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# Being the Beautiful Fool

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BEING THE BEAUTIFUL FOOL

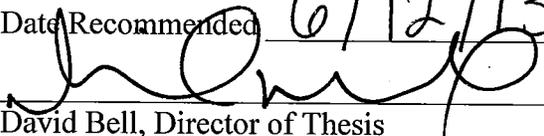
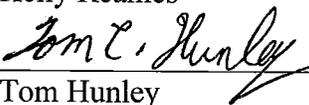
A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

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

By  
Ashley Gore

August 2013

BEING THE BEAUTIFUL FOOL

Date Recommended 6/12/13  
  
David Bell, Director of Thesis  
  
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Tom Hunley

 8-9-13  
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research Date

I dedicate this thesis to my parents, John Walter Gore III and Peggy Littlejohn, who support and believe I can achieve anything. Also, I also dedicate this work to my friends Hunter Williams, Mindy Yarberry, Kristen Fields, and Oliva Lee who inspired and helped me throughout the writing process.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CONTENTS

The Generation of Discontent.....	1
The Bachelor.....	11
Eggs Kennedy Style.....	24
Cops and Robbers.....	34
Flat Tire.....	41
Almond Blossoms.....	50
Revisions.....	65
References.....	75

## BEING THE BEAUTIFUL FOOL

Ashley Gore

August 2013

75 Pages

Directed by: David Bell, Kelly Reames, Tom Hunley

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Ernest Hemingway wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald that “The good parts of a book may be only something a writer is lucky enough to overhear or it may be the wreck of his whole damn life — and one is as good as the other” (305). With that, I created a collection of short stories that analyzes my generation of women’s struggles.

Framing the thesis are two stories involving three women, Lindsey, Jenny, and Sarah, “The Generation of Discontent” and “Revisions,” with the characters attempting to sort through love, success, and happiness in society. The piece “The Bachelor” has Amanda torn between her currently successful life and the glamour and sometimes infamy of being on ABC’s reality show *The Bachelor*. In “Eggs Kennedy Style,” the fine line between delusion and dreams becomes defined in both Nan and Kelley of being one of America’s royal Kennedy family. “Cops and Robbers” shows the inner turmoil of women who do not aspire to be mothers and feel guilty for their aspirations as well as the resulting resentment when they have to give up their dreams.

The ideas of taking your loved one for granted and life goals become the driving aspect of “Flat Tire” where story picks up in the middle of major fight between Nicole and Tommy stemming from him dropping the garter the night before at their friend’s wedding. “Almond Blossoms” between a flashback to Amsterdam with Sam’s Dutch fling Andric and present time suburban Ohio with her finance Kevin showing the conflict of being single compared to being settled.

As Fitzgerald said, “An author ought to write for his generation” (ix) and I wrote based on my personal experiences as well as my friends’ tales and tribulations that tell of our generation’s struggle. Giving a voice to the high hopes and resulting discontent I feel is important which models the Modern writers like Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby*’s green lighted hope for Daisy. I hope to revive a bit of that Modern era in my time though our green light just might be the glow of *The Bachelor* from the television.

## The Generation of Discontent

The bar at the local restaurant was dimly lit except for where the flat screen TVs shined from the walls. It was nice because it was set away from the rest of the establishment so that those who preferred to drink and socialize didn't have the burden of a family toting small children near their exploits. Unlike chain restaurants, one could have more dignity while rallying over martinis and drafts.

A shapely blonde with big, heavily lined eyes sat at the bar with her coat draped over the adjacent two seats. She barely noticed the bartender walk up and lay a coaster in front of her due to being fixed on her phone's screen. The light from it made her face take on a blue hue that made her eyes look turquoise.

"What can I get you to drink?"

Lindsey's eyes widened and she set her phone down briskly as if the bartender would think her rude. "What do you have on special?"

"\$2.50 domestic and \$3.50 import drafts as well as \$5 martinis."

Lindsey wrinkled her brow as she attempted to decide between beer or liquor. "Let's go with a Blue Moon. I have friends meeting me and we'll be here for quite a few drinks while catching up."

"That's the way I like it," said the bartender with a wink.

Lindsey attempted to not roll her eyes and went back to her phone.

A few minutes later, a thin, tall brunette walked into the bar. After surveying the room, she perked up when she saw the blonde sitting at the bar and moved swiftly to the coat-covered seats.

“Hey, girl!” she said to Lindsey as she pulled Lindsey’s pea coat off one of the seats. Lindsey had the same wide-eyed expression she gave the bartender but this time it was accompanied by a high-pitched squeal. She threw her arms around the brunette.

Before the brunette could sit, the bartender was already setting a coaster in front of her. The squeal had tipped him to the arrival of another patron. “What will it be, miss?”

Before answering, the brunette took stock of what Lindsey was drinking and what the varied taps had to offer. “I’ll have Miller Lite draft.”

“Coming right up.”

Lindsey had waited to squeeze the orange into her beer until she had company. She hated to look like a lonesome drinker at the bar. Now, she eagerly twisted the orange slice. “Okay, Jenny. I want the details about you and Brian going Facebook official finally.”

“There isn’t much to tell. We were sitting in his living room and his friend called and he said his girlfriend was in for the weekend. When he got off, I teased that I didn’t know he had a girlfriend and I was some mistress. From there, we had a kind of awkward but good relationship talk. And now the rest is social media history.”

“That’s great that it came up so naturally. Last week you didn’t want to come off a bitch about the lack of solid commitment,” said Lindsey.

“It’s just awkward. We went from individual dates to spending whole weekends in town with one another. I wanted to assume that we’re a couple but with modern relationships nothing is certain.”

“Modern romance is just awkward and devoid of classic romance. The lack of courtship thanks to texting and the ease of sex is the downfall of modern romance. But it sounds like you and Brian have something good.”

“It’s more than good. It’s great. Scary great, really. Like I can see myself moving up there for him. Is that dumb?”

“Dumb? No, that’s real modern romance. When you want to pick up the life you’ve made and make it work with someone else, that’s the commitment after the long distance courtship. I’d be worried if you couldn’t see yourself with him.”

A blindingly white smile of validation spread across Jenny’s tan face. “Have you met anyone you’re interested in?”

Lindsey averted her eyes from Jenny and took a deep drink of her draft. “Not really.”

“I know that face. You’re hiding something. What do you mean not really. Spill it.”

“Don’t laugh.” Lindsey fidgeted in the tall bar seat.

“Okay.”

“Promise. No judging or anything.” Lindsey’s eyes were wide and her lips firm as she scanned Jenny’s face for a visual agreement to her request.

“Oh, god. You’re not dating a convict or anything are you?”

“Seriously? You went to dating a fucking convict? No. Lord, Jenny.” She paused and took in a deep breath. “I joined eHarmony.” The words spilled out of her quickly so that it all slurred into one word.

Jenny broke out into laughter.

“Bitch! You promised you wouldn’t laugh!”

“I’m not laughing at the fact you joined eHarmony. I’m actually quite proud of you. I’m laughing at what a weirdo you just were about it.”

Lindsey flushed a pink hue that was even more noticeable on her due to her pale skin.

Jenny calmed her laughter. “So, tell me about your matches on there.”

“They all seem nice. They all like to travel or read and things I’m into but...”

“But what?”

“Most of them are short. I put on the match preferences that I didn’t want anyone under 5’10” and eHarmony still matches me with short guys. I’m sorry. I’m not dating anyone shorter than me.”

“You think you are taller than you are. You are only 5’6” and you act like you are 6 foot tall. You have major height hang ups.”

“I do not have height hang ups.” She paused. “But if I did, then for sure I won’t date anyone short.”

“There have to be others that aren’t short. Right?”

“Yes, but they’re bald.” Lindsey wrinkled her nose as if the word bald had offended her olfactory senses.

“You are cracking me up. I doubt all the guys who join eHarmony are short or bald.” Jenny stifled her giggles with a wash of Miller Lite.

“Or both.” Lindsey erupted in laughter. “It seems as if all the twenty-eight or older guys who are bald, short, and single flock to eHarmony.”

“Maybe you should have tried Match. But any with potential?”

“Any not living in Australia or California? Not really. All the ones close and wanting to get to know me, I’m just not exceptionally attracted to them. I haven’t felt taken aback by a guy since Stephanie’s bachelorette party.”

“You are not talking about that stripper again, are you?”

Lindsey’s eyes became large and accented with wide grin. “He was gorgeous. And the things that man did to me in about three minutes were better than any of my exes.”

“It’s his job to do that, Lindsey.”

“I totally understand why guys pay for multiple lap dances at strip clubs after that.” Lindsey let out a high-pitched giggle as she fanned herself as if a heat wave had come over her along with the memory of the stripper’s talents.

“Thank god I cut you off. I mean, you had already licked his abs. I can only imagine what would have happened if you went back a second time.”

The bartender stopped putting the clean beer glasses into the cooler and looked up at Lindsey with a muddled look of amusement and disgust.

Lindsey blushed a deep shade of red and focused her eyes and effort onto taking a big gulp of her Blue Moon.

“You’re a hot mess. I’m just glad you’re past the whole Anthony thing. Internet dating and strippers are much healthier than that asshole.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t believe I spent two years in a relationship with someone who was in a relationship with someone else hoping he’d pick me. Wasted time.”

“He didn’t deserve you at all and I wouldn’t call it wasted. You at least got to see what you never want in a man or relationship.”

“Guess so. Now I can rule out polygamy for sure.”

“Can we add strippers to that?”

“Never.”

The girls erupted into laughter. A husky middle-aged man approached the bar and headed to the empty seat next to Lindsey.

“I’m sorry. We have a friend coming to meet us,” Jenny said.

Lindsey turned and quickly set her purse on the seat. “Yes, sorry. She should be coming any moment.” She then turned back to Jenny. “Where is Sarah anyway?”

Before she could reply, the bartender cut in. “You wouldn’t want to sit next to them anyway. They might lick you.” He winked at the girls.

“I just might enjoy that,” said the man.

Lindsey once again turned red with Jenny joining her. “I think I just threw up a little,” Jenny said through a distorted mouth.

“At least the guys on eHarmony are better than that,” Lindsey said as she lifted her beer and swigged back the remainder. She looked to the bartender and waved him over.

“Another Blue Moon?”

“Yes, please.”

“What about you miss, another Miller Lite?”

“Sure. Can’t let this one out drink me.”

The bartender poured their beers and placed an orange on the Blue Moon. As he set them down, he smiled and nodded at Lindsey before turning back to the orders being printed for servers' bar drinks.

"I think the bartender has a crush on you, Linds," said Jenny as she nudged Lindsey in the side.

"Funny. Maybe he thinks I'll lick his abs," Lindsey said flatly to signal Jenny to drop any notion of the bartender being a viable match. "Now, what did Sarah say in her last text?"

"She said she was held up at work and would be a little after six. But, it's well after that now."

"By far, she has the worst job out of all of us. Who knows what her asshole boss has her doing now." Lindsey paused to concentrate her effort on squeezing the orange into her beer. "Speaking of work, is Michelle still being shitty to you?"

"She has let up some. I think she could tell I was getting short and distant from her."

"I still can't believe she is acting like such a bitch since getting the promotion."

"The thing is, she isn't my direct boss. She is just the lead on some projects now and she thinks that makes her my damn boss. That is completely unnerving. She was hired not even a year before me so it's not like she is much my senior even with that."

"That's just hard because you were such good friends."

"We still are. But when she gets all controlling and rude, I just shut her out for a bit until she backs off."

"Maybe you should talk to her?"

“No. That would just cause more drama. She is one of my closest friends, but she would react badly and accuse me of being jealous of her promotion. Though I’m not, it’s more work with only minimal increase in pay.”

