know and could hit them. A tall kid—a kid four feet tall—could go unseen and get hit and die by the driver of one of those things," my mom would say. She didn't take the highway, either. So when Dad took me to guitar

lessons it would take ten minutes but with my mother I'd always have to leave twenty-five.

I looked out the window, looking for the mural, 'This is Real Social Media'.

"You sleep okay?" he asked.

"Uh-huh."

The sun shone in my eyes. I felt exhausted.

"Did you have a nice time?"

"Uh-huh, I did."

I expected to see the graffiti every new block we passed, but as we got on the freeway it occurred to me that the group must have driven off the direct route to get to that particular wall.

Derek brought up Chucklehead and Sibyl, salaciously, but I didn't feel like discussing it. All I gave him was, "Yeah Sibyl's a nice girl. She's my best friend."

On the freeway I watched the rolling billboards; they hid the weedy overgrown hillside and the empty factories behind said hillside. We passed a factory where I had volunteered in high school, sorting medical supplies, and a strip club—the tawdry Fox Den, and an Adultmart.

"You're meeting your parents?"

"My dad."

My throat felt dry and my jaw, wound shut. The factories were turning into small businesses. Printer shops, bulk food stores. Places on the fringe.

For some strange reason, I thought of my mother bringing groceries in the house: “Put the bags on the table, not on the ground.”

“Help unload,” she would say when I tried to scurry off to re-plug myself into the television or, later, computer.

My eyes brimmed with tears. Fuck, Cecilia. Think about something else. Think about something fucking else, you idiot.

“This it?” he asked.

I nodded.

He turned off and we drove past a few strip malls and my rival high school until we got to the strip mall we wanted. He pulled in front of the Panera Bread, and I hastily unbuckled my belt.

“Wait—” he said, “Are you going to come to my thing tonight?”

I shook my head and shrugged, “I don’t know.”

“Hold on, wait.” He took ripped off a sheet of carbon paper and found an uncapped pen mixed in with the dirty coinage of his vehicle.

“Here,” he said, handing me the slip, “This is my address. You should stop by some time, if you want to be friends, that is.”

If you want to be friends.

“What do you mean,” I said, “I’m not just going to come by your house, it’s weird.”

He said, “Well, I don’t have a phone, it’s the only way. It’s not weird to me.”

“What if I stop by and your not home?”

“Leave a note. I’m home quite a bit though.”

Did he want me to come?

“Well, if I come when should I come?”

“Anytime.”

“Well is there a day that’s best?”

“Nope.”

“Why don’t I give you my address and you can stop by my place instead?”

I suggested.

He nodded at the slip, “Just take that. I got you here five minutes late and you should get in there.”

I slipped the paper into my pocket. My clothes were a little wrinkly and they reeked of cigarettes, but my dad wouldn’t care. I waved him goodbye.

My dad sat hunched, stuck behind a burgundy booth all alone. He looked skinnier every time I saw him.

“Hey Dad,” I said.

“Hey Kiddo.”

We hugged. We ordered food. I painfully listened to my dad ask questions about the order. The teenage girl with ugly, chipping pink nails asked him, “Have you been to Panera before?”

Which of course he has.

We got our food and went back to the booth.

“How’s the restaurant?” he asked.

“It’s good. How’s work?”

“How’s Julie?”

“Oh, she’s good.”

“Doing good at school?”

“Well,” he furrowed his brow, “I think so.”

I was starving, looking down at my salad, but I liked not eating too much around my Dad. It gave him something healthy to worry about.

“Cecilia, eat up.”

“I’m working on it,” I said, “What did you order?”

“Tomato soup.”

“Is it good?”

“It’s alright, I should have gotten the chicken noodle.”

I nodded. I opened and closed my mouth. I took a bite of cheeseless salad.

“What did Mom used to get here?” The wrinkle that started inside the tip of his left eyebrow creased deeply. It seemed like an innocent question, but he was just finding any excuse to bring her up.

“I think, Asiago turkey sandwich and an apple,” I said.

“Oh, that’s right,” he said, right.

Maybe, in that moment, we were both hearing my mother say it, “Asiago turkey sandwich and...I’ll have the apple.” The ‘I’ll have the’ thrown in there after a planned pause was my mother trying to make her statement sound more organic, but I knew that she always ordered the same. She always ordered

carefully, practiced. She always said it exactly that way: “Asiago turkey sandwich and...I’ll have the apple.”

My mother.

My dad’s eyes were watering when he reached across the crumbs on the table to grip my clammy hand with his big, warm, rough one. We were crying together in a Panera Bread.

We said nothing but I wondered what was worse, ignoring this obviousness, letting it be wordless, or if we were to say something, try to acknowledge it somehow.

I wondered, suddenly, why I had to remember my mother this way: hating the phony sound of her voice as she ordered here, but also being endeared to her because of it. Like all of the “Don’t Ask Me Again”’s, which I hated hearing but appreciated, too, knowing she had been trying to mother me properly.

I never came to places like Panera Bread anymore, unless it was with my father or baby sister. People like me belonged at places like *Muddy Waters*, not Panera Bread.

On the drive back to my apartment he asked what my plans were, like usual, and like usual, I shrugged and didn’t know what to say.

“You got time,” he said like he had been saying since I came back to Ohio. Like his making my potential plans up and me making my potential plans up were one in the same. This time, he added, “but you’ve got to start figuring it out.”

“I like working at Delmonico’s,” I told him.

“I know,” he said, “but you’ve been working there since high school, Ceely Wheely.”

“So?”

“You have a college degree now,” he said, “You can be whatever you want.”

I rolled down the window of his truck and looked out, resting my elbows on the sill. It was a beautiful day. All the lawns in my neighborhood were chock-full of dandelions.

My dad had let me know that he didn’t like where I lived—it wasn’t a safe enough neighborhood—but he didn’t bring it up this time, thankfully. Just dropped me in the gravel driveway and I came around to his side and hugged him, standing inside the open car door. Whoops—I made him cry again, and walking away, whoops, I made me cry again. I smoked half a cigarette on the back porch until I thought my eyes were cleared a little, before strolling into the apartment like a hung-over has-been rock star.

Angie sat slouched in the couch, in these atrocious pink fuzzy slipper-socks, a towel wrapped around her head, working peacefully on her lesson plans and watching a TV program.

“What show is that?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“Mm, it’s called “I Married a Crazy Person.””

“What’s it about?” I said. Disgusting.

“It follows,” Angie became animated, explaining like an expert, “four married couples where one spouse thinks the other is crazy. Not like clinically, just like kinda acts dumb and erratic.”

“Is it mostly men with crazy wives?” I asked, disdainful.

“Yeah, well,” she thought hard, “No, with one of the couples it’s the other way around.”

“I see,” I disapproved.

I started for the stairs, “Is Sibyl home?”

“No. You guys had a fun night?”

I nodded. Exhausted.

I walked upstairs and collapsed on my bed. 3:33 pm. No new texts. No texts to expect from anyone new. I fell asleep in my clothes.

I woke up to knocking on my door.

“Hello?” I said, half asleep and disoriented.

Sibyl came in, flicking the light on.

I rubbed my eyes.

“Sorry, did I wake you,” she said, but it wasn’t an apology or a question.

She sat next down to me on the bed, a concerned look on her face.

She stuck her phone in my face. I squinted, and took it into my own hands. On its big screen a tiny picture appeared, very dark and taken without flash. I tried to make it out.

“What is that?” I asked, giving up.

“It’s *Greg’s tattoo*,” She said, staring at me looking at it. There it was. The orangey redness of someone’s skin. An outline of a color-darkened heart. Bad calligraphy script that connected to either edge of the heart. *Sibyl*, it said.

“Shit,” I said.

“What the fuck do I do?”

I was speechless.

“I’m freaking out, I’m like having a panic attack, I—a” I held up my hand to silence her, thinking, thinking.

“Well, he’s obviously crazy,” I said.

“Obviously.”

“Have you responded to his message?”

“No.”

“Are you going to?”

“I don’t know. What could I say? Hello, I never want to see you again. Accordingly, I am sorry you just got that tattoo. Ok, bye, Love Sibyl?”

“No, not that. Um. Sibyl, this is crazy.”

“He’s texting me,” she said watching her phone screen with horror, “*Do I like it?*, he says.”

“You could just never respond to him ever again.”

“He fucking knows where we live.”

“Yeah, but do you think he’d have the balls to stop by if you stopped talking to him?”

“Yes,” she waved her phone around again, “He just got my name tattooed across his chest.”

Maybe it’s a different Sibyl.

“Okay, well, let’s think.”

“I’ve been thinking for twenty minutes straight since he sent me this, but all I can think is that he is going to rape and murder me and I have the shiver…”

“Calm down,” I said, “Calm down. We know Greg, right?”

She nodded, tearful.

“We know Greg is a nice guy. We know Greg is probably not a psycho or a killer or a rapist, even if he is kind of creepy and old and from the Internet and went overboard with this tattoo business, right?”

Sibyl nodded.

“So just ignore him. If he comes by, we’ll have Angie answer the door. I can’t seem him getting violent, just mopey. Eventually, he’ll get the picture.”

“That’s mean though,” she pouted.

“Or you could talk to him about it,” I suggested.

She shook her head, a vehement ‘no’ for that choice.

“I wish I could talk to my parents about these sorts of things,” she said.

I nodded, remembering the way Mr. Bernstein looked me up and down at graduation dinner.

“What if I’m pregnant with this man’s child?” she shot me a look that told me she hadn’t forgiven me for last night.

“It’ll be okay,” I said.

“Whatever,” she replied.

“How’s your internship going?” I asked, trying to distract her from her anxiety.

“I quit last week,” she said, and flounced out of my room.

When my mother died, Sibyl had been the first person I told.

Lem was the second.

I stopped telling people after that, because telling both of them had been like opening a door to nowhere.

Once, Sibyl had signed up to be a sex chat phone service girl. She quit after a month, (*No one* sounded sexy!). Nothing scary had ever come of that, though. Now, here, benign little Greg—a roaring psychopath. I lay back on the bed thinking through any times that I had done something which could have incurred dangerous male behavior. All I could think of was the time that Sibyl and I wore bras instead of shirts to the bars, and the time in high school that I gave Marc Huffman a boner in math class by rubbing his back with my knees, and the time that I lost my virginity to a total stranger. That was it.

I wondered if Derek had slept more when he went home or if he had set to doing diligent work until his evening event.

I looked at my phone.

6 pm. I had no way of getting there.

I didn’t really feel like it, anyway.

I went to the porch, called Lem, and talked a long while. He told me about a paper he was writing, a book he was reading, about a breakup in our loose

circle of acquaintances. He asked about Sibyl, about job hunting, and about what I was reading and I told him stories.

Lem told me he missed me and I smiled. He had to go to start his work.

“I really ought to visit you, actually. Soon,” he said, and I thought of Derek.

“Yeah, I’d like that,” I said. “We could go to the Polish restaurant that Bill Clinton really likes.”

And then I told him about that.

Sibyl kept to herself the following days. So Sunday I cleaned my room and watched Gaspar Noe movies, and thinking about all the boys I had ever loved like trading cards.

Lem, Rich, Brad, Paul, and Cooper, with some repeats.

Most of the time Lem felt like an amalgam of Paul and Cooper.

I yearned for a crazy love. An eat-each-other’s-toenails, sing-each-other-songs kind of love.

Lem and me, our love was oppositional to that idea. It was something quiet and comforting. A don’t-ask-too-many questions, always-answer-the-phone kind of relation. We both just hung on to occasional phone and Skype conversations, for comfort’s sake. Baby fucking koalas.

My mother was my first and deepest love.

After vacuuming, I got down on my knees on my carpet and started making carpet angels. The carpet smelled like funky vacuum. Nose tingling tears

came—these teardrops made it three incidents of crying in three days. Was I depressed?

No...

