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Gritting Teeth: A Memoir of Unhealthy Love

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GRITTING TEETH:
A MEMOIR OF UNHEALTHY LOVE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Samantha L. Day

December 2010

**GRITTING TEETH:
A MEMOIR OF UNHEALTHY LOVE**

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Directed by:

Dale Rigby, David LeNoir, and Wes Berry

Department of English

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Originally intended to be modeled after Eula Biss’s creative nonfiction essay “The Balloonists”—which tackles the subject of marriage via fragmented prose poems—“Gritting Teeth: A Memoir of Unhealthy Love” is a piece that has taken on a subject and form of its own. A memoirist like Vivian Gornick might not claim the writer’s piece, as it hesitates to offer a “story” in places. A memoirist like Sue William Silverman might not claim the piece, as it hesitates to be courageous at times. But this collage of song lyrics, research snippets, and even Craigslist postings works in conjunction with fragments from the writer’s two most “serious” romantic relationships, as well as fragments from her more recent romantic past, to create a piece that has given her an awareness of the unhealthy relationship behaviors she possesses, and with that, a tinge of hope for changing these behaviors in the future.

To the woman who’s ever been obsessive about a boyfriend (or even a fling), the woman who’s married for ulterior motives, or the woman/man interested in peering into the recesses of a neurotic, obsessive, and generally warped female mind, the writer offers this memoir.

INTRODUCTION

It's been about four years since I've been to a dentist. It's not that I haven't wanted to go or am scared of going, but I just haven't had the resources to get myself in a dentist's chair. I have yellowed, weak teeth with periodically aching molars. Just unhealthy teeth. I want a dentist to fix them. I need him to fix them. I realize this and the dependency scares me. I want to find a way to fix my teeth myself, before a dentist—the right dentist—sees them.

*

In *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, Vivian Gornick very succinctly lays out just what the “situation” and “story” are in relation to writing creative nonfiction: “The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.”

In the year I've worked on this project, it's always had a situation: the piece was to explore snippets of my marriage, recount experiences with my “first love,” and delve into awkward moments with those who have come and gone over the last few years. I knew well before I even started this thesis what my situation was going to be.

But the story didn't show itself nearly as easily.

Sue William Silverman tells me that “[w]riting memoir requires courage.” A lack of courage has pervaded this project from beginning to end. I see it as the main reason why it took so long to gain some semblance of a story within this piece.

Any hesitancy you may notice in my narration stems not from an attempt to conceal or deal in dishonesty, but it speaks to the fact that I'm still working toward gaining the courage necessary to be a bona fide memoirist.

When I first starting writing this thesis, I hid behind cryptic, sparse fragments that ultimately meant little with regard to the situation and in no way spoke to any sort of story. I claimed to be attempting to imitate the sparse prose poem style of Eula Biss's "The Balloonists," but I was no prose poet. I am nowhere near any sort of poet.

When my director intimated that my Biss imitation wasn't going to work, I needed a new way to retreat: I tried to link many of my experiences with my exes to childhood experiences involving my family, with most of the focus on my mother. This, too, didn't work, as the writing was stale and simply became a deflection of blame for my choices onto my parents.

This piece isn't about blame. It isn't about the possible origins of my behaviors. This project, through the lens of my first relationship and first marriage, seeks to identify my unhealthy relationship behaviors so that I can start working toward changing them, so that I might be able to be in normal, functional intimate relationship one day.

And I really look forward to that day.

I

I remember the amber glow of the tollway street lamps as I rushed through the I-Pass lanes of Chicago's I-294, then I-90. Its warm tones comforted me during my undignified night drives, when I had to make that 63-mile journey to try to get what I needed.

What I needed was love. Matt, my 20-year-old bandmate, was the first human object I tried to get it from. But that wasn't working out. The unrequited love cliché came alive in me: I couldn't sleep; food had no taste. My mind was so preoccupied with Matt and getting his love that I quit high school to long for him full-time. My mom thought I quit school because the idea of attending an agricultural high school in urban Chicago was absurd. My friends and fellow musicians thought I quit to naively pursue rock stardom. But I was obsessed. Couldn't focus. The school's floor tiles flashed at me the deep brown of his eyes. The strokes of words onto pieces of paper only made me think about what I'd be willing to give up—anything—to get a love letter from him. I'd never had anyone take me over in whole and make me lose self-control like this before.

This was nine years ago. Despite dropping out of the agricultural high school, I'm now a few months shy of a master's degree in English. I've come a long way. Academically. But I've used my moderate success in academics to cover up the fact that an obsessive, needy girl continues to rush those interstates, desperate to fill herself up with love.

I want to be the stable, secure woman that my education suggests I am.

Maybe one day I will be.

My street lamp nightlights, although comforting, interrogated me like a mother as I drove: *Who quits high school, despite being in the top quarter of her class, because all she can think about is her on-again, off-again boyfriend? Who rushes the I-Pass lanes, blowing off tolls, only because throwing change into a toll booth takes too many seconds away from being with said semi-boyfriend? What kind of person does these things?*

My tiny frame put all its weight into the gas pedal and weaved in between lanes, unwilling, perhaps unable, to consider these questions. *Quitting school would make Matt love me. Not paying the tolls would get me the love I needed.*

When the \$2,200.40 bill came from the Illinois Tollway Authority, I couldn't dispute what I'd done. The violation notices included black and white pictures of my 1995 Grand Am blowing through the lanes, with my ponytailed head visible in some of the shots. I couldn't blame my brother or some stranger. And I didn't want to. By paying the fine, I felt one step closer to being loved.

*

Part of my morning internet routine includes perusing the Chicago missed connections section of Craigslist. The elegant descriptions of Michigan Avenue's beautiful, long-legged women, the raunchy specifics of anal sex at Cook County forest preserves, and the poured guts of broken hearts all give me a glimpse into what love, in its varying degrees (Stendhal contends that there are four types of love: "passion-love," "gallant-love," "physical love," and "vanity-love"), is like for others.

These online posts from regular people all over Chicagoland intimate that love is real, tangible, and I, just like anyone else, might *finally know it someday*.

When I see a post titled “Sam,” my mind immediately jumps to Matt. *Is he looking to mend things after all these years?* I don’t consider the fact that there are hundreds of thousands of other people named Sam in the Chicago metropolitan area. He’s finally looking for me. As I click on the link to the post, the text feels oddly applicable to what I had with Matt:

“You are why restraining orders were created. You’re a psycho. Get help. Professional help.”

I realize the post isn’t for me. For a few seconds, I forgive myself for being clingy and obsessive me, because I know there’s another Sam out there feeling the same ways. But did Matt think I was a psycho back then? More importantly, *was* I a psycho back then?

I’m not sure I can even attempt an answer.

*

Mouthful of cavities

Your soul’s a bowl of jokes

And every day you remind me

How I’m desperately in need

- Blind Melon, “Mouthful Cavities”

*

Security lights hovered above a dead grammar school parking lot as Matt and I pulled in. *A few years before this, I had been the Student Council President of this school, Cassell Elementary. I won by making a false promise to make cookies and pop more readily available in the cafeteria.* Grey-black snow sat in six-foot-tall piles along the

perimeter. The uncollected remnants morphed into a combination of ice and thick sludge. *My tiny trophy for winning the school spelling bee had already been thrown out.* Matt backed his compact Cavalier into the school's lower-level loading dock area to create the illusion of privacy. Apartment houses hovered high in front of us. Heat hissed through the dashboard vents as I thumbed the car window's lower rubber trim. *I was voted "Most Likely to Succeed" and "Best Musician" as part of the yearbook's eighth grade superlative survey. This was out of 32 students.*

"Is this safe?" he asked, as he put the car in park.

I just kissed him and unbuckled his pants. It didn't matter if it was safe. All that mattered was that he saw me as the perfect girl for him—adventurous, risk-taking, fun. Worthy.

*

Matt's teeth were round and small like a child's—or maybe they just looked that way because, unlike the teeth, the rest of his face and features were elongated and exaggerated: he had a thick almost-unibrow, a long nose and chin, and when he would smile, his gums would overtake his teeth. The gums were pink and puffy and initially hard to look at without discreetly turning away and waiting for him to draw his lip down. One of his upper front teeth curved inward and behind another tooth, causing a highly visible vacant black space right near the center of his smile.

According to a 2009 article in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, "[T]he appearance of the mouth and teeth [is] important to ... an individual's perception of self..." If this is true, then he should've perceived himself as ugly and crooked, but he didn't. He obnoxiously wore leather hats and pants to enhance his "moxie," as he called it. This

moxie would work to boost his already high confidence, and he'd walk around, strutting like he wasn't sporting a repellant set of teeth. And girls, including myself, bought it.

*

It was about 4:00 A.M. on April 8, 2001. My curveless body lay in my daybed, staring at the cusp of the wood-paneled wall and cheap ceiling tiles. The streetlights outside my windows glimmered through the blinds. I had been fantasizing about this for years: I was finally a part of an actual rock band.

In April of 1997, 12-year-old me, in my purposely cut-up jeans and holey Nirvana t-shirt, asked my stepfather, John, a veteran of the Chicago '80s metal scene, to teach me to play bass. A few months before this, when I sat on the kitchen counter and told him that I wanted to play guitar, he laughed at me, with his sharp, tobacco-stained teeth exposed. Given that bass was his instrument of choice, I figured I'd have a better shot at him teaching me how to play it than the guitar.

"You serious?" he asked.

I nodded my head fast and quick.

A week later, John and I sat on the pink living room carpet with a boombox as he taught me the bassline from Jethro Tull's "Locomotive Breath." I watched his right hand slide smoothly across the fretboard as his left hand plucked the quarter notes with a pick. The song ended, and he handed his blue Guild bass that he'd had for over a decade to me. He replayed the track on the boombox. I focused on hitting each note at the appropriate time, moving my fingers to the right frets. I was able to play. But it didn't feel right. Progressive rock was nothing but long, showy songs that had little heart. I wanted to play

along with the melody, simplicity, and power that inspired me to ask John to teach me to play in the first place.

“Today” from the Smashing Pumpkins’ *Siamese Dream* record resonated with a sonic quality that made me want to explode every time I felt the song’s fifth measure burst into my young ears. As John played along with the song on our boombox, his slouched posture and glazed-over eyes told me that he wanted me to learn more complicated songs. I just needed him to show me that one song. I took it from there.