“Hopefully she keeps slowly getting back to normal. Sounds like she has improved from treating you like her damn personal assistant.” With that, Lindsey rolled her eyes slightly and then hoped Jenny hadn’t seen. She wasn’t a fan of Michelle and thought she always was a bitch, but knew better than to outright show her disapproval to Jenny.

“How is it at school? Any better with the new principal?” asked Jenny turning the topic away from her issues with Michelle.

“Extremely better. We finally sat down face-to-face and talked. So now, I know he isn’t some strict asshole who is out to get everyone. He is trying to set a tone coming into the position.”

“So after one conversation he isn’t an asshole anymore?”

“Yes. That and the fact he gave me lots of compliments and wants to put me on the teacher leader board. So, totally not one anymore.”

“Okay. He is an asshole, but an asshole that likes you. Sounds like most men and you, Linds.”

This time, Lindsey rolled her eyes over dramatically at Jenny. “Ha-ha. Thanks, friend.”

“You know I’m only kidding. So, you’re back to loving teaching again?”

“It’s still teaching high school. I am getting burned out on the shitty teenage hormones and childish coworkers. I only have this next year left of my Master’s and then I can move on from that job and this town.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“I mean it. I am not meant to settle here for the rest of my life.”

“How much work is left for your Master’s?”

“A couple classes and a thesis.”

“Thesis? That sounds fucking awful. I’m glad I only had to take comps to get mine.”

“It’s creative writing. Won’t be too bad, right?”

“That sounds even worse.”

Lindsey laughed but this time in the self-deprecating way instead of her usual loud amused cackle. “I know, right? I have no clue what all my stories will be about.” And with that, she breathed out and drank down the last of her beer.

“Well, write about us. You always say your life is like a sitcom.”

“Sure, because people would want to read about a bunch of discontented girls in their late twenties who want more out of life but are stuck in the same damn place.”

“Wow, when you put it that way, we sound so great,” Jenny said then continued more seriously, “But why not? Sounds like something I would read. Though, you need to write in some sexy love stories and maybe a happy ending in there somewhere. Can’t be too depressing. People like some hope, after all.” Jenny didn’t laugh like Lindsey had expected her to do. Instead, she was looking at Lindsey earnestly.

“Can I get another beer?” called Lindsey to the bartender. She then turned to Jenny. “Don’t forget booze. There will need to be lots of drinking in there as well.”

“Exactly.” Jenny looked proud as she drank down the rest of her Miller Lite. “Another one for me too,” she called to the bartender.

“You know, to get all English nerdy on you, Hemingway and Fitzgerald were the lost generation. We’re like the next coming of that. The generation of discontent.”

“See, there is your title. You’ve got plenty of things to fill up a thesis with. Then you can get out of this town. Cheers to that!” She lifted the beer from the newly laid coaster in front of her.

Lindsey raised her beer and wondered if there really was something to write about in all of this.

## The Bachelor

Mixing in with the instrumental version of the latest pop hit, Amanda heard the soft melody of her iPhone come from her purse. She rifled through the expansive Coach bag until she found it at the bottom. “*How does it always make its way to the very bottom,*” she mumbled as she pulled it up. The number displayed said Los Angeles, CA. Her mind quickly raced through the possibilities of who could be calling. She decided that attractive guy from college and now struggling actor wouldn’t have her new number, and it was unlikely that Ryan Gosling was trying to track her down regardless of the tweets she had been sending. Once she reconciled she was up to date on bills and went to answer, the missed call bubble appeared. A moment later the doorbell-like ding let her know the strange LA number had left a voicemail.

Amanda unlocked her phone and pushed play. A perky female’s voice filled the receiver. “Hello, Amanda. This is Melissa Robson with ABC’s *The Bachelor* casting team. You recently submitted a web application” and with that, Amanda dropped the phone from her ear and stood frozen with a muddled look of disbelief and amusement.

“Miss, do you need help with anything?” asked the elderly Macy’s sales clerk who probably thought Amanda was caught up in a shopper’s haze at the winter clearance racks.

Partly embarrassed and caught off guard, Amanda replied, “Oh no, ma’am. I’m fine.” With that, a smile spread across her face and she nearly skipped out of the crowded department store.

Once away from the people and out in the brisk early spring air, she replayed the message as she walked to her car. “Hello, Amanda. This is Melissa Robson with

ABC's *The Bachelor* casting team. You recently submitted a web application and we found it to be in line with what we are looking for this season for the show. If you would please call me back at 213-624-9785, I would love to speak to about furthering your casting audition. Look forward to hearing back from you."

By the time the message ended, Amanda was sitting in her car and allowed herself to let out a squeal of joy. But the stunned woman carrying her small child next to her in the parking lot looked like Amanda had let out a war cry. Hurriedly, Amanda buckled her seat belt and pulled out of the parking lot. Grabbing her phone, she did not call Melissa Robson back but rather clicked on her first speed dial contact.

Lori answered, "Hey, girl."

Before she had barely gotten that out Amanda, nearly yelling, started to update her. "Oh my god. You know how a few weeks ago after that bottle of wine and watching *The Bachelor* and you and Michele were going on about how I should apply for the show? Well I did and..."

"You did what now?"

"I applied online for *The Bachelor*. Now, I didn't think anything of it. I was half drunk and the site told me when I was done that to really be considered I'd need to send in a video and formal application so I really didn't think anything of it."

"I cannot believe you actually did that. You crack me up."

"Yes, I thought that I would be just some ridiculous thing to have a good laugh about but the casting people called me."

"No, they did not. Really?"

“Yes. Like, I was shopping at Macy’s and just missed the call and the voicemail is from this Melissa saying to call her because they think I am what they are looking for this season.”

“Well, what did she say when you called back?”

Amanda was silent.

“You did call back? I mean, someone from LA calls you about being on your favorite show and you haven’t called back yet?”

“Well, not yet. I had to call you first.”

“I’m hanging up. Go call LA back right now. Then call me.”

“But, I’m...”

“Seriously. Go call. Bye.” And with that, Lori hung up.

By this time, Amanda was pulling into her apartment complex. After turning off the ignition, she sat there. Getting out of the car meant going inside and calling LA Melissa back and making it all that much more real. She wrinkled her brow as she attempted to remember all the details of what she wrote in the ‘*Why would you like to be on the show?*’ box. All she remembered was laughing while sipping on the remainder of the bottle of Pinot.

Never before had she been nervous to walk up to her own apartment. That feeling was meant for that awkward moment after a date going up to his place for the first time. She could feel the tightness in her stomach as she turned the lock and walked into the foyer. The comforting smell of cinnamon apples wafted over her and she threw first her purse then herself onto the couch.

Amanda exhaled heavily. “Guess I should just call and get it over with. It’s a positive thing so I need to quit being dumb and call her.” Then she smiled and let out a nervous laugh. “I’m giving myself a pep talk. I have officially lost it. If I do get on the show, I will be the crazy girl that everyone makes fun of.” With another laugh, she picked up her phone and called LA Melissa back.

After not a full three rings, Melissa picked up. “Melissa Robson.”

Amanda thought that only people who thought they were extra important answer the phone with their own name. “Um, hello. This is Amanda Williams. You called me earlier and…” Amanda chastised herself for sounding so dorky.

“Oh, yes,” Melissa coolly broke into Amanda’s rambling. “I must say, your web application was by far my favorite that came across my desk. You are hilarious and the picture you sent in was stunning.”

Amanda could feel her cheeks warm into a blush. “Why, thank you. It is a dream to even have you call me.” There, she sounded more confident, she thought.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that. We have selected you to make the next round. With that, we would like you to send in a video and complete the full application. But I will need you to email it to me. From that, we will decide whether to fly you out here for the final casting call. How does that sound?”

“That’s great!” Amanda was half lying. She hadn’t sent in the full video and application because she thought it cheesy and awkward when looking over their questions and suggestions. But this was *The Bachelor* and to even make it to the next round would be a feat to brag about and earn a trip to LA. She could be cheesy and awkward and own it for a ten-minute video.

“Super. Is the email address on your application the one to send you the information? You can reply with your digital files when you have them done.”

Amanda paused. What email had she put down? “Can you tell me which one I put down? One is work and one is my personal. I would prefer the personal one.” Now she sounded dumb. Who can’t remember which email they put down?

“Certainly. It’s the amanda.williams@gmail.com. Is that one alright?”

“Yes, that will be perfect. When do you need the video?”

“I’m going out on a limb with getting you to the next round. The lead casting agents are screening the semi-finalists this week. So, I can slip yours in last. But that means in the next two days. Hopefully that won’t be an issue. You can have a friend help and record it on an iPhone for example. That is outlined in the application information. I will be here until 6pm your time and tomorrow if you have any questions.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. Thanks for the help,” Amanda said as the knot in her stomach returned.

“Great, Amanda. I am sending you the information now. I look forward to your response. Just have as much fun with the video as you did with your written response and you’ll be golden.”

“Okay, thanks Melissa.” And with that, Amanda heard her hang up. She sat there for a moment unable to process any thought or body movement. Suddenly it hit her: she made it to the next round of being cast. Springing up from the couch she suddenly couldn’t sit still. She paced back and forth to mimic the internal pull of being excited and cynical.

The tiny ding coming from her iPhone caught her mid civil war and she gasped as if it had shot a bullet into the fray.

Amanda ran for her phone and took a deep breath before sliding her finger across the screen. Clicking on the email, Melissa hadn't included anything but an attachment entitled "Tapeinstructions.pdf." Clicking on it, her phone screen filled with a layout she probably could have constructed in her intro to graphic design class. "Forget being on the show. They should hire me to do their design work," she thought. Laughing she realized she was judging the same people who would be judging her video. "It's all karma, I guess."

Sitting back on the couch, she began to glance through the list of recommended dos and don'ts:

Be aware of lighting—no shadows please!

Stand in front of a colorful background so you don't appear washed out.

White walls do not work well.

Be aware of any background noises - turn off the TV, radio, air conditioning, ceiling fans or heating units as this will create a hum or buzz. If you tape outside be aware those elements as well, wind, traffic, sunlight etc.

No hats or sunglasses.

Do not chew gum. (*The Bachelor: Casting*)

Thinking that these should be given things when making a video, Amanda remembered all the comical commentary she had supplied mocking many of those vying for the roses.

“Do I really want to be associated with those laughable morons?”

Before she could delve too far into that thought, a new iMessage popped up across the half-witted taping instructions. Lori Clark: *Slut. You haven't called me back. I want to know what LA said. CALL ME.*

“Oh, shit. She is going to kill me,” Amanda said under her breath. Clicking out of the pdf, she typed, “Give me five.” With the whoosh of the message sending, she pushed herself off the couch and towards her desk. Opening up her laptop, she reopened Melissa’s PDF attachment. Scrolling past the first dopey seven tips, she read number eight:

Have someone else read you these questions. Do not have paper in hand or in front of you. Have a friend or a relative film you. It will make the quality of your tape better!

CONTENT (these are suggestions - be creative and have fun with this!

Let your personality shine through. If there is something you’d like to tell us that we haven’t asked, tell us!

1. Introduce yourself, tell us your name, age and what you do for a living. Where do you live? Do you rent/own? Do you have roommates? Do you have pets? Introduce us to them! If you are doing the tape at home, give us a tour!

2. Give us a dating history. Have you ever been in love? If no, why not, and if yes, tell us your love story! Or tell us a funny first date story!

3. Describe your ultimate fantasy date! Where would you go, what activity would you do, what would be on the menu for dinner, etc. (*The Bachelor: Casting*)

The list of suggested topics of self-conversation went on for another page. Wrinkling her nose, she picked up her phone and hit Call.

“I want every detail.”

“I’m not too sure I want to do this anymore.”

“What do you mean you’re not sure?”