1.) I was washing myself and my clothes on a regular basis, 2.) I wasn't sleeping all day, 3.) I wasn't desperately texting anyone, 4.) I wasn't always eating 5.) or never eating, and 6.) I didn't, above all, *feel that sad*, and these were all the warning signs.

I did, however, feel so numb that if someone could crawl up next to me on the carpet and poke their finger into my cheek, I wouldn't flinch.

Chapter 10

Work, Play

I woke Monday morning with resistance in every bone. No work. I just didn't want to go. Yet I had to go. I soothed myself with morning coffee, and with remembering that this was the way that many living (and dead) adults felt (and had felt) every day since the dawn of human existence, and that there was something redeeming about going, something redeeming putting in my full eight hours, something redeeming about 'breaking my back' over the dishes, just like my dad had scooped street garbage for close to thirty years now. 'You can do it', my mom would have cheerlead.

Just as I had learned in secondary school that Christopher Columbus was an important hero to respect, like you would the American flag, and in college I had learned that he was a horrible killer and oppressor of peoples, so I learned in secondary school that the American Dream was something beautiful, and in college, that it was something if not evil, untrue, and, not to mention, painful. I often thought about the American Dream at Delmonico's.

"Hey, smarty," Liz said when I walked in. Liz was a curvy Italian manager with pink lip liner. She was one of the only people who had worked at Delmonico's when I had been hired at 19. An original cast member.

Here, I wore my Bachelor's degree like a scarlet letter. Here was my secret advantage—my goddamn mystic item to be called upon in a moment of

darkness or need. Liz or Charlie sometimes asked me about my plans. They wanted to be encouraging but it made me grit my teeth.

I just wanted a quiet place to think and to forget.

I wanted to eliminate the brain parts that felt unsettled. Often, my efforts to fit in at work seemed to backfire.

“I was born here, and I’ll die here,” I told Chelsea, in defense of hometown.

“Why would you want to be here forever?” She asked me, “I want to move to Boston,” she had said. Boston.

Once, I described a customer as having Robert De Niro-esque gestures and Liz laughed, clapping an innocent dishwasher on the back, saying, “There’s Cecilia, always with such big words!”

“What word was big?” I asked, confused and defensive.

“Somethin’, Denerr-“

“Oh,” I said turning pink, “That wasn’t a big word, I just added ‘esque’ to the end of Robert De Niro’s last name.”

She gave me a blank look.

Liz hinted at my ‘intelligence’ often. Later in the morning, I pulled off my black apron, so worn that it had a green incandescence, to go for a cigarette and Liz came up close to me so that I could smell her musky perfume and said, hushed, “You can’t wash dishes forever, smarty.”

She looked at me, expecting me to speak. I knew that if I washed dishes at Delmonico’s for many years my feet were likely to have a mutiny and kill me or I

would develop lower back problems, like Liz. Liz's lower back caused her unceasing pain; it seemed like the single obstacle that could keep her from being chipper.

I tried to cop out of a response for Liz by giving her a smile.

I envied Sibyl.

Jobless but without ambition. A veritable kewpie doll. Living off her parents' paychecks without guilt (now there's the trick). Keeping our fridge stocked with \$4 cartons of unsweetened almond milk, spending her days with Greg (well not now, I supposed), jogging, reading, or painting, never restless or dissatisfied, keeping up with Tavi and the Satorialist and Slutever blogs.

After my cigarette, I inserted my headphone buds and began kitchen prep, wiping everything down with a washcloth and starting up the industrial toaster. It took me until lunch break to admit to myself that today was different from the past several months at Delmonico's. I stared out into the back parking lot, holding the warm cylinder of my cigarette. I felt hopeful. I liked Derek.

I thought about him all week. Could he be an addition to my small, ever-growing stack of trading cards? On Wednesday, when it occurred to me to write him a love poem, I got disgusted with myself that I was spending so much time thinking of him. My mother deserves poetry, not this schmuck I just met, I told myself, but thinking about him was involuntary—something my mind did to entertain itself.

I thought about when and if to travel to his house. I thought about how easy it was to make him wait (if he was waiting, I had no way of knowing) by

making up important reasons. Like, I was on my period until Wednesday, which was a reason not to go. Thursday was so close to the weekend that I might as well work Friday so if I visit him I'm not anticipating work (which, work got me down), and that was another reason. Friday came around and I told myself it was too soon, but since Friday was really the first day my mind considered going over there, it was also Friday that I found myself in Angie's car, routed to the Westside, to his residential street (which may have still have had some blood of mine on its sidewalk). In Angie's car my mood lowered from the week's electrifying anticipation high. I realized that this time I would be going in alone, sober, and unarmed.

On his porch, I watched Angie drive away. Poor Angie had agreed to turn around and come back if he didn't answer, because I hadn't wanted her sitting in her car in his driveway like my mom to take me back, if he did answer the door.

I knocked. Nothing.

What could I do with my night now? Eat an entire loaf of bread and an entire 16 ounces of pepper jack cheese while playing Angie at Scrabble at her Scrabble club night? Nooo. I refused.

I banged on the door, as if I could make him home by having more of a will.

I sat down on his porch. Took a deep breath, trying to let all the excitement run out of my nose. I searched Angie's name in my cell phone's contact list.

The door opened.

“Hello?”

I turned around, to Chucklehead, “Hi, uh, hi It’s Lucas right?”

“Uh yeah.”

“I met you last weekend, I’m Sibyl’s friend?”

“Oh yeah,” he said, “Yeah I remember.” His voice was friendly but his eyes glossed over me. Angie had told me that he hadn’t responded to any of Sibyl’s phone calls, making her more miserable in a dismal week already wrought with bitchiness and Greg-fear.

“Is—uh—” Whore. Slut. Prostitute. “Is Derek home?”

Lucas looked up the stairwell.

I’m sorry, we already bought girl scout cookies from somebody else.

“Yeah,” he said, “Come on up.”

I followed him.

Back in their apartment. “He’s upstairs, go on up,” Lucas suggested, and I went to the second floor. For a minute I doubted which room on the right it was. I knocked.

“Yeah?” He said. How exhilarating to hear his voice, him thinking he was talking to Lucas. Would I be a pleasant or nasty or neutral surprise?

“Hey!” I said, opening his door, slowly. He sat at his ex-computer desk, strumming on a guitar.

“Hey,” he said, processing my face, and then smiling.

I gave a small wave, “I stopped by.” My voice abstained from further sensible comments, nerves shot and brain exhausted from complying with stopping by.

See, I did it. See, I stopped by, like you said.

“I see that.” He smiled, “How you been?”

“Good,” I said. Nothing valuable has happened since I’ve seen you. “Is this an okay time?”

He looked around, “Yep,” he said. “Perfect time.”

“Sorry I didn’t make it to your thing,” I said. “How’d it go?”

“My thing? Oh the video speech. Good, good, it went well.”

“What was it again?”

“I gave a speech, my schpiel on why the Internet is a brain rotter, and we recorded it, and then we took the disc from the camcorder and burned it, to demonstrate that the speech was more special to everyone there because it would only live on through them as literal witnesses and we refused to have it in any way be digitized.”

“I see. That seems—”

“Destructive? Over the top? Crazy?”

“—Carcinogenic.”

“Can I see your cell phone?”

“Why?” I said, suspicious.

“Just let me see it a moment, I won’t hurt it, I promise.”

I fished it out of my bag and handed it to him.

He fiddled, turning it off, “If we’re going to hang out you’re at least going to have to turn it off for the duration that you’re here. Is that okay?”

“Iphone hostage!” I laughed. He looked serious.

“Sure,” I conceded, and watched him place it in a desk drawer.

He wheeled his ex-computer-chair-now-just-chair close to me on the bed, “What do you want to do?”

After a judicious amount of chatter that avoided themes of the anti-Internet movement, I, a lightweight emboldened after two cocktails, brought up the subject.

“Derek, let me ask you something,” I said. “Say you reach your primary goal. Say that, in part because of your movement, the 800 million *active* members of Facebook delete or abandon their accounts. Maybe social media goes out of fashion, and that’s the main reason why. Does it bother you that we’re right back where we started? That people would develop complexes—feeling bad that social media was such a bad investment of time?”

“No,” he said.

I wanted to operate on Derek’s stoicism, remove the façade and study the greased mechanisms beneath. We played pool with a couple that struck me as lighthearted and normal. Derek came up to me when I was almost at the end of a drink and asked, “Cecilia, do you want another beer?”

I hiccupped, “Um, yes,” even though I didn’t. I held my nose and took a few gulps. I nursed the rest. I giggled while Derek chewed the bartender out for

turning off his jukebox song halfway through. At last call, I left the beer there half full, Derek grabbing my wrist and walking me back to his house.

We stumbled up the hallway stairs. I tripped, landing hard on a stair, and sat there, clutching the wood railing. I laughed, unable to stop, “What if we got separated...at the bar...and neither of us had our cell phones?”

“Come on,” he said, and, with a grunt, he picked me up and carried me up the stairs and into his room. The gesture felt corny but I couldn’t help be amazed by it; couldn’t help enjoy it—no one ever having done that to me. It felt heteronormative. Normally, I alternate between resistance and rejection.

He laid me down on the bed. I was still giggling.

He looked down at me smiling.

Being horizontal made me tired and I yawned, calming down.

“You know,” I told him, “I don’t know if we should keep hanging out.”

“Oh no?” Derek said, sitting down in his ex-computer chair.

“Cuz I’m tough—not very nice to guys.”

“I’m mean,” I said. Suddenly, desperate to make him understand, I sat up, holding the sides of the bed, eyes wide and looking at him, “and I *love* the Internet.”

“Mhm,” he nodded. I looked at the ceiling, which had no markers. Nothing to see. Instead of responding, he came over, brought my chin to his face and kissed me.

This is where many men go wrong. Derek, though, didn’t get lost, forgetful in rhythmic sensation. He didn’t lean his head back, closing his eyes

and forgetting I was there below. He grasped onto my shoulders and he talked to me.

His throaty gasp, almost a sigh. An earnest sound, I thought.

“Hold still,” he said. And he got up. In the dark, I heard him open and close his creaky door. Were his roommates home? Would someone walk in and find me here? What time was it? Where was my phone?

Then he was back, handing me a glass of tap water.

I drank the whole cup. In the lamplight, he looked like a stranger. Usually I went for either fat or scrawny, and looking at his muscular arm that led to his hand grasping his personal water glass, I realized that I never, ever went for someone who looked as healthy as Derek did. I looked at him as long as I could without staring.

He lay down, putting his arm around me. I had a headache.

“Mm,” he said, nuzzling into my neck. I could tell he was already half asleep.

This time when I woke up Derek was still wrapped around me, asleep like an inescapable bear—*if you move, I'll kill you*. I lay there paralyzed, wide-awake, panicking. Had my Dad texted or called? Had Lem? If Lem had, was he suspicious?

I gave the slightest stir and Derek's body responded.

“Goodmorning,” he said smiling. I smiled. I couldn’t turn around because I was sure my breath smelled horrendous from a night of drinking, so I just said loudly, to get him more awake, “Good morning to you!”

It worked. No long hours of contemplating boredom and unknown text message statuses for me. No lying stuck under a heavy arm.

I made sure to get my cell phone back from him.

“Don’t,” he said, withholding it from my hands a second extra, “turn it on till we part ways, okay?” I nodded. I could adhere to the request.

He drove me home, “This it?”

“Yep,” I nodded. I felt more of a right to linger in his car this time.

“Can I see you again?” he asked me.

“When?” I responded, eager to have a definitive plan vs. any *yo show up at my house whenever* nonsense.

“Tuesday, let’s get lunch.”

“I work Tuesday.”

“Wednesday?”

“I usually work all weekdays.”

“Wednesday night?”

“Okay, could you pick me up?”

He nodded.

“Ciao,” I said, “for now.” Cringe.

When I strolled into our little house, Angie and Sibyl were making salad.

“Well, well, well,” Angie said in good humor.

Well well well.

