

At Least I've Got My Mom

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“Shaniqua”

I watched as her head drooped and her dark hand slid from the desktop to dangle a few inches above the floor. She was exotic, foreign to this classroom, her mahogany skin smothered by the overwhelming varieties of white peach. I felt guilty. As my dad lectured about auditing, I noticed the other students, the older students, the whiter students, I noticed them thriving under the fluorescent lights and my father’s words, their hands stretching upward whenever he asked a question, just like daisies in spring. Shaniqua, or Latoya, languished. She didn’t complain, but rather, she slumped, withered, clearly in the wrong environment, needing to be outside in the wild, cold winter air. A girl like Shaniqua needs other Shaniquas, not a bunch of Jane Smiths and Peggy Joneses. Shaniqua was not intended for a private, all-girls college in West Hartford, Connecticut. Something forced her here and it was wrong, wrong to put someone with such beautifully manicured fingernails and intricately braided hair like ropes here. St. Joe’s reeked of white tradition in every hallway, the tradition that smells like old chalk and Dove soap. White Jesuses are poised and anguishing on the cross, bodies stretched, genitals tastefully covered by leaves, hands disgustingly depicted bleeding in great detail. This institution only really ever fit for older white women, pigeons, who found themselves bored of being housewives, so they got an education so they can get a job. Young black women like Shaniqua, parakeets, don’t fit in with all the cooing of the pigeon-women. The white Jesuses stifle and silence her as she walks down the hallway, and by the time she steps into a classroom, she’s almost unconscious from suffocation.

“Birds of a Feather”

I squirmed and tried to figure out how to arrange my zipped binder, my Walkman and my math book all on the small beige desk attached to the orange plastic chair I sat in. I sat in the very back of the drafty classroom and found myself surrounded by beige walls and green chalkboards and big gothic windows and other small beige desks attached to orange plastic chairs. My father set up shop at the front desk, a big, looming brown desk made of fake wood that looked a lot heavier than it was. As his students started trickling in, mid-forties women with bobs and Keds sneakers, my dad walked back toward me as I wrestled with my belongings. He knelt down and whispered, “Remember that girl’s paper you graded? The one where she couldn’t string together a sentence? She’ll be here, the last one in, I’ll bet you.” I remembered and nodded, thinking of the test essay I’d seen written in bright blue ink. It wasn’t so much that Shaniqua couldn’t write; it’s that she didn’t get the material, and I knew I wouldn’t be able to string together a sentence about auditing either. My dad walked back to the front of the room, greeting the early-birds with his gray-black comb-over and wide smile. Before I could get a headphone in my ear, one of the older ladies waved at me. I waved back, my smile crooked and awkward, trying to hide the braces. I heard them murmuring and cawing to my father about how adorable I was and how sweet it was that I wanted to come to class with him, like I was an obedient little chick, like I’d really begged him to let me sit in on his stupid night auditing class instead of just staying home and talking to my best friend on the phone about boys and music and video games. As I finally got my CD playing, tuning out the women’s chatter that sounded like those stupid pigeons that poop on your car, I saw her walk in. There was no mistaking Shaniqua, not with her perfectly waxed eyebrows and dark red lipstick. She stood out, towering over the other women in her four-inch heels, a lone willow tree in a forest of shrubs. She click-clacked her way toward the back of the classroom, settling down in the second-to-last row as my dad started lecture. I watched her set her belongings carefully on the floor, dark hands steadying her backpack, dark toes wiggling in her heeled sandals, dark braids rippling over her shoulders like waves. The women in the front of the room already had their notebooks and textbooks out and had begun writing notes in neat, blocked letters. I glanced back over to see Shaniqua resting her head on one arm, half-moon eyes staring blankly at the messy scrawl on the green chalkboard. I started sketching in my binder, somehow comforted by her presence, comforted because it seemed I wasn’t the only one who didn’t belong here.

“Suspicion”

Obliviousness was one of my gifts as a child, just like my natural skill at playing second base in Little League baseball and landing high leaps in dance class. It took me ‘til age eleven to realize something wasn’t *quite* right about my dad, that maybe he wasn’t such a nice guy after all. I should have gleaned it from his comments about some of his students, like Shaniqua, whose essays he’d hand to me and say, “Read this, you’ll get a kick out of it, it’s hilarious.” On a trip to Atlanta, when we stood in the gray, cement subway, no one around to tell us where to go, and a young black professional asked if we needed directions. He wore a gray tweed suit with a white button-down and a solid burgundy tie and shiny, silver-rimmed glasses, every inch an articulate Southern gentleman, but my dad made sure to grip my brother’s and my shoulders and push us slightly backward, away from the man giving us directions. I shouted a ‘thank you!’ to him after we started off in the opposite direction but my dad shook my arm and told me I shouldn’t talk to strangers, that we were in the subway and anyone could be dangerous. I thought that was strange, seeing as how he had no problem with me talking to other kids on the train, but I let it go. It wasn’t until Hannukah the year I turned fourteen and moved down to Florida with my mom when I finally got it. I sat in the living room of my Aunt Barbara’s house with my cousin, Ashby, and we were playing with Barbara’s dry-skinned, watery-eyed beagle and talking about boys. A lull in our conversation, prompted by the whimpering of a beagle not receiving quite enough attention, and we heard our aunts and uncles and grandma laughing and giddy over ginger ale and crackers, talking about how nice it would’ve been to live in the old days when everyone had their own slave. Ashby and I looked at each other, our hands frozen on the belly and back of the beagle. We didn’t have to ask if we’d heard the same thing. We glanced over at the dining room where they all continued their sober giggling and our eyes narrowed, we shook our heads, and we asked each other in hushed whispers if they’d be laughing just as much if someone made a joke about how nice it was back when Jews were stuck in concentration camps. Ashby, who had been conflicted about me moving to Florida, leaned forward to murmur in my ear, “I don’t blame you for leaving these assholes.” I nodded, smiling, and promised I’d still visit, just for her.