“Just that.” She paused. “Do I want to be one of those dimwitted drunk girls who say and do the most foolish things on national television? I finally am making a name for myself in the advertising world.”

“Well, I’ve always told you that you would be the one to fall into the pool drunk at the Cocktail Party.”

“Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“I just remembered something I wrote in that web application. I wrote *that*.”

“Shut the fuck up. You did not!”

“I did. And now I’m not going to make a video. They think I’m a hot mess that will be sheer laugh-ability on the show. No way.”

“Let’s be real, Amanda. You are a hot mess. Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll be there.”

Before Amanda could protest, Lori had ended the call. Amanda sat there staring at the questions. Her dating history? It in itself was laughable. Since high school, her

longest relationship was six months. She barely liked to admit that to people who knew her dating history first hand. Lord knows that Lori had heard every sob-filled ending and her conclusion that she was un-dateable for the long term. And a fantasy date? She was so envious of most of the dates (minus the ones with heights) that the show had built up that this scripted question seemed daunting. “This is ridiculous. I’m going to bomb this stupid video,” she thought. “What else did I write in that application? Damn-wine induced stupidity. Maybe I would be that girl who fell in the pool in a ball gown after all.”

Her thoughts were interrupted by the door swinging open.

“Where is my future TV star bestie?” yelled Lori stepping inside with a brown bag in her arms. She sidestepped the living room and turned into Amanda’s kitchen.

“I wouldn’t go that far. What in the world did you bring over here?”

“Liquid courage. You filled out the web app drunk so I figured we could capture the magic again on video with a little help from Jose.” She pulled out an ember colored bottle and set it on the speckled counter. She then dumped out two limes. “I’m going to need a cutting board, knife, shot glass, and salt. Then, we’re getting you to LA.”

“I am not going to take tequila shots in order to make an audition video,” Amanda said.

“Oh, please. You’ve done tequila shots to do things way worse than a video for *The Bachelor* so lose that tone.” Lori began searching through cabinets for the cutting board.

“You think as many times as you’ve been here, you’d know where things were.”

Amanda sighed and opened the skinny cabinet by the stove and pulled out a bamboo cutting board.

“It’s not like I come over and cook. I know where the wine glasses and forks are. That typically suffices.” Lori grabbed a knife from the wood block and went to work slicing the limes into wedges. “Grab the shot glasses and some salt.”

“Glasses? You’re drinking with me?”

“What kind of friend would I be if I let you drink alone? Plus, I have a feeling this will be way better with a buzz.”

“Glad I can be a source of entertainment for you,” Amanda muttered and leaned her elbows onto the counter.

“Seriously? Are you pouting? What is wrong with you? We’re each other’s typical entertainment so this moment isn’t any different. Plus, this will be an amazing story to drunkenly tell your teenage kids someday to embarrass you and them.” Lori laughed and twisted open the tequila bottle.

“If you do, I will tell your future children about the ‘This was the worst idea ever’ night in Vegas.” Amanda perked up and was pulling out two shot glasses.

Lori laughed and poured two shots. “I think it’s safe to say we have plenty of ways to embarrass or get revenge on one another.” She licked her hand and poured on salt and motioned for Amanda to do the same. “So, here’s to another story at least, if not the start of your Hollywood career.”

They clinked shots, licked the salt, and threw back the tequila. The contortions of their faces were almost synchronized in fashion as they bit into lime wedges.

“Whew. Let’s go get you famous!” Lori grabbed the tequila, a few lime wedges, and her shot glass. “Bring the salt with you,” she instructed as she headed for the living room.

Amanda followed Lori with the salt and shot glass. Once both of them had done another shot, Amanda turned and walked out of the room.

“Now where are you going?”

“Getting my laptop. If we’re going to do this, might as well do it following their simpleminded directions.” Amanda could feel the tequila warming through her and her skepticism being drowned out. “*Lori’s nutty approaches somehow work,*” she thought as she toted her laptop back to the living room. “Okay. Here is what they suggest. Maybe we can start here and then see what we get?” Amanda attempted to make herself sound assured.

“Great. Give me your phone. It says here to film horizontal and not vertical. We can splice the video together on your MacBook later. You ready?”

“Do I look alright? Should I put on lipstick or anything?”

“Hum. Yes, let’s put on some lipstick.”

Amanda laughed at Lori’s use of “let’s.” She tended to make Amanda and her one entity when she was excited. She rifled through her purse and pulled out two tubes. “Which one?” she asked and offered up the decision to Lori.

“Oh! The red! It will pop with that yellow top you have on and give you more color. You’re tan skin and brown hair needs more than that pink. And hey, it’s red like the roses you’ll be getting!”

“You’re way too excited about this. I’m going to need you to bring it down a level.”

“No way. One of us has to be hyped to do this video and until it’s you, I’m carrying the burden for us.”

Amanda traced her lips in the red and realized it did pop with the yellow and her tan. “Okay, think this wall will work?” She patted the pale turquoise of the living room wall. “Think I should take down the painting?” She cocked her head slightly trying to envision Monet’s Water Lilies in the background of her attempt to sell herself to a room of strangers.

“Love the wall. Not the painting. Might be too much, you know? Let’s take it down.”

Though she made it seem like a team ordeal, Amanda hefted the print off the wall and set it against the adjacent one.

“Ready?” Lori said as she jumped up with iPhone in hand.

“Guess so,” Amanda said.

“Okay, question one: Introduce yourself, tell us your name, age and what you do for a living. Where do you live? Do you rent/own? Do you have roommates? Do you have pets? Introduce us to them! If you are doing the tape at home, give us a tour! And go!” Lori clicked record and steadied her focus on Amanda.

“Um. I’m Amanda Williams. I’m twenty-six and work at an advertising agency. I do ads. I live in this apartment alone and that includes no pets.” Amanda recited her answers frozen in place like a possum when the headlights hit it.

Lori clicked off the video. “Take a shot.”

“See, I’m awful. I don’t need to be doing this.” Amanda’s rigid stance melted into a dejected slump.

“For one, I would not be friends with you if you were awful,” Lori said as she poured another brimming shot of tequila. “Here. You just need to loosen up and show the fun side of you I actually enjoy being friends with and impressed the hell out of LA on that web app.”

Amanda shook some salt onto her hand realizing there was no fighting with Lori or her logic. “So you’re telling me that I’m only impressive when I’m drunk. That’s exactly how I want the world to see me.” She rolled her eyes and accepted the shot from Lori.

“Hey, I seem to remember you hooking up with some pretty hot guys drunk off tequila. It’s a winning combination, right?”

Amanda set her face as stern as she could for holding back laughing at Lori’s cracked logic.

“Okay. Serious moment.” Lori changed her approach. “If you go on the show, America will fall in love with you even if the bachelor doesn’t. Your personality is funny yet the kind that when you do topple into the pool in a drunken cocktail dress, America will want to jump in right with you. Lord knows I would, heels and all. What is the worst that can happen from this video other than not getting selected for the next round? Now drink that damn shot.”

“At this point, it looks like a tequila hangover,” Amanda said before licking her hand and throwing back the shot. As the sting burned up her throat to her face, she wondered if she was taking all of this too seriously. “*It’s not like I’ll be picked.*” She

shook her head to rid it of the contortion and to affirm her thought. “*But is it absurd to hope that I might?*” She bit the lime and breathed deep.

“Ready to try again? And this time, try to sell yourself like you do products when you do ads. It is your damn job to make people think they want something. Make LA want you.

Amanda nodded and walked towards the wall. “That’s a logical way to look at it. Let me know when to go.”

“That is why you keep me around.” Lori smiled. “Okay, now!” Lori started recording.

“Well hello there, casting agents. I’m Amanda Williams and I’m going to show you why I’m the girl you want to not only be friends with, but fall in love with.”

Amanda smiled as she saw Lori’s face light up and head bobble with approval. “*Maybe I am just what they are looking for,*” Amanda thought. “*Surely I won’t be one of those twits on the show. I’m more than that nonsense after all.*”

## Eggs Kennedy Style

A dull cinnamon smell had started to waft through the air and, as soon as Kelley smelled it, she heard the ding of the microwave. She called down the hall back to where the bedrooms were. “Breakfast is ready!” She opened the microwave and removed the almost searing pink plastic bowl. She quickly laid it on the kitchen table and went to the drawer to get a spoon.

Now came the smell of mothballs and baby powder from behind her to mix with the cinnamon of the oatmeal. Nan appeared in the kitchen. She was wearing a peach and pink mulled floral nightgown that hung loosely upon her thinning frame and probably qualified more as a muumuu. Her feet shuffled in baby blue worn house shoes and the clear tubing of her oxygen machine trailed behind her. Kelley frowned. She was used to the oxygen tubing since Nan’s lungs had been in steady decline from the emphysema, but Nan really was getting thinner, wasn’t she?

Her mom had been frenzied in planning for their anniversary trip to Hawaii. First, only months after the attacks on the World Trade Center, flying anywhere made just about everyone uneasy. Kelley’s mom checked and rechecked everything they had planned to pack to make sure it wouldn’t deem them to be terrorists. The thought of her petite blonde mom as a terrorist always made Kelley laugh. Her parents both went back and forth with leaving Kelley alone with Nan. Kelley had protested that she was seventeen and would soon be in college and should be trusted to handle herself without a babysitter. More so, she had been babysitting for spare money since she was fourteen so the fact they thought she couldn’t take care of herself and her grown grandmother was

insulting. So they relented to letting her stay with as long a list of reminders and rules as the TSA had posted for flying.

The most important of these rules was that she would make sure Nan ate three times a day so work and friends had to be juggled around these meal times. At first, Kelley had rolled her eyes and thought this an absolute burden. Nan used to watch her and now here she was watching Nan and to Kelley, Nan was not as helpless as her parents had made her out to be. Plus with having to be Nan's cook three times a day, she wasn't able to fully enjoy her parents being out of town.

Nan hadn't been too keen on this either. Yesterday when Kelley made her oatmeal, she had refused to come out of her room. Kelley stood in the hall. "I am not going to let my grandma waste away on my watch. So Nan, you had better get in this kitchen."

Nan yelled back. "My granddaughter is not going to sass me." After a few moments, she appeared at the kitchen table regardless and sullenly stared at the oatmeal long enough that Kelley felt bad for yelling.

"Want me to warm it up a bit for you?"

"No, you made it too hot anyway." She defiantly sat and spooned now lukewarm oatmeal into her mouth. Kelley rolled her eyes at the stubborn old woman and walked back to her bedroom to get ready to go to the mall.

Now on this second morning together, sitting down and staring at the oatmeal, she turned and placed her frail hand on Kelley's arm. "Sweetie, do you think you can make me those eggs like you make?"

“What eggs, Nan? The scrambled ones with the cheese?” It had been almost three months since Kelley had cooked her whole family breakfast and she hadn’t thought about even offering to do so again this week with Nan. Oatmeal was the near ritualistic breakfast.

“Yes. Those eggs.” Behind her thick glasses, Nan’s eyes lit up like those of a small child about to be given candy. Kelley couldn’t believe this was the same surly woman who had been yelling to not sass her just yesterday morning. It was moments like this when she could tell Nan was getting old and changing. She had always heard that people revert back to acting like children in their old age and now she saw it in Nan’s fragileness and kid-like enthusiasm. Maybe this was what her parents saw more often than Kelley and why they had hesitated in leaving her to keep watch over Nan?

So, just like she was unable to tell her nephew no, Kelley was unable to tell Nan to just eat the oatmeal this morning. “Sure, Nan. I’ll make you eggs.” With this, she picked up the full still steaming pink bowl and placed it in the sink.

As she got out the eggs, milk, cheese, and butter, Nan continued, “You know, I never have made eggs as well as you. Yours are always so fluffy. Maybe before I die, you can teach me to make eggs like you do and then I can.”