Chapter 11

Attendance

She died one week before graduation. On the morning of the funeral I awoke not wanting to go. If there had been a way not to go without upsetting my father/everyone, I would have found it. So unlike graduation, I pulled on ugly black clothes, went downstairs, and met the fucking day.

The mass was held at Immaculate Conception Church, a traditional Catholic Church that I grew up being bored in 1 hr/wk. Sitting in the front row, unable to look at the coffin nor the priest nor my father and kid sister, I took up my old practice of counting all the red pieces in the mosaic glass windows. When I had counted all the ones I could without turning 180 degrees and doing the other side of the Church, I peaked at my father. I imagined that, to an outsider, my father looked like he was doing pretty well. He was not blubbering, he nodded in recognition at those apologetic pats and whispery condolences. To me, he looked bewildered. His eyes, wide and dark. Like an Alzheimer's patient, looking around for a stronghold. Julie cried the length of the funeral and the wake. Gifted an entire box of tissues, she scratched her nose rosy.

I felt disassociated, watching them mourn. I wanted to dissolve in water—to let the fun-loving side of me evaporate.

After the service, I rode with my father and Julie to the wake. The funeral home was right in the downtown square, owned an Italian family that my Dad knew. He recited the first names of every member in the funeral director's family

to the driver of our hearse. To the driver, my father remarked, “The Alesci’s—nice family—helped us set it all up—very good family.”

The driver nodded, not knowing my father had not spoken a word to his old buddy Gio Alesci, nor that my aunts had prepared every detail of the funeral and wake for my father, who had been too nonresponsive and distraught to take care of this dirty business. I had stayed quiet during the planning. Everyone seemed to be afraid of me.

From the passenger seat, I could see the funeral parlor. Its old sign out front hadn’t ever changed. They didn’t need to advertise much.

At parlor, I suddenly hated the Alesci’s because my mother’s funeral wouldn’t be special to them. How could it be? For them, it was business, even considering that our families were acquaintances. Inside the home, I showed my protest of the whole thing by sitting near the back, alone. My mother’s Walking Friend spoke, reminding the room of all of my mother’s angelic qualities. Old Pastor Alfred rose and announced that my mother was, “one of the most devout women to come through the doors of Immaculate Conception during his years as pastor.”

“Truly a child of God,” he said, “a role model for all Catholics. She will be loved and missed here on Earth.”

As a child, I had always liked the word ‘Immaculate’. I had never seen the slightest sign of doubt in her. Her immaculateness had been what had made her cancer so hard to believe. How could she have had an evil growing inside her,

on a reproductive organ, no less? She had gone undiagnosed for many years; that is what the doctor had told my father.

When most attendees had left the room, I approached her coffin and knelt. The funeral seemed wrong. It moved too fast, it would be over too soon. She couldn't oversee that it was going to her liking. Couldn't tell everyone in her humble pie way (which infuriated me), "Go home, I don't need all this, a big funeral." I made myself look at her face. The liver spot on her cheek.

I repeated to myself, *This. This is the last time you will ever see your mother.*

There will be pictures, videos, but this is it in 3-D. The last tangible moment.

I touched her embalmed hand, her smooth skin from washing dishes. Her eyes were closed, her lips closed. Her facial expression was closer to how she looked when stressed than when she was sleeping.

At the cemetery, they lowered her into the ground with a loud machine when we were supposed to be standing in solemn silence. People looked down into the hole, and walked away, back to their cars. The dispersal felt a bit like the end of a 3-step funeral scavenger hunt.

I hadn't spoken all day, except for a downcast mumble or two to respond to those who came up to me.

The next week, I found I couldn't stomach another public event. Since my father hadn't called to ask about graduation—since he didn't even seem aware that it was happening—it was easy not to go. I rejected the dovetailing of these

two events. I didn't want their significance tied together in my mind. Didn't want to stand in a stadium with tens of thousands of living families celebrating. In a way, too, it was my way of showing respect.

Months later, holding my Dad's hands, crying, in the Panera Bread, I still had felt that I had made the right choice. I was still staunch in my happiness of not having gone. The infinitesimal nagging guilt I did feel was from knowing my mother, lover of both tradition and her daughters getting recognition, could not have understood my decision to play hooky. She would have been disappointed.

Chapter 12

The Time in Between Other Time

Saturday Sunday Monday Tuesday passed slowly. Days sewn together. Flopping days. I dreamed at home and at work. I created thousands of mental lists. All the things I wanted to know about Derek. All the things I wanted to do with him (watch good movies, share books, befriend his friends).

On Wednesday, Sibyl and I made plans to get a coffee at *Muddy Waters*, a formal-feeling and implicit attempt at friendship repairing.

“I got my period,” Sibyl said slowly.

“Sibyl,” I gushed, “that’s awesome!”

“Let’s forget it already.”

“Alright.”

I searched for words, determined to keep acting positive. I began talking about Derek.

“Of course, he could be an elaborate fake,” I told Sibyl, “Still’s he’s like a good feeling I can’t shake. My mind is snagged.”

Wednesday night, Sibyl asked me not to talk about Derek to her anymore.

“I’m not interested, and it just reminds me of that asshole Lucas,” she said.

“Don’t invite them here,” she said before going upstairs.

Angie pretended to listen but didn’t offer the same kind of salacious reciprocity that I had gotten used to receiving from Sibyl over the past few years. Still, I told her while she watched TV, “It’s like I’m a magnet. Or I’m a piece of

space rock revolving around Sollinger, the sun, and in my female stupidity, I'm incapable of disengaging, even if it means I'm going to burn up." I thought of lovers like trading cards, like Dynasties—tyrannical despots ruling my heart. I forced myself to shut up, but as I sunk further into the couch, turning my attention to the scripted dating show Angie watched, Derek Sollinger dawned over Cecilian China.

Chapter 13

The Sollinger Dynasty

Thursday, I blamed the Derek's movement for wrecking a day that could have been filled with gleeful anticipation. He hadn't given me a time he would stop by. We had specified the vagary 'night.' For people my age, time flexed. 'Night' could mean anywhere from 4 pm till 4 am, and you had to know the person well enough to guess. Sibyl's 'few minutes', for instance, meant about a half hour. Angie's 'around six' meant right at six. At work, I cornered Chelsea and confessed my predicament:

"I can't text this guy I'm supposed to go on a date with tonight to confirm, because he doesn't have a cell phone."

"Sounds like a loser," Chelsea said.

"Well, he's not a loser," I began, "He *chose* to give up his cell phone..."

"Sure he did," Chelsea said, "Cecilia, one sec." She left to seat a new table but didn't return.

"Maybe it's better this way," I told Angie on the ride home. "I've been prevented from acting like a crazy-girl. I haven't been able to send a thousand insipid messages."

Angie looked out of the window squinting, "Having a cell phone seems practical," she said, "I need to have one at work in case of emergencies. Last week one of my friend Beth's kids snuck a peanut and she called 911 using her

cell well before our principal had waddled from his office AC to assess the kid. Kid was highly allergic.”

“Was the kid okay?”

“Oh yeah, she was fine.”

At home, I decided to Skype Lem to make myself feel good if Derek chose not to show. It was a risk, because if Lem didn’t answer the Skype call and Derek didn’t show I would experience a double-punch.

“Hey piggle-wiggle,” Lem said, his pixelated face appearing in start-up stalls.

“Lem!”

After we had talked for a half hour or so he typed, “I miss you.”

I laughed, “Why couldn’t you say that out loud?”

He shrugged and typed, “It doesn’t change anything, but I do miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” I said aloud.

When Derek arrived later, I would consider if I felt guilty for having a romantic Skype chat with Lem before a romantic date with Derek. The truth was that the perversity of enjoying both Lem’s Internet-company and Derek’s in-person company was the primary compulsion for Skyping Lem at all. Plus, it’s not like Lem mentioned if he’d fallen in love or not or had sex or not.

Derek took me to chess night in the Edgewater park.

“Want to make a bet?” he said after we had begun the game.

I smacked a mosquito on my leg, “Maybe.”

“If you win,” he said, “I’ll take you out to a really fancy restaurant downtown. Dinner, drinks, I’ll do my best to be romantic. But if I win, I want you to stop using the Internet on your computer and texting and Internet on your phone for a trial week.”

I looked at the board. We had only made a few moves but no pieces had been taken yet.

“I need to be able to text my dad while he works in case of an emergency.”

“Fine. You can text, but you have to turn off the Internet on your phone.”

Just from looking at the board, it was hard to know if one of us was winning.

“Do we have a deal?” he asked.

“Sure.” I said

Fascinating, really, how it was easier to hide what I was feeling when I skyped Lem, versus In Real Life. In Real Life, Derek beat me in three more moves and he could see that I was mad, as much as I tried to seem uncaring.

“I’ll still take you on that date,” he said, “after you make it through your week.”

“Fine,” I said, sitting back in my chair.

Derek picked up and examined the king piece, “You might like being offline.”

“What do you do besides the movement?” I asked. “Where do you work?”

“I’m sort of unemployed,” he said, spinning the piece up and down between both his palms.

“How do you pay your rent?” I asked.

“It’s a long story,” he said. I watched a mosquito land and bite my forearm through my thin sweater. He seemed annoyed to be pressed.

“My parents, basically,” he said.

I looked at him with disbelief, “Do you feel bad about that?”

“Not really, no.”

“I see.”

“My Dad’s loaded, Cecilia,” he defended himself, “and the movement is important to me.” In the dusky park, my mind collected the visages of other chess players at their stone tables, and the big willows dipping their branches into the still water of the stream. I wanted to be able to preserve the memory in case tonight Derek and I pissed each other off too much and never saw each other again.

Back at his place, he took me to the sun porch and showed me some of Marian’s photographs from a previous anti-Internet show.

“Art is an essential part of the anti-Internet movement, because it’s more memorable than almost anything, other than advertising which we try to avoid.

Art is like qualitative advertising. No professional PR needed.”

We sat on wicker chairs, finding the smooth, tinkling currents of discussion.

“My parents think I’m crazy,” he said. “My dad works leading one of Apple’s IT teams and thinks I’m only doing it because I hate him.”

“My dad is a garbage collector,” I said, “He wants me to find a career, but I’m happy working as a dishwasher.”

“What does your mom do?” he asked. “Does she live around here?”

I heard myself answer him, “She passed away,” I began to cry, “in April.”

“Sh,” he took me into his arms and rocked me. It felt good but I sat up and pushed away. I couldn’t trust in the need for him to hold me, because who would hold me the next night, when I was home alone? And the next night and the next? In hysterics, covering my face because I had giant, drizzling snot and needed a tissue stat but couldn’t move.

“Do you have a tissue?” I asked him. He got me one, and I blew into in savagely. Better. I needed another.

“Thank you,” I said. I stood up.

“Wait, wait,” he said, “I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to upset you. Please, come back down on the carpet.”

I stayed standing. I shook my head, “I’m not upset, I’m fine,” I said, not looking at him. I sat back down across from him.

“I’m sorry about your mother,” he said.

“Yeah, well, me too.”

He drove me home.

“Cell phone, please,” I said, sticking my hand out. He dug my iPhone out of his pocket.

“Are you sure? I could hold on to it for your trial week?”

“How can I call all of my other boyfriends if I don’t have a phone?”

“I’m serious. What do you think?”

If I left it with him, I would be guaranteed to see him again.

“No, I need it,” I decided, and when I got out of the car I felt relieved to be back home.

For some reason when I walked inside I expected to see Sibyl, but no one was in the living room. I thought that when Sibyl’s period came she would have regained some of her smarminess. Instead, she slunk around the house like a sulky cat. I had lost interest in Sibyl. She seemed more self-absorbed than in college and seemed to spend all time in her room, except when she slithered out for meals. I didn’t know what to tell her to do about Greg.

Angie came down the stairs, “How was it? Was it fun?” I remembered all my anticipatory psycho-babble and I was embarrassed.

Chapter 14

Anti-Interneters

All my boyfriends were interludes—utilitarian breaks from the soul-crushing dysthymia of the quotidian. I always loved them, but I disregarded them, too.