As I learned more Smashing Pumpkins songs, I imagined myself in bass player D’Arcy’s shoes: big, sticker-clad yellow-bodied Fender Jazz Bass strapped around me, playing for thousands of moshing, crowd surfing rock lovers.

And now I was basking in the afterglow of being dropped-off by Matt, the 19-year-old drummer of my new band, Effigy.

That day, Matt and I trekked busy, congested streets and a number of Chicagoland interstates to get to the Effigy practice space in Algonquin. Although we’d talked on the phone a few times before, we were strangers. But an outsider would’ve thought we were best friends. As Matt seemed to just be discovering grunge rock, I pimped Alice in Chains’ *Jar of Flies*, and he engaged me in questions about the EP as if I were an authority on it.

A palpable affinity circulated through the car like warm air.

We went on to agree that something wasn’t quite right about ‘80s cock rock.

“It just makes me think of David Lee Roth’s bulbous junk and the way he screams ‘YOW!’ at least ten times in every song,” Matt said.

I smiled my big, white teeth his way.

Eventually, Matt asked me about my hate for Limp Bizkit. The ad I placed in the local *Illinois Entertainer*, the ad that brought us together, made my distaste clear enough. The primary text read: “Like Limp Bizkit? Well, suck my balls ‘cause I don’t!”

And that phrase—“suck my balls”—has haunted me ever since. When I wrote the ad, I didn’t think about the tone, image conveyed, or how I would be perceived. The words simply streamed from the pen of a silly, naïve 16-year-old. The masculine overtones in that phrase worked with the rough rocker image I wanted to construct for myself, but I was too young to realize that if I wanted to be seen as a female all the while, if I wanted a boyfriend—and I did—I’d have to play into society’s constructed gender standards and keep the ball talk to the boys.

I sat on my bedroom floor, at 12, having just traded in my Barbies for a bass guitar. I conversed with myself about the qualities I wanted in a future boyfriend. Personality or sense of humor weren’t factors. He just needed to be tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed, and a drummer. Yes, I seriously said that he had to be a drummer. I had idealistic boy fantasies just like any other girl.

So, naturally, as I lay in bed reflecting on the day and briefly recounting these rather specific future boyfriend requirements in my head, I said aloud, “We’re gonna end up together.”

When the sentence came out, I didn’t think much of it. It just flowed out of me like it was something that needed to be acknowledged, and I didn’t consider the sentiment again until about four months later. A slight closed-mouth smile just popped up on my face, and I drifted off to sleep.

It was the Friday night of my second weekend with the band, and I was in Matt's bed. His room was plastered with baseball player wallpaper in shades of hunter green, maroon, and tan. He had a laminated poster of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* hanging next to his strategically placed mirror on the wall nearest the foot of the bed. A poster of a row of women with Pink Floyd albums painted on their backs and asses hung above his bed.

Because I lived about 1 ½ hours from where we practiced, I had to stay with Matt at his parents' house every weekend. Given that I barely knew Matt or his family, sleeping on a couch or in a guest bedroom would have been appropriate. But, apparently, the only sleeping area available for me was Matt's bed.

I knew being in his bed wasn't right—I had only known him a couple of weeks—but it didn't feel terribly wrong. After all, he was lying on the floor, and we had the closet light on as a sort of night light. My conscience fought with itself: *You shouldn't be in this bed*. I covered myself with his blanket and pressed its edge against my clavicle with both hands. We talked for a while. I don't remember what we said. It doesn't matter, though. We should've talked about how sleeping in the same room would eventually lead to sex, sex would lead to me clinging, and clinging would lead to a three-year-struggle to get him to fill me with a feeling I'd always been searching for, but never able to define.

We continued to talk. I let go of the blanket. *But it just feels right*. We skirted around the issue that I was in his bed. Or maybe he didn't think much of it. Maybe he just viewed the situation as a couple of the guys hanging out, having an age-inappropriate sleepover. Perhaps it was this idea that drove him to get up, turn off the closet light, and ask if he could climb into his bed with me.

In later weeks, I found out that there were two vacant bedrooms in the house, both with beds, where I could've slept alone. An emotionally sound and secure person would've been furious with Matt. But me? I was flattered. In my mind, having me sleep in his room when I could've slept in two other rooms was like a compliment. He accepted me. Liked me. I kept sleeping in his room and bed every weekend, thinking it an honor.

*

After an expensive and unproductive recording session at Reeves Audio Recording in Evanston, we walked in a cluster of four to the nearby lakeshore. Smells of cumin and chili powder enticed me as we passed a gritty Mexican restaurant. I stayed silent, taking in the smells, listening to Matt and the other guys in the band joke about the studio's owner, Jim Reeves, a bald, semi-stout Jewish guy.

"Stop playin' with your balls, honey" Matt said to me in his best Jewish guy voice, as he nudged my left shoulder with his right elbow. We each said this phrase frequently, as it had become Reeves's catch phrase—in our minds—but it was usually said generally, just for laughs. Matt said it to me directly, looked straight into my eyes.

I know the ad I placed in the *Entertainer* suggested I had balls, but he didn't really think I had balls, did he?

Once we got to the shore, I stared out into Lake Michigan. Given my inexperience, it seemed as worldly and vast in that moment as the Atlantic. Nothing could've gone wrong there. The four of us treaded the big, gray rocks at the water's edge. The lake breeze whipped in our faces, making it feel much cooler outside than it actually was. We didn't stay very long. As we walked away from the water and onto the beach's

sand, I rubbed my arms and chattered my teeth in an overdramatic gesture to announce my coldness. My bony arms in a sleeveless shirt needed some attention.

“Do you want my jacket?” Matt asked, raising up his eyebrows with a certain hesitancy that hoped I’d say no.

I declined, but only to be polite. I wanted the jacket. I kept rubbing and chattering.

When he came up from behind me and draped his auburn leather jacket on my shoulders, it hung heavy: I wasn’t prepared for the weight of the leather. I tipped barely forward and put my arms through the too-long sleeves. The khaki-like lining scratched at my skin. But it felt good.

I’d never had a guy do something so chivalrous for me before. I felt like my female self, a self that had never really been acknowledged by the world. I played with guitars, swore a lot, and said things like “suck my balls.” I wasn’t hard and tough, though. I was vulnerable and emotional and fragile despite it all. And now this cute guy was answering to my inner life, saying *I see what you need, and I’m here to give it you.*

When he asked for his coat back a few minutes later, I felt like I’d been had. I must’ve had balls after all.

*

Matt and I sat at opposite ends of his parents’ living room couch one Friday evening. The bitter of my beer helped ease my nerves, as I could feel Matt nearing an explosion. He was leaning forward, elbows on his knees, forehead in his left hand, cordless phone in the right. Alice in Chains’s “Got Me Wrong” played on the TV. He hung up abruptly, slammed the phone into the couch cushion next to him.

“He ditched practice to fuck his girlfriend!” he shouted at me. Our singer had just canceled practice for the night.

“There’s no point in you even being here!” he continued.

He directed the rest of his tantrum toward the television, coffee table, and other objects in the room, as though I’d disappeared.

I hid my face behind my beer bottle, trying as best I could to disappear the way he wanted me to. I took frequent swigs, thinking that the beer would take me to a place where the tension would be gone, and I would be Matt’s weekend bed buddy again. I kept drinking, half-consciously thinking, *if I drink enough, maybe we can be more than buddies*. We’d been sharing a bed for months now. Spent our entire weekends together. Talked on the phone for hours throughout the week. I wanted him to be mine. But a voice whispered: *He doesn’t like you. You’re not good enough. All you’re good for is playing bass*.

This voice still lingers in me, telling me I’m not good enough, telling me that I’m the problem, telling me I’m shit. And the voice has only gotten more powerful with time.

-

After my morning shower, I turn on my computer and sign into Yahoo Messenger. I see Jeremy as offline. *Where is he? Why is he offline?* A wave of worry runs into my hands. I have to clench my fists.

Jeremy and I talk on Yahoo Messenger every day, throughout the day. He works as an Internet Marketing Manager, so he’s constantly stuck to his computer. I spend the bulk of my days writing and looking for jobs online, so I spend most of my time at the computer, too. This mode of communication makes me feel like he’s always with me. I

like him with me, always. I want to write that I don't *need* him with me, but my gut tells me that would be a lie.

I open Microsoft Word and start to look over my writing from the previous day. The words just blur in front of me as the voice overtakes me: *He's ignoring you. You probably said something really fucking stupid last night and now he wants nothing to do with you.* I was hungry, but not anymore. My heart beats quicker. I close my eyes and try to rationalize: *But we have plans tomorrow. We've known each other for a few months now. He's not gonna just disappear on me.* This soothes me for a minute.

I try to review my words again.

He's not gonna log on. You fucked up.

I punch my right thigh and let out a restrained "Stop!"

But until he logs on, I can't stop.

-

Several more hours. Several more beers. I sat on the floor, Indian style, near the cheap wood coffee table. Matt was still on the couch, but was sitting in closer proximity to me. The alcohol washed away the room's tension and his frustration hours ago. It had also washed away my inhibitions.

A lull came about in our conversation.

"I'm determined to lose my virginity this summer" flew out of my mouth like projectile vomit. Uncontrollable. Urgent.

I had been saying this to friends for months, but I don't think I ever meant it. Or maybe I meant it, but just didn't think it was actually possible. After all, I had been the prude girl who, when making out with boys became a thing, was in her room playing bass

and journaling; who, when fingering became all the rage, had just experienced her first kiss with her best friend, Joel; who, when sex was fashionable and pregnancy wasn't scary or dangerous at all, was still stuck on kissing.

“Oh, yeah?” Matt said to me.

His voice had lowered an octave. He moved down the couch, was only a few feet away from me now. I grinned. The musk of his sudden attraction to me filled me up. That night I began to understand that I could use sex—or the idea of sex—to garner attention, to feel desired, to get filled up.

My brain knew that something was off, though, given how easy it was to get Matt's attention as a sexual object. My brain knew that his sudden interest in me probably had more to do with the prospect of general sex than the prospect of being with me. But none of that mattered. My heart, body, and inner voice just wanted—needed—the guy she shared a bed with, the guy she knew she would end up with because he was tall, dark, and played drums.