“That’s silly. You’re an amazing cook. I wish I could cook as well as you do.” Placing the skillet on the burner to heat, Kelley felt her heart tighten. She hated when people talked of Nan dying even though now with cancer forming in those already weak lungs, Kelley refused to face the inevitable.

“Well, maybe we can teach each other then,” said Nan.

Kelley cracked the eggs into the mixing bowl and poured in some milk watching the creamy white mingle with the translucent whites and bold yellow yolks. As she followed the psychedelic-like pattern with her eyes, Nan's voice brought her focus back.

"You know, dear, I've been going through some of my old photos. From when I was a nanny to Mac in Hyannis Port. I told you I was his nanny, right?"

"Yeah. He's the guy who wrote *Sunset Boulevard*, right?" Kelley had begun to whisk the mingled mixture into a cohesive frothy pale yellow.

"That's him. What a smart boy he always was. He called the other day. The next time he does, I hope you are home so that you can talk to him. You're smart like him. So proud of you both."

As she dropped a slab of butter into the warmed skillet, Kelley tried to remember if her parents had mentioned Mac calling or if this was another one of her moments. Swirling the butter to coat the bottom of the pan, she recollected her mom saying how sweet Mac was to check in with Nan more since he learned of her steady decline in health. So he must've called for her Mom to bring that up because her mom wasn't much for gossip. She poured the frothy eggs into the pan and watched the bubbles slowly rise and pop.

"You know, I even found my pictures of the Kennedys. Such good-looking boys they all were. Good Catholic family too. I still treasure the time I spent with them."

"I still can't believe you were a nanny right next door to where the Kennedys lived. I'm going to have to see these pictures of yours, Nan." Kelley swirled the spatula back and forth creating mounds of fluffy bright yellow. Just before the eggs were fully

cooked, she grabbed the cheddar cheese and dumped in a fist full. The bright orangey-yellow cheese melted quickly creating a gooey coating encompassing the ruffles of egg.

“Well, I was. Found all my pictures so I can prove it.”

Kelley portioned out the eggs onto two plates with Nan getting more. “Cool. You’ll have to show me. We just talked about JFK in my history class. Be cool to see someone’s real photos of him. Here you go, hope they’re as good as last time.”

“I bet they are, dear. Looks fantastic. And John was such a little flirt, but always such a gentleman.”

Sitting down across from her, Kelley smiled as Nan dug in with more gusto than the oatmeal ever induced. Maybe the key to getting her to gain weight was more eggs with cheese?

“Oh, I bet JFK was a flirt from the rumors I’ve heard,” said Kelley with a laugh. “I can only imagine being surrounded by such glamorous, good looking men. Bet you loved that, huh?” She winked at her grandma. A faint shade of red actually crossed Nan’s cheeks.

After a few moments of silent, focused eating, Nan set her fork down reached across the table and grabbed Kelley’s hand. “You know,” she said, “your eyes are the same color blue as Joe’s were.” Kelley looked up and locked her gaze with Nan’s. In this moment, her grandma’s hazel eyes were tinged with the hues of nostalgia and a slight sadness. Her lips shifted into a soft smile and with that, she loosened her grip on Kelley’s hand and went back to eating her eggs.

Kelley sat for a while watching her grandma eat. Finally, she spoke the words that both were waiting to hear. “Nan, who is Joe?”

She waited until finishing her last bite of eggs before she set her fork down again, bringing her withered arms across her chest. Nan steadied herself in this position then replied, “Why, Joe Kennedy of course.”

“Oh, Nan. Looking at those black and white pictures has you dreaming up colors.”

“No. Those eyes of his are locked in my memory. We were in love.”

“Right.” Kelley made no attempt to hide the sarcasm in her voice but the eye roll came as second nature. As soon as her eyes steadied back on Nan, she could tell she had hurt her feelings. But really, what was she supposed to do? Go along with this crazy tale about Nan and a Kennedy being in love? She had outgrown fairytales years ago.

“We were. He loved me even though he wasn’t supposed to love me. His parents planned for him to be a great politician. He was to wed Athalia after attending Harvard and not love me, some lowly nanny having to send money back home. But he did.”

“And I bet he wanted to run away with you too?” At this point, Kelley knew this was not the way to handle her grandma’s ailing fantasies. But Nan had known the Kennedys, so at least the story had some reality rooted into it.

“He was to go off to war. We had one great day and night on the beach together. I loved him, I did. But after he left, I was shipped back home. Mac’s family was moving back and no longer needed me. I guess I’m lucky I did. Joe died. Your grandpa took me in and married me in my condition.”

“What condition?”

“I was pregnant with your father. Two months almost. Joe hadn’t died yet of course but as soon as my mom found out, she made arrangements. Because, what rich Kennedy would want poor, uneducated me? So, we told everyone I got pregnant on the honeymoon and back then, no one noticed the difference.”

“Really, Nan. You expect me to believe that?” Kelley picked up their plates and set them in the sink.

“It’s true. You’re Joe’s granddaughter. Those eyes don’t lie.” With that, Nan slowly stood and quietly walked back to her room.

As Kelley washed the now hardened cheddar banded egg clumps from the plates, she had that same tight feeling in her heart. She shouldn’t have been so harsh with Nan. She had a hard life with having to support her family all those years as Mac’s nanny. Then, having to move home from that glamorous lifestyle of the rich and live as a poor housewife to a coal miner. She could understand why Nan had this fantasy of a greater life as a part of America’s royal family. Wouldn’t she do the same in the final days – make life out to be more than what it was?

Kelley’s mind then turned to another thought. What if she was a Kennedy? She would be American royalty. The tightness squeezed her all over and she tried to shake the excitement of the thought that if it was true, her whole life could be so different. So luxurious and famous just like all the Kennedys.

Hearing the phone ring, Kelley dried her hands completely before crossing to answer it. “Hello?”

“Sweetie! How is everything going?” Kelley’s mom’s voice filled the receiver and sounded like two days in Hawaii was doing her justice.

“It’s going well.”

“Is it? Are you keeping your grandmother fed?”

“Yes, Mom. Made her scrambled eggs and cheese this morning actually.”

Kelley could feel the pride in her voice.

“Really? That’s great! Kelley, you also should set aside time to spend with her. Wouldn’t kill you.”

“I know. She told me a story today. You know, about the Kennedys.”

Silence for even a moment was awkward in regards to Kelley’s mom. After what seemed longer than what really was, she finally responded. “Oh, really? What about?” Her tone went up an octave that always gave away when she was trying to hide something.

Kelley did not pause. Her mom’s apprehension had somehow ignited that small hope she had. “She said I was a Kennedy. I’m guessing she told Dad, too? Cool you’re married to a Kennedy, huh Mom?” Her voice was a mix of sarcasm and a slight hope that her mom would reveal they really were part of America’s royal family.

“Now, Kelley. Your grandmother is getting old. Making up stories is all. You don’t need to feed into it though, you hear me? Your father is beside himself over it. He’s talked to her many times and now he is worried sick she is going mental on top of her lung problems.”

“Oh, okay. No worries. Nan and I are doing great. So, enjoy Hawaii. How is it going? All you told me so far was how you survived the crazy post 9/11 security and were there safe.”

Kelley's mom started in on all the details of the beaches, food, shopping all while some part of Kelley's mind was still thinking about what Nan said about being a Kennedy. How was she just going to forget such a thing?

Heading back to her room, she paused at Nan's. The door was cracked so she let herself push it softly open. "Nan, I'm sorry. I shouldn't make a joke of your memories like that." The door opened enough to where she could see the frail old woman sitting on her bed, tears streaming from those thick glasses. "Aw, Nan, don't cry." She noticed she was holding a solitary picture—once black and white but now tinged with a yellowed hue. "Is that one of your pictures from Hyannis Port?"

Nan patted the bed. "Come here, I want you to see." Kelley made her way over. The smell of mothballs and baby powder was overwhelming and the main reason she rarely ventured for visits inside her grandma's room. Kelley always wondered why even after almost two years of living here, that mothball smell of Nan's old house still permeated everything. Sitting down, Nan placed one arm around her as she gripped the picture with her other hand. "Look, it's Joe and me at the beach."

Looking at the photo, Kelley saw her grandmother—youthful, full figured in a one piece dark colored suit, light brown hair pinned up in curls in the fashion of the time. She looked so happy—face caught in mid laugh but with her eyes open wide. Next to Nan in what Kelley thought looked like Speedo shorts was an athletic, handsome man. Dark hair, square jaw and cleft chin, big grin—probably from causing the laughter in Nan—and light eyes. He was handsome but, weren't all the Kennedy men that way? His eyes were looking at Nan not like some dapper and poor nanny but

like she could have been Marilyn Monroe. Kelley stared hard at the photo, taking in every detail.

“Your parents said the same thing. That I was crazy. Losing my mind. Telling stories. But I’m not. Kelley, I’m not.”

“I see that, Nan.” Kelley didn’t know if she was humoring her grandma like you do a child telling you about seeing monsters or if she really believed this fairytale. “But can I ask you something? Why now? Why tell Dad and the rest of us this now?”

“Before I die, I have to let you know who you are. You’re a Kennedy. I can’t *not* tell you. It’s been a secret far too long. Your parents don’t believe me, but you do, don’t you?”

Kelley couldn’t look at the pleading face of her grandmother anymore and her eyes fell back to the photo. Her grandmother and Joe Kennedy were together on the beach. They did look like a couple. A couple in love. “Okay, Nan. I believe you.” Kelley whispered it as if they both had now reverted back to being children and sharing a secret that no one else knew or, in this case, that no one else would care to believe. There had to be some truth to Nan’s story. Pictures do not lie. How could her parents not at least see some truth in Nan’s story? Kelley looked back at her grandma. “And look at you, looking all hot in that swimsuit. No wonder a Kennedy fell for you.”

With this, Nan smiled and silently nodded. Taking this as her notice, Kelley stood and kissed her grandma on the head. “Love you, Nan.” As she walked out, Nan was staring at the photo and Kelley imagined she was replaying that moment on the beach with Joe over and over. What he said to make her laugh as the camera clicked,

the way his arm felt around her, those eyes looking at her like that was a moment where Nan was more than Nan. She was that unlikely princess among princes.

Back in her room, Kelley smoothed her auburn hair with a brush. Pulling it up into a ponytail she noticed her jaw line and chin –square angles cut into a cleft. She was the only one in her family with this. Her blue eyes searched her face seeing what she hadn't before. Then, her eyes locked on the ones in the mirror –eyes that were the same as Joe's.

## Cops and Robbers

The egg hit the frying pan with a sizzle and a flicker of melted margarine. Jessie pushed her bleached unruly bangs out of her face. A small crash buckled her legs from behind and her knees hit the cool metal of the oven's glass window with a slight pain.

"Not by the oven, honey," she sweetly chastised. "Grab some juice and I'll bring you your egg."

The small dirty blonde child smiled and with a tip-toed reach grabbed her Disney princess embossed glass off of the counter. She pranced over to the fridge and pulled out the jug of Sunny D. All the while, Jessie attempted to watch the eggs fry as well as her growing Audrey pour her own juice from the jug that seemed over half her size. Jessie's husband, Brian, had trusted Audrey to do the same less than a week ago with a good portion of the Sunny D spilling on the floor. She had fussed but Brian laughed it off and told her that if they don't allow Audrey to try to make mistakes, how was she to learn? That was always Brian, the eternal optimist who saw everything as moving towards a better future while Jessie saw the wasted juice that would need to be replaced before their budget allowed. But that was Jessie, the pessimist who quit college when she got pregnant.

Just when the eggs were ready, an echoed thump and slosh turned Jessie away from the stove. "Not again," she thought.