“Dinner”

When I was a kid, my siblings and I all had different chores assigned to us. At eight years old and the youngest in the family, I set the table. Six places around a long, rectangular table with rounded edges and a leaf in the middle. Six folded white paper napkins, six forks (one small, five large), six butter knives, six cups. Put the salad dressings on the table, along with the soft drinks. Anyone not drinking soda had to get up and get their own beverage. Dad sat at the head of the table, me on his left, my mom next to me, my sister at the foot, and my brothers on the other side. The meal always consisted of some kind of meat, a cooked side vegetable, salad, and rolls, which were always served last so we'd have them nice and warm.

I'd settled in well into this system, even looking forward to when I could set the table. After the smells wafted through the kitchen to the den where I watched either the Disney Channel or Nickelodeon every night, I'd suffer terribly from a grumbling stomach until dinner was served. We never ate early -- 7 p.m. at the very earliest.

One day, the system changed on me. I suppose I should have seen it coming, seeing as my parents announced they were divorcing a few months earlier, not too long before my eighth birthday. Mom still lived with us, we kids started going to Dr. Lucyk once a week, the court decided we'd be living with my father, and I'd transferred to public school. I went to set six places, as per usual, despite that Mom hadn't shown up to dinner for a few weeks.

That's not to say she wasn't home. Rather, she was in the guest bedroom, where she relocated herself and had installed a Norman lock, an unpickable lock invented by my genius great-uncle Norman. Each night for those few weeks, I'd rerouted my routine to go up to her room and knock on the door, knowing full well I couldn't actually enter. I'd pass from the kitchen through the den, maybe linger at the giant TV for a few minutes, transfixed by *The Rugrats* or reruns of *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Then I'd remember that I had a mission and I'd continue through the mudroom and up the stairs. Before I could knock I'd be greeted by the sound of heavy, wracking sobs. I'd let my fist tap the door a few times quietly, then venture a, “Mom? Dinner's ready,” while I ogled the automatic card shuffler on the little table outside of her bedroom.

She'd sob a little more, then manage a watery, “I'll come down in a little bit, honey,” or some close variation on the theme.

I'd accept this, and then go back down the stairs, back through the den and into the kitchen. I'd carry everyone's plates to the table and proceed to eat everything on my plate. Mom would never show up.

This one day, my father stopped me as I collected forks and knives. “Only get five, Laura.”

I was confused. All of us were in the house; why wouldn't we all have a place at the table?

“Your mom never eats with us anymore, sweetheart. If she wants to eat, she can get her plate herself.”

“But *why* doesn't she eat with us anymore? She's always crying in her room.”

He shrugged his shoulders as I began to fold napkins, settling into his wheeled, plush black chair before answering me.

“Some people just have a very hard time dealing with the consequences of their actions,” he explained, pulling at my hand so I’d look him in the eye. “She’s feeling guilty for breaking up the family.”

My eyebrows furrowed as I continued setting the table.

“But... won’t she be hungry?” I asked, my voice raising in pitch. I’d already had a hard enough time accepting that my family wasn’t as perfect as it was supposed to be; having to face visual proof of it wasn’t something I wanted. I’d been proud of my family up to this point. For most of my life, all four of my grandparents were alive and my parents were together. I had three siblings, and we went in boy-girl-boy-girl order. We had one dog and three cats -- Yankee, a black lab, and Misty, Star, and Rusty. We lived on a nice cul-de-sac where all the kids were friends and played kickball together. We even had a ping pong table. I wasn’t upset at the prospect of living in two places, but rather that my picture perfect family wasn’t picture perfect at all. My grandma died and my parents were in the middle of a divorce. I felt ashamed above anything else, and to cut Mom out of dinner was too final.

“If she wants something, she needs to come down when dinner’s announced,” he replied. “She can take care of herself for dinner.”

Defeated, I set only five places, and when I sat down to eat, the left side of me itched in her absence. My siblings did not say anything, but rather seemed in a lighter mood than usual. I tried to keep up with the strange energy but couldn’t understand why it’d be a good thing to not have Mom with us for dinner. I picked at my food, chewing slowly and hoping that she’d find something good to eat.

The routine continued that way for only a week before it was interrupted. I’d set five places, like I was told to, and didn’t go and get Mom, like I was told to. However, Mom ventured down to the kitchen table right after the food was served. Right on time. She noticed the distinct lack of table setting in her place and I thought I was going to get yelled at based on how fast her face turned red. Instead, she turned calmly to my father and asked him, “Why don’t I have a place setting? I still live here.”

“You haven’t come down in weeks. It was wasting dishes and food.”

The argument continued, Mom yelling at Dad for making Michael always do his typing, Dad yelling at Mom for being stingy and firing our best babysitter. The argument ended with Mom storming out. I bowed my head, feeling terrible. All I wanted at that moment was to rewind time to when I was setting the table so I could just set a place for her, just this once. My siblings scoffed, muttering, “Serves her right,” “If she wanted to eat, she should’ve told us,” “Whatever.” I didn’t know what to say, but I couldn’t make eye contact with any of them as I continued to eat my mashed potatoes.

“Why?”

“Why do you hate your dad so much, anyway?” Gabi asked as we noshed some hearts of palm in her kitchen.

I paused mid-bite. I knew I hated him, and I knew I had plenty of good reasons, but they were buried in the back of my mind like dogs’ toy bones. I remembered where I put them and would be able to dig them out eventually, but on the spot, I didn’t have them with me.

“I just... do,” I said. “He’s just a terrible person and he makes my life miserable.” Gabi raised an eyebrow and popped another heart of palm in her mouth.

Moving with my mom to Florida opened up a world of little revelations for me. Things I’d accepted as fact from my childhood got disproved to my face left and right, and things I thought were normal as a child I realized were sick and wrong.

My brother has Asbergers autism and for years, my dad explained it to me in simplistic terms that I took to be scientific.

“See, Laura, with autism, it means that one part of the brain is significantly smaller than it should be, and another part of the brain takes over that space,” he told me one evening. “David’s control center for his emotions is the small part in his brain.”