Derek was turning out to be no different.

“Did you cheat?” were the first words out of Derek’s mouth as I got into his SUV. I handed him my phone and he tucked it in the back pocket of his seat. I had tried, but not the hardest I could have.

“Nope!”

“Not at all? You can tell me,” he said, “I’ll still take you out to dinner like I said.”

“Once,” I said, “once.”

“Once is pretty good,” he replied, gripping the wheel. His smile sloughed right off of his face. Maybe I just didn’t like being told what to do.

His fancy dinner spot was a fondue place on 3rd. He ordered for the both of us while I calculated how much our meal would cost Derek. Ten hours of dishwashing at Delmonico’s.

“This is really good,” I told him when the cheese pot came. “I really like this wine,” I said as we finished the bottle. “I’m glad there’s vegetarian option,” I said when the entrée pot came. Derek nodded, staring at some vanishing point off beyond my left shoulder. When the chocolate fondue arrived we had spent almost

the whole meal in silence. I resigned to shut up, too, and fiddled with the skinny metal fork. I dipped a fat strawberry into the fondue stream, watching the chocolate languorously pour over it, coating it. I rotated it slowly to try to get every part of it covered in chocolate except for its little green leaves and the part at the top, where the red turned to white-green. I had cheated three times but still felt like I had gotten the idea. It *had* been nice—I wanted to tell him. I read more, I went for a run. A baby’s cry startled me and I pulled the strawberry out from the stream. The strawberry hit one shelf of the fondue fountain and the pot tipped. In a flash the waiter pulled it back up straight.

“I burnt a hole in the tablecloth! I am so, so sorry,” I told the waiter.

“How miserable.”

“No,” the waiter replied, “It happens all of the time, Miss.”

Another waiter came over and wiped at the chocolate around the burnt hole. I wanted to cry, but when I looked over at Derek he was smiling for the first time since when we had sat down.

“Pretty funny,” he said.

“Clumsy,” I said.

“Cecilia, can I introduce you to my friends Jeanette and Ronan tonight? Go over their place for a drink?” His sullenness had vanished!

“Sure,” I said, “Of course, that’d be wonderful!”

Jeanette and Ronan lived on the Westside, like Derek. I spent the whole ride over with my arm hanging out with window, riding thermals. My thighs rubbing together created sweat.

“Still so hot for nighttime,” I said to Derek as we waited on their stoop for them to come to the door.

“You must be Cecilia!” Jeanette said upon opening the door. She smiled and hugged me; I felt the sweat of her body. She wore a flimsy summer dress and her hair was cut into an auburn bob. Dark, pieced strands of sweaty hair haloed her round face.

“Bruce,” I said, looking behind her as she hugged.

“Hey, man,” Bruce said.

“Cecilia—this my husband Ronan, and you know Bruce?”

Bruce hugged me, too. “Heard you been doing better with trying to go offline. Dude, that’s cool.”

I shrugged. We all went upstairs and sat outside on the porch, smoking for a while and drinking some wine.

“Derek has wanted to bring you around for awhile now,” Ronan said. I looked over at Derek. He looked serious, smoking his cigarette. Intelligent, handsome, and charming control freak.

“How’s prep?” Derek asked Ronan.

“Man,” Bruce said, “The shirts came in, finally.”

“Cool,” Derek responded, “Wanna see, Cecilia?”

“Sure.”

Four large cardboard boxes were stacked on top of the hard wood floor in the living room. Derek opened one with a pocketknife and pulled out cotton fabric. The tan shirt read in black font on the front, 'Anti-Internet.' The back read, 'I was not on the LISTSERV.'

"Dude, they're for the protest," Bruce explained to me, hopping and pulling one up to his chest.

"What protest?"

Ronan glanced at Derek.

"We're holding a protest march, Cecilia. We'll walk from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame to the Warehouse District. Two months from now. The end of September."

"How many people do you expect to come?" I asked, fingering the soft fabric of one of the shirts.

"Two hundred."

The symptoms of ovarian cancer are subtle. Bloating, mild lower back pain, less appetite. The cause is unknown but a person can lower her risk by having all her children earlier on in life. That's weird. It seems like doctors should fight to make that fact more widely known.

When I was eighteen, in my first semester at Syracuse, my mother miscarried a boy that she and my dad had named Adam. So when the doctor told my dad and I that a weird thing about ovarian cancer is that a woman can lower her risk by having all of her children earlier in life, I made a connection. My dad

told me that it wasn't fair to look at it that way. That he didn't blame doctors or Adam. That sometimes these things happen no matter what.

She was diagnosed on the weekend of my twenty-first birthday during the fall semester of my junior year. I had gone to the bars with Sibyl and our friend Jolene. I had gone home with a stranger and lost my virginity. After I came home and showered off the stranger, I charged my dead phone and got my dad's text, "Call when you can."

My dad said, "Your mom has ovarian cancer." I cried and he answered all of my questions, and seemed very strong and acted very reassuring. Which was how he was at first. For the first few months, it seemed like he had more faith and strength than any of us. I went home twice that month but they told me I'd have to stay in Syracuse more. She would go through her surgeries and be in and out of the hospital, and I would have to stay and Syracuse for now. Talk to her on the phone or on Skype. Too much time and money spent coming home every other weekend.

I didn't call her or skype her that often, though.

One night, lying with Derek in his bed in the pitch black, I admitted, "I guess I thought that when she got sick, everything would suddenly change. But she and I still fought. She still drove me crazy. Only I felt worse."

"My parents and I fight all the time," Derek said, running his hand up and down my side. "That's why I try to avoid talking to them. That's why I'm going to start looking for a job after the weekend of the protest—if I'm not financially tied to them I won't have to listen to them at all anymore."

“In the summer, I moved back home, working at Delmonico’s and biking to the hospital afterwards on most days. I would spend the time there reading, mostly. Talking to her when we could find things to say. We got along pretty well in the summer,” I said, “except for the big blow out fight we had around this time last year. I wanted to take a year off to stay around and help. I wanted to be near her, and I dreaded going back. The cancer had spread, you know? Why would I be in Syracuse?”

“Yeah.”

“She wanted me to go back. My dad backed her up. I think he was worried that I’d never go back.”

“When did you find out?”

“Oh,” I sighed, “I was in the shower and when I came out of it I saw that my dad had called five times. As I was looking at the call times he started calling again. That’s probably when I knew.” Lying on my back, some of my tears pooled in my eyes. “I didn’t want to answer. The phone kept buzzing and I threw it on the bed and laid down and cried. Eventually I answered because I knew that my dad needed to get telling me over with.”

Derek rocked me. His tan t-shirts and his protest planning kept reminding me of the cancer walk through downtown I had participated in with my aunt and father. The walk was for anyone whose life ‘cancer had touched.’ The organization didn’t ask the participants to specify what kind of cancer. The t-shirt colors were white for the caregivers and purple for the survivors, and my aunt brought my mom a purple shirt in the hospital. She never wore it, not that I can

remember. Along the walk there were paper bag luminaries for the deceased. Near the end of the walk, we got hit with a hot late August rain and most of the dumpy little things went out.

“He’s essentially the leader of a cult,” I told Angie as she drove me to work. “Is that livable? I mean, I have some pretty fundamental character flaws. Mine had to be worse than his.”

“It sounds complicated, Cecilia.”

“What would you do?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think I would date him in the first place,” Angie replied. “He doesn’t seem like my type. You should ask Sibyl about it.”

“Yeah,” I said, “Angie, I haven’t talked to Sibyl, really.”

She stopped in front of Delmonico’s. “Greg’s been leaving Sibyl creepy messages on our door.”

“What kind of messages?”

“Porn-o stuff,” Angie said. “Nothing violent or threatening.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Yeah but he’s still leaving a note about once every other day, and she hasn’t contacted him at all in two full weeks.”

“Greg, what a fiasco.”

“We think he’s stalking her.”

“Why doesn’t she call the police?”

“She doesn’t want to,” Angie said. “I think she should, too, but she won’t listen to me. Cecilia, maybe you could try talking to her.”

“Okay. Next time that feels appropriate, I will.”

“Great! Thanks,” Angie smiled.

“Another week?” he begged.

“I just finished my trial week!” I said. We lay in his bed atop the blankets.

“That was three weeks ago!” he tapped my nose. “For me?”

“What do I get this time?”

“I’d be so happy.”

I ran my fingertips along his shoulder and down his arm. I liked how firm his muscles were. I could see where one muscle began and ended, and I imagined them all coiled up beneath the skin like a twisted pretzel.

“I’m not cool and good looking like you,” I said. “I was a lonely nerd who raised herself on AOL instant messenger. That shit is bred into me.”

“You’re beautiful,” he said, grabbing my arms and pulling me close. I could smell his onion breath from lunch.

“Fine,” I said reluctantly. “Can we leave the cerebrum, though? I’m bored.”

Bruce and Derek had begun referring to their house as ‘headquarters.’ Derek privately referred to his room as ‘the cerebrum’. At first I avoided saying it, not wanting to encourage Derek’s over-exercised ego. Then, I made the mistake of saying it once and succumbed. It was funny.

“Actually, babe, I have to run over to Ronan’s, we’re supposed to hold a meeting for the protest guards—the people who are willing to stand alongside the street to keep the anti-Interneters protected, and possibly get arrested.”

“Do you want me to come?”

“Want to stick around HQ?”

He left. I went downstairs.

“Hey, Bruce, Marian, Sid. What are you guys working on?”

“We’re making collages for Bruce’s anti-Internet art show Saturday night at Cleveland State. Want to help?” Marian asked.

I sat down on the futon and looked around at their collaging supplies. I began working on a collage, only pausing occasionally, distracted by wondering why Derek was taking so long. Otherwise, I became immersed. I was doing the kind of art project that Angie prepared for her Montessori students. I liked working, I felt helpful. The artistic aspect of collaging stimulated a rusty creative part of my brain, one Delmonico’s hadn’t invigorated at all. By the time I finished, Marian and Bruce had wandered off. I found them on the screened back porch, smoking hookah. The sun was setting. I put the four-paneled collage into Marian’s hand. On the left side, it featured a man with a big, fat belly peaking out of a wife beater, sitting in front of a computer screen, his hands relaxed on the keyboard. Using the stack of cut up magazines, I had cut out two colorful pinwheels and glued them to the man’s eyes. I made his floor out of dirty clothes and fast food garbage. With RoseArt markers I drew an analog clock that said 4:04 AM.

The right side's panel was a vertical triptych. In the first of the subset, a tough female jogger grimaced, sweat shining up all her Nike* muscles (*The goddess, not the brand). In the second, two small children patted down firm sand, caught in a moment of finishing burying their silly old dad at the beach (I love ads where the advertisers make a large, unbelievable, implicit claim: in this example, that these two child models, both aged around 4, had buried this shiny-toothed man in the sand all by themselves) The final subset of the right panel was best. I collaged two genial shiny-toothed young folks so that they looked like they were coquettishly eyeing each other. Chucklehead donated an old copy of a Hustler magazine ("My dad's subscription"/ "Lucas, I've never actually seen the inside of a porno mag before. Thank you for this experience.") and cut up and added big boobs on the girl and a 'roid-y 6-pack of muscles on the guy. Later, Derek would tell me that he considered the last flourish of gratuitousness to be unnecessary, but reassured me that he liked the collage overall.

As Marian looked over it, I was excited like a child sharing a project with their parents. She told me it was, "So cool," but disappointed me by critiquing it (which showed me she didn't like it as much I had hoped she would). "So cool, donno if it's too complicated though?" She said, putting the hookah mouthpiece back on the tray.

"Well, it's kind of supposed to be busy and ornate..."

"Like, yeah, I like it, I get it, but not *everyone* might understand."

I reexamined it. Too subtle? Should I tear it to pieces? Add a cheeseloaf footer that says '*Get out there and live*' to spoil the ambiance of flyer as self-castigation for lacking my newfound friends' rampant enthusiasm?

Bruce said, "Let me see."