*

Matt, our two other band members, and I sat smoking pot on the cul-de-sac curb in front of Matt's parents' house. It was the end of summer, a cool Friday night in northwest suburban Chicago.

I had already had several beers so I—with my 115-pound, 5'6" frame—was pretty messed up to begin with, so drunk that I don't remember actually smoking any pot. I just remember staring into Matt's parents' house, specifically the white siding and the white fence that enclosed the porch. I thought about the way I never saw such cookie cutter

houses in the city. I wanted a cookie cutter house. I wanted a cookie cutter house with Matt.

He and I had been involved for about a month and a half now—but it was a secret. I was conflicted. I wanted to pull a *Singin' in the Rain* all over Chicagoland to spread my growing affection for Matt. I wanted us to go on double dates and trade cute anecdotes about one another with other couples. I wanted to spend our Friday nights cuddling on the couch, eating popcorn in front of the TV.

He rationalized the need for secrecy: “It’ll ruin the band if they found out,” he said to me on multiple occasions. I agreed, but only because my bass player stepdad’s voice echoed in my consciousness: “Never, ever date a bandmate” was the first piece of real advice he ever offered me.

The weed hit my system. My body felt frozen in place. The idea of not having control of my body freaked me out. I got control of my fists. Bounced my knees up and down. That calmed me a little. But I couldn’t move my head. Matt and our guitar player laughed about some obscure pop culture reference and hit the bowl. My head stayed stiff, stuck straight ahead. The urge to run came over me. It clawed at me. Maybe the weed was enlightening me, telling me to get the fuck away from there before I did something regrettable. But Matt was sitting right next to me. I liked him sitting next to me. I didn’t want to be away from him. But I couldn’t ignore the stoned impulses that brought me to my feet.

I grabbed his hand and ran with him into the house and up the stairs. I could sense his delighted confusion. It was all very theatrical, but I wasn’t aiming for it to be. I was just stoned and drunk as hell. Needed to run. I could’ve gone anywhere to fulfill this urge

to run: around the cul-de-sac, down the street, up and down the front porch steps, but I chose to go to his bedroom. It had become my safe place. The wallpaper baseball players, Pink Floyd poster women, and rock stars on matted paper became my friends.

He turned on his closet light. Old condom wrappers were strewn across the floor, along with copies of *Guitar World*. I jumped into his bed, snuggled up, and just laid there. To Matt, who'd been pressuring me to have sex for weeks now, my urgent-seeming actions must've signaled that I was ready to lose my virginity. I wasn't ready, though. I had no justifiable explanation as to why I dragged him up to his bedroom. I was cornered and confused, but the voice spoke: *He'll be yours after this.*

And then, his twiggy body lay atop mine. A blanket shielded the awkward first insertion process from the eyes of the world. I just lay there, motionless, still fucked up while he kept trying to work his junk into my soon-to-be junk. There was still time left to keep claim of my virginity. *He'll be yours after this. You'll be his. You'll be loved.* I unfocused my eyes and stared into white, a blur created by the closet light and the white wall.

“I just want to be inside of you.”

“I want to ravage you.”

He whispered these phrases into my neck, delicately transferring guilt. My body absorbed the syllables. Their reverberations traveled down my insides, and like they were access codes, he got the go-ahead to come inside.

His guttural moans beat my eardrums and rivers of his warm saliva trickled down my neck. I looked up at the ceiling with wide, freaked-out eyes. The guys from Alice in Chains were up there, all sitting in a row. Jerry Cantrell, the guitarist and main

songwriter, was hunched over with his long blonde hair and stocking cap, watching us intently. I wanted to please him and wondered if he approved.

In another poster, I saw Scott Weiland of Stone Temple Pilots making a face at me. His head was tilted to the side, lips curled, thick sunglasses obscured his eyes. He looked disappointed in me. I was disappointed in myself.

I wish this disappointment would have stayed with me. I could have taught myself early on that sex isn't the way to force a connection with someone.

-

I sit with Joe on a funky loveseat in my tiny studio apartment. The mustiness of '70s wallpaper circulates as I lay my legs across his lap. He looks down at them. My legs aren't welcome on his lap.

"I got a new bra. What do you think of my boobs?" I ask, pointing to my chest.

"Boobs shouldn't touch," Joe says.

He doesn't want your fat ass.

Joe's scrawny and small: 5'6", maybe 130 pounds. When he doesn't smile, he's one of the cutest guys I've ever seen. His teeth are small and sharp and have gaps in the front.

I'm 5'6", but I weigh 175 pounds. I know he thinks I'm fat, and I'm not completely sure why he continues to see me. But I like having someone to be with every weekend.

I take his denial of my cleavage as a challenge. *Make him want you. Sex can get you what you need.*

I jump up onto his lap, straddle him, and reach over to turn the table lamp off. I graze his left ear with the tips of my teeth.

“Don’t...” he says, conflicted.

I breathe into his ear.

“I don’t wanna....”

I kiss his neck.

“Fine....”

-

Sensing that he was finished, I came back down from the ceiling. He mumbled a series of jumbled slurred syllables into my left shoulder.

And then, “I love you, Kate” came out crisp. Kate was Matt’s ex-girlfriend.

The surge of anger and hurt I should’ve felt was instead a feeling of happy confusion and surprise. I smiled and laughed softly. He shot his upper body up from my shoulder as though he were suddenly sober and held himself up by his palms.

“What?” I asked, as I reached up and placed my hands on his clavicle, gentle and understanding in my movements and the syllable spoken. He was telling me he loved me. This was it. I just wanted him to repeat it—without mentioning Kate this time. My fingers pressed into his sweaty skin.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...” he said.

“It’s okay.” I smiled and brushed his hair back with my right hand, still gentle.

The dead air’s tension screamed.

Say it. Say it. Say it.

I imagine myself giving him a last kiss, getting up, collecting my articles of clothing from various sections of the room, and getting dressed as he passes out into the face of his pillow, with us denying in the morning that anything happened. I like to believe I was strong enough to do that then, strong enough to let go like that now.

But I stayed in the bed, with my hand still going through his hair and my eyes pleading with him. He looked toward the closet, and then looked down at my shoulder. He spit the words out, not slow nor fast, not necessarily emoting, not mentioning any specific names afterwards. He pulled his palms out from under him, free falling into my shoulder.

This was what I'd been waiting for—to hear those words. It didn't matter how little he meant them when he said them. In my desperate world, just hearing "I love you" meant that I was going to receive the acceptance, care, and attention I craved for so long; even if I didn't receive these things, as long as he kept telling me he loved me, I was convinced I'd receive them someday. He could do whatever he wanted to me from that point on, as long as he kept saying those words that meant nothing.

*

In 1979, social psychologist Dorothy Tennov wrote *Love and Limerence*, a trailblazing book on the study of obsessive, aching, romantic love, termed by her as "limerence." Some attributes of limerence are "intrusive thinking about the object of [...] passionate desire (the limerent object); acute longing for reciprocation; fear of rejection; intensification [of limerence] through adversity; an aching 'heart.'"

In 2008, USA Today reported that researchers are pushing for limerence to become an actual disorder within the spectrum of “obsessive-compulsive disorders and addiction behavior.”

*

The white walls and Berber carpeting of Matt’s parents’ basement did little to take my attention off of Matt’s hands, with his jagged nails bitten nearly to the cuticles. I caught myself staring, gave my head a quick spastic shake and turned away from him. But as though he were a magnet, my eyes slowly pulled back toward him, this time admiring his plump lips, which were always in dire need of Chapstick.

He sat five feet away from me behind his reddish Gretsch drum set, keeping me at bay by hiding behind his high hat and multiple cymbals. I sat in my red chair, Squier bass in my lap, a pained half-smile on my face. I reached for the beer on my amp, took a sip, and stared into the can. I didn’t want to be at practice. I didn’t want to play music. I just wanted to be in his arms.

Our musical bond was undeniable: he could predict when I would do an elaborate riff during a song and would somehow complement it perfectly with a series of cymbal hits and snare fills. We showed approval through our own language of slick smiles and slight nods. His cymbals were my stresses; his high-hat dictated my eighth-notes. He always referred to us as the rhythm section—“Don’t mess with the rhythm section!” he once said—which is the literal truth, nothing to get flattered about. But I always took that label with affection, even before I got limerent. Matt is the only drummer I’ve ever been in sync with. And for giving that up, I wish I could go back in time and violently shake myself.

Matt clicked his sticks, and we launched into a three-chord, three-minute love song. In minute one, I tried to focus on the notes and their progression: *G G D DDD GG C CCC... G G D DDD GG C CCC... G G D DDD GG C CCC...* My stomach tensed up: the more I ignored thoughts of Matt, the more intense my inclination to jump on him and scream my “love” into his face. I closed my eyes and tightened my grip on the neck of my bass.

Minute two brought the lines of the chorus into my ears, making it more difficult for me to fight.

“When you look at me, oh, you know that I can’t, I can’t breathe...”

I love him. I love him. I love him. I want him to love me.

More tension clouded my mind. Ill-feeling gushed its way into my stomach.

By the end of the song, I was exhausted.

Music, after being such a comfort and release for me in those last four years, became a barrier that prevented me from getting closer to Matt. Really, anything that wasn’t Matt-related was a barrier: friends, family, and hobbies.

*

Although I’d lost my virginity to Matt, which theoretically implied his awareness that I was a girl—and I didn’t have balls—I still felt insecure in my femininity.

You’re not pretty enough.

You’re fat.

Look at your nails, bitten down so low. Women don’t have nails like that.

So when I met Nicole, our new keyboardist/back-up singer, the picture of feminine grace and poise, my warped self-image continued to take hits. I’d never been in

a band with another girl before, and I didn't want to be in a band with another girl. The novelty of being the only girl in a rock band made me feel special. And Nicole, a delicate North Side twig with the voice of a ditzy California Valley girl, threatened that, too.

One Saturday afternoon, I rolled out of Matt's bed and walked downstairs to practice wearing pajama pants and one of Matt's red, baggy polo shirts from work. Despite not having brushed my teeth or making any real attempt to get ready, I decided I wanted to take pictures of the band. I always carried disposable cameras with me in an effort to catch the little moments in life that tend to be forgotten. I handed my camera off to our guitar player, Stone, and had Nicole kneel with me in front of my amp stack. The voice must've still been asleep, as I didn't mind how I looked in relation to Nicole in that moment.