"Uh oh. It okays, Mommy. No spills," Audrey said knowingly reassuring the nerves of her mother.

Moving the pan off the heat, Jessie said, "Let Mommy get that for you."

“Babe, she’s got it. She did it fine yesterday.” Brian had entered the room already in his police uniform. “I’ll watch her while you finish up breakfast. You’re a big girl, aren’t you, Audrey?” He crouched down beside Audrey smiling brightly.

Jessie loved that he was such a great father but there was always something inside her that also was irritated by his good cop mentality with Audrey while she played the foil of the harsh parent. Brian had been the good parent from the beginning with being excited when Jessie told him of her pregnancy. When she began to cry, he told her in his honey-toned southern drawl, she would be a great mom and they were going to have a great family. At that moment, *great* seemed like a life sentence of anything but.

She collapsed onto his lap, body convulsing in sobs. She didn’t want to be a mom. She didn’t want a family. She wanted to go shopping with her sorority sisters for a formal dress. She wanted to graduate. Move to the city. Work at an advertising firm.

“Babe, I love you. We are going to do this together.”

Her sobs deepened. She did love him. It was the kind of love that comes from being by his side amid the keg beer euphoria of fraternity parties. Being Facebook official. Getting lavaliered. Being the couple cuddled up at The Backdoor early enough to get a table for everyone. But at this moment, this was not the same love. This was too serious to be love.

She suddenly shot up. “We can’t tell anyone. Promise?”

He looked at her red, swollen face with wide scared eyes like animals on the farm when it came time to round them up for slaughter. “You mean our friends? Yes, I

promise. But, babe, we are going to have to make arrangements with our families, you know.”

She nodded and fell back onto his lap. Not sobbing, but motionless like an anesthetized patient about to undergo surgery.

The rest of the semester went by to everyone else as usual. More so, their group of friends loved having someone who more regularly volunteered to be the designated driver when she wasn't playing the drunkard while secretly getting virgin drinks. At the end of the semester, she broke the news to her sorority that she wouldn't be back in the fall due to family circumstances. They never pried for the exact details, and she was glad they didn't because she did not want to lie to them to cover the fact that her starting a family was the circumstance. They all cried together as they granted her alumnae status.

Brian had pull back home thanks to his family's name in the small town. He was able to go to the police academy with what college credits he had completed. Brian saw this as “God's sign that everything was going to be fine.” His fraternity brothers celebrated his success with a farewell bar crawl and, for him, it was a true celebration of his life ahead.

“Make sure you eat all your toast,” Jessie said to Audrey as the toddler was trying hard to nibble only the grape coated center away from the crusts.

Audrey wrinkled her nose and furrowed her small brow at her mother. Then she softened to a pitiful plea as she looked at her father.

“Now, sweetie, your mom is right. Plus the crust has all the magic in it to help you grow up to be the prettiest princess.” He sealed his smooth appeal with a wink.

Audrey’s eyes became large and she picked up her cup. “As purty as her?” she asked as she pointed to Aurora.

“Maybe prettier.”

Audrey quickly put her cup down and grabbed the fairly gutted piece of toast. She devoured the crust as she smiled with crumb-coated lips.

Brian reached over, squeezed Jessie’s hand, and smiled.

She smiled back through firm lips. “*Always the good cop,*” she thought.

He wasn’t always the good cop. When she told her mom he was accepted to the Bayberry police academy and would be a full time officer, her mom replied, “Police academy? He’s going to be a cop? Well isn’t that hilarious because he’s robbed you of your future. Cop. Ha! More like a robber to me.”

As much as Jessie wanted to argue with her mother, she couldn’t. She would be moving to small town Bayberry. Be a cop’s wife with a baby on her hip. That wasn’t her future. It was someone else’s that she had yet to fully claim as her own. She deactivated Facebook and kept the shame of her forged new life a secret from all but their families.

“Your mom said she’ll get Audrey from the sitter today. I’m in class now before you get off work.”

“Yay grammy!” Audrey shouted and clapped with excitement.

“I’ll drop by and get her after. I’ll get off today early.”

“Now, you can’t take work off early Tuesday to do that, can you?”

“I just may. Remember it’s ol’ Bayberry after all and your big city rules don’t apply here.” He stood, laughing while picking up the plates from the table.

“Ol’ Bay-bear-ye,” Audrey repeated while shaking her head like her mom did when she said it.

This time, a wide, relaxed smile spread across Jessie’s face.

He strutted back from the sink and kissed both his girls on the forehead. “Well, if I’m fixing to take off early, I best not be late. Love ya’ll.”

“We lub you, Daddy,” Audrey cooed as Jessie shook her head in agreement.

As his footsteps disappeared out the door, Jessie said, “Come on, princess, let’s turn on your cartoons while Mommy gets ready.”

Audrey scampered for the living room and collapsed onto her beanbag. She was not to play with the remotes, but if allowed, could do this aspect of her daily routine on her own. Once her mom turned on the TV, she would spend the next forty minutes or so with Dora and Boots going on at least one complete adventure.

Jessie turned on the TV and flipped to Nickelodeon. She smoothed Audrey’s blonde hair as she walked out to Dora teaching the Spanish word for mountain. “La montaña,” she repeated to herself as she walked down the hall. Entering the bathroom, Jessie looked at herself intensely in the mirror. “Why do I even bother with makeup anymore?” She knew why. She didn’t want to fully assimilate to Bayberry. She wanted some of her slick city glamour to be resilient. When they first moved there, her bump was showing, but surprisingly, this was not a scandal in Bayberry. Most people didn’t go

to college and instead got married and started families young. She was like many in town and being the average young mom had been a consolation after what was a shameful first trimester. But the thing that set her apart was that she was Brian's "fancy city girl he met at college." She wasn't going to give up that aspect of herself for the comfort of small town makeup-less life.

Once she had herself together, she beckoned for Audrey. Getting her ready for the sitter was a daily ordeal and she didn't know what they would do next year when she had to be ready for preschool. "*He'll have to start either laying on the daddy charm or be the bad cop,*" she thought. "Audrey, come on, now!"

"But 'nother Dora just come on," Audrey pleaded.

"You've already watched one whole adventure. Time to get ready." Jessie firmly stood her ground.

Audrey sulked into the room.

"Okay, skin the rabbit." Jessie laughed at her Bayberrism. "Off with your PJs."

Audrey jerked her arms up and stood there until her mom pulled her nightgown over her head.

"Show me you're a big girl and put on your top." She handed her daughter the bedazzled pink shirt. "*I hope she never grows out of being girly. Too many country tomboys in this town already,*" she thought.

Just when Audrey had wrestled on her shirt, a car pulled into the gravel drive. At the sound, Audrey bounded for the living room. "Daddy's back!"

"You need pants!" Jessie cried after her, but she was already gone.

"Mommy! James is here! Think he will play with me?"

“Why on earth is James here?” she wondered out loud as she walked, Audrey’s leggings in hand, to the front door. “Brian probably told him he could borrow something without telling me. Again.” As she rounded the corner, she could hear James talking to Audrey, but noticed he was still outside the door.

“No, kiddo. I can’t play. I need to talk to your mom.”

“I’m here. What’s going on, James?” She handed the leggings to Audrey. “Put these on, princess.” She realized her voice trembled with a growing worry inside her. It wasn’t like James to not come in and at least indulge Audrey in some small game.

“Well,” his eyes fell away from hers. “It’s Brian. There was trouble serving the first warrant. We thought going early would catch ‘em off guard. The robbery suspect put up a fight. In the midst of it, Brian got,” James paused and took a deep breath, “shot.”

Jessie just stood there staring at James as if he was speaking Spanish. “La montaña,” she thought of Dora. At that, she almost laughed. This had to be some joke. This was ol’ Bayberry. Most of the time, she saw Bayberry as safe for Brian where the most dangerous criminal he had to deal with was an old lady stealing pork chops from the Piggly Wiggly. But she knew warrants were much different than the speeding tickets on the county road or small town shenanigans.

“Jessie, I’m here to take you to the hospital. See, Brian was in bad shape.” He swallowed hard. “They are doing what they can, but I got to get you there right quick.”

Suddenly the shock and horror hit her in the middle of her chest. The last time she felt that blow, her eyes fixated on the two lines that appeared on the pregnancy test. Now, it was James’s two pitiful eyes that brought the crushing blow.

“Let me grab my purse. Audrey, put those leggings on now.” She waded through the thick air to her purse. It was then the weight of it brought her to her knees. “I cannot be robbed of my life again.” But a small part of her remembered that old Bayberry wasn’t much of a life anyway.

## Flat Tire

The last five miles had been tense quiet. Nicole and Tommy had different types of quiet. There was the comfortable quiet in which both were content with just having the other one in the room. Then they had funny quiet in which they both played an unsaid game of who could control their laughter the longest without losing it. After sex quiet was the exhausted heightened bliss silence. But this was a dreadful kind of quiet.

Tommy leaned over and turned up the radio.

Nicole cleared her throat and looked sideways to see if that would urge Tommy into talking or saying something else angst ridden.

Tommy rolled his window down a couple of inches but kept his intense blue eyes fixed on the expressway ahead. He leaned towards the rippling breeze and closed his eyes. The draft of air twirled his shaggy brown hair about his forehead.

Clenching the steering wheel to the point her knuckles hued slightly white, Nicole pushed a flyaway auburn hair back from her face. She hated driving Tommy's car but he was too hung over to drive. "*Serves him right. I hope he feels like shit,*" she thought. She reached over and hit the seek button on the stereo.

"I was listening to that."

"Driver controls the radio. Your rules."

"My fucking car."

"You don't have to cuss at me."

"It wasn't at you. I swear. Could you be more sensitive about every damn thing?"

Nicole paused. She debated for a moment not going back down the path to the fight in the hotel room last night that, like Tommy's bourbon drinking, lingered painfully into this morning. "Right. You know, I shouldn't care that you purposefully dropped the garter last night. I just need to be patient and stand by for another six years until you're finally ready to marry me. I mean, who needs to be married? Let's keep playing house together without you having to fully commit. How awful of me to be bothered by that."

"Jesus Christ. Really? You really want to go back to that again?"

"You act like our different visions of our future together isn't a major issue."

"We don't have different visions. I want to marry you. I don't understand why you're making such a fucking huge deal out of that damn garter. It's some stupid wedding tradition."

"Look. It may seem like a stupid tradition to you, but to everyone there including me, when you purposefully dropped the garter, it showed that you're not ready to marry me. You may want to, but you don't want it to be soon. So you can say it's just a garter, but we both know it's more than that." Nicole's tone ripped through the air with more force than the wind blowing into the car at sixty-five miles per hour.

"You know how much bourbon I had drunk by then? It's not like I was on my A-game. Yes, I dropped it. Then Kevin's ten-year-old ring bearer snatched it up. What did you want me to do, beat up a kid for it to prove my damn devotion to you?" Tommy's voice rose with intensity.

“I mean, I don’t want you to punch a kid, but putting a little more of a fight into getting that garter would have been something. But, no, you dropped it and sorry to say, it looked more deliberate than a drunken whoops.”

“Yes. I threw it down in hopes it would cause all this bullshit last night and today. I was hoping to make some grand statement on our relationship last night at my best friend’s wedding.”

The car interrupted them with a loud ding and a flash across the driver’s dash monitor.

“It says ‘Low Tire Pressure!’ Should we be worried?” asked Nicole.

“No. It does that sometimes. Usually when the weather changes, but we have been driving up and down these hills so maybe the pressure is thrown off.”

“Oh, okay.”

The tense silence invaded the car again but with the pressure of condensed air. This time Nicole reached over and turned the radio up. The fight and the thick air made her chest heavy. “*The last thing I want is to give him the satisfaction of crying,*” she thought.