He put his purple kids yogurt down and took the collage. "Cecilia, this is brilliant." He showered it with effusive compliments. "This is our poster. Dude, I'm the one giving the talk, this is what I want the poster to be." With that, Bruce lengthened the collage's lifespan.

I sat outside with them, smoking hookah.

"Want to go poster?" Bruce asked, drumming his hands on his thighs. He and I drove to OfficeMax to get copies made.

At first, the girl working refused, "We close in ten minutes." Bruce sweet-talked her. Then we drove and parked near the college campus. We walked around in the dark forested quadrangles, postering signboards, trees, and sides of campus buildings.

"We're in the jungle," I told Bruce.

Bruce laughed, "I think we have the campus plastered by now."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just explaining the movement, and I'm presenting my individual art pieces that you already saw at that night at the gallery. Dude, shocking the unwitting populace. Manipulating some malleable college minds."

When we arrived back at HQ I expected Derek to be mad. He was writing in his journal in his room.

“Sorry, I hung up some posters with Bruce.”

“It’s fine,” he said. “Take you home?”

I walked inside my apartment and saw Angie on the couch.

“Fuck,” I said.

“What is it?”

“Fuck. I forgot to get my phone from Derek’s.” I looked at the screen. It was the horse races scene of *Pretty Woman*.

“I’ll take you back over there if you want?” she said.

“It’s one in the morning.”

“I don’t mind.”

“No, that’s alright,” I sighed. “I’ll do without for a day or two. I’m already trying to not use the computer, might as well go full-on anti-Interneter. Can I use your phone to text my dad to tell him that I don’t have my phone?”

Derek seemed pleased that I had gone without my phone.

“Only for two days,” I said.

“Still something,” he said, grinning. He took me to the movies and afterwards he took me back to HQ and we had sex. It was like he was rewarding me for good behavior. I realized that agreeing to Bruce and Marian with the collage gave Derek the wrong idea about me. I lay under his bear arm, listening to him snore, and wanted to wake him up to tell him that I was only suffering through another Internetless week in order to curtail his nagging and only

collaging because it was fun. Instead, I moved his arm and went through my bag until I found my Xanax. I took two and went back to sleep.

When Derek dropped me at Delmonico's the next morning, I turned on my phone and the messages arrived rapid fire. One-two-three-four:

“Hey Cecilia, I was thinking I could may b visit you next weekend?”

“Cecilia can you call me I want to book a bus 2 visit you?!”

“Calllll meeeee.”

“Alive?”

Lem.

I worked my shift and walked home. I wrote Lem a text: “Now is not a good time?” Afraid of his response, I turned off my phone and shoved it in a bottom drawer, which was getting pretty easy to do with all of my recent practice.

Derek used the ‘L’ word for the first time.

Unfortunately, it was to give me an ultimatum: “If you love me, you’ll give me wholesale commitment to the movement.”

“I didn’t sign up to be an anti-Interneter, Derek,” I replied slowly. “Just because I’m interested in *you*—it doesn’t mean that I should have to convert!”

Derek sighed, “Decide if you want to be an anti-Interneter, and if you do, come to the protest. Simple.”

“What if I say no?” I demanded.

He shrugged and looked away from me.

At home, Sibyl stood at the top of the stairs. She looked beautiful and feminine in a white cotton dress. When I attended my mother’s funeral I didn’t wear makeup and my hair had noticeable static cling. Sibyl’s beauty made me more jealous than any intelligent, proud woman should ever admit.

“Cecilia,” She breathed deep. There was something in her voice—a tone I hadn’t heard in awhile, that reminded me of pre-Greg Sibyl. College-Sibyl. “Come up here.” I remembered my promise to Angie to talk to her about the Greg situation and tried to think of what to say.

We both sat down on the top stair.

“I’m moving back home.”

“What?”

“My parents found out that I quit my internship. They had me feeling so guilty and upset, and I had already felt horrible and stressed about this Greg rapist business, and I cracked and told them about him and his notes on the door—maybe just to get some sympathy—and they freaked out, and they’re worried for my life, and they don’t want me freeloading anymore, either, so it’s done. It’s done. I’m leaving next week.”

“How did they find out that you quit your internship?”

“I told them.”

“Do—“ I started.

“My dad already has his plane ticket,” she said with finality. “He and I are going to rent a truck and drive back to Princeton together.” She looked at me with her apologetic eyes but I had seen her give them to one too many guys.

“Whatever,” I snapped and stood up.

“Cecilia—”

I tried to sound neutral, “Do what you want.” It came out cold.

I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know.

I found Angie in her room watching TV on her laptop. Again unsuccessfully maneuvering the tone I wanted, I asked, “Did you know about this?”

Angie nodded, “She told me yesterday.”

I felt the steam blow out of me and I collapsed on her bed.

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“Well,” Angie said, “I’m going to move back in with my parents. They wanted to let me try living with other people, but since it didn’t work out, now I’ll just have to wait until I can save some money up to maybe put a payment down on my own place.”

I nodded, looking straight ahead.

“What about you?”

I sighed.

“I don’t know,” I sighed.

I felt crude, I felt duped by myself. I wanted to call Sibyl a conniving bitch and a whole slew of slurs. I wanted to break up with Derek and get another clean start, because my Cleveland clean start was failing already.

I broke three dishes at work. Charlie made me take a half day to, “go home and relax,” even though I didn’t want to.

“Am I in trouble?”

“No, of course not,” Charlie said.

I had heard about a campy double feature night at the old movie theater, and had wanted to invite Derek to go with me. That is how I had wanted to spend my night. He had a speaking engagement representing the anti-Interneters. Besides, even if he didn’t I wasn’t ready to tell him I’d commit to the movement.

I called Angie, “Imma need you to pick me up early,” I said.

“Cecilia—I told you I couldn’t drive you today last week. We’re on a field trip to the FarmPark.” But I had forgotten about it.

“I have to go, Ceely, we’re all about to milk the cow.”

I hadn’t called my Dad to ask him to come, and he would probably be busy at work. Listening to his voicemail start, I kicked the cement back wall of Delmonico’s, too hard. My long walk home, all I felt was fury towards Derek for ruining a potentially perfect relationship for something as volatile as belief.

His confident voice roared in my head, “Don’t you realize, Cecilia, how kidnapped you are by your phone? You told me that you check your email *even if you know that there won’t be anything new*. You told me you feel anxious when

it's dead even if you're not expecting a phone call or text message! Does that sound healthy to you? You're *enslaved*. Try offline, try it.”

Didn't he know that I was supposed to *enjoy* the time I spent with him?
Didn't he know that he was supposed to be my relief?

When I think back on the anti-Interneters, I imagine a short-lived rose-colored crystalline time, where I tried to make small commitments to the movement, before Derek's campaign to stop my Internet and phone use began to feel like an unwinnable war. I think, though, that Derek pressured me from the start. There was no crystalline time and I make it up in my head.

I wanted to break up with Derek and I wanted to get right over to his place and let him take care of me.

Instead of either, I passed out in bed and was at Delmonico's bright and early at 7:14 the next morning, like I had to be. It was the first cold day and I shivered in my measly sweater. Smoking, I could see my breath. Inside, I shook my head at the unpleasant combination of hot water hitting my cold white hands. Sometimes, at Delmonico's, I cleaned pretty industrial things, big heavy stainless steel objects that'd be great for throwing at the floor in a rage. What kept my body moving, cleaning?

It was pathetic, then, at four o'clock, to be sad to be off work, to have to go back to making decisions about what to do with my own volition. I biked out to the Collinwood pier, a flat twenty-minute ride. The sun was setting at the end

of the lakefront, on the dark, cold-looking water—a very beautiful scene. I couldn't enjoy it. I felt like the pier. I ended here. There was nowhere else to go. I thought of this book we read in high school, where the female protagonist, trapped by the societal roles for gender, swims out to sea in some sort of open-ended suicide we were supposed to read as hopeful. How is swimming out to sea hopeful?

I still respected our friendship enough to help Sibyl to move out. I helped her load the rental car with an inordinate amount of her lux shit. It was like fuzzy-dusty Crate&Barrel everywhere. Some stuff was broken. Some had never been used and maintained its tags. She had more clothes than a small boutique. I skirted Mr. Bernstein.

When we were all finished, she gave me a hug.

“I love you, Cecilia,” she said.

“Uh huh,” I said, begrudgingly, feeling nothing, knowing I would feel it later, “Take care of yourself.”

“You too.” Another hug. She was grandiose, pristine, a ballerina of loose movements. Elegant to the end.

“Goodbye, Cecilia,” Mr. Bernstein said from ten feet away. He didn't shake my hand; he just got into the truck. It was as if I were diseased or as if the Greg fiasco had been all my fault.

Sibyl got into the passenger side of the rental, her thin-wristed long hand adjusted the mirror. She waved. I waved back with a half-smile. Back inside, I let out breath I'd been holding in for a week.

The next morning, I gave Angie a hug. She would stay in the apartment until the end of the month. Then I packed my stuff, which fit all in two large suitcases, and my Dad came and picked me up.

He smiled and squeezed my hand on the ride back.

At home I could do what I had been thinking about since visiting the pier. I got on my dad's bike and rode down the road and up the street and across a few strip malls and past our small suburban city center, to cut down behind it to the cemetery.

My mother's plot.

I was wrapped up in a long dark dress and a thick, thick sweater. I stared at it, reading. Indisputable letterings and numberings on the headstone. It didn't say much, really.

I sat down. God, the grass was cold, like an ice pack on my ass. It told me, 'you can't sit here forever.' I thought of Derek and I thought of cell phones. I thought about, with this type of experience, how I felt the impulse to pull out my phone and check the time or send a text message just because I didn't know exactly what else I was doing there. The little tiny bit of Derek's training that I hadn't resisted made me be able to see that. So I didn't take out my phone, and instead I lay down between my mother's gravestone and another, and stared at hers as if it were her lying there.

I looked at the sky.

I tried to be good at lying there. I thought of all the people like my father who got so good at going to cemeteries to pay their respects, who got so good at silently holding it in. Their burdens became them. Moreover, I enviously saw simplicity in my father's and Julie's abilities to mourn. Had I even loved my mother?

Even before we found out about the cancer, when I would call her to chat for a few minutes in between my college classes, I would hang up with my voice warbly and with tears in my eyes even if we had only talked about Julie's new play or the fucking weather. Not normal. Not normal. I'd call her every day, sometimes, and other times, not for a couple of months.

I fingered the engraved lettering.

Chapter 15

Delmonico's Again

Mid-shift and sticky with grease-sweat at Delmonico's, I stared down at the stacks of dishes when Chelsea came up and dumped a whole 'nother bussing container into the industrial sink. *I cannot do all these dishes. Simply cannot. Must. Stop.* I would, in fact, not stop. I would finish all of them. The dishes were destiny.

On days like this, my thoughts always wandered to Charlie's open offer of waitresshood.

"Really only interested in dishwashing," I told him at the re-hiring interview, "Not so good with people. I'd like to work in the kitchen."

"You seem like you'd be great with people," he had replied.

"I don't like working with people. Please? It's what I did in high school, I already know how."

He gave up and relegated me to the kitchen as I had wished, but had floated the offer two or three times.

Chelsea returned, "Are there still no forks?" I shook my head.

I began thinking of myself in the outfit she wore: A white button down, black pants. It didn't seem so bad. People respected the black/white combo much more than the dehumanizing collared shirts of fast food places. Black/white looked particularly good on rails like Chelsea, even with the marinara stain she

sported today. Black/white would probably make me look like either butch-prom or like nothing.

My real problem with moving to the main dining room, besides needing a larger Xanax prescription, was the increased possibility of talking to someone who knew me or someone who had known my mother.

In college, one of Sibyl's many boyfriends, Eric, lived with us for two or three months before he declared his major and got his shit together and quit recreational party drugs and Sibyl in one swoop. I would fumble out of my room around noon or 1 or 2, in a Xanax daze and find him in our boxy kitchen in his frat insignia'd shorts, smiling broadly at me, as if I were the succubus feeding him a diet of blow jobs and cooing compliments.