When Stone snapped the picture, her delicate skin sported earth tone tint in the eyes and cheeks. Her long brown hair hung like sheer silk curtains. As she motioned for Stone not to take the picture just yet, her slim fingers held a Marlboro Light in such a way that she exuded an air of 1920s grace. My greasy, pulled-back hair and bulldog grin with a pick in its mouth only amplified her comparative beauty.

You're such a man, the voice still says to me as I look at this picture today.

*

Matt and I stood in the basement. Our equipment, beer cans and cigarette butts faded out of my focus, leaving the two of us in barrenness. He stood in front of me, hovering, and I looked down at the oatmeal color of the carpet. The stink of my longing for him was stronger than ever. It should've clung to the white walls like cigarette smoke, collected up in a yellow muck, and spelled out for me that what I was about to do was

just a tactic to win Matt's love. It was just one of many games I'd play over the years in my attempts to win the affections of guys. And games never work.

"I have to quit the band," I said.

His eyes widened and mouth opened. His crooked teeth gave way to the black hole inside his mouth. He put his hands on my face, scraping my cheeks with the tips of his fingers. What I saw then was his emotional world about to spill over, his love for me about to pour out and bathe me and reward me for the pain I'd suffered in my longing for him. *Yes, yes. He loves you.* Down and up his hands went, stroking, almost pulling, like he was trying to pull my skin away. What was he trying to uncover? Was he just pleading with my skin to get his band buddy back? Was he trying to unpeel me until I was no longer there?

"Why?" he asked.

"I just... have a lot going on."

He sat me down in my chair and continued rubbing away at me, rubbing my arms and my thighs as he sat on the floor, at my feet. He looked up at me with glassy eyes and didn't break eye contact. Maybe the intensity behind his touch was what brought out his near-tears. Maybe he realized that getting involved with me was a mistake. Maybe he was just playing along with my game. I was filled with an internal glee—a tingling, ecstatic feeling—that I couldn't express or I'd be found out. I looked down on him with a smile ready to leak.

I walked out onto the sidewalk, showing my smile now. I got what I needed: his affection embedded in my skin, the memory of his welled up eyes—I made them that way—burned in my brain for the rest of my life. I looked up to see the snow swirl with

the darkness to create a deep blackish-purple and reached my right hand forward to feel the prick of snowflakes on my fingertips. As I got to the door of my Buick, Christmas surrounded me: the snowmen, angels, elves, Santa, and baby Jesus all merged into kaleidoscopic vision of yellows, reds, and oranges and filled me with a warmth that contradicted the chilly air.

Inside the car, I sat in the moment and closed my eyes. My equipment sat behind me. The repercussions of quitting the band were lost on me: I didn't fully grasp that I'd actually quit until a few weeks later. Instead of losing a band, I felt an assurance that I was loved. The replay of his touch and his eyes and his pouting was on instant playback. I couldn't stop it and didn't want to.

*

I lay on the hood of Matt's teal Cavalier. I tilted my head back as I inhaled the icy air. He parked in a lot behind an industrial building off one of the main roads. If anyone worked there, they'd gone home hours ago. I looked up. All I saw was indigo and snow. I looked back down. My flat, bare stomach served as a floorboard for the security lighting that surrounded me. Amber came at me from every direction. Its auras whirred. Snow was everywhere. I didn't feel its accompanying chill, though my entire body was exposed. Instead of teeth chattering, or my skin's goosebumps screaming, or my rationality emerging, I just lay giddy with legs spread wide open, waiting for him to jump inside and make love to me—on the hood of his car, in December, in Chicagoland, in public.

*

And I'll pull your crooked teeth

You'll be perfect just like me

You'll be a lover in my bed

And a gun to my head

We must never be apart

- Smashing Pumpkins, "Ava Adore"

*

It was June 23, 2002, a Sunday. Matt's parents, maternal grandparents, a cousin, and Matt and I were gathered at the Indiana Dunes, on Lake Michigan's south end. Unlike many beach visitors—who usually settle into a spot and lay down a blanket or series of beach towels—we trekked all over the sand, never quite settling anywhere. We were largely silent. It was either an uncomfortable silence stemming from my infiltration of their family outing—or a silence that wasn't a silence at all, just my disassociation from anything unrelated to Matt.

The sun's rays attacked me from all ends, though I barely knew it. My skin was slowly turning fire-red and my insides were being roasted. The lake breeze did little to counteract the smell of dead fish and subtle rubber from the nearby factories. As we walked, my un-sandaled feet pained with every step onto the scorching sand. I stayed close to Matt's side. I'd have clutched onto him if he would've let me, but we had a silent understanding that I wasn't to touch him in public. But as long as he was next to me, I'd bear anything.

My mind was constantly retreating into its own obsessive recesses. I thought about how I just wanted to dive inside of him and mix with his blood and guts to become a part of him, how placing my ear above his heart as he slept to hear his slow, unaffected

heartbeat didn't bring me anywhere near close enough to him. Anything I did during the Matt years was motivated by one thing: finding the way to be closest to him.

And I never found a way. You can't be close to someone who doesn't want to be close to you.

When we got back from the beach, I lay alone on Matt's grandmother's couch, sick. Maybe it was just a standard flu, maybe I concocted an illness, maybe I was getting what I deserved. "Why isn't he with me?" replayed over and over in my head as my eyes oscillated between the family room walls and the floor. The wood paneling had disintegrated into a grey dry-rot and the floor's tiles were cold, off-white, and clean, like those in a hospital room. "Where is he when I need him?" I thought. When he had the flu over the winter, I still kissed him, slept in bed with him, went to 7-Eleven for 7-Up and soup at 3:00 in the morning for him.

I heard Matt's mom through the wall: "Matthew ... go be with her!" Within a few minutes, he came in, knelt to my level, and apathetically asked, "Do you want some Tylenol?" I watched him as he went back to the kitchen for the pills: he had a spring in his step as he popped up the few stairs to the kitchen and a smirk on his face as he turned the corner and then out of my sight. He certainly wasn't happy to be tending to me while I was sick. He was probably happy just to have me incapacitated and at bay.

This day at the beach was on my grandmother's 76th birthday—the final birthday she'd ever celebrate. In the few years previous, she'd battled breast cancer and suffered a double mastectomy. She joked, "Now I know what it feels like to be a flat-chested woman!" and she playfully wondered why her clothes didn't fit her the way they used to. Every birthday after her cancer diagnosis should've been a big deal to me. Instead, I left a

card with my mom and rushed up north to meet with Matt and his family—the family that was more important to try to be a part of. The card had pretty loops and pink roses and sophisticated cursive, but I knew it wasn't enough, and my instincts told me to do more. On the left side of the card, I wrote all the things we all write in cards to our grandmothers: how much she meant to me and how much I appreciate everything she'd ever done for me.

After she passed less than six months later, I rifled through her desk, desperate to cling to relics of her. I came across piles of birthday cards—ones she'd planned to give for future birthdays, ones she'd received. And there was the card I gave her on her final birthday.

I put my head in my hands and wept.

Missing that birthday is one of my biggest regrets.

I fear that I'll miss something else if I don't get my limerent compulsions under control.

*

On the last day I ever saw Matt, I parked down the street from my parents' house and turned my Chevy Corsica's engine off. The street was foreign to me for the first time: there were trees and well-watered lawns on flat land when I had gotten used to cacti and gravel nestled in the valleys of Western mountains. I put my forehead to the worn red leather of my steering wheel and started to cry. "Why am I back here?" I thought.

I had started a new life in Phoenix: I lived in an apartment with my sister, worked a full-time job, and went to a community college part-time. Here it was, not even two

months later, and I was back in Chicago. I had no real reason to come back; things weren't bad out there.

I refused to believe that it was because of Matt that I'd driven another 1800 miles across the country. I refused to believe that he was the reason I ever left to begin with.

On day one of the journey back to Chicago, Chris Issak's "Wicked Game" played on Albuquerque radio as my friend Dave and I drove east on I-40. The seductive instrumentation—combined with the warm tones of clay, caliche, and adobe-like structures around us—completely cleared my mind of any fear or concern for my future. As we rode up I-25, through the pinks, oranges, and purples of Santa Fe's sky into the dark chill of a southern Colorado night, my mind lay suspended, like a child who's mastered floating on its back, ears submerged, in a pool of water.

At the end of day two, I sat behind my steering wheel, squinting, half to keep Omaha's poorly lit portion of I-80 in focus and half to help heighten my discernment of the words Dave's girlfriend (and future wife, then a year later, ex-wife), Sandy, spoke through his cell phone. Bickering, yelling, and clucking is all I could process. It was our twelfth hour in the car: we were tired and hungry, and I was getting frustrated. The previous seven hours of staring at the lifeless Nebraska plains—with only an occasional cow pasture or truck megastop in view—in conjunction with my increasing awareness of our imminent arrival in Chicago and, now, the sounds of this banshee-like creature made my insides clench tightly against themselves with every minute we continued on the road.

"I know, sweetie."

My jaw half-dropped after the tenth minute of Dave—with his handsomely pronounced facial profile, charming smile, and sharp wit—sitting largely silent, absorbing the verbal blows from this woman I would never meet.

“Uh huh.”

As I turned my head to look at him, he nudged against the passenger door, dodging eye contact, perhaps attempting to salvage some dignity.

“I’ll get back as quick as I can.”

She demanded Dave get back to Chicago soon, or she would break up with him.

Dave hung up the phone and looked straight ahead, saying nothing. Now the bitch’s demands on my friend and my trip and my life had stirred up inside of me a cauldron of misplaced anger that was about to overflow.

...

...

...

“WHO THE FUCK IS SHE TO DICTATE THE TERMS OF *MY* TRIP?!” I screamed with my throaty, spiteful signature on it.

I ranted and raved about what a bitch this woman was and how she could fuck off if she thinks we’re gonna speed home just for her and how Dave shouldn’t put up with bitches like her and Dave sat there and continued to just stare into the darkness through the windshield as I kept going, pushing, clinging to whatever random insults flew out of my mouth.