Seeing Nicole turning up the radio as a momentary white flag, Tommy closed his eyes and rested his aching head back on the seat. Between the bourbon and this battle with Nicole, he wondered if his head would ever quit pounding.

Another loud ding came from the dash.

“What now?” asked Tommy.

“It says ‘TIRE PRESSURE TOO LOW!!!’ and this time it’s in all caps and has multiple exclamation marks. Do we have a flat?”

Tommy reached quickly for the radio and turned off the music. “I don’t feel or hear anything. Just decrease your speed and pull off at the next exit. We’ll check and fill up the tires then.”

Nicole pressed the brake and decreased to fifty-five. She bit her bottom lip and flashed her green eyes at Tommy. “I don’t think there is an exit for a while. Think we’ll be okay?” She hated driving his car almost as much as she hated showing her insecurity in the midst of their current fight.

Before Tommy could answer, the car shook to the muffled boom of the rubber tire wall giving out. The rhythmic thumping of rubber to pavement confirmed what the car had tried to warn them of miles ago.

“Shit. A fucking flat. Seriously.” Tommy’s attempt to remain calm boiled over with yet another thing going wrong. He slammed his palm hard against the dash. Then he looked at Nicole and saw the green of her eyes intensifying and glossing over. He knew she hated to drive his car and felt his heart drop seeing her emotions exacerbated now with this. He soothed out his tone the best he could and said, “Pull over, babe.”

Nicole was already pressing on the brake and easing the car down in speed to be able to pull it over safely. She nodded as if to reassure Tommy she was following his request.

When the car came to a complete stop, Tommy unbuckled his seat belt. “Stay here while I check it out.” He climbed out into the warming May air. As soon as he turned towards the rear of his side of the car, he immediately saw the flattened tire. The rim was being held up with less than an inch of rubber. He began to walk back when

Nicole threw open her door without much notice of the oncoming truck. “Damn it, Nicole. Are you trying to kill yourself?”

“*What concern,*” thought Nicole. She walked around the front of the car to avoid the side near the road. “That truck wasn’t that close. And trust me, I’m not suicidal over our fight -that’s for sure.” She stood with arms crossed looking from him to the tire.

“The tire is completely gone. There’s no driving on it anymore.”

“Well, can’t you change it?”

“No. Have you seen the tiny jack that Volkswagen includes? The car could fall on me.”

“I doubt they would include one that could possibly kill you. There’s a spare, right?”

“There is a full size spare but I’m not about to tempt it. The way things have been here today hasn’t really inspired me to take risks. Plus, if the car fell on me I would die or be trapped because you wouldn’t be able to lift it off of me.”

*Or I’d let you suffer until you agreed to marry me,* thought Nicole but she stifled the sarcastic comment back. “I’ll call AAA. My dad still pays for me to have an account.” Nicole dropped her arms to her sides and walked back to the driver’s side. This time she was mindful of any coming vehicles though none had passed them since the one Tommy yelled at her about before. She slid into the car and pulled her wallet from her purse. Flipping through the cards, she finally found the gold glitzy AAA card. *Thank God Dad still has me on his gold membership. How pissed will he be to hear*

*good ol' Tommy boy's 'foreign car' got a flat and left us in the middle of nowhere Kentucky.* At this she laughed as she grabbed her phone and dialed the service number.

“Hello, AAA service. This is Mark. How can I assist you today?”

“Hi, Mark. I got a flat tire and need help putting the spare on.”

“Alright. Do you have a spare in the car or do we need to provide one?”

“There is a full size spare so we just need someone to come put it on the car.”

“Great. You were auto routed to our Kentucky office. Where are you at with the flat?”

“On the Natcher Parkway.”

“Okay. What mile marker?”

“That’s a good question,” replied Nicole hesitantly. “Let me go look.” She hadn’t been watching the mile markers carefully. She remembered passing forty-two but other than that, she had no idea how far they were past that one. *I really hope Tommy doesn’t yell at me for this*, she thought. She opened the car door and yelled for Tommy. “Hey, can you tell what mile marker we are at?”

“There is one up there a bit that we must have passed when the tire went flat. Let me go look.” Tommy jogged off in the direction of the small road marker. *Man. I hate that we are using her dad’s AAA card. He already hates me. I should have risked the damn car falling on me then have another reason I’m inadequate for his baby girl.* He rounded the marker sign and turned back to where the car and Nicole were. “It’s thirty-one,” he shouted back. He saw Nicole give him the thumbs up that she had heard him and disappeared back into the car. Tommy slowly made his way back taking his

frustration out by kicking rocks that were strewn alongside the highway. *How did everything get so fucked up?* he wondered.

As Tommy approached the car, he heard Nicole raise her voice. He quickly opened the passenger door to see what was wrong.

“No ,sir, that is two hours from now. That is unacceptable.” Nicole couldn’t help the agitation and her voice going up an octave.

“Miss Martin, that is only an hour from now.”

“I’m looking at my clock and it says 11:45, so 1:45 is two hours, sir.”

“Oh, wait. Where are you located again? I’m saying that the service truck will be there at 1:45 according to the time in Louisville currently.”

Nicole started to laugh. “Okay. I’m in a different time zone. One hour is much better than two. Sorry, sir, but it’s been a frustrating day to say the least.”

“No, my fault. I should have realized that, miss. The service truck has been dispatched and will be there within the hour if not sooner. I will patch your cell phone number through to the driver in case he has any issues in finding you. Anything else I can help you with today?”

“No, just the flat tire is all I need,” said Nicole though she was thinking that if AAA could service her relationship, that would also be great. This next hour was going to be a long one. Maybe the driver would be there much sooner than an hour?

“Great! Have a pleasant day and thank you for being a loyal AAA member.” Mark from AAA hung up leaving Nicole stranded back on the side of the road with a flat tire and a relationship that seemed to be having its own blow out.

“Somehow don’t see this being too pleasant,” Nicole said grudgingly as she pushed open the door. The car was getting too hot under the sunny sky for only being May.

Tommy had closed the passenger door back up once he realized that Nicole and the AAA guy were just caught up in a moment of miscommunication. He now leaned against the side of the car warming in the fresh air. His hangover was almost gone and he smiled at the fact that this day had all been one big miscommunication from the garter, to the tire, and then to the AAA incident. “They say bad things come in threes,” he said musingly out loud.

“What was that?” Nicole asked.

“Nothing. So, get things sorted out with AAA?”

Nicole slumped against the car next to him, but making sure to leave enough distance that it could be noticeable. “The service guy should be here within the hour.”

“Great.”

The two of them stood leaning against the incapacitated car. The spring breeze swirled around them, but it did nothing to alleviate the fraught feeling between them. Though inches apart, it felt as if they were in completely different worlds. The silence only highlighted the surrounding sounds of nature.

Tommy leaned his head back on the top of the car letting the heat from the sun beat down and also rise up off the metal. When he opened his eyes, he noticed the birds flying high above them casting their shadows down. He shouted out to them, “Go away you damn buzzards. We’re not dead yet!”

Suddenly, Nicole erupted into loud hysterics and in moments she was gasping in between laughs.

“Really, Nicole. I’m glad you find this that funny.”

“It’s just.” She gasped. “They can tell when something is dying.” She choked back a laugh. In her head she had pictured them as picked clean skeletons when the AAA truck finally showed up. “Here we’re sitting here in the midst of the biggest fight of our relationship.” She paused and breathed deeply to quell the laughter back. “Maybe they can sense we are dying?” And with that, she quit laughing altogether. It really wasn’t hysterical once she articulated it out loud.

“You really do consider this a relationship ending fight?” Tommy asked. His voice had pleading and panicked undertones.

“I don’t know. But you know what I do know? I would marry you right now.”

“Considering our current circumstance, I don’t think this very moment we could.”

Nicole laughed. She knew this was Tommy’s tactic for easing out of a fight: make her laugh and transition their previous frustration into playful banter. “You know what I mean, Tommy.”

“Fine, fine. When the AAA guy comes, I will ask him if he is an ordained minister.”

“Don’t talk the talk if you won’t back it up.”

“What? You mean being married on the side of the highway by a greasy AAA guy isn’t your dream wedding?”

“All I care about is marrying you. The rest is just details. I don’t know why you don’t feel the same.” With that, Nicole’s face fell flat and she stared at the pebbles on the concrete.

“I do want to marry you. I know you’re not happy that it’s been six years. But what’s the hurry? You’re the only one I see myself with for the rest of my life. I love you and I love what we have now. We have plenty of time to become our parents. I want to enjoy our twenties. We can be married and settle down when we’re thirty and we’ll have a long life together ahead of that. Can’t you be happy with knowing that?”

Nicole was silent. She was too focused on controlling her breathing and blinking to consider answering him. She knew what the answer was and it would be of no use to set aside her own breathing and blinking to articulate it and give it life.

The fretful silence reappeared for a moment and then the AAA truck appeared in the distance.

“About time. Thought they’d be here sooner,” Nicole muttered as she pushed herself up off the side of the car.

As the AAA Rescue Rangers truck pulled behind them and parked, Tommy looked at his watch. The truck had only taken thirty minutes to reach them. He looked up and watched Nicole walk slowly away. He tilted his head back to gaze at the sun now high in the air with the buzzards still circling them from above.

## Almond Blossoms

Arms partly folded, clenching her Starbucks coffee to her chest, Samantha stood facing the store's fluorescent-lit wall of colorful prints and canvases. Secretly what excited her most about their new house was decorating it. The vast walls of every room were perfect to display art. Positioned close but with enough distance to show disinterest, Kevin grasped his coffee in his right hand while his other hid away in his pressed khaki's pocket. *Why had he even asked to come? Better, why had she let him?* While dating, he sweetly mused over her "hobby" paintings and allowed himself to be dragged to a museum event once but now, he showed no interest in art.

"See anything you like, Sam?" His head tilted slightly as he tried to make out what the block-like shapes of the Picasso were meant to portray. He was at least trying to put on a front of interest for her sake.

Her eyes scanned the wall trying to picture how the paintings' colors would look hanging up in various rooms with the softer lighting of her home. Suddenly, she felt her heart pick up its pace: *I've seen that painting somewhere before.*

As her fingers ruffled her brown hair out of her eyes, the dank smoke of the coffeeshop wafted again to her nose. She wasn't one to regularly partake in drugs –many scoffed at her explanation of wanting to see the Anne Frank house and the many art museums as motivation for this weekend's trip to Amsterdam. The saying goes "when in Rome" and she was in Amsterdam after all, so she ordered the bowl of blueberry dank from the menu in Café 420. But that was hours ago. She hated how the smell of smoke lingered.

Tonight the Van Gogh museum had a pleasant number of people there: enough to be comforted by human presence but few enough that there was no crowding at any one painting. She wondered if they had wine tasting events all the time or if these occasions were left for the off-season in tourism to draw business. She must remember that: *though the weather might not be ideal, it was worth the crisp early winter wind to not be overrun by tourists.* Such pretension she had gained from a mere semester abroad. She smirked at herself as she thought, *Well, I'm technically a tourist too.* She took another sip of Pinot Noir Rosé and moved to the next painting.

Something about this one captivated her: a muddled mix of blue, teal, and aqua with delicate creamy white flowers contrasted upon a dark mangled branch.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked.

Turning, her eyes locked with his –the same blue mingled with teal and aqua mixed around his pupil.

He continued to talk with a Danish accent. “Van Gogh painted *Almond Blossoms* as a gift for his youngest brother upon the birth of his son, who he named Vincent.”

She nodded, gaze fixated on those eyes.

“Van Gogh has many paintings with flowers and sky, as you have probably seen. This one has significance because it symbolizes his nephew’s birth. Almonds are the first to blossom in spring. By the way, I am Andric.”