"Ey, Cecilia," he would say.

"Hey, Eric," I couldn't help but to grin at him. "Whatcha making?"

"Grilled cheese." Always the same. Sibyl's healthy seeded loafs with cheddar and a fat slice of tomato. If Eric felt like variation, he'd toss some thin red onions into the cheese. He toasted all his sandwiches in a small, burnt-up frying pan over the only burner that worked on our stove.

"Do you want me to make you some real food?" I teased.

"Nope," he'd poke the top of his sandwich with the flipper, steering it centimeters across the pan. I would console myself that Eric was so routinely satisfied with unhealthy grilled cheese. And that he slept with Sibyl instead of me. Because I knew Eric liked Sibyl's nerdy-smart 'alternative roommate' as an extension of her quirk. So Eric would eat his grilled cheese and I'd eat sweet

potato broccoli quinoa soaked in red wine and vinegar or splayed vegetables with homemade coco-brown sugar-Sriracha Thai sauce. I would offer him bites and he would shake his head no and turn his head back to the game on TV (never did I see so many sports with such concentration than Eric's stay in Chateau Sibyl-Cecilia). Once, near the end, though, Eric was sick of grilled cheese and Sibyl had mauled some of his chipper happy dog energy, and he ate some of my hummus and carrots.

So dishwashing was something like Eric's grilled cheese. Simple and right. If I got desperate though, I could slip into something else. Maybe, I thought, halfway through a stack of oblong-entrée plates, I could get Charlie could just let me do a shift here and there. Charlie told me when he hired me that he only hired men for the dishwashing, usually, but that he would let me do it if that's what I wanted.

Dishwashing was something I had to remember to love and appreciate. Like my family, I supposed, or the toughness of all edges.

Chapter 16

Clean Start

Living at home felt nice. I had imagined it to be horrible. The night of the anti-Interneter's big protest, I sat on the couch and watched Liza Minnelli movies with Julie. In bed, I searched for news on the protest. Lem skype called me and we began talking. He had a new girlfriend. The next day, though, I didn't feel any different. Maybe I felt better. My Dad, on purpose or not, gave me space. Summer was over and my sister had schoolwork and her own, busy life. I spent a lot of my time working at Delmonico's.

After a week, I drove out to the Westside to talk to Derek.

I knew that I couldn't be a part of the movement.

Chucklehead answered the door, "Hey, Cecilia. How's it going?"

"It's good. Is Derek here?"

"Uh," he looked around. "Uh, no, he's not."

"Lucas," I said, "You can tell me if he's here. I'm not going to be weird. I need to talk some stuff out with him."

"It's not that," he said, stepping out onto the cement block of front porch.

"We assumed you saw it on the news."

"What the hell happened?" I asked.

"The protest was awesome. Three hundred and fifty people showed up. More than we were expecting. Lots of hypocrites who say they use the Internet way less than they actually do. But still, cool."

“What happened?” I said again.

“Derek got arrested.”

“What? Why? What charges? Didn’t you guys have a permit?”

“They say he assaulted an officer.”

“Did he?”

“I think he just threatened him. Look, they already charged him. It’s only going to be a misdemeanor.”

“How is he? Where is he?”

“He’s doing twenty days. Seems okay.”

“Okay, Lucas,” I said, “I’m going to go now.”

“You want his info, where to find him?”

“No, but you can tell him that I came around here.”

“Hey, do you want me to give him your info? You parents’ home address so he can visit when he gets out?”

“Not right now,” I said.

Chapter 17

Panera Reprise

I began going to the Panera bread down the street from my house. I tried to sit in at a different table or booth each time. I studied the wall paintings. One painting was a woman with a baguette for a body, and a loaf of bread for a hat. Another, an impressionistic painting of some bread loafs and pears on a serving slab. At the bottom of the painting, there were mysterious initials 'EM'. These paintings made me smile; they were so ridiculous. It seemed sad to me that these silly, faux-art paintings were reproduced a thousand times, across the continental United States, when there was so much good art that sat around because nobody gave it patronage.

At Panera, I thought about jobs I might like to pursue, and made fantasy lists where 'Corporate Art-Buyer' was number 1 followed by ice cream flavor tester and heiress/socialite. I went to Panera bread because I had to get out of the house. *Muddy Waters* didn't seem worth the drive. Mostly I got coffee and I read. On the twentieth day, I wrote two letters, an awkward one to Sibyl and one to a college friend. With Sibyl gone, I realized that I had a lot of college friends that I missed.

On one occasion, I brought my laptop to Panera. I reactivated my FaceBook account and read through all of the messages on my wall that had been left for me when my mother passed away. They didn't seem as overwhelming now. I searched Derek Sollinger's name, but, of course, found nothing. I

checked for Bruce and Lucas's names, too. As I deactivated my account again, I remembered my first conversation with Marian. She had found Bruce using the Internet at the public library but never told anyone in the group. If I could show Derek that his best friend was a traitor, maybe he would forgive me.

The next day, I packed my reading materials and drove out to the Cleveland public library. It was freezing outside, the coldest day of fall so far, and as I drove, I saw the first snow flurries of the season.

Inside the ancient library, I wandered around looking for the computer stalls. I found them sandwiched between the main reference desk and the musty historical fiction stacks. The heating in the public building had drawn in a few homeless men and women. They slept in the cushioned chairs. I found one cushioned chair near the computer stalls and settled in. My plan was to read a page or two, check for Bruce, read a page or two, check for Bruce, and so on, until I got too bored or realized how weird I was acting. After twenty minutes or so of my plan, I noticed a man at the computer stall noticing me. He approached.

"Miss, you just have to sign your name at the computer desk if you want to use one."

"Oh no, Sir," I said, "I'm not waiting for a computer."

"You wasn't?" he said. "I just thought since you were lookin' over here at the computers..."

"No," I said quickly, "funny story. My friend doesn't use his computer on purpose and I think he might come up here to use the library computers in secret."

“Well, he should,” the man said, “The computers are free and you can use ’em for a half hour at a time and they’s fast. I come here every day. My nieces, they come up here after school ’cuz they always gotta be checkin’ they’s facebook,” he laughed.

I smiled, “Yeah my little sister is addicted.”

“Them, too,” the man said. He put his hand to his forehead, “Alright Miss, if you don’t need help with them computers, I’ll be movin’ along.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It was nice meeting you.”

“You too. Remember, all you got to do is sign up and they is totally free.”

I nodded. I waited for him to walk out, and then I left.

“Where are you going?” my dad asked.

“Out to see some friends on the Westside,” I said.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” he replied, “The roads are snowy. The plows aren’t in the swing of things yet.”

“I’ll be careful,” I promised.

The thirty-five miles to the other side of town went slow. My dad was right, the roads were snowy. My dad’s car needed new wipers. I rehearsed what to say to Derek, but I couldn’t picture our re-encounter.

In his neighborhood, I felt like an alien. Like I had lost my permission slip to be there. Still, I parked and knocked and waited. Bruce came to the door.

“Hey, Cecilia,” he hugged me. “Good to see you.”

I felt surprised by how good it was to see him.

“Hey, how’s it going? Is Derek here?”

“No, he’s not,” he shook his head, “The man’s out postering for a speech he’s giving tomorrow.”

“Oh,” I said. The movement. I wished that Derek had abandoned it after his arrest. “Well, I had better go then.”

“Cecilia!”

I spun around, “Hey, Derek.” We drove to Delmonico’s.

Chelsea stood at the hostess stand, “Well, hello. Who’s this?”

“Chelsea, this is my friend, Derek.”

She held her hand out, “It’s nice to meet you Derek.”

“Likewise,” he said.

We sat in a back corner and had coffees. The place was empty.

“How have you been?”

“Good. Good. I’ve been at home. How’s the anti-Interneters—the movement?”

“Good,” he said, “I’ve been really busy with it actually.”

“That’s great to hear.”

“I started writing letters with this computer science professor from Yale.”

I added cream to my third cup of coffee.

“He put things in a whole new prospective for me,” Derek said, “To usurp people’s minds from social networks, we have to invade. That means getting into the system. Breaking it down from the inside.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Bruce and I have created some fake Facebook accounts and we’re working with this Cleveland artist guy to make and post some YouTube videos. A new angle. We didn’t like it at first, but this Yale guy made me realize that it’s totally necessary.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“Sure,” Derek said, “but Cecilia—I’ve missed you.”

And there it was. Derek looked at me, still wanting me.

“I missed you, too,” I said.

“I missed you, a lot,” he said. He leaned in, “I love seeing where you work, and your coworkers and everything. I want you to be my girlfriend, Cecilia, I want you to be my support system as this thing gets bigger and bigger. I love you.”

He took my hand. He drove me home. The sun was setting already—I hated that about the impending winter. In my driveway, we kissed a long while, and I promised him that I’d see him over the weekend.

Inside, my Dad startled me. He was in the kitchen, sifting through the mail. He tossed me a letter, “This came for you.”

The letter he gave me was a response from my college friend, Jolene. She knew it was crazy, but her and my other college friend Kelsey were going to get an apartment in Seattle and they needed another roommate and would I like to join them? Or was I living with Sibyl, or something?

I got my phone out from my desk drawer and turned it on. I had been leaving it in the desk drawer sometimes, and I really didn't mind having it off during the day. Jolene and I caught up for a few hours. The rent was reasonable, and Kelsey and Jolene were flying out. I could tell them my decision whenever.

At Delmonico's, I found Charlie in his little office at break.

"Hey, Cecilia," he smiled at me, pulling out a plastic fork from his desk drawer to eat some Chicken Parm, a popular Delmonico's entrée, "You need something?"

"I have to quit," I said.

"Oh," he said, "Okay, Cecilia. I'll have you sign the paperwork sometime today."

"I'm going to miss you guys." Charlie practically ran out of the office and came back with a box of tissues. I took several.

"Well," he said, "I won't lie, you'll be hard to replace. But when you came in here saying you wanted to work long-term, I knew you'd be out of here eventually. Greener pastures."

"I've really loved working here."

I sat with Charlie as he ate his parm, and he told me about how a second Delmonico's was going to open up on the Westside.

"I'm going to transfer there," he said. After I calmed down, I went back to work for my last few hours. I took out my phone while washing dishes and saw

that my dad had called. Liz bumped me and it went flying into the accumulated bile sink water.

“I am so sorry, darling!” she said as my hands dove in and searched for it. When I finally felt its rounded plastic body among the dirty dishware, I pulled it out soaking knowing that it was a goner.

“It’s okay,” I told her, “It was an accident.” I cleaned off the spaghetti and put it on a paper towel to dry in the manager’s office.

At the end of my shift, Chelsea gave me her phone number even though I explained I wouldn’t be in Cleveland anymore, which I considered nice, and Liz squeezed me saying, “I knew you’d be on to better things,” even though I explained to her that I was just moving to a different town.

The next day, I went to a dealership and bought a car with all my Delmonico’s savings. In the evening, I drove out to see one of Derek’s video presentations. The use of video seemed extreme to me; it made it seem as though their movement had changed so much in the month that Derek was in jail. I noticed many familiar faces in the front rows of chairs, but I sat in the back, legs crossed. Afterwards, Derek made small talk with many people, and answered questions like a celebrity, but then he came back to where I sat among the empty chairs, and kissed my cheek. At HQ, he showed me more videos he’d been working on, and I waffled on bringing up the fact that I was leaving.

“Is something wrong?” he massaged my shoulders. In the morning, he asked me if I was going home or to Delmonico’s.

“Home,” I told him and I kissed him as many times as he would let me before getting out of his SUV.

The next morning, my dad and my little sister helped me load my bags into my new car.

My dad hugged me, and while in the embrace he whispered in my ear, “Your mom would be happy that you’re on a little adventure.”