I can’t recall how many people I passed that onto. I educated countless classmates on “What Autism Really Is,” and it wasn’t till I talked to my mom about it when she told me I was spouting a load of bull.

“Laura, if autism was something physical we could detect like that, his autism would have been diagnosed much earlier,” my mom told me. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well, that’s what Dad told me,” I said.

“Well, when is your father ever right?”

“True,” I replied.

One junior year morning while my mom was driving me to school, a thought jumped into my mind.

“Mom,” I said. My head started to ache.

“Yes?”

“I just remembered. Dad used to, um, help me shower.” I paused, my nose scrunching like an accordion. “Because he said I never washed my private parts correctly.”

My mother shook her head, jaw set hard as we crawled through the morning fog.

“Despicable,” she said. “But you know what he did with Michael and Debbie. He wouldn’t let them wipe their own asses when they were five and six years old. I had to get your grandmother to talk some sense into him.”

I nodded, remembering the story about my siblings.

“Every night I was at his house,” I continued. “And Debbie once even said something about it, like, ‘Don’t you think she’s old enough to shower by herself?’ And I told her that it was because I was the baby that I got help in the shower.” I paused. “This was after the divorce. This was in Hunter’s Run.”

Silence filled the car, but my mind tumbled further and further on. He had to help me shower to wash my privates. He did this until I finally decided I was old enough to shower on my own, which was after I hit the beginning of puberty. At the time I thought nothing of my dad helping me shower. I was being molested for years and I just didn't realize it. The idea turned my stomach.

"Sick," my mom finally said. I nodded, watching a hazy farm pass by on the right. "He's a sick man."

"Can... can I not go to school today?" I asked.

My mom nodded.

"Let's get you some blintzes," she said. She turned left at the next light instead of going straight, and as we headed to our favorite deli, my left hand held her right hand over the cupholder.

“Overview”

Meddling mothers are normal, Nicole thought, or at least, I think she thought, when her mother asked her if she was dating that nice boy, Ryan, who always came over to watch funny movies. “No, Mom, I'm not dating Ryan,” Nicole said, her short, fake-red hair swishing around her ears when she shook her head. “Stop asking me that, will you? I mean, if you like him so much, why don't *you* date him?” Who in their right mind would want their mid-40s, married mother contemplating a crush on a 17-year-old boy who only talked around good friends and had a hesitant but full laugh and liked to play a lot of video games? But contemplate she did, that is, Nicole's mom, and before we all knew it, Ryan had a new girlfriend, one none of us had ever met, and he started to tell us the story of how they met. Her name was Marie, and Marie went to the same middle school as Ryan and always had a crush on him, but never said anything about it because she was too shy, and now she lived in Fort Lauderdale but hadn't gotten him out of her head, and she was so glad to find him again through the internet, and here, she sent him a picture that he printed out and put in his wallet, and wow, she's pretty! She looked like a model, with straight brown hair that had blonde highlights, and beautiful white teeth, and her picture looked professionally done, too, but apparently her mom was a photographer or really liked photography or something, which explained the nice shot. While all of us congratulated Ryan on his catch, we all secretly wondered, or at least I secretly wondered, where the hell she'd come from. I didn't wonder for too long, because Ryan and I weren't terribly close, and he seemed happy, and who was I to question happiness, really? Months went by, and well, as anyone would, he wanted more, he wanted to see and touch this beautiful dream girl, this enchanting Marie who'd swept him off his feet. Ryan, Ryan made sure to save the return address from the package she sent him, which included a brand new iPod, and made plans to go visit her. He rode his bike twenty long miles in the South Florida heat, pedaling as hard and fast as he could so he could meet his sweet Marie, finally, at last, even if it had to be at the law firm her mother worked at. He arrived a sweaty but triumphant mess and asked for Marie, whose fake last name doesn't matter because the secretary had never heard of this girl. Distraught, confused, Ryan rode the bus back to his house, too tired and drained to conceive of what just happened. It was then that we all started to piece things together, well, with the help of the private investigator Ryan's mom had hired. Marie was Nicole's middle name. The letters Marie wrote to Ryan were in the same handwriting on Nicole's birthday cards from her mother. The names of Marie's two best friends were the names of two of Nicole's cousins. The law firm Marie sent everything from is the same place Nicole's mom worked. As piece by piece of proof came through, we were all shocked and horrified, but none more so than Ryan and Nicole themselves. Ryan's parents started sending him to a psychiatrist for the obsessive compulsive tendencies he began to display, while Nicole fought within herself on who she should believe and trust, her best friend or her mother. When she chose her mother, Ryan's condition worsened and he had to see a psychologist as well. Nicole's mother got away, scott-free, except that years later her husband filed for divorce, claiming he'd fallen out of love with her years ago. I don't wonder why that happened.

“Puppy Love”