“Samantha. Nice to meet you,” she said as she took his outstretched hand into hers and felt her nerves flutter; he was quite attractive with dark hair and creamy complexion with those bright eyes. “How do you know so much about this painting?”

She had never seen it before so it wasn't one of the popular ones taught in art survey classes.

“I come here often. I live here. Where are you from, Samantha?”

The way he said her name made the sides of her mouth tinge reflexively with the desire to smile at it. “America. Ohio actually. I am studying for a semester in France.”

She couldn't discern if it was the wine compounding her lingering weed buzz or if the light headedness was due to his hand now cupping her upper arm. Such a moment felt surreal.

“Would you like company viewing the rest of the collection, Samantha?”

A foreign hand now rested on her arm. She smoothed her hair back with the smell of this morning's Aveda shampoo still noticeable. She turned to see his russet eyes looking partly uninterested and partly agitated but his tone was surprisingly charming. “So, Sam, sweetie, do you want to get that one then?”

“Yes. It works well with the blues in the kitchen,” she said with a smile that came distantly from somewhere.

Kevin picked up the large canvas print. “Anything else you want to look for, babe?”

“Let me hold your coffee.” She took his cup to make sure that neither that nor the canvas got dropped on the way to the front though his large arms and build were easily handling both. “No, until we pick out new couches for the living room, I am going to hold off on getting anything for that room.”

“Okay, want to stop by Home Depot and look again for paint for the guest room?” His dimpled grin spread across his face. Though this always made her smile likewise turn up, she wondered if it was due to her saying they were done here or the idea of getting to look at unnecessary power tools under the guise of trying to find the perfect color paint.

She narrowed her eyes playfully. “As long as you don’t try to convince me we need a table saw again. They just built our home and you’re already trying to remodel.”

“Yes, I guess I could let you finish beautifying the inside before I plot to gut it. But, hey, then you can redecorate it all over again after that. You’d love that, right?” With what free range he had left, he nudged her with his elbow that in turn incited her hips to bump into his legs. Laughing, they headed for the check out.

Stepping outside, she pulled her peacoat’s belt tighter in hopes of it keeping her body warmer.

“Have you had the Jenever that Amsterdam is famous for yet, Samantha?” He placed his hand on her upper back to lead her down the museum’s steps.

Her body filled with tingles under his touch. It took all her concentration to focus on each step so that she didn’t miss one in the midst of his touch’s distraction. “No, not yet. That’s the liquor here, right?” She knew it was from reading it before this trip. *Why was she playing dumb?* She turned her head to find Andric staring at her; his blue eyes studied her face. Her blood rose to flush her cheeks and her eyes found the ground again.

“Yes. I know a place...” For a moment he was silent. Sam held her breath waiting for what he’d say next. She hoped he would offer to continue their night together; maybe then she would be able to get past his piercing eyes framed by that gorgeous face and say something of substance. She breathed out as he continued, “You know, if you’d like to go. It’s a place more for locals.” Another pause. “You know, you cannot leave Amsterdam without trying Jenever in the traditional way. This place also has Brandywine. I noticed you like the sweeter tastes from your wine before.”

Her face lit up and she felt her cheek muscles twinge from the grin stretching them farther than usual. In all of two hours, he had noticed more about her tastes, from her preference for Van Gogh’s landscapes and her choice of white or rose wines, than her ex had noticed in two years. “Yes, I’d love that. How can I pass up trying Jenever in a true local establishment?” The giggle cut off her want to add *with you* onto it.

“Excellent.” His hand moved to her arm to pull her into him with a tight squeeze. “You will enjoy tonight.”

Her pulse quickening, she thought *I already am*.

Walking through the door, her pupils dilated under the harsh light’s reflection on white linoleum. Blinking, she attempted to focus her eyes on the advertisement display. Bright orange was a poor choice for this store’s logo. Too much gaudy harshness mixed between all these elements. They could stand to let her redo their look, though she was more keen on neutrals under warm light with pops of accent colors; people would linger instead of moving on to whatever Home Depot bought project they needed to do.

Kevin wrestled with detaching a cart from its interlocking spot.

“Think we need a cart, Kev? Thought we were just browsing.”

“I’m just being precautionary. I know how paint samples and window treatments send you into fits of excitement. If I don’t grab one now, you’ll be sending me back up here so you can load it down later.”

“Says the man who attempts to purchase tools we’d need a professional to actually use if the need came.”

Kevin didn’t retort. Instead his dimples fell flat into his shadow of stubble. He pushed the cart forward and veered towards the paint department.

“I was just teasing. I know you’re good with your hands, babe.” She attempted to hide the agitation in her voice and hoped he wouldn’t catch it from her voice going up an octave to compensate. He could be unnecessarily sensitive especially when he teased her so much. Sam reflected back to what her mom would tell her and her brothers: *If you can’t take it, don’t dish it out.*

“So have you decided to stick with the comforter in that room or has it caused so much distress on choosing a paint color that you’ll buy another one? If so, might as well pick paint you like since the walls are there longer than the bedding. Unless you want to paint every time you change that too.”

Sam decided to ignore the underlying bite his suggestion held. “Yes, but I love that comforter. It’s the first one we picked out together as a couple. I’ve found a few colors that could work in there, but I just want to be sure it all works perfect together.”

Her reference to their first purchase from when they had decided to move in together called forth his dimples again. Reaching out, he grasped the back of her neck

softly and pulled her to him. “One thing I know, you are quite the perfectionist. It will be perfect, Sam.” With a gentle kiss to the temple, he released his grasp.

It wasn't that she was a perfectionist in every area, but colors, the way they mixed were important. The composition between things mattered. She turned, following Kevin down the aisle.

The alley they entered was dimly lit, but a blue and yellow neon sign shimmered brightly over halfway down before the alley opened back up into an area aglow with red. Sam could see how Wynand Fockink remained primarily a local place hid away in a side alley. “I'm surprised it's not a more known place being right off the Red Light District.”

“Tourists are probably too distracted by all the sights in the District to bother to look down side alleys. Their senses are overloaded by all that red illuminated sex.”

The mention of sex sent a quiver through her as it sparked her wondering what his body looked like under his clothes, how he kissed with those lips, and how his touch would feel. Catching herself, she felt embarrassment spread faster than her lusty reaction had.

Andric held the door open as she stepped inside. Wynand Fockink was much larger than its alley entrance had made it seem. It was dim and everything tinged in shades of brown. The room opened up to an antique looking bar and the adjacent room's tables were filled with boisterous conversation in what Sam presumed to be Dutch. Like before, Andric placed his hand on her back but this time it was the lower portion; her body quivered once more. He led her to the bar and spoke to the bald, grinning barkeep in Dutch first before transitioning to English. “Lars, this is Samantha,

from America. She wants to try Jenever, of course.”

“Well hello, Samantha from America.” Lars reached out his hand and gingerly shook Samantha’s. “Let’s get you and my friend, Andric, some Jenever then.” He pulled out two glasses that looked as if a shot glass and a champagne flute had offspring: its cup was shot size upheld by a stem as long as the top deep. The lip of the glass bent out and downward, mimicking the Dutch tulips. Lars pulled the clear bottle with the translucent Jenever and poured the shot to where the liquid hovered above the curved lip. Overfilling was not an accident; Lars repeated the top-heavy pour for the second. “Now, there is a certain special trick to drinking this. Andric, show Samantha the proper way.”

Andric smiled and winked at Samantha as he placed his arms behind his back. Bending down, his lips parted and met the lip of the glass. He slurped softly, the Jenever dropping below the lip of the glass. Once the amount of pellucid liquid disappeared that he could siphon in this way, his right arm swooped forward picking up the glass in a fluid motion that kept it pressed to his lips. He raised it as he tilted his head back taking the rest of the shot down. With another smile and a wink, he turned to Sam. “Your turn.”

She let out a deep breath and steadied herself in front of the small, overflowing chalice. Folding her arms behind her, she bowed her head down and placed her lips cautiously on the brim. Nervous she would mess up, her hand came up and grasped the small stem while she still siphoned off the top portion of Jenever. With one swoop which she was sure was not as graceful as Andric’s had been, she threw her head back and took down the rest of it. As she straightened, the stinging slight bitter taste

enveloped her tongue. Her face must have distorted as well because Andric and Lars both tried to stifle laughter. “It reminds me of gin.”

“Lars, let’s get Samantha something a bit sweeter.” Andric then spoke again in Dutch and Lars nodded his head in response before turning to a shelf of bottles with red and white Wynand Fockink labels scrawled with Dutch titles. Lars picked one up that read Zwarte bessen that she could match to what Andric had ordered her. “I think you will like this much more. It is their brand of Brandywine you can only get here.”

Lars brought the bottle back and pulled another fluted shot glass out. As he filled it, the thick deep reddish purple contrasted from the translucent Jenever of before. Once again, he filled the glass above the brim, this time the liquid more noticeably floating above the edge’s curvature.

“What kind is it?” Her eyes had been so fixed on Lars pouring she had not yet noticed he had leaned into her, his closeness now noticeable as he responded.

“Black currant. I find it to be the sweetest. Perfect for you.” His breath sent shivers through her body. “Now, go ahead. It should cut the bitterness of the Jenever.”

She lowered her lips to the rim and sipped the slightly thicker liquor before drinking the rest down. This time felt like a smoother transition and the sweet black currant taste warmed over her tongue and throat. “That was amazing.” Turning to face Andric, she was met with his hand cupping her face, his lips parted as he bowed his head to place them delicately on hers.

Wrapping her arms around him from behind, she spoke into his back. “Babe, I think you had the marks level the first time you did it. And the second. And third.” Sam squeezed Kevin hard.

He stood rocking in her embrace as he twirled the level around in his hand. “Fine, yes. I am just making sure that this painting is hung perfectly straight for my perfectionist fiancé.”

“Just admit it; you’re savoring using one of your new toys.”

Turning to face her, Kevin held the level steadily in front of her face. “This, my dear, is not a toy. It is a level. A tool. A tool that your man wields in order to tackle your epic tasks of hanging your prized pieces of artwork.” Kevin suddenly dropped to one knee crossing the level across his chest. “For I am forever at your service, my lady.”

“You are such a dork.” Overcome with laughter, she leaned back on the kitchen counter.

“Now that is no way to talk to your knight in shining armor.”

“Well, when the armor is tin foil...” Before she could finish, he gently set the level down and sprang up, catching her thin frame in his grasp and hoisting her over his shoulder. His strength always amazed her though he had once played football in college. Most saw him as the personable accountant in his suits and not this jokester jock she knew well from when they met at the end of college. “Put. Me. Down!” She squealed as he twirled her around in circles. Sam playfully beat his back.

“Not until you admit that I am your Prince Charming.” He began to twirl with more vigor.

“You won’t be charming if I puke on you. Put me down!”

“Say it.”

“Oomph. Yes. Kevin Payne, you are. My prince. In shining. Armor. Down. Now.”

“Ha, that was more than I required. Was that so hard?”

She tottered and wobbled for a moment. “Yes. You are a dork in tinfoil but you are at least my mine.” Hitting his chest, she continued, “Though that was not charming. Your princess is going upstairs to put on something more comfortable.” Rolling her eyes and feeling queasy, she made her way to their room.

“Careful, they call Dutch stairs ‘leg breakers’ and I would never forgive myself if you hurt yourself coming to my place.” Andric’s concern was also a reminder that these steep yet narrow and winding stairs leading her up to his loft made her almost miss a step. The Brandywine still warmed her cheeks and made her footing slightly less confident and the thought of being alone with him made each thing seem worse.

“So how many people live here?” She tried to maintain the conversation in the friendly realm so she could refocus on not fulfilling the leg breaker nickname. She wondered if he split the upstairs or if they would be alone. Again, she felt her attraction to him run through her nerves.