I had always liked the passenger seats of cars, because I could watch everything, not just the butt of the car in front of us. I could watch the rolling scenery, the people in the cars we passed, and the changing sky. I got into my car and I began to drive, thinking about the phone number that I slipped into Derek’s notebook on a tiny sheet of paper. Somehow, I thought I knew that he would call it to reach me. Of course, I couldn’t be sure. But I kept envisioning him, at the blue-shelled pay phone at the gas station on the corner of his street, dialing the number on the sheet of paper, guilty, listening to the rings, waiting to hear my voice answer. I felt bad knowing this; knowing that I had a cynical disposition and that I liked to test people more harshly than anyone could be expected to withstand. I knew that, at times, I could be a mean person. That I had liked Sibyl and Marian because they were aesthetically pleasing waifs, and that I had liked Angie because she would do me favors, and that I had loved my mother, yes, but I hadn’t been great at showing it. I knew that if I relaxed and leaned back in my seat while driving, I could watch the road as well as catch glimpses of the scenery

and the sky and it would almost be like riding in the passenger seat. I knew that Derek would call me because of his recent realization that he loved me, which was a weird realization, because he seemed to make it entirely regardless of me. And I knew that it would hurt him to break down his tenets, especially for the pitiful, human reason: a girl. Mostly, I knew that the number I had given him was not attached to the cell phone that had been destroyed by the Delmonico's bilge food water the day before, but instead, was a number for an Addiction Relapse hotline—which was my version of a very good joke.

Reflective Essay

Authors often employ satiric elements in their stories in order to critique the contemporary world. Those satiric elements are often humorous, and they often come to the reader through the use of hyperbole—showing dystopian visions of the world if we as a society continue to progress the way we have been. Our very own brilliant George Saunders writes short stories that take place in alternate worlds or in dystopian futures in which our society has devolved even further in so profoundly valuing mindless entertainment and product advertisements. These hyperbolic satires point to how powerful the current advertising world already is. Perhaps hyperbole and satire pair off well when critiquing advertising and marketing fields, and the consumerism that drives them because advertisements have such a recognizable set of characteristics. Ads are already unavoidable and ubiquitous, and satiric stories demonstrated what it would be like if ads developed into more than a pesky hindrance, and becoming outright endangering of personal liberty, health and wellness, and global ethics.

Another approach to writing a story with satiric elements might be to try to write about a character that completely avoids advertisements. The character might first avoid the radio, magazines, and television. Then, he might realize that he has to keep his eyes on the road at all times, to avoid looking at billboards. When he starts to struggle in his efforts and still finds advertisements everywhere he looks, he might enlist a trusted friend as a lookout. The friend might scan

materials for ads before handing them over to the character to read, and might start shouting out warnings if our hero is in danger of experiencing an advertisement placed in an ingenious spot. The character, our protagonist, when still dissatisfied with how many advertisements he's still experiencing per week, might start wearing blinders. When blinders aren't enough he might invest in both blinders and ear plugs, and that might finally reduce his daily intake of advertisements, but the ear plugs and blinders present problems external of the central problem. Now he has to worry about crossing the street and he can't talk on the phone. He misses music. His ears develop a large amount of itchy earwax from wearing the plus so much. Pretty soon, he is spending every day to be certain that he can avoid all advertisements. This isn't good. It isn't good for the quality of life of our fictional hero, and it isn't good for the author, whose character is deaf and partially blind and somewhat paralyzed. It is a very hard character to make dynamic.

Yet this type of character interests me right now. Over the past few years, I have been fixated on *abstention*. I believe that total abstention is often an addict's answer, and in certain cases, it is because he or she lacks the willpower to just use moderation. Obviously I am not talking about drug use, where an addict quitting entirely is a positive occurrence. This could apply, though, to eating sweets, watching too much television, using Facebook, the list goes on. Of late, I have also been interested in the increasing ubiquity of the Internet alongside Smartphones.

Thus my approach with my Creative Capstone novel, *Here, from the Passenger Seat*, was that instead of showing a satiric and hyperbolic dystopian vision of the future of a society desperately dependent on the Internet, I wanted to show where we are now. At least, I wanted to show my artistic vision of where I think we are now. I wanted to create a character that absurdly tries to abstain from using current technology. I challenged myself to develop Derek as a character who does earnestly *give up* his laptop and cell phone, but remains dynamic. One of the ways that he stays dynamic in my eyes is that he proselytizes, trying to get others to commit to his belief system. I saw the anti-Internet movement as a result of charismatic Derek's attempt to develop a following.

I believe that since widespread use of the Internet is relatively new in the course of human history, the Internet thereby maintains some ties or associations with youth culture. Blogs, recipe sites, news sites, email, academic articles, social media, smartphones apps—people know that it is humorous to reduce all of that variety and usefulness and power into two little words. 'The Internet' becomes a chic umbrella term, almost slang. Since the Internet is still so abstractly tied with coolness and since our society is still in awe of some of the conveniences that the Internet provides, and since, as I said, the novelty of the Internet has yet to rub off, I think that, as a result, critical discussions of the possible downsides or negative consequences of the Internet have been severely under discussed.

Sure, we see some articles and headlines that engage the topic. Particularly, I have paid attention to the discourse over data showing that social media communication might actually make its frequent users lonelier. Last fall I studied and wrote a research paper on '*Textese*', the language of text messaging. Coming up with slang and abbreviations in order to use the economy of words that Twitter literally requires and the medium of text messaging naturally recommends may actually stimulate creative parts of teenagers' brain. Then, they are less controversial but nonetheless new conversations about laptops and smartphones. Be conscientious of your computer's brightness settings. Could cell phone use be carcinogenic? And so on.

The development and application of the Internet and smartphones is such a big change for us. We *will* be somewhere drastically different in ten or twenty years because of these influences, and—you must admit—it is highly likely that there will be some negative effects. Even if we aren't total slaves to screens, at the very least, there will be an increased diagnosing of carpal tunnel.

The idea that a group of younger adults in Cleveland would start an anti-Internet group peaked my interest and I began writing. I liked playing with the humorous element of the group—that ceasing these types of communication would seem so impractical to the outsider characters. There are also plenty of people in Cleveland, who have neither Wi-Fi nor a laptop nor a PC nor a smartphone nor a personal cell phone, and it's not a choice they made because they're 'anti-

Internet’—so I wanted to draw out the satiric humor in that way, too. By showing their movement as incomprehensible and indigestible to certain characters, I could use perspective or point of view to critique assumptions that the anti-Internet members from higher socio-economic classes too easily make. Finally, there were opportunities for humor in the fact that Derek’s group is not only seen as strange but also they have to fight the ‘uncoolness’ of what they are doing. Cecilia accuses them of being “Luddites.” For outsiders like Sibyl or Angie, resisting the technology seems stupid and like extremely hard work for very little reward.

Of course, if Cecilia had remained an outsider by outright rejecting the anti-Internet movement’s cajolements and Derek’s persuading, the reader wouldn’t have been able to experience the hypothetical experience of ‘going offline.’ I envisioned the novel as one where the reader can travel alongside the first person narrator Cecilia, so that reading would incur curious thoughts about what abstention would really be like for the reader, personally. I’ve always liked trying many approaches as a method to discover which approach I like best. The novel is supposed to make the reader consider if their life would be better or worse if they added or subtracted. How does losing or gaining a friend impact one’s life? How does using the Internet more or less impact one’s life? These changes are almost always subtle, and they require introspection.

Many fellow students around me constantly complain about how much time they spend on Facebook, but no one seriously acknowledges it as an addiction. In fact, students joke that they are ‘so *addicted* to Facebook.’ Yet hardly anyone I know has left Facebook for a time, just to see how it feels. I am letting some of my more direct biases slip, but I strongly believe that trial periods of abstinence or reduced use are great routes to self-discovery. A person can turn their phone off and stick it in the bottom of a shoe box in their closet for a day without making any ideological commitment. They can do it without even telling someone that they are doing it. I see my work as echoing what great satirists before me have said before me about advertising—I’m preaching open-mindedness and resistance to overly conformist thinking. I think what’s harder about my issue at hand is one may not realize that they’re ascribing to a school of thought that never places blame on the Internet.

To level out what I just said, which might seem heavy handed, I’ll also say that I’m not a Luddite myself. I know people who have gained self-confidence and great joy from becoming bloggers. I think that the Internet can be a great form of communication and a good resource for information and I enjoy it. One could make a parallel with how the Internet exists in relation to globalization. On one hand, the Internet is one of the destructive forces of globalization that is slowly eliminating distinct elements of cultures around the globe. On the other hand, the Internet aids in keeping in touch with people across the globe, and it helps people create sustainable businesses and helps raise awareness. It’s difficult too

weigh both sides, but what becomes most important is that we stimulate discussions on the topic—that we have the discourse—and that together we anticipate problems.

As I was writing, I thought a lot about my potential audience. I wanted my readers to have, as they read, critical thoughts about their own rituals and behaviors in their daily lives. I wanted my readers to reach points of the story and pause and think of how they use technology and question how effectively it works for them. One of my desired audiences is definitely my friends and peers. If I could get the attention of a single student who walks around Syracuse University's campus with his or her phone practically super glued to their palms, and get them to question their practice of doing so, I would see my novel's project as a success. I would say that my other desired audience was also people in my parent's generation, baby boomers who might not identify as being tech-savvy but who actually use the Internet and smartphones as much as people my age.

Another natural fixation I have had over the past year that wound up in my Capstone novel was some of those feelings I was undergoing as a senior undergraduate nervously anticipating graduation. You might think it's cheesy, but I thought it seemed fitting for some of those emotions to wind up in my novel. Why not make my senior undergraduate project about some of those confusing feelings most students have when graduating? I never experienced a coming of age ceremony such as a bat mitzvah or quinceañera but I see that one's twenties

are often a time of many departures and transformations. I also really ascribe to the fact that the midlife crisis is overblown—people have tough and dynamic moments throughout their lives. People like me graduate at the age of 21 or 22 and go on post-degree spirit quests. I have always loved books and movies that involve quarter-life crises—post-graduation seems like a particularly difficult and existential time for some. I love the humor and tenderness when twentysomething characters are trying to grow up. For me personally, meaningful film representations that come to mind include *Tiny Furniture* (2010), *Garden State* (2004), *Kicking and Screaming* (1995), and *Party Girl* (1995).

For the peers with whom I will graduate, the question of where the economy will be in two, five, or ten years is looming. Yet I don't hear people my age worry a lot about money—they talk about their lives in terms of wanting their experiences to feel meaningful. They want to enjoy their job and their social interactions. They want to travel or create families. “I just want to be happy,” they say. This sort of existential concern is probably indicative of the technological age in which we grew up. These simple and earnest desires continue to seem poignant to me.

When I went to write, I thought about how even though I have anxieties about my own future, at least I have the unconditional love of my family. It occurred to me that if I didn't, I would be so destabilized. That's when I knew that I wanted Cecilia to be going through the loss of her mother. I wanted Cecilia to have to cope with mourning while simultaneously graduating college to add to feeling of

being lost. This event in her life creates empathy in the reader, balancing out Cecilia's caustic attitude and her cynicism. Most twentysomethings go through the frustration of figuring out what they want to be and what their life goals are, through job searching and self-searching. That Cecilia goes through all of this with the added confusion of the recent loss of her mother is a testament to her bravery—in my eyes, it's what makes her my heroine.

In the scenes involving Cecilia's remaining family, her father and younger sister Julie, I explored how family relationships differ from friendships. I wanted the juxtaposition of these scenes with scenes involving Sibyl, Angie, Bruce, or Derek to be sharp and contrasting. Both the interactions with her father and the interactions with her friends make Cecilia nervous, for different reasons. Cecilia trusts her father, but needs to prove that she can become a successful adult. Cecilia doesn't trust Sibyl or the anti-Internet movement, but needs to prove that both that she belongs and that she can be confident.