I saw myself in Sandy in those moments. I saw the demanding, controlling, insecure bitch that I’d been over the last three years. I hated her and didn’t want to be her

and didn't know how to *not* be her. And now going back to my origins, where I'd become this person, I feared that I'd never change. I could've stayed on the road forever, searching for a new me, searching for some reason to live other than for Matt. Although he was no longer an all-consuming focus, he was still an ever-present force in my head, sometimes right in the forefront of thought, but always at least lingering in the back, waiting to make me feel like a helpless little boy.

And then he was next to me, in the passenger seat of my car, one last time. I could've stayed at my parents' and recovered from a stressful three-day road trip. I could've gone to a friend's husband's birthday party. But I chose to spend my first day back in Chicago with him, falling into old patterns once again.

We'd just come out of the Walgreens I'd worked at. The one-hour photos from my road trip were in a white plastic bag, somewhere in my car, and I panicked when I couldn't find them.

My first instinct was to accuse Matt of stealing them: "Where are my pictures? Where are my pictures? Did you take them?"

I, at least half-insanely, believed he wanted my memories for himself.

He looked down the floorboard, opened the passenger door, and said, "I don't need this. Why the fuck would I take your pictures?!" And slammed the door.

I got out, too.

"Well, if you didn't take them, who did?" I shouted across the parking lot.

I stared at the back of him as he walked away from me. His head was cocked up, shoulders glided back as he strutted inside the store. He didn't look back. I was too exhausted to run inside. Just got back in my car and drove off.

It was such a lame, anticlimactic final moment to share with someone who'd become the embodiment of what love was—and still is—in my mind: *love is compulsion. love is obsession. love is sex. love is games.*

II

Dan, my husband, had me by the throat. His hands wrung the flesh around my neck in his attempt to pierce my trachea and cut off my air supply. I didn't struggle. I just stepped out of my body and viewed myself: face red with fear and decreasing amounts of oxygen flowing through, eyes and sockets bugged out in shock, an undignified posture that stemmed from being helpless. A montage blazed in my brain: unbroken, uncertain eye contact on our wedding day, a shotgun in his mouth, our trip to Chattanooga's Lookout Mountain....

We stood atop one of the many viewing platforms on Lookout Mountain. 18 hours before I was wrestling a shotgun out of his mouth. We stood side by side against the northernmost railing, him chomping away at his blue raspberry rock candy and me staring off into the curvy hills below. The expanse of various greens on the ground and the alternating layers of grey and white clouds against the grey-blue above met in the middle and enveloped me. I wanted to stand alone on that platform forever, where no one could hurt me. I could hurt no one. I thought about jumping off Lookout Mountain and what would happen if I did. I felt so safe there that I believed that if I were to jump, some natural force would've suspended me in mid-air and guided me to where I needed to be.

The light in the room had been off, but it was on now. His eyes were rabid. The small red veins in each eye swarmed to suffocate his pupils in the same way he was suffocating me. His teeth clenched so tightly that I expected them to crumble and explode into a cloud of ivory dust. His knees were squeezed together to protect himself from being kneed in the balls.

“The only defense girls have is the balls,” he once said to me.

This rang in my head: *He thinks I'm weak. He thinks I can't break free.*

He'd had extensive military training. He'd seen war. I'm surprised that I did break free.

My right-hook sank into his bottom lip. He let go of my neck. Swerved as he regained his balance. A drop of blood trickled down to his chin. Touched his hand to it. We looked at each other, dumbfounded. *Can't believe I punched him.* The rabidity in his eyes was gone. Now he was blank. Which meant anything could've happened.

I was certain I was going to get the shit beat out of me. He'd bust my lips open. Leave deep red gashes. Put black spaces where my teeth used to be. Give me purple-blue-black eyeballs. He probably killed some people in Iraq. Now that I was his enemy, too, what made me any different?

A few weeks prior, we decided to separate but still live together until the next semester, when I'd move into the dorms. The anger that boiled in my gut during our marriage—anger at myself for marrying him, anger at myself for constantly trying to brainwash myself into loving him, anger at myself for using him for ulterior means—finally gave itself permission to spew itself out, coating me with thick scales, making me an expert verbal abuser. I wanted to kill the core of his soul with my words. Have him feel the hate I was misdirecting at him.

Walking past in the living room as he sits on the couch: “You'll be nothing without me. You'll never, ever find someone better than me.”

Doing dishes as he makes a sandwich in the kitchen: “You're a fucking piece of shit.”

And on this night: “I wish you would’ve died in Iraq.”

Instead of beating me, he slammed the door of the room we were in and held it shut, trapping me inside. I tried to pry it open but quickly gave up. Despite the white walls and white door making me feel the confinement of an insane asylum, I was more lucid in this moment than I had ever been. *Just listen to when he lets go of the knob, wait for his footing on the steps, and then book it the hell out of there* was my thinking. It was the most clear and logical plan I had had in the last two years.

*

I should’ve known he wasn’t the guy for me when the first word I spoke to him was “peyote.” Dan was telling Seth, the guy I’d been seeing, about a hallucinogenic drug from Mexico and couldn’t remember its name. I overheard this, and as I walked up the barracks’ brown metal steps and reached the guys at the top, I interjected.

My long, wavy dark blonde hair framed my face, making the dark tones in my mascara and eye shadow pop. My boot heels clanked metallic against the steps. With every clank I felt sexier, more confident. I’d learned by this point that real women wear make-up. If Seth was going to want me, I’d have to play along. The bass-playing girl with the bulldog grin just wouldn’t do.

I’d just spent six hours in a car, having driven from Chicago to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, with Krissi, a childhood friend who had just gotten married to Joe, another childhood friend, who was stationed at the Fort Campbell Army base. I was surprised to hear they’d gotten married: they’d been broken up for about a year at the time they exchanged vows. I’d come to learn later that service members receive extra money every paycheck for being married—a basic allowance for housing (BAH) and a basic allowance

for sustenance (BAS)—which amounts to hundreds of extra dollars every month. My friends were working the system, like many service members and their significant others do, like Dan and I would do a few months later.

As I imposed upon Seth and Dan's conversation, I put my left arm around Seth's waist and looked at my feet, trying to exude a smug aloofness. I really just needed to look away from him: that would've made it easier if he denied my touch. *He doesn't want to touch you. Why would he?* When I looked up and realized his arm was around my waist, too, a temporary relief came over me. I looked off of the balcony and out into the dirty, muddy barracks' courtyard with its souped-up cars and crotch rockets, wilting trees, and a massive dumpster in plain view. And for a brief second, in the corner of my left eye, I could see Dan slightly smiling at me. He could've been thinking I was cute, could've had a sincere appreciation for my limited knowledge of hallucinogenic drugs, could've read the insecurity all over me.

When I looked at him, his teeth popped out: they were big, square, seemingly white and strong. We stood eye level with one another. He had a brownish-blond fade and a slender face with chiseled features that were still paradoxically soft, giving his face a handsome but cherublike quality.

We later all found ourselves in the rec room, with grey concrete floors and white concrete walls, drinking mass amounts of Bud Light and playing Asshole. I pounded my beer as Seth sat to my left, his bald head glaring and pit bull tattoo snarling at me.

He's not into you. If you fuck him, he will be, my fucked up relationship conscience whispered.

Dan sat in a blue polyester camping chair—uninvolved in our drinking game—smoking a Newport and drinking Bacardi 151 straight.

“151 is so strong, it actually catches fire,” he said.

Joe threw down a card. We all drank our beers, not responding to any of what Dan said. I was starting to catch on that Dan was a sort of barracks phantom, always around but never really acknowledged.

He got up with his bottle of rum, put the bottle’s cap on our table, poured a few drops of rum into it, and took a lighter to it. I stared into the blue-white flames, feeling strangely comforted. Everyone else just continued with the card game.

My last memory of that night is watching Dan stumble out of the rec room doorway, presumably to his room just down the hall. In my haze, I watched him intently for what felt like an eternity. I felt sorry for him. His head hung and his brown moccasins shuffled slowly across the dirty floor. He’d said nothing before he walked out, perhaps having finally realized that even if he had wished us goodnight, his words wouldn’t have been met with so much as a grunt.

*

According to a 2007 article in the *Journal of Family Violence*, “in order to enter the military, persons must be relatively healthy, so they are not as likely to have many of the health disorders that have been associated with family violence (e.g., severe substance abuse or mental health problems).”

Although having “relatively healthy” people enter the military is certainly ideal, this isn’t reflective of reality. Many service members—at least the ones I’ve known—come into the military with hosts of unhealthy issues: Joe had a coke problem and was

running out of options; Seth joined the military to avoid jail; Dan joined the Army to avoid serving time for a DUI charge.

*

The faux Maine seaside décor of Red Lobster soothed me during my 20th birthday dinner, despite the tension. My parents had large Long Islands, and I couldn't help but scarf down the cheesy biscuits. I was unaccompanied at the outer edge of the table; they sat next to each other on the opposing side. It felt like a job interview: they were glaring at me, scrutinizing all the moves I made. Questions were going to start flying at me soon enough: I'd been back from Arizona for just over a month and hadn't indicated what I planned to do now that I was back in Chicago. My parents and I went through the ritual of awkward, surface dinner chat:

"How's work?"

"Okay. I mean, it's Walgreens. How's work for you guys?"

They both shrugged and made semi-disgusted faces, as if to say, "Work is work."

It took about 20 minutes for the LITs to kick in.

"So, now that you're back here, what're you gonna do?" my stepdad asked. My mom lifted her head from her drink and shot her eyeballs my way. It's funny that while I was underage and under their care, they let me run around with Matt and didn't ask questions or even know where I was most of the time. And now, at this dinner, they wanted to play concerned parents. Maybe they saw that my lack of direction would eventually give way to my tendency to make bad decisions and an intervention was necessary.

"Not sure yet. Keep working full-time at Walgreens and go back to school next semester, I guess."

I looked down at the table. The answer I wanted to give John—the real, not-so-logical answer I had in my head—was: "Marry a military guy. Move down to Fort Campbell."

I was registered to take spring courses at the community college I'd previously attended, but I never really had the intention of going back there. In my mind, going back meant that I'd fall back into old patterns, which meant that I could get sucked back into Matt at any time—an idea that terrified me. Marrying a military guy was a legitimate plan in my brain. I told no one of it. Paradoxically, I knew if I told anyone, they'd think I was insane, but I myself didn't think it was insane. It guaranteed a new life, and that's all I wanted.