What a sweet boy Ryan is, Mrs. Joly thought, seeing her sixteen-year-old daughter Nicole and this Ryan watching a movie on their giant flat-screen TV. What a sweet boy indeed. I wonder if they're going to end up dating, Mrs. Joly thought. She studied Ryan's childish black hair and Japanese nose and grey-blue eyes while her daughter Nicole and this sweet boy Ryan were watching a movie on their beige leather couches. I hope Nicole sees what a fine catch she has in front of her, Mrs. Joly thought. She heard Nicole's deep laughter mingled with his always-quiet chuckle as they were watching a movie with their feet propped up on the coffee table. In Mrs. Joly's head, she heard wedding bells, saw her pear-shaped daughter in a sparkling white gown vowing to become Mrs. Nicole Giordano. One could say that Mrs. Joly already loved Ryan as a son as she watched them watch a movie in their living room with their golden retriever, Buddy, resting his head on Ryan's lap. After Ryan drove away in his little white Toyota, such a good dependable car, one Mrs. Joly felt safe letting her daughter ride in, Mrs. Joly settled in a seat next to her daughter on the couch. It felt warm, still, since Ryan only just left and he had been watching that movie. “So,” Mrs. Joly said. She had a little twinklegleam in her eye, one Nicole recognized as a sign that her mother wanted to have a Boy Talk. Mrs. Joly continued on to say what a nice boy Ryan was, and Nicole sighed, realizing she should have seen this coming, since her mom took a noticeably bigger interest in her friendship with Ryan a few weeks ago. Mrs. Joly had been asking questions about Ryan, where he lived, what he was interested in outside of school, what year was he, and mentioned how glad she was that Nicole had expanded her circle of friends past only having Ashley. Craving some orange juice and a reason to not talk to her mother about boys, especially boys like Ryan who were just a little too short and a little too nice for Nicole's tastes, Nicole walked to the kitchen. Alas, Mrs. Joly followed her into the kitchen, watched her daughter open the fridge, noting somewhat sadly that Nicole's thyroid condition must be getting worse, because her fingers looked a little chubbier than usual. She frowned, thinking of how athletic and thin Nicole had once been, just a few years ago, before she gained a few dozen pounds. The thought dissipated at the look she remembered seeing in Ryan's eyes, how happy he had been to make Nicole laugh. It didn't occur to Mrs. Joly that perhaps Ryan simply really enjoyed making his friends laugh because he had low self-esteem and it made him feel better about himself. Or that he did love Nicole, but only as a brother loves a sister. Mrs. Joly leaned forward on the island, the gold of her wedding ring glinting under the kitchen lights. Mrs. Joly spoke again about the idea of Nicole dating Ryan, but to Nicole it sounded like the “wah-wah-wah”ing of the adults in the Peanuts cartoon she watched as a child. When the wah-ing stopped, Nicole almost spilled her glass of orange juice out of spite. “No, I don't see myself dating him, but if you like him so much, *Mother*, why don't *you* date him?” Nicole stormed out of the kitchen and into her bedroom without another word to Mrs. Joly. As she prepared herself for bed, Mrs. Karen Joly stared at herself in her bathroom mirror, pulling back her skin at the sides of her eyes to hide the slight wrinkles. Date him, indeed, she thought, before crawling into bed next to her overworked husband. No kiss on the cheek, no “I love yous” said, no warm embrace. The two slept on opposite sides of the queen-sized bed, and Karen Joly wondered if her daughter had just given her a wonderful idea.

“Puzzle”

We sat in my room on my starry-covered futon, the fan whirring like bees' wings above us. Nicole's eyes were red and green like a sad Christmas Eve and she picked at the bright orange polish on her left thumbnail. Here she was, trying to piece together a puzzle that she didn't want fitting, one where her mother matched perfectly as the online girlfriend of her best friend Ryan. I listened. Nicole had posted in her Livejournal on her birthday and had scanned in a picture of the birthday card her mother had given her, one with delicate pink flowers and loopy black script telling her she was the best daughter ever, and now that card was being used as evidence to prove her mother was some sort of psycho who posed as a girl named Marie and dated teenage boys on the Internet. Nicole sniffled, rubbing her shiny nose, and told me that she'd never thought much about the fact that Marie's name was her own middle name, Nicole Marie, oh, how she loved her name, or that Marie's best friends shared her cousins' names, because they were all common names and who would think that was strange? She fiddled with a ring on her right pinky, a cheap mood ring from Hot Topic that was leaving the base of her finger slightly turquoise. How could her own mother *do* this, risk her marriage and the happiness of her family and Nicole's social life? I reached my arms around Nicole's broad shoulders to hug her, and while her quiet sobs echoed in my ear I couldn't help but wonder who was comforting Ryan, who had just loved and lost someone who never even existed. I wondered what it must have felt like to realize he was in love with a dream.

“Marie”

Jennifer never pretended to be some girl named Marie who had a crush on a boy named Ryan, but Karen Joly did. Unlike Mrs. Joly, Jennifer, sixteen or seventeen, never claimed to have attended middle school in Coral Springs, never said she'd gazed upon a shy boy in seventh grade who didn't remember her, never kept him in her thoughts even after she moved to West Palm, because she'd always lived in West Palm. In seventh grade she had a crush on a boy who played soccer, not one who played Pokemon. She went to Bear Lakes Middle, not Coral Springs Middle, and never did Jennifer pretend her name was Marie. Jennifer's mother told her to shut up and play along, because otherwise her favorite coworker, Karen Joly, would get fired and she couldn't imagine finding another fa-abulous lunch date like her. Jennifer, now pretending her alias is Marie, sits in a hard-backed chair in a meeting room at her mom's work. She rubs her sweaty palms on her jeans, hating that she's going to have to lie, hating that she's protecting a woman she doesn't know, hating that she's about to be a bad guy, hating that she has to take credit for hurting someone she's never met. The private investigator swipes his hand on the brim of his hat before sitting down, and then he leans forward on the wide table between them and she wants to run away. He asks about the letters, asks if the skinny, loopy cursive that professes love to Ryan belongs to her. Clenching her fingers into her legs, she says yes, not noticing that her pink nail polish on her pinky just chipped against the rough denim. He asks about the iPod, the three hundred dollar iPod, and she swallows even though her mouth is dry and says she bought it with birthday money. Birthday money, even though her birthday was over six months ago? Yes, she saved it and was going to buy one for herself but instead she decided to buy it for Ryan. The PI pushes forward a picture of Marie, the one Ryan fell in love with, and notes that the girl in front of him looks nothing like the dirty-blonde beauty in the photo. Who he sees across the table has dark brown hair, blue eyes, not brown, pale skin and freckles instead of a healthy tan glow. Jennifer looks down and sighs, mumbling a lie that she didn't feel pretty enough so she used a fake photo so that he'd like her. She says the charade went too far and she knew he'd be upset when he saw that she wasn't the Marie he knew to look for but she just didn't know how to be honest. She continues to confess, her heart hollowing out at the pace of someone picking out pomegranate seeds as she does her best to cover Karen Joly's tracks. The seeds are piling up on the floor next to her left leg and it begins to itch. Yes, she sent the iPod from the lawyer's office where her mom works because she was afraid of admitting where she really lived because even though her mom has a nice job, they still live in kind of a crappy neighborhood to save money. Yes, she made up the names of her best friends, but had no idea they were also the names of Karen Joly's niece and nephew, that's just a crazy coincidence. The PI notices Jennifer fidgeting, a tendon in her arm jumping erratically, her eyes darting across the table, aimed toward the ceiling fan, then the blue-green speckled carpet, then the window, longingly, the window. Before the PI can ask another question, a tall man with slicked hair opens the door and announces that they're done here and the PI is welcome to walk himself out. Jennifer lets out a huge sigh, but it dies in the air because guilt weighs it down. No one feels it, no one feels her relief. The PI leaves, and as Jennifer starts to leave the room, she catches Mrs. Joly's green eyes in her peripheral vision. Mrs. Joly smiles and Jennifer nods, an icy-lukewarm-hot pang settling into her ribcage. Jennifer finds her