“The downstairs is split into three areas. I have the upstairs alone. So, four total. We all share the kitchen though.” He placed his hands onto her hips acting like a spotter as she neared the top.

She turned the knob and the door swung open. *He must trust his house mates not to lock it*, she thought. Inside the open loft, Andric had created defined areas through

careful placing of furniture: a sitting room, a bedroom, and a place with painting easels and bookshelves. Instinctively, she moved towards the easel. Upon it was an impressionistic landscape with multihued flowers. “You didn’t mention you were such an amazing painter.”

“Um, yes. That is why I was at the museum tonight. Helps to inspire my creativity seeing another’s.” His words spilled out shyly.

“I’m sorry. I should have waited for you to show me around. How rude of me...” Now, embarrassment flushed her already warm face with a hot glow.

“No, no. You are my guest. I wanted you to see my entire place, even this.” His eyes peered at the ground and for the first time, she saw him as nervous and tentative towards her. “It’s just revealing to have another see your artwork. Especially someone as smart and captivating like you.” He took her coat and quickly moved to the sitting area and opened a small box. “I sometimes have a puff after drinking to ease my stomach. Care for one? I wouldn’t presume you did but I could smell it mixed with your perfume at the museum.”

“Oh. Yes. I’ll have a puff with you. Kind of a night cap.” She smiled feeling assured they both were nervous. A little weed would at least take the edge off. She sat down next to him on his gray cotton couch as he made sure the glass pipe was ready to smoke. It was a swirled mix of blue, aqua, and teal. *Just like his eyes*, she thought.

He took a drag first and her eyes fixated on the way his lips met the piece and then a moment later expelled a trail of opaque smoke. “Here, Samantha.” He handed it to her and she could feel those eyes of his eyes watching her as she had just done.

Sam's lungs breathed in and held the smoke before coughing it out; in no way was that smooth and sexy like Andric's exhale. She felt his hand take the pipe from hers and she opened her eyes to see him set it on side table.

He turned back to her, placing his hand on her upper thigh. "Are you okay?"

Her head was light and her body warm. From where his hand lay, her body radiated warm pulses. Every nerve soon felt the intense flicker of his touch. She nodded and let out a quiet "Yes" as her hand likewise fell upon his leg.

This connecting circle surged forth an energy through them both. He took her face in his other hand and passionately kissed her. They collapsed in a frenzy of kissing and groping with a whole night of longing being unleashed all at once. His hand went up her blouse to find her breasts and hers likewise found his sculpted back. She could feel him bulge under his pants as they unknowingly had begun to rock their pelvises against one another. He sat up and pulled her up with him in one hurried movement. As they moved to the bedroom, she couldn't feel the steps she was taking. All she could focus on was his hands undoing buttons, his lips frantic yet soft on hers, and the warmth between her thighs spreading throughout her body now.

Standing in her underwear, Sam surveyed her side of the vast walk in closet. She had always wanted a big closet like this ever since she had thoughts of a dream home as little girl. Though Kevin was a child at times, he provided for her every desire she ever had.

She debated putting on cotton shorts and a tank or a silk nightie. She hadn't busted out the sexy stuff since they had first moved in this place. She had wanted their

first night to be in celebration of building this house together. As she bent down to open the sexy drawer, her head became light and her stomach turned again.

Instead, she opted for the cotton shorts and tank. Tonight, Kevin had only his childish ways to blame for the lack of sexy sleepwear.

She could hear him in the master bathroom, brushing his teeth. They had just finished decorating the entire master suite. Well, she had with his chiming in from time to time. Kevin was most helpful when she had narrowed down between items or colors. Like the comforters, the bathroom set, or the mirrors. He had the final say only after she had it narrowed down to two options she would approve of either way. They were a good team like that.

Turning off the closet light, she headed to the bed. Ivory and varied hued purple pillows accented the deep purple comforter. She had been surprised with this over the option of hunter green, but Kevin had picked the purple. But, it was elegant and thus fit his taste. She tossed the pillows haphazardly to either side of the bed. Kevin didn't understand the need for pillows you couldn't actually use for sleeping. She had told him it was for decoration and he had just shook his head. Some things they just didn't see eye to eye, but at least they were things like pillows.

She pulled back the comforter and slid into the ivory 800 count bamboo sheets that Kevin had insisted and she hadn't seen the need to spend that much when 500 count would suffice. Now, she secretly thanked him for it every night as she wrapped herself in their silkiness. Being brought up in money, Kevin at least understood that things like sheets, couches, and décor were investments, not costs.

As Kevin came out of the bathroom in his boxers, still chiseled as he was when he played football, she smiled. He took that as a sign of her forgiveness for spinning her around the kitchen and took the opportunity to jump onto the bed sending her bouncing before collapsing in a mingled mess of sheets, comforter, and him. *Always the child*, she mused.

He laid her back onto the bed. He gripped her under the knee and moved her left leg over to position himself between and then on top of her. He let his fingers glide over her, causing her to spasm in time with his movements.

She grasped and found his erection already hard. Her hand commanded it to grow more so.

They locked eyes and the consensus that neither could wait any longer was passed between them.

As he entered her, a burning tingle spread through her body. The feeling of him inside her fused onto the booze and weed overcoming every inch of her with an ethereal high to where she no longer felt the bed beneath her. Her nerves pulsated with every thrust of him perfectly filling her. She wrapped her legs around his body to pull him deeper into her. Never before had her whole being been filled with such euphoria.

Andric pushed his weight all the way onto his hands and took in her face, overcome with pleasure. His blue eyes locked on hers and he shifted his weight to push her hair out of her face. “You’re beautiful.”

“You’re. Perfect,” she moaned out as he quickened his pace until her body tightened in sync with his. The tightness exploded and cleared every thought as it spread from her nerves to muscles to skin; all ignited with the most intense ecstasy.

He collapsed onto her as they both gasped deeply. Slowly, the feel of his smoldering skin on hers, the bed beneath, and the loft’s surroundings returned to focus.

Opening her eyes, Sam’s pupils set on the alarm clock. It cast soft red hues onto the nightstand. She felt sticky like she had broken a fever. Pushing away the ivory and deep purple cocoon she had rolled herself in, she welcomed the cool air on her skin.

Kevin’s hand fell away and he rolled over to face the other side pulling a good portion of the now free sheets and comforter with him. He would never admit to being a cover hog.

Sam’s right foot landed on the ground and her left leg, clumsily bent at the knee, soon followed. Pushing off the bed as lightly as possible, she headed for the kitchen.

Once downstairs, she opened up the cabinet and pulled out a water glass. Turning on the tap, she first splashed her face with cold water to help wash away the night’s sweat from her brow. The coolness on her face sent a shudder down her spine and through her whole body. She toweled off her face and filled the glass.

Turning to head back upstairs, she stopped. Her pulse involuntarily quickened a beat as she took in the Van Gogh canvas. The muddled mix of blue, teal, and aqua with delicate creamy white flowers contrasted upon a dark mangled branch.

*“Beautiful, isn’t it?”*

Her lips reflexively curved into a smile. “*Yes,*” she reflected, “*it was perfect, wasn’t it?*” For a moment, she stood transfixed deep within the mingled blue with aqua and teal.

Suddenly, Sam felt the cool tile beneath her bare feet of the kitchen and she was back in her house in Ohio. She thought, “*I must compliment Kevin on hanging it perfectly straight. He really is quite handy.*” Flicking off the light, she headed back to bed.

## Revisions

An auburn hued girl bustled into the restaurant. She practically ran over to the blonde and brunette already settled in their bar seats.

“I quit my job!” Sarah eagerly told Jenny and Lindsey.

Lindsey and Jenny sat there in shock while Sarah burst into high-pitched giggles.

“I’m miserable. My boyfriend is now in North Carolina. I’m going to pack up and move there and give it a real go.”

“You’ve lost your mind,” Lindsey stammered, wide-eyed. “What will you do for a job?”

“I’ll wait tables and pick up odd jobs until I can get another one. One I’ll actually not hate my life doing.” Sarah jumped up into the tall bar seat.

“So that’s your plan? Waiting tables?” Jenny’s face contorted into one of displeasure and worry.

“We all did in college and got by just fine. I don’t see what the big deal is. Brian and I have been together for two years and now that he is there, I don’t see a reason to not go join him. We’re going to move in together and I’ll be able to pay my part off tips. Then I can work on finding a job where I don’t feel like years of my life are being sucked away.” Sarah smoothed out her top and hoped her friends likewise would level out their attacks.

“What has gotten into you?” Lindsey shook her head in rhythm with her words.

Sarah looked slyly at them out of the corner of her eyes. “Want the honest answer?”

“Of course.”

“Butt plugs!” she squealed.

Once again, Lindsey and Jenny sat, shocked.

This time, Lindsey’s mouth dropped open in astonishment.

Suddenly, Jenny burst into loud, gasping laughter. “I know we all loved *Fifty Shades of Grey*, but seriously?”

“Mitchell was curious to what we were all aroused by in that novel, so he read it. Best thing to ever happen to our relationship. It opened up the conversation for our sexual relationship. Since then, we’ve been up for trying new things in the bedroom. Let me tell you, butt plugs are the secret to the best orgasms.”

“You’re a fucking mess. You mean to tell me that you quit your damn job over butt plugs?” Lindsey said, blaming the haze of great sex for her friend’s sudden impulse to change her life.

“So, ladies,” awkwardly interrupted the bartender, “I’m guessing another round is in order for this conversation?”

“Yes,” Sarah excitedly replied. “I’ll take a Bud Light.”

“Oh, god. Now he definitely thinks we are whores.” Lindsey blushed even redder this time.

“Why would he think you two are whores?” Sarah asked.

“Well, Lindsey got all carried away about licking strippers and now you with your butt plugs. I’m just guilty by association to my slut friends.” Jenny laughed.

The bartender set the beers down in front of the girls and gave them an amused smile.

“You should have gotten that stripper’s number,” Sarah said.

“Yes, because dating a stripper is my goal in life. What was I thinking not getting his number?” Lindsey actually sounded amused and not dejected.

“Hey, you never know what can happen. If today has taught me anything, you need to just go with what feels right regardless of what anyone says.”

“Now, are you talking about quitting your job or the butt plugs again?” Jenny stifled her laughter by taking a drink of her beer.

“Hell, I guess both.”

“Now this is thesis worthy, Linds,” Jenny said.

“I can see it now, the treatment for the generation of discontent is butt plugs. That is exactly the thematic slant I need.”

“Don’t knock it until you try it.” Sarah smiled.

“With that mentality, you all cannot fucking tease me anymore about strippers or eHarmony.”

“You’re on eHarmony?”

“Yes. Figured I’d give it a try.”

“I’m so proud of you, Linds! See, we’re not content with our discontentment. Every single one of us is doing what we can. That’s something, right?”

“Never thought of it that way,” Jenny said.

“Hey, maybe there is a happy ending in the works,” Lindsey smiled and drank her beer. Maybe they all would get out of this town and live the lives they talked about at eighteen, laying in dorm rooms before life brought a change in the plot outline. Her stomach was tight and uneasy feeling. What if Sarah was making a mistake? Giving up everything with no certainty. Now all she would have is Jenny and she even was talking

about leaving for a guy. What would she do if was left alone? Her stomach got queasy. “We should order food,” she suggested.

“Yes! I’m famished.” Sarah waved over the bartender.

Lindsey took the menu from the bartender and tried to focus on the menu. She hoped the food would help her stomach. Surely it was just hunger she was feeling. But deep down, she knew it wasn’t. As she decided on the lettuce wraps, she reminded herself if there was anything she knew for sure, there is always time to edit and rewrite endings.

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