The title of the novel, *Here, From the Passenger Seat* is an attempt to convey Cecilia's the clash of emotions. Cecilia's insecure and negative feelings of quarterlife crisis mix with her sensitive, positive, and observational side. Cecilia likes having experiential moments. For her, life is felt as a series of impressions, but her passivity presents problems. The story hopefully operates as a bit of a bildungsroman in that Cecilia realizes by the end of the novel that she must be an active agent in her own life in order to work towards becoming a happy adult.

She must liberate herself from negative situations, unhealthy friendships, and her own guilt.

In terms of literary influences, I don't know that I was influenced strongly by one particular work or author. I have always enjoyed novels about clans, cults, and clubs. These groups always have their respective rules and a fascinating, pronounced culture. For instance, I'm not alone in saying that when I discovered the Beats I very much fell in love with them. I loved the way Jack Kerouac talks about his friends, acquaintances, and enemies in his prose works like *The Dharma Bums* and *The Subterraneans*. One of my favorite novels in recent years is Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives*, narrated by dozens of poets who are trying to create a revolutionary poetry movement in Mexico City. In Bolaño's novel you can see how the decision-making in their poetry movement occurs based on how group personalities coalesce or clash. I tried to carry that over to *Here, from the Passenger Seat*. The polyphony of the voices and perspectives in *The Savage Detectives* shows how what outsiders see as one poetry movement is actually like a beast that propels itself forward using many, many different appendages.

A group that forms an anti-internet movement is going to have a varied and quirky set of fictional personalities to create, a set of rules, and a whole world of rhetoric. The aim is create a believable world, a believable fictional 'movement'. As Cecilia learns more and immerses herself more with the movement, people

within the movement become more and more demystified. The inner workings of the movement become clearer, until Cecilia can ultimately feel she understand them, and in that moment, she becomes an insider. That moment should feel like the climatic moment in the novel, because Cecilia can now choose—must choose—whether to become one of them or to reject the movement.

I did find it difficult to create the whole fictional world of an anti-internet movement. Even the question of how to define simply parameters was a repeated challenge. I don't know if I succeeded. How does one define the Internet? There were times I felt I was treating the topic too vaguely—using too broad of strokes. Cell phone bans became a part of the anti-Internet movement. That felt strange but it was necessary. I realized as I was drafting that smartphones have really been erasing the boundaries between being 'offline' and 'online'. For example, if one's email is accessible with one touch on a touchscreen phone at all moments of the day, is that being 'offline' or 'online'?

Something else that I wanted to capture in the novel is Cecilia's suspicion of Derek because he is a sort of type-A 'leader.' It seems to me that people become suspicious whenever an individual has the wherewithal to create their own organization, business, grassroots mission, whatever it may be. This suspicious may derive from the envy of the person's ambitiousness and hard work ethic, but it's also that we are often questioning strangers' motives. We expect a ruse, especially if someone tries to start something seemingly without trying to make a

profit on it. We expect a ruse, too, if the idea seems entirely of his or her own design. If Derek isn't in it for the money or stealing his ideas from elsewhere, Cecilia probably initially thinks that he has started the movement for fame or prestige. You might notice that she hyper-sensitively notes whenever people praise him. Derek, for me, has incredible charisma and he turns out to be a fairly good person (at least not an overly simplistic evil person). Still, I wanted readers to feel conflicted about his tactics. I wanted readers to consider whether or not they found his pressuring of Cecilia to be ethical or not.

I will now talk briefly about the overall experience of being a producer of an Honors Capstone Project. (There may be some overlap between this and my Capstone Summary.) I made the decision to attempt a Capstone novel in fall of my junior year. I traveled to Chile through Syracuse University's abroad program in the spring, and had planned to let myself be inspired by Chile. I initially planned to write an urban novel that takes place in Santiago de Chile. I still want to capture experiences I had in South America in my fiction, but while abroad I had difficulty starting the novel project. I have learned in the past two years that I need to be at least somewhat moved or inspired in order to then begin writing something worthwhile. That means I can't force myself to write sometimes, but it doesn't mean I sit around for months waiting for inspiration to strike. Instead, I spend a lot of time 'mediating' on ideas—going to the gym, taking walks, or sitting at a table with nothing but a notebook and pen in front of me—until I find

the idea or character or setting that feels right, and then the details of the work starts developing in my mind.

So when I came back and met with my advisor in early fall of last year, I knew I had just start writing whatever I knew I could write about sustainably. My advisor warned me that a novel was a huge undertaking, and it is. Novels take longer than a year to write. The Honors Capstone, though, was a great opportunity to attempt a longer work as a student project, and we decided to move ahead with a novel knowing I would just do the best I could, and we could see how far I could go in a year. It really has been a valuable learning experience for me. Having to do revision work multiple times, making all the small details of the story have continuity, and staying committed to one idea were all healthy, awesome challenges.

In general, it was a very different experience than a creative writing workshop where I don't always have to work and re-work material through several revisions. My advisor Dana Spiotta and I created deadlines for me and met several times over the year to discuss progress and her in-depth revision comments on my growing manuscript.

The novel project became increasingly personal. During one revision session, my advisor suggested that I name the urban setting, explicitly. I had been shy to do so, since I am from Cleveland, Ohio and I think writers often experience a certain

shyness or hesitation with using autobiography. What I mean to say is that I value research as a means to prepare oneself to write. In this case, though, I really enjoyed setting the bulk of the novel in Cleveland, and I used the knowledge that I possess of Cleveland neighborhoods and niches to create the environment of the story. As I worked, I became more and more comfortable with using Cleveland as a setting.

That is just some of the psychology behind what I was attempting to do with the emplotment and characters in my Capstone novel. If I could do this project over again, I definitely would still have chosen to write a longer work. My biggest wish is that I would have found a way started earlier. At the same time, I am very proud of the momentum I've kept up for the project over the past two semesters. At my advisor's suggestion I got into the habit of writing every day around the same time in the evening. I didn't always manage to work on this Capstone every day, but I did write and re-write enough each day and each month to be proud when presenting this finished and polished product, my novel.

I set this work aside for now, and look forward to this summer. I will be spending my summer reading fiction, writing short stories, and preparing for my first year in Syracuse's three-year fiction writing graduate program. From this project, though, I gained a new appreciation for novel writers and I also gained a glimpse at what it takes to write a novel. The conventions of writing a novel versus writing a short story have significant differences. I also learned or reaffirmed that

I do have a profound personal interest in trying to write a novels or a novella, eventually. While I will happily return to working on short stories for the time being, I do think I will feel called to pursue novel writing again. What I liked about working on *Here, from the Passenger Seat* is that I got to develop and to spend time with my characters for more than ten or twenty pages. As a writer of a the Capstone novel, I had the opportunity to give more back story and detail than sometimes is possible or appropriate for short story writing.

I need to thank Dana Spiotta, my superb advisor, who helped me keep on track and whose respect matters to me greatly (it subconsciously probably encouraged me to write more and more often). I also need to thank Michael Burkard, who lent his brilliant eye to this project, and who took the time as my Honors Reader to read through my project twice. My family and Dan have given me support to help me finish out the year strong, I thank them as well. Finally, I thank the Honors Staff. I have truly enjoyed being in the Renée Crown University Honors Program throughout my four years at Syracuse University, from the volunteering component of the program to the variety of classes they have provided that had unique focuses, certainly deviating from the typical college course. Of course, I also want to thank the Honors Staff for taking the careful time to read my novel into which I put so much of my love and effort (and its corresponding essay segments).

Summary of Capstone Project

From the moment I heard about the Honors Capstone, I knew I wanted to do a creative project, if I could. When I found out that it was indeed possible to pursue a creative project, I realized almost immediately therein that I wanted to attempt to write a novel. A creative project such as the Honors Capstone was a good excuse to push myself to write a longer work of creative writing, because the parameters of having assigned deadlines and having an advisor read my work and give me feedback would keep me motivated, not letting the project fall by the wayside. I knew that writing a novel was a huge undertaking, so I never thought to myself *I am going to write the perfect, publishable novel*. Instead, I thought of my choice to novel-write as a risky move that could prove fruitful by helping grow as a young writer. In pursuing a novel, I had the opportunity to develop a set of characters and stay with them longer than ten or twenty pages, when the past three years of my life had been dedicated to and wrapped up in writing short stories.

Initially, with my Creative Capstone, I had wanted to evoke the interdisciplinary component that the Honors department often encourages with these types of projects by setting my unwritten novel entirely in Santiago, Chile. I studied abroad in Santiago for six months during my junior year, and I had planned to begin writing while living there. While Chile is an inspiring place, I struggled to write about it. One day after several frustrating hours of false starts, I realized the

best action I could take would be to set aside that material and try coming back to it at another time. In the meanwhile, I still had my aim on writing the best novel I could within the timeframe. I kept two characters that I liked from the original manuscript as well as a couple of small plot elements, and I turned my attention to what *was* inspiring me at the time: the Internet, and the resistance I felt to the cumbersomeness of new technologies and of social media websites. Writing creatively then became a phenomenal way to understand my own resistance; I explored the possible reasons why I was feeling the way that I did.

Here, From the Passenger Seat is a novel about time in-between other time. It's about a twenty something named Cecilia, who has unwittingly graduated from college and upon moving back to her hometown of Cleveland, takes Sibyl, her closest college friend, with her. Between Cecilia's trips to the Cleveland suburbs to visit her grieving Dad and her monotonous day job washing dishes at a family-owned Italian restaurant downtown, Cecilia befriends a group of young people who are developing their own anti-Internet movement. Their leader, Derek, and his methods of protesting fascinate Cecilia, and she begins to spend more and more time with him rather than her best friend Sibyl. As Derek presses her more and more to give up some of her modes of communicating, though, Cecilia faces the decision of whether or not to become part of the movement. Cecilia loves the view from the passenger seats of cars, but she learns that she cannot sit still and passively let life happen to her. In the final chapters of the novel, she learns that

she must stop running away from her emotions and take action in order to regain her selfhood after some traumatic life events transpire.

My method for approaching this project was by slow and sometimes difficult accumulation. For several months I worked with the Capstone for one hour each and every day. I tried to always work around the same time of day, as my advisor suggested, since by doing so, the habit becomes naturally reinforced. I aimed to have it as long as a typical novella or novel, although since it's hard to say what that average page count would be, for either, I decided not to set a page limit for myself. I also didn't outline too much on paper, preferring to establish characters and settings I liked, and then letting the emplotment be guided by the conflicts in the story. I worked this way because I wanted to keep the project very open. For me, it's always better to have a lot of freedom to experiment and play around—it makes me more psychically comfortable with the task.

If I had to choose a reason that my project is significant, it would be because of cultural relevancy. Whether or not it succeeds, the novel is supposed to convey a close relation to current cultural times. Many contemporary writers (established and otherwise) are attempting to write about the advantages and disadvantages of emergent technologies. While the media form of television might have been the target of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (and countless other literary examples) several decades ago, now we are located within the realm of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. Literary satire now often aims at the negative consequences of

multitudinous media forms, like the oversaturating effect media has on all of us, or the invasiveness of social media, not to mention the addictiveness of new technology, the Internet, and social media websites.

Contemporary writers, even if they aren't interested in cultural technology shifts in their work thematically, are still trying to incorporate the laptop and cell phones and the Internet into their artistic literary creations more seamlessly. This novel, *Here, From the Passenger Seat*, was so challenging for me to write, for that reason. In my creative writing workshop we talk about how it is challenging to make a discussion of social media seem *artful*. It is challenging to craft a scene in which a character uses her laptop *dynamically*. I think that as author Zadie Smith commented when she came here this semester to lecture, if anyone can figure out how to incorporate technology into literature artistically, it will probably be writers in my generation. That process has already begun. I am just one of many partaking in the endeavor. I feel that including emerging technology in the contemporary novel is an important and significant project first and foremost because this will help keep the novel relevant to our society as a genre. I think of this endeavor as an update on literary realism that is particularly difficult to do but also impossible to ignore. After all, we practically swim through these new systems of technology. How can authors portray these systems intelligently? Again, how can we convey them as interesting, dynamic, or even elegant? This has been the role of the writer for me during this challenging but fulfilling project.