way to her mom's desk and pleads to be taken home. On the car ride back, she can finally breathe.

“Hester”

They're bright, they're bright and forceful and these sticky notes won't fail to remind her. Maggie, Maggie needs to remember, remember to do thirty sit-ups a night or else she'll lose those abs, lose those abs and gain a big fat belly by the time she's fifty. That's what the antifreeze blue sticky note says, on the right edge of the mirror, waving like a flag under the ceiling fan's gusts. Underneath is a picture of Maggie and her sisters from when they were younger. Underneath is another sticky note, this one a vibrant green, the color of radiation. Don't forget, Maggie, don't forget to brush your hair – a hundred strokes a night, or else it will snarl into a pit of a thousand snakes like Medusa's. Across the mirror is a picture of Maggie and her boyfriend at Homecoming last year, her in a black dress and a red lipsticked smile, he in his rented white tux and red bow-tie. Above the picture is another sticky, caution tape yellow, that reminds Maggie to lift weights three times a week because she certainly doesn't want her upper arms to jiggle like water balloons in ten years. Below the mirror are a few bottles of flowery body spray, freshly sharpened eye pencils, an issue of *Motor Trend* magazine. On the wall she's pinned up dozens of Snapple bottle caps, each offering a piece of wisdom and insight that Maggie holds sacred, like Maine is the only state with a one-syllable name. She has two of those. The walls are painted the sky's blue, Maggie's doing, and painted again with big darker blue stars, Maggie's doing. I admire her room, admire her, while we work together to write the diary of Hester Prynne, that character from *The Scarlet Letter*. Her mother opens the door, looks around at all the blue, and says, “Maggie, the cat needs her litter box cleaned. And you need to vacuum downstairs. We're also going to have dinner at six, so at around five you'd better start working on that, too. Oh, is this your study buddy?” I notice that she has no flab on her abs, no jiggles in her upper arms. I wave to her in greeting, terribly glad I have a mother with both flab and jiggles.

“Italian Ice”

Maggie lived at the corner of Wiles Road and Coral Springs Drive, right by a middle school and a gas station and a park and two shopping plazas. If Maggie needed anything at all, she could walk in under ten minutes to her destination, which worked out well because her mother wouldn't let her get her driver's license. One Saturday in May my mother dropped me off at Maggie's and we spent the first hour and a half of my visit talking, while she folded laundry and scrubbed the bathroom, about the AP exams we'd just taken and her boy issues and all sorts of things. After awhile we decided we wanted to go out for some Italian Ice, which was wonderful because it was cheap, cold, delicious and just across the street. Maggie and I headed down the stairs and passed her mom in the kitchen, and Maggie asked if it was alright if we went to the Italian Ice place. *Did you fold the laundry? Yes. Did you clean out the bathroom sink? Yes. Did you scrub the toilet? Yes. Vacuum the floor? Yes. Clean the litterbox? Yes. Hmm.* Maggie and I watched as her mom thought of every other possible thing that needed to be done. *Well,* she said. *You can't go until you wash the van. It's filthy.* The van? *Yes, the van.* But it's not like we're driving there. We're walking. *Are you giving me attitude, young lady? You'll wash the van or you won't go to Italian Ice. Laura, you can stay inside and watch T.V. with Coral if you want. You shouldn't have to help Maggie with chores she should've done before.* Maggie stormed out of the kitchen, grabbed a bucket from the closet and went outside to fill it with water from the hose. I stared after her, watching the front door slam shut. Maggie's mom patted me on the back and said, *She can be such a brat sometimes, I don't know how you put up with her.*

“Roommate”

After my high school graduation, which I did not attend, my mother and I went to Kansas City for a few days to visit my great-aunt, who likes to drink hot water with lemon and to eat plain chicken with no marinades or sauces. When we returned to Florida, I checked my Livejournal and saw a comment from my friend Maggie, who asked me to call her boyfriend Jon as soon as possible because it was an emergency. I called. Jon gave the phone to Maggie, who explained that her mom had kicked her out of the car in front of a Publix grocery store with no phone, just a wallet with only her license in it, and drove off. Maggie'd wandered into the grocery store in a daze, realizing she'd just been kicked out of her home, not knowing where to go or what to do next. A friend working at the grocery store saw her, approached her, found out what just happened and called Jon to have him pick her up. She'd been at Jon's for a few days, but Jon's mom didn't want her staying there, so could she please stay with me? I thought back to when I'd told Maggie, middle of junior year, that if she ever needed somewhere to go, she could come to me, and I felt inordinately pleased that despite the horribleness of the situation, she'd taken me up on the offer. I yelled for my mom's attention and asked if we could have Maggie live with us. *Sure!* I told her to come on over and I'd make up a bed for her. My mom started baking brownies while I put sheets over my starry-covered futon. Maggie hug-tackled me as she and Jon walked through the door. Maggie had a few plastic grocery bags of clothes, mainly underwear and other essentials, that her sister Coral had snuck over to her the other day. I let Maggie try on a few pairs of my jeans, and upon discovering that they fit, a big chip fell off of both our shoulders. When Jon left, Maggie found her way to my mom and reached both arms around her and squeezed tightly. *Thanks, Mom,* she said.