*

Dan sat in the passenger seat of my Corsica not too long after Seth stopped taking my calls and responding to my text messages. Dan had come up to Chicago from Fort Campbell with Joe and their friend Trevor, and somehow, within a half hour of their arrival, Joe vanished into a trailer to get it on with Krissi, and I was stuck entertaining the other two. Not knowing them very well, I hopped on the Dan Ryan and made my way to Lake Shore Drive, a road I drove frequently when restless or looking for answers.

It was November and late and cold, and the skyline to my left—despite its majesty and twinkling, awe-inspiring white-yellow lights—just didn't affect me anymore. On my right, Lake Michigan's waters sat dark and slow-moving, like an oil slick. Trevor, the tall, moderately handsome dignified soldier type, sat in the back and said nothing.

Dan, on the other hand, who I then described as a crack-headed version of Leonardo DiCaprio, wouldn't stop talking. He was almost manic: in the corner of my eye, I saw him flailing and getting close up to the dashboard as he spoke with conviction of things I hardly processed then and certainly can't remember now. I looked into my rear view and saw Trevor staring out of his window, disassociated from Dan's words. I looked through the windshield and threw myself into Lake Michigan's blackness for a few minutes thereafter, hearing nothing, saying nothing.

I had known Dan for about a month and was starting to learn that he loved to talk, even if he wasn't saying anything at all. He just seemed to have almost no social intelligence, couldn't see—or maybe refused to see—when people were disinterested in his bullshitting.

But as our trip down Lake Shore Drive ended and we drove down empty, dirty side streets to get back to the empty, dirty interstate, I mentioned how I was having difficulty getting money for college and how my mom was giving me a hard time about giving me her tax information for FAFSA purposes.

“Know what you should do?” Dan asked.

My detached, increasingly irrational mind—now completely aware, thanks to my friends Joe and Krissi, of the benefits of a military marriage—automatically thought he was going to say “Marry me.” I had barely known him a month. We weren't dating. I didn't really even like him. And somehow my brain jumped to the idea that this stranger was about to propose to me. I closed my eyes for a moment and hoped that I'd get to start over somewhere new, have a completely new life, leave the past behind, and get to go to

a college without worry on top of it. I said, “What’s that?” all the while, trying to play it cool.

-

And I still yearn for commitments from guys I barely know:

I tell Jeremy via Yahoo Messenger that I may need to move to Iowa because Chicago hasn’t been very good to me as far as jobs go. I also tell him that Iowa might be a better place for me to write, as my parents are getting frustrated with me living with them, and my brother is happy to have me stay with him while I finish my thesis.

“I don’t know what to do,” I type.

I’m fishing. I don’t want to go to Iowa and don’t even consider it a real option. I want Jeremy to tell me that I can move in with him, even though we just met in person less than a month ago. I want him to tell me that he’ll make sure I’m taken care of and nothing will go wrong if he can help it.

“Wish I had all the answers for ya.... You need to do whatever you need to do to get your degree done.... After that’s done everything else can fall into place.... Hard to plan a life being in limbo,” he types.

I stare at his words on my computer screen as I finger the hives on my chin. I try to channel my disappointment with his response into something rational: *We still barely know each other. Moving in together is just not an option.* But I still feel half-compelled to cry. *Another guy who doesn’t want you. Another guy that you’re too crazy for.*

-

“You should slang,” Dan said.

“I should what?” I was totally let down. “Slang? What?” I thought.

“Sllliinnng. You know, sell drugs?”

“Yeah, no. I’m good. I’m a skinny white girl. I couldn’t bust any caps if bitches didn’t pay up.”

That conversation should’ve affirmed the fact that Dan was someone I didn’t want to know or be around: not so much because he was recommending that I sell drugs, but because I could just sense a falseness in that recommendation. What could this cute, eccentric white boy know about selling drugs? But this falseness, this I’m-a-hardass mask he wore only intrigued me.

This mask suggested to me a fragility in him, that he could be hiding something gentle and sweet underneath his words.

This fragility would make him a perfect future husband.

*

On Facebook, my closest grad school friend tells me that she has a bun in the oven. Tomorrow, she’ll be married by a Fort Sill, Oklahoma area Justice of the Peace. I don’t know whether to continue to play passive, unconcerned, and congratulatory, or to speed I-40, kick down her door, shake her like stuck pepper and scream my experience into her stubborn ears.

I want to tell her that marriage is evil—more specifically, that marriage to an Army guy is evil. I want to say that marriage will turn her into a verbally abusive, loveless hag, tell her that her husband will put his hands on her at some point because all soldiers are insane.

But then I remember that she’s known her soon-to-husband since high school. I’d met my husband only five months before we got married. They’re from the same small

town in Kentucky. Dan and I grew up in different regions of the country. They've been dating for nearly a year. My ex and I had been dating for about two-and-a-half months before our big commitment.

She knows who she's marrying. I didn't know who I married. Neither did he. And that would've made all the difference.

*

On our first date, we ate dinner at the Opry Mills Mall food court, killing time before an IMAX showing of *Closer*—a film with a main character named Dan, described by Sony Pictures as a “very dangerous love story.” I had a pretty flavorless Cajun dish that I stared at and used my fork to play with so as to avoid the awkwardness of having nothing to talk about with Dan. And if our opposite personalities weren't enough to inhibit conversation, his Salvia-induced state certainly didn't help.

I hailed from a large Midwestern city; he spent many years of his life in Georgia. I strongly identified with '90s rock music and writing; he strongly identified with drug culture and wanting “big ol' rims.” I discovered later that the only things we actually had in common were a love of road trips and unspoken affinities for dysfunction.

And there I sat at the wobbly white table, staring into my food, smelling Subway, Cinnabon, Chinese and Cajun cuisines, and steak sandwiches all intermingling to create a somewhat nauseating yet somehow enticing odor. The neon pinks and blues of the food court signage were captured by the strings of Christmas lights that hung like nooses from the ceiling. He stared into his food, too.

-

Although my aim of getting married to a military guy clouded my judgment on that awkward first date with Dan, I don't think my ability to gauge the success of a first date has ever been very keen—and it still isn't. I don't worry about the quality of the date. I'm just happy to be on a date. *You're lucky this guy is even going out with you*, my self-hating voice repeats.

I sit at a Japanese restaurant with Joe, who brought his friend Ryan along, for dinner. The waitress greets us and lays down forks rolled in napkins and places paper-wrapped chopsticks on top. Joe and Ryan unwrap their chopsticks and place them accordingly in their hands to prepare for the forthcoming sushi. I ignore my chopsticks, as I have never been able to figure out how to use them.

When my Philadelphia rolls come, I take out my fork, dab it in the wasabi paste, and spread it on the cream cheese portion of a sushi slice.

“You're not gonna use your chopsticks?” Joe asks.

“Never could figure out how to use them,” I say.

His mouth drops and eyes widen, with a certain contempt that makes me feel bad about myself for being unable to do something so insignificant.

“Are you serious?” he asks, still glaring at me, still seeming like I make him want to puke.

I look down at my food and wonder why this is an issue, but I nervously laugh, thinking this is just a quirk of his. Once he recovers from this devastating blow and Ryan goes his own way, the date will have to improve.

About 3 ½ months after our awkward first date, we were back at Opry Mills, this time at Ultra Diamonds, picking out wedding bands. The small store had several fingerprint-smothered glass cases with gaudy, expensive rocks that just weren't suitable for the rush job I was trying to pull. I tried several of them on, anyway, just to humor the process. They looked absurd on my tiny dry hand, with its jagged, bitten-off fingernails and untamed cuticles; the rings just screamed at me that it wasn't the right time, that I needed to mature into woman hands—rational woman hands—before a wedding band would look right on me.

I came across a \$450 set of rings, which included an engagement ring and his and her wedding bands, Dan saw my eyes widen. My 20-year-old self knew nothing about buying jewelry and thought I'd just seen a bargain.

“You like those?” he asked, with a big grin on his face.

I tried the engagement ring on. I barely acknowledged its 1/16 of a diamond or that the platinum material the little fleck of rock sat on was hollowed out. I just held my hand out away from me, acting the part of the giddy bride-to-be, smiling big, trying to convince myself that this was right, this was a legitimate marriage.

“Do you want it?” he asked.

I just looked at him and smiled. I kept smiling, trying to fill myself up with the pride and happiness that any person about to get married should feel.

“Then I'll get it for ya,” he said.

We walked over to the cash register, and I pulled my debit card out of my wallet. I handed it over to the saleswoman, who was older, short, blonde, and looked moderately uncomfortable taking the card from me. She knew something wasn't right. Dan mused

aloud—almost to the woman as she ran the card—about what a great deal he got on the rings and informed me that “furniture, cars, and jewelry are always negotiable.” I peered over his shoulder and through the storefront windows, as if he weren’t there, as he said this. When I looked back at the counter, the receipt was waiting for me to sign it. I scribbled a frustrated, illegible signature onto it. “What kind of girl pays for her own rings?” I wondered.

When we walked with the new rings into Glow Golf—an indoor, glow-in-the-dark miniature golf course—there were fake plants everywhere and large slabs of bright green wood lying on the outer edges of each hole, which essentially just consisted of ten-foot strips of poorly secured black material with a hole cut into them.

“You should propose to me here,” I told Dan. I thought of the way all married couples have a proposal story. We needed one, too. Even if our marriage was a sham of sorts.

He looked around and gestured toward all the children that were running around us. “Here?” he asked.

I pouted as we played. I wanted my cute, silly story.

With every hole after he denied my request, I got angrier. I glared at him and clenched my fist as he putted. My anger shone through that easily even then. I wondered if he was embarrassed to be seen with me. If he really loved me, I thought, he wouldn’t be able to wait to propose to me.

Then, after I came back from the bathroom, as we approached the final hole, he got down on his knee. He looked down at the floor and looked out of the corners of his

eyes to see if anyone was watching. Although he usually loved to be the center of attention, he was not looking for that in this moment. He looked up at me with an embarrassed half-smile and just mumbled the supposedly magical words. I nodded my head matter-of-factly, and he slipped the ring on my finger.

And then, on a mild day in mid-March, I clasped hands and locked eyes with Dan at the Montgomery County Clerk's office in Clarksville, Tennessee. In a place where people get their license plates, voter's registration cards, and driver's licenses, I was getting legally married. My plan had come to fruition. I was marrying a military guy.