“Raise, Call, Fold”

At eighteen years old, I'd never been stalked before, not seriously stalked, but Maggie's mom and uncle changed that for me. A few weeks after Maggie had been dumped at the grocery store, after Maggie took the bottom bunk of my bed and got a job at Dunkin Donuts, Maggie's mom started to realize that now she had no one to boss around at home to get all the chores done. Panicking, she started making phone calls. Maggie's mom called Jon's mom, telling her that she would report a kidnapping if that *son* of hers didn't return her daughter, and Jon's mom didn't really know where Maggie was, so she began to panic. Maggie was already eighteen, so my mom and I weren't terribly concerned about being charged with kidnapping, but we were somewhat concerned when we saw Maggie's uncle's dusty white truck parked in the undeveloped lot across the street from our house. To get Maggie out of the house with us, we had her lie down in the back seat of my mom's Navigator on the floor, but we only had to do it once because our neighbors called the cops and complained that some ugly, unsightly truck was hanging out on our street. He had to leave, but about a week later we answered the door to see Maggie's mother, in all her angular, wide-eyed, low-boobed glory, along with the unwashed uncle. We made Maggie stay upstairs, locked in my bedroom, while my mother and I defended her honor. Maggie's mom first argued that us making her stay at our home was detrimental to the family structure and that Maggie's little sisters were heartbroken and missed her oh-so-much. We countered, saying the sisters were more than welcome to visit if they'd like. Maggie's uncle said that we were only hurting Maggie by keeping her from her family, and I said that if they cared so much about family they wouldn't have dumped her alone outside of a grocery store. Maggie's mom changed tactics, then, flustered, hands shaking, forehead crinkling, and said she didn't why Maggie was being such a traitorous, lazy bitch who abandoned her family and never took responsibility. My mother, her mind quick as a hummingbird's wings, tilted her head and said that if Maggie was so awful, why would she want her back? We didn't hold back our smug smiles as her mother got angrier, threatening to sue us for kidnapping, and after I explained that you can't kidnap someone who's eighteen and voluntarily living somewhere, my mother finally threatened to call the cops for trespassing if they didn't leave in exactly one minute. They backed away from our front door, shouting that we hadn't seen the last of them. We watched them drive off slowly, and when we shut the door my mom and I high-fived each other.

“Birthday”

Lumpy mattress, rickety-rackety white bed-frame from Goodwill, a closet with no doors, Cassie knew it all. The scrawny little seven-year-old, with straw-straight and straw-colored hair, she could close her eyes and tell you exactly the dimensions and features of her bedroom. She could tell you about her favorite dress, a pink dress with Cinderella on it, and how it hung apart and lonely on a dull white hanger on the right side of the closet. Stretch-waisted jeans mixed with pastel shirts hung together on the left side. She could tell you that some of the dots on her spackled ceiling connected like stars do in the sky. She could tell you this all after spending one afternoon in there, one afternoon spent in time-out on her seventh birthday, just Cassie alone in her room with no books to read or movies to watch, just Cassie and a sad, half-deflated foil balloon with Dora the Explorer smiling on it. She was sick of it. She paced around the room on her seventh birthday and tossed her oily bangs out of her eyes. At five o'clock, she heard her brother Phil walk by and burst out of her room. The Dora balloon dragged behind her like a reluctant puppy and she shouted for Phil to come see her beautiful balloon. He saw it, but only briefly, because then Mommy came by and yelled, her voice scratchy and screeching like baboons on the Discovery Channel, yelled and told Cassie that she was grounded and had better not leave her room again until she was told she had permission. Phil pushed a hand gently on Cassie's back while her bottom lip wobbled and shivered. Back in the room, Cassie noticed that her ceiling turned pink and purple with the sunset, but nothing else. She slumped against the bars of the white headboard, her balloon drooping in the air beside her.

“Phantom Sting”

I wanted him, wanted and waited for him, and that Wednesday afternoon was no different. We watched his little sister Cassie pass by in furious circles around the cul-de-sac on her scooter, watched her sleepy blonde hair be whisked into her eyes by the wind. We leaned against my car, standing just too close to only be friends, but not close enough to assert a romantic relationship. It was always like this, so near but so far away, while he dated other girls and kissed them and I settled for the subtle brushing of hands, the slightly-too-long hugs and play-wrestling. I'd let him pin me, I'd pretend to try to kick him off of me, but I loved the feel of pure *boy* on my body, his slightly clammy palms holding my wrists down, his rounded stomach resting on mine. I thought about those moments even as we talked about Frank Sinatra while Cassie rode faster and faster on her scooter. It was inevitable that she fell, going so fast and trying such hard turns, but when she cried and showed us her bleeding elbow, my fantasies of wrestling disintegrated like sugar cubes in water when Phil took a quick glance at all the pulsing red liquid and told her she'd be fine. I saw the blood-drops on the pavement, the red-brown streaks on her arms, and I couldn't just giggle and accept his tough-love this time. I scolded him, dragging him inside to help me find Band-Aids, and I couldn't help but notice the appreciation in Cassie's dark blue eyes as I wiped her arm with a paper towel and water before I applied the Neosporin. Phil stood behind me as I tended to her, arms crossed, nail-bitten hands gripping his sides. She picked up her scooter and wheeled it into the garage. Phil and I once again leaned up against my car, even though we had no reason to stay outside. His arm still lingered close to mine, his laugh still louder around me than around anyone else, our conversation never dying down. Despite our ever-easy camaraderie, my elbow suffered a phantom sting.

“(T)issues”

Phil and I sat on his thin twin mattress, balancing a Trivial Pursuit board between us, fighting over who would be the green pie because I wanted it, but he then wanted it because I wanted it, and soon we were wrestling each other, kicking the board off the bed. He won and I didn't care because we were both breathing a little heavier and smiling and my heart felt warm, like how it feels to first sink into a bubble bath. We brought the board back up onto the bed, I settled for being blue, and we started playing a good, competitive round of trivia. We'd calmed down, answering questions left and right, when Phil's mom stomped her way past his room to the garage. I'd only caught a flash of her blonde, over-teased, over-highlighted hair. I didn't see her face, but the thumping of her heels and the abrupt muttering I heard as she passed indicated trouble. Door slams. Car door opens. Car door slams. Door opens. Door slams. Thump thump thump thump. She arrived at Phil's doorway, glaring, teeth clenched. He looks over his shoulder and asks what's wrong. Mistake. Her cheeks flushed a bright, toreador red and she started yelling about how she had no tissue box in her bathroom and how she checked every other part of the house that was supposed to have a tissue box and they all had them. *What, Phil, I'm not important enough to you to get a tissue box in my damn bathroom? You can manage every other part of the house but are too fucking lazy to put one damn tissue box in my bathroom? Can't take one last damn box out of the car?* Phil took a deep breath, nostrils flared like a bull's, and released it slowly. He apologized, said he hadn't seen the last box, it was an honest mistake, he'd take care of it now. *Good.* Her eyes finally went past him and saw me but I couldn't bring myself to just say a cheerful 'hello.' She rolled her eyes as Phil moved past her and she clicked her pearly pink nails against the door. I started straightening up the Trivial Pursuit board, which had unsettled when Phil rose from the bed, and I did not look up until I heard the thump, thump, thump of her leaving. *One day, I thought, he's gonna run her down.*

“Driver’s Seat”

Our hips were the same size, and I know because one time after Phil threw me into his pool, I had to borrow a pair of his shorts so I wouldn’t get my driver’s seat wet. My chlorine-drenched underwear chafed against the hard denim as I walked to my car but I bore it all with a smug grin. I recalled the feel of his warm arms wrapped around my waist, my toes clenching the sloping concrete of the patio, his deep chuckling in my ear as he wrestled me over to the pool, his hands sliding under my bagging shirt in the water as he dunked me. As I turned the corner off his street in my red PT Cruiser, my phone rang. I answered without looking -- I knew it was him, of course it was him, who else would it be? Who else did he have to call? He had a girlfriend, but Phil and I, we’d be best friends to the end. One day, he’d realize just how perfect we fit. We’d duet to Sinatra when I drove him home from school because he didn’t have a license even though his grandpa had bought him a white little sports car years prior. I’d bring him dinner from Arby’s and he’d steal my car keys so I couldn’t leave until after midnight, then stand in front of my car when I turned the key in the ignition. When Nicole dumped him in November, it was me he called in his misery, me who comforted and consoled him and convinced him not to drink his parents’ entire supply of alcohol. I thought things were going great and that soon we’d finally date, but my friend Alyse started flirting with him and by February they were a couple. After months of Phil dating a girl who wasn’t me, I couldn’t figure out what was wrong with him, or with me, or with something, because it was very wrong that we weren’t dating. I’d sacrificed so much, dropped other friendships and obligations throughout senior year in order to devote my time to him and he did the same. By the summertime, after Maggie had moved in with me, my chest stopped tingling at the sound of his voice, stopped hopping around like a frog prince desperate for a kiss. Instead it began to burn, a slow burn, like holding a hand out over a candle. I couldn’t handle being around him anymore. He’d been particularly insufferable since Maggie started living with me because I was less available to him, less able to cater to his every whim because I had someone else to worry about. I told him we had to talk. I borrowed my mom’s car that day, a lumbering gold Lincoln Navigator. I took us to Border’s for neutral ground, told him as we got out of the car that we needed to have a serious talk, but he directed us to the comic book section to find something to read. He buried himself in the world of X-Men for about an hour and a half before I lost my patience and told him we had to go. I hoisted myself into the car, grasping the smooth steering wheel under my sweaty palms, and the hot leather stuck to my thighs within moments. I straightened my back while he slumped in the passenger seat. Phil stared out the window as I shifted gears. *So let’s talk*, I said.

“Rude”

I think it was a Cheesecake Factory, or maybe a Dave and Buster's, but either way six of us were squished into this big old booth, me stuck between the wall and Danielle, my new best friend, pretty with her straight black hair and dark eyes and pale hands. It was eighth grade, both of us new to the school, both of us preferring to draw in class over taking notes because our teacher made us outline with highlighters and Crayola markers, and she didn't remember our names after several months and so we figured we may as well draw little cats instead, because cats are cute and algebra is not, even with blue highlighters and red markers. We faced Danielle's mom and step-dad and half-sister and we were happily eating very large salads with croutons and those mini burger sliders and whatever else, and I remember Danielle's mom got a sandwich. I remember because she kept going on and on about how the bread was so good, and how was she supposed to finish a sandwich that big, and would anyone like to try a bite, because surely she couldn't finish it on her own? Everyone but her fat husband declined the offer, which clearly disappointed her, so she talked about her thrilling job as an advertising executive at 94.9 ZETA instead, where she supposedly got to meet some teenybopper actress from the Disney Channel and got to dance with them and oh, she had such a *wonderful* time. I leaned over to ask Danielle if we'd had any homework for algebra or chemistry, since we shared those classes together and I figured I'd better ask now before I forgot. I didn't know that whispering in Danielle's ear would be a problem, but apparently it was, because her mom was like, “Excuuuse me, girl in the glasses with the curly haaair, I was talk-inggg, and it's rude to talkkk while other people are talkinggg!” I looked around for another girl with curly hair and glasses at the table, even though I knew I was the only one, because what had I done wrong? Danielle just shrugged, casting a little sad smile my way, and her sister Krystyn leaned over to present me with the same expression. “Sorry,” I muttered, shrugging my own shoulders in defeat just as Danielle and Krystyn had. None of us spoke for the rest of dinner until we went to the bathroom, the only place to escape from the crazy woman who worked at the radio station. “I'm sorry for what she said,” Danielle said, as we observed a clearly pregnant woman wearing jeans that looked like she'd fallen in mud. “She's just kind of like that – don't be too offended. You just have to let her talk.” I told her I wasn't upset, just surprised, maybe a little caught off-guard as I washed my hands and contemplated myself in the mirror. Before we'd left for dinner, her mom had commented that we looked like the Goth twins since we were both wearing baggy black pants and fairy t-shirts we'd gotten at Hot Topic, and how everyone was going to make assumptions about us being lesbians because only lesbians dressed that way. *Well*, I thought to myself, *I may look like a lesbian, but at least I'm not rude.*