The cherry podium, faux flowers, and gold-framed pictures of old white guy judges on the walls encased us in the tiny room; these decorative touches kept the room from screaming "jail cell" in my mind. A white man in black stood over us, saying \$20 worth of words that I didn't hear. Dan wore a blue FUBU shirt and matching sweatshorts. I wore jeans and a t-shirt. I stared into Dan's eyes for what felt like an eternity, feeling nothing. I thought about how handsome he was, trying to convince myself that I was doing the right thing. The entire time the judge spoke, Dan and I never broke eye contact. I continuously wondered when the ceremony would end so I could break it without guilt.

When it was all over and he and I walked back to my car, I asked my new husband if he felt different. I think he said no, but I felt so numb that I wasn't attuned to anything that was going on around me. He and I got in the car, and all I remember is staring at the road as I pulled out of the clerk's office parking lot. I wasn't convinced I'd done the right thing.

It wasn't a game anymore. I was legally married. Marriage is supposed to be forever, and I was forever tied to an Army guy that wore FUBU and talked too much and wasn't liked by anyone. I was stuck. My clouded mind struggled with itself in the subsequent days, wondering how I could get out of it, as if getting out of it so soon was an option.

*

Status update from friend's Facebook page:

"Dear Army, if you say my husband will be finished in the field on Thursday, I'd appreciate it if you would send him home at the appointed time. This last-minute, mind-changing crap is not very professional or polite."

*

One month after my husband and I married, during a night of drunken hot-tubbing at his dad's rural Georgia home, I pleaded with him for an annulment. My uninhibited state allowed me to admit that our marriage wasn't going to work. The booze allowed me to tell him I didn't love him, that we'd made a mistake. But he refused. Not only did he refuse, he got out of the hot tub and ran to the downstairs gun closet to find a loaded shotgun. He ran back up the stairs and situated himself and the gun in his father's living room, a few feet away from where I was standing in the kitchen. He was fake-crying the way five-year-olds do when they can't get the Mega Ranger they want from Wal-Mart.

"If I can't be with you, then I have no reason to live," he said to me.

He put the barrel in his mouth and shoved it back toward his throat, a few inches deep. When he looked at me with this shotgun in his mouth, his eyes maintained a puppy

dog quality. At the same time, I saw the way his eyes, if he killed himself, could say so many other things—namely, “You did this to me, you frigid bitch.”

I stood in the doorway and held tightly to its frame, as if it were a shield. I pleaded with Dan not to pull the trigger; I didn’t want to be responsible for someone’s suicide. Surprisingly, despite my gross selfishness in our relationship and even in these moments where I kept thinking only of how his suicide would affect me, I didn’t worry about him killing me.

Then, he lightly tapped the trigger. I sprinted toward him, with the aim of grabbing the gun and no worries of being shot. As I put both of my hands around the barrel of the gun and tried to pull it away from him, he cocked his right fist back and punched me in my upper left arm. I looked at my arm, touched the spot where he’d hit me, and looked at him.

“I can’t believe you punched me,” I said to him.

I should’ve left then. The shotgun, the punch, and my drunken confession that I didn’t love him all spoke to the fact that our marriage was never going to work and certainly was never meant to happen in the first place. Maybe a fear of him or social stigma kept me there. Maybe I’d already become codependent and just couldn’t let go. I’m never able to let go.

-

Craigslist missed connections posting from me to Jeremy, titled “To J, from S”:

I think it's really sad that the three months I spent communicating with you (solely via instant message) were a waste. I wish I could message—or even call—you now and tell you that, but it's just easier to stay silent and let things pass. We're so incompatible

and want completely different things out of life. I wish I would've realized that in month one (or week one, for that matter). But, on the upside, I think I now have a clearer understanding of what I want in a guy: I want a guy who isn't judgmental and will accept and embrace my quirks with a smile; I want a guy who's aggressive and will ask me out when the mood strikes him and kiss me when the mood strikes him and can't stop himself from telling me I'm pretty; I want a guy who isn't into material shit and doesn't obsess about money and wanting more money and being rich one day; and perhaps most importantly, I want a guy who can't wait to call me or see me, because I'm one of the highlights of his day. This could be asking for too much, but oh well.

I realize that Jeremy—even before I meet him in person—isn't the guy for me. I still, however, remove this post five minutes after it goes live on Craigslist, for fear he'll see it and I'll lose him. I see that this fear of losing Jeremy isn't at all about losing Jeremy himself: it's about missing out on an opportunity to cater to the neediness that lies dormant inside me when uninvolved with anyone romantically.

*

From an unsent letter to Dan, circa time of divorce:

“I miss your smile so much—every time I've seen your smile—even now—it melts my heart. You always glow when you smile.”

He did glow when he smiled. I couldn't help but smile myself every time he smiled. He had big square teeth that, on the surface, shone bright and ivory white. But upon further inspection, they were translucent. The enamel had worn away and degenerated into brittle crystalline pieces that were quietly decaying away, perhaps in a reflection of the state of his soul.

*

Over his life, my husband had mastered the practice of chameleonism. When he was around his fellow soldiers, he was the “wigger” guy from Atlanta—or, as he pronounced it, Alana—who called people “cuz” and mused about the gold grill he was dedicated to having one day; he also became a daddy’s boy who, because he admired his father’s money and power as a computer company executive, would humor his father’s self-righteousness by having gasbag conversations about current events and random historical trivia; and around me, he was generally an affectionate husband with a tendency to stretch small truths.

One morning I woke up to him sitting on the edge of his side of the bed. He looked down at the carpet with a grave disposition. He looked over at me and saw that I was awake.

“I haven’t been completely honest with you,” he said to me.

I stared up at our bedroom ceiling, still under the covers, feeling numb. I knew I hadn’t been completely honest either. I heard some of his confessions, but I was most focused on whether I should tell him that he was essentially just a pawn in my plan to marry a military guy.

He told me that he wasn’t the person he’d said he was. He felt guilty about telling me he lived in Atlanta proper, when he’d actually lived in the outlying suburbs. The scar on his head wasn’t from a drug deal done bad: it was from when his dad pistol whipped him for threatening to commit suicide. These were details that he shouldn’t have had a guilty conscience over, but I used them to deflect from the real falsehood that should’ve been exposed in the conversation.

“Why would you lie to me about those things?” I asked. I was sympathetic and gentle about it, as I was the bigger liar.

But over the subsequent months, I used his confessions to label him as a liar, the wrongdoer in the marriage. I convinced myself that he lied about everything on the basis that he lied to me about the origins of the scar on his head.

When he went to Iraq in September 2005, I was so paranoid about him lying to me that I was half-convinced he never deployed. I thought that he was capable of concocting an elaborate ruse where he moved back in with his father and used his technological skill to bring about the 1.5 second delay in our phone conversations. Whenever we webcammed, he could’ve just come back from a party with his rural Georgia friends and quickly set up the tent, cot, stereo system and toiletries in the background like the set of a television show, and threw on some ACUs.

During our entire marriage, I managed to successfully detract from the fact that I was a liar myself. Our marriage, for my part of it at least, was about pretending to love for ulterior ends. I knew we’d end up divorced. It was always part of the plan.

*

A Hallmark Expressions card—with a background in varying shades of orange, a smiling sun, and other figures of optimism that failed to capture my heart—from Dan, unknown date:

Sammi,

I love you more than anything.

You are my light at the end of a very long and dark tunnel. I'm ripping this card as I write, but what is love without a few holes? Like this card, there is more solidity than

not. But like our love, there is no shortage of tape to fix it. I love you more every day. I know that our love can overcome any adversary whether it be from within or an outside force. We can get through the trust issues.... We just need a little help, that's all. I will always love you and I will never be able to live without you because I don't know anyone that can live without their heart and I know I can't live without mine.

Love,

Dan

*

I have been guilty

Of kicking myself in the teeth

- Alice in Chains, "Down in a Hole"

*

Although we had a brief courthouse ceremony in March (to get my military spouse benefits pushed through as soon as possible), we had a "real" ceremony on April 9, 2005 on the General Jackson Showboat in Nashville. The boat skirted the dirty Cumberland River, which ran through Nashville and up to Clarksville, the town we lived in, a military town of around 100,000. People in Clarksville always talked about how bodies were sure to emerge from the river one day; the green-black water had to be a result of rotting flesh mixing with old monster truck tires and rusted Old Milwaukee cans.

The boat was also docked behind the Opry Mills Mall, the place where our relationship milestones had been cemented. After making the 45-minute drive from Clarksville in my 1994 Celica in my wedding dress, I parked in a spot a few hundred feet away from T.G.I Friday's and the rest of the food court. We were surrounded by

unfamiliar cars. My maid of honor, my brother, and I got out. People shuffled off down the parking lot to the Nike Outlet or the Rainforest Café. We sprinted over to the boat's entrance gate. There were people all around, and I knew none of them.

My brother—whom I was much closer to than my father or stepfather—walked me down the aisle as I sported my off-white, wrinkled-to-hell dress and greasy snakes of hair. As he and I walked up the maroon never-before-cleaned carpet that led us to the altar, my husband's father stood there as the best man. Dan didn't even have one friend to serve as his best man. He stood at the altar in his Class A uniform with the black boots he repeatedly shined the night before, perfectly pressed green slacks, and jacket with the ribbons he received during basic training arranged accordingly above his left breast pocket.

We joined hands and locked eyes again, to do the marriage thing a second time. This time, the officiator said \$200 worth of words that I barely processed. I thought about how awkward it was to be staring at a person for so long. It felt like hours but couldn't have lasted longer than 30 minutes. I thought of the movie *Runaway Bride*, where Julia Roberts's character jumps on a horse in her wedding dress and rides away to escape the pending nuptials. --At one point in the movie, her character says, "I'm profoundly and irreversibly screwed up."-- But when I realized that *Runaway Bride* was just a movie, and the priest needed to be paid, and the cost of the wedding as a whole was close to \$5,000, I squeezed out a few tears to convince everyone of my happiness in this moment, because I wasn't getting out of it.

*

Status update from friend's Facebook page:

“OF COURSE M has CQ on Saturday! It had to happen because our baby shower has been scheduled for that day for months. Thanks, Army.”