“College”

Carly was one of those girls that succeeded solely because of her dogmatic, stubborn work ethic, inherited from her mother, the type of drive that would keep her awake until 4:30 a.m. working on one set of physics homework problems. The work ethic kept her competitive, and she always compared herself to her friends, whether she compared chest size or hip size, grades in AP English or AP U.S. History, writing ability or drawing ability. Carly strove to be the Renaissance woman, good at everything, lacking in nothing, envy of everyone. She competed with me the most and yet considered me her best friend, which brought an uneasy tension to all of our interactions. Her mother, of course, encouraged the friendly rivalry while my own thought it was ridiculous. Carly's mother tsked at me taking only two APs my junior year, because her precious Carly was taking six. When I said my first choice school was UNC Chapel Hill, Carly's mom scoffed and said that I'd never get in with only six total AP classes, that not even Carly's sister Ashley got in and she'd taken ten AP classes total. I rolled my eyes as she then tried to tell me I should go to UC Berkeley like Ashley had, and like Carly planned on doing, and it'd be a big happy UC Berkeley family. Carly agreed, thought it'd be so cool and that I'd love Berkeley, while I thought, *isn't Berkeley one of the top schools in the nation, ranked higher than UNC? If I couldn't get into Chapel Hill, how could I get into Berkeley?* I tried to get myself out of their Berkeley grasps and explained that my mom had a rule, no going to a school west of the Mississippi River because the travel would be too much of a pain in the neck. Carly's mom sneered and said if you went far enough east, you'd end up at Berkeley, but I told her my mom didn't think that way. I'd only been to California once, back on a business trip of my dad's, and all I remembered was that I hated the Pacific Ocean. I began to tune out their campaign, content with my measly 6 total APs and my low college standards.

“Winner”

It drove Carly batshit crazy when we got an in-class writing back in our AP English Language class and I got an eight out of nine. She got a seven. Both counted as As, but mine was the highest grade, and Carly groaned and complained about how mine didn't make any sense. Our essays were about connotation, and I compared the connotations and definitions of a terrorist versus a revolutionary, and I cited examples, and for my conclusion I said that revolutionaries were Bugs Bunnies and terrorists were Elmer Fudds, and Carly adamantly told me that Elmer Fudd is not a terrorist. I told her that the point wasn't to accuse poor Elmer Fudd of being a terrorist, but rather, to show that the connotations of the two words basically boil down to good versus evil. She did not accept my explanation but kept her complaints to herself until the English Honors Society induction. Carly's mother complimented me on being inducted and asked if I'd heard that Carly got a seven on her last in-class writing, one of the top grades in all the classes? I countered with a smile, saying yes, I'd heard Carly got a seven, and did she hear that I'm the one that got the highest score, an eight? Her face turned purple in a few blotches, Carly scowled and subtly flipped me the bird and I watched as Carly's mom went to our teacher to discuss why her daughter did not get the highest grade in the class, and how I did, instead. I walked over to my mom, who'd been reading the program for the induction, and told her what just happened. She smiled up at me, patted me on the back and said, *That's my Chapel Hill girl.*

“Little Black Dress”

Homecoming, junior year, seventeen, braces removed last summer, everything shaped up to promise a wonderful night. I wore a tight-knit beige gown my mother bought for herself after her 1979 wedding. She never wore it. I admired how womanly I looked, the fringe hanging long and low over my chest and stomach, swaying as I swayed. My mother dropped me off at Carly's pristine white house, the one in the gated community that blinded people as they drove past. The roof sparkled in its starkness as I stepped out of the car in my first set of two-and-a-half inch heels. Carly came out to greet me and I couldn't help but wince. I'd just decided to straighten my hair and didn't bother with makeup, aside from a little concealer on a forehead zit. Carly's hair curled with the help of ten pounds of hairspray and the brutal heat of irons. Her black and red dress shimmered in the bright sun, a long, sleeveless sequined and silk and satin collage haphazardly altered to fit her tiny chest. As a result, two darts pointed outward from her breasts like nipples gone wrong. Her deep-set eyes were rimmed in blacks and grays and her lips painted crimson, completely wrong wrong wrong for her light brown hair and slightly olive skin. Her mother bustled out after her, welcoming me in one breath and exclaiming how great Carly looked in the next. I climbed into the back of Carly's VW Beetle and waited while Carly's mom dragged her around to the neighbors to show her off. *Oh isn't she bee-yoo-ti-ful*, they cooed, making her twirl in the hot Florida sun, sweat already glistening on her made-up face. Carly's mom bragged about the absolute *dream* of a dress she'd found at Neiman Marcus and let the neighbors know that *Lisa down at the hair salon on Wiles Road gave Carly this amazing up-do*. Finally, Carly and her mother came to the car. I sat in the back seat cramped by myself, and as Carly's mother drove us to the hotel she started telling us horrifying stories about her youth. My eyes widened as Carly's mother told us that the sexiest thing to ever do was to go out on a hot date, wearing a little black dress and no panties, and have your man dance with you, and have him grab your ass and realize you're wearing nothing underneath, and that his reaction will be totally worth it. I slouched down in my seat, wishing I could crawl into the trunk and die of heatstroke. I tried desperately not to picture the fat, shrill Jewish woman in the driver's seat wearing anything but a baggy, beaded t-shirt and sweatpants. I let out a breath as we arrived at the hotel and scrambled out of the car. While Carly watched our friend Frank the whole night, he danced with me and later asked with a laugh, “What happened to Carly's **face**?!” I glanced at her and her raccoon makeup from across the room and shrugged, instead of saying, “Her mother.”