*

Journal entry dated 12-18-05, 1:18 AM:

I realize that I am becoming more and more perplexed by my life and current situation; how did this happen? How am I some housewife of a military man in Tennessee? Did I just have a complete brain fart in 2004? I think so.... [...] What do I do about my marriage? I want to love Dan, I know I should, but I can't bring myself to truly believe that he is the love of my life and that I want to spend the rest of my life with him. I've made a big mistake... and now I'm paying for it. The problem is, though, that Dan is paying the price as well. He's married to a woman who doesn't love him the way he loves her....

*

As loud as hell

A ringing bell

Behind my smile

It shakes my teeth

- The Pixies, "I Bleed"

*

When he came home from work one day high as hell—I liked to use him smoking pot as a reason to act out, even though I knew from the beginning that he smoked—I decided it was finally time to throw away our wedding albums. One of them was a silver plated engraved album from Things Remembered, the other a modest album embellished

with pinks and blues and silvers. When I'd put these albums together months before, I was in denial: I could make this work. I could get myself to love him. I strategically placed our most timeless and elegant looking pictures in the engraved album. I glued our cutest and most whimsical pictures onto pieces of pastel construction paper for the other album. The more effort I put into these albums, the better chance my marriage had of surviving.

But I'd wanted to throw away these books for a while now: this marriage wasn't going to survive. These books archived my mistake, threw it in my face and embittered me. I snatched them out of our living room console. Marched out to the dumpster. Let out a restrained scream as I slammed the first one, then the second, to the bottom of the dumpster. My teeth felt the reverberations of my anger in their roots.

When I walked back inside, I went to the kitchen and put on a June Cleaver air as though nothing had happened. Dan was sitting at the table, looking at me. He tilted his head and squinted his eyes at me. He'd sensed that I'd done something hurtful.

"I think our wedding albums might be gone," I said to him with an inappropriate enthusiasm.

"Where are they?!" he screamed.

He freaked out as though these albums were precious relics from an ancient time. As he searched our apartment, he frantically looked on top of our kitchen cabinets, tore the closet apart, and I just sat on our living room futon with a poorly contained smirk on my face. I just remained silent and relished tormenting him.

After he'd torn most of the apartment apart, he stomped his boots into the kitchen. I followed, hoping to delight in more of his desperation. He put his face near the front right stove burner and slowly turned the knob.

"Tell me where they are," he said.

I tried to call his bluff by saying nothing, leaning against the fridge, squinting my eyes to show him that I wasn't going to play into his manipulation as he'd played into mine. But as he turned the knob to high, he put his right cheek on the burner.

I blurted out, "The dumpster!"

And he ran outside.

When he came back in with nothing—having not gone into the dumpster to retrieve the albums—I sat on the futon, blank.

*

Undated journal entry, circa 2006:

I'm in a marriage with someone I don't know... I can't get out... so I basically use him for the benefits... which makes me feel like a horrible person right there. "What the hell have I done?" "What am I gonna do?" "What the hell happened to me?" are questions I ask myself frequently.

*

I lay in bed on a Saturday night toward the end of the marriage. A tapping noise came from our living room, where Dan was still awake, watching television. It sounded like a key tapping against our glass coffee table.

Coke, I immediately thought.

I walked down the steps slowly, to give him time to hide whatever he was doing. I was certain he was doing something he shouldn't have been. And I wanted to catch him.

“What are you still doing up?” he asked as I walked over to the living room chair.

“Heard a noise. Thought I'd come down,” I said. I leaned over and peered into his face, which was only a few feet from me.

“What are you up to down here?” I asked.

He stared into the television, bouncing his right knee up and down.

“Just chillin.”

I looked at our coffee table and noticed the DVD player remote lying face down on it. We never used that remote. I couldn't remember the last time I'd even seen it.

I closed my eyes and snatched the remote off of the table. I knew I'd find what I was looking for—a reason to fight, a reason to let out my anger.

When I opened my eyes, five chopped up rows of white power stared at me and put a menacing smile on my face. I turned my head back at him, very slowly. My teeth rumbled.

“And what's this?”

Tremors went off in my hands.

“Just opened up one of your pills, that's all!” I had been prescribed lithium carbonate as a treatment for depression. --I later discovered the drug is most commonly associated with treating manic episodes of bipolar disorder.-- I'd started taking depression medication a month after I was married. I thought I needed it if I wanted to survive feeling stuck in the marriage.

I looked at him again. Teeth exposed this time.

I took my sweaty, shaky right index finger, scooped up one the lines he had cut, and shoved the powder directly into his nostrils.

“You low-life piece of shit.... You low-life piece of shit....” I kept saying it. Couldn’t stop.

When he pushed me away, I ran back up the steps.

“You ruined my life,” I whispered to myself.

*

A year-and-a-half later, I received a text message asking, “Is this Sam?” I saw the Atlanta area code and knew it was him. I was lying on my tiny studio apartment’s fold-out bed, in Kentucky, resting before I needed to get ready for a date I had with a guy I’d met online. After several back-and-forth pleasantries text messages, he asked if he could call me. I agreed, as though he were just some guy from my Tennessee days, whom I had never had an order of protection against, whom I had never used for my own selfish reasons.

When he called, he told me that he was driving down I-75 on his way back to Atlanta to pick up a pound of weed and that he was living in Ann Arbor and that he was dating a Jewish girl. And then he asked me if I was seeing anyone, as though he was so removed from the existence of our marriage that my answer affected him in no way.

“Yeah, been seeing a guy up in Owensboro. We see each other every weekend.”

And he asked me what else I’d been up to and had a snarky comment about me still being in school—“More school, huh?”—and added that he was going to start taking classes at a community college in Ann Arbor for computer science. And the conversation flowed so smoothly, with none of the awkwardness and bitterness that comes with a

divorce. It was like we'd been long-lost friends, just touching base after years apart. We were better friends in those fifteen minutes than we had been throughout our slightly less than two-year relationship.

And when each of us was fully apprised of the goings-on in the other's life, Dan cut me off mid-sentence, suddenly eager to let me go. He blurted out the word "peace" as a goodbye, just as he did at the end of our first series of phone conversations back in 2004, the time when we should've just been getting to know each other, the time when—provided I was working with a rational mind and rational plans—I should've realized that scheming to marry a soldier—or anyone, for that matter—would only bring nothing but bad karma.

*

My friend's baby, a boy, was born a few weeks ago. He's healthy and cute and they call him Smunchie.

My friend writes to her husband via Facebook: "We miss you! Come home soon!"

And this is what healthy military marriages are made of.

AFTERWORD

I sit next to Jeremy on the white leather couch in his living room. I met him on an online dating site about four months ago, though we just met in person about three weeks ago. Our knees faintly touch. I feel the warmth of his skin through my jeans and I want more. I want to be enveloped in his warmth: I want to feel secure. I want to feel calm. I want my mind to stop looking for ways that this could go wrong.

“You worry too much,” he says to me on at least a weekly basis.

But I have plenty reason to worry: romantic relationships continue to consume me. I currently have no job, live with my parents, and should be devoting most of my time right now to finishing this thesis and studying for my oral exam so I can finally get my master’s degree. But what do I do instead? I stare into my computer screen, obsessing over archived instant messages from Jeremy to find secret signals in the way he said “hello”: I have literally thought to myself that if he greets me with a “good morning” on any given day, he’s still interested in me romantically. On the other hand, if he greets me with a “sup?” I worry that he’s losing interest fast.

I also go through our instant message conversations regularly to keep score and see how many times he initiated conversation versus how many times I initiated conversation, because, in my skewed view of relationship dynamics, if I contact him more often than he contacts me, he’ll get sick of me.

I need to be worried, Jeremy. I’m repeating old patterns and don’t know how to stop.

Although our knees touch, my upper body leans away from him. I tilt my head to the side and close my eyes to express my disapproval of watching Happy Gilmore on his couch for our fourth date. I shouldn't have come here—my brain thinks he's not right for me—but the indiscriminate, fragile girl in me still lingers. *You need to be loved. Someday you will be. It doesn't matter who*, she whispers.

I'm so confused. I trust my own judgment less than ever. I'm starting to doubt I'll ever have a healthy relationship.

Jeremy's plaid yellow and blue cargo shorts and teal tee, from which his fast food belly protrudes, half repulse me. "If he were into me," I think, "he would've made some effort to not look like a hobo tonight."

I made an effort: I, in my desperation to be validated, spent over two hours getting ready for this couch date. I swirled—over and over again—peach blush into cheeks. *I'm a woman now*. Drove the eyeliner around the skin of my eyeballs. *I'm beautiful*. Rubbed eyeshadow into my eyelids. Whipped the mascara onto my eyelashes. *So why do I have to fight to make a guy care about me?* Straightened my hair for 45 minutes. Tears streamed down my face as I tried to make it perfect. If it came out perfect, I thought, he'd want to get to know who I am beyond asking me what my top favorite candy bars are, he'd finally want to know the subject matter of my thesis.

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"A good dentist will ask you about your life.... If you feel you can't talk to your dentist about such personal issues... consider finding a new dentist," says Dr. Helaine Smith of the e-book *Healthy Mouth, Healthy Sex*.

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I want to be perfect for him. But I don't acknowledge whether he's even right for me. I'm still not even sure what makes a guy qualify as being "right" for me.

But Jeremy's deep brown eyes affect me too much. I remind myself to look away. I've looked into them for too long. They transport me back nine years: back to the Northwest suburbs, back to trying to get Matt to say he loves me and mean it. I want to reach into Jeremy's eyes—and Matt's eyes—and retrieve some lovability.

I look to his teeth, the top front ones big and square. He has one crooked bottom incisor, like me. He smiles big and glowing, like Dan did. His smile makes me smile. But my insides remember the past and say that smiles can be misleading.

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A week later, I message Jeremy:

"I ... think that although dating doesn't look like it's gonna pan out for us, I really think we could be good friends. And I do want to be friends. I know people say that—and don't mean it—but I do."

I need to tell him this.

I've gotten too obsessive. I want to have a healthy relationship, and I won't be able to have it with him. I need to learn to keep my limerent compulsions under control. I need—and I know this is a cliché—to learn to love myself before I can expect anyone else to love me. But I want to keep him in my life. Maybe one day I'll learn to let go, too.

"If things aren't feeling right for you," he replies, "it is what it is. I'd love for us to be good friends, if nothing else, and who knows what the future holds."

... And I spend days trying to dissect his response for its hidden meaning.