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Tight Void

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TIGHT VOID

Brooke Burns

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This thesis is a memoir that draws on the life experience of two promiscuous women, Brooke and Karen. Both characters come from upper-middle class backgrounds, have extremely similar family lives, and take two very different paths in both their education and sexual behavior. While the women both retain their strong friendship throughout the narrative, eventually, Karen, and her decision to become a prostitute, takes its toll. Though they remain supportive of one another, Karen's lifestyle of sex, drugs, and partying begins to create a disconnect between them. This thesis sheds light on the true nature of female promiscuity: its relation to feminism, race, prostitution, education, sexism, friendship, and human experience, and the ways in which female promiscuity is perceived both by society and the two main characters in the narrative.

TIGHT VOID

BROOKE BURNS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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TIGHT VOID

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CHAPTER I
CRITICAL PREFACE

We use narrative to assess cause and effect in a pattern of significance, to relate ourselves to a sense of purpose, to claim a shared reality with other people, and to identify a specificity and a continuity of self through memory. (255)

—Joanne S. Frye

My decision to work on *Tight Void* was more of a sudden realization than anything else. A few months before I began graduate school, my ex-boyfriend, Matt, from a few years back, died of a heroin overdose. Despite the fact that we hadn't been in contact for quite a while, his death triggered an intense emotional response. He was my first true love: the big love of my college years, and my experiences with him occurred during very emotionally unstable periods of my life. Not only did I cheat on him a handful of times, but I took advantage of his love and devotion, only to then fully realize this upon his death. In the back of my mind, I always knew the truth of my actions, but I didn't fully accept them until he passed away.

Having an extremely promiscuous background spanning from the age of sixteen through my mid-twenties, I began to question every sexual and romantic decision I had

ever made. I began to slowly put together a twisted sort of narrative in my head that circled around my relationship with my ex. In her essay, "Politics, Literary Form, and a Feminist Poetics," Joanne S. Frye makes sense of this seemingly bizarre thought process when she states that "...construction is accomplished in large measure through the identification of perceived beginnings and endings, for we assess our current situation in terms of its previous causes and its projected effects" (256). Matt's beginning and literal end prompted me to evaluate the lifestyle I had lived for a large part of my life. His end was the beginning of my self-examination, forcing me to constantly think about our relationship and my behavior during our time together. He was by no means perfect during the three years we were together, but he never cheated on me to my knowledge, and his love for me was extremely apparent. I, however, couldn't help but to indulge in sexual encounters. I couldn't help but wonder who I was, why I was.

Sex poems turned into short autobiographical stories which turned into a full-length memoir. So was the chronology of my creativity; and while my original intention was to self-explore my own motives and actions, I began to realize that I was shaping my views around how society viewed highly promiscuous women. Frye goes on to say that "...if the novel has grown up in association with women, it has also grown up in association with the given cultural assumptions about women's lives" (259). Though this work is memoir, I started asking myself questions in relation to Frye's idea: What does the majority of society think of highly promiscuous women and why? What do these people think that female promiscuity looks like? What do they think motivates such

women? What effects do these views have on those of us that fall into this category?
How do the effects of a patriarchal society fuel the answers to these questions?

This was just the beginning. Asking myself these questions, I already knew who I was. I was confident, creative, and smart. I was talented, honest, and caring. And yes, I was bisexual and promiscuous on a level that many would consider utterly absurd. But what did it matter? I wanted to write something that would speak to my experience, but also speak to others with similar ones, as well as to the social concerns surrounding female promiscuity. Frye explains the power of the novel and feminist poetics in a way that powerfully expresses the intent of my memoir:

In this sort of novelistic individualism, a feminist poetics can find a further expansion of the novel's capacity to speak to social concerns. Because the novel form is concerned with the lives of individuals, it opens immediately onto the social reality of both its author and its readers. Because it speaks from individual to individual...it affirms the possibility of social communication and of shared understanding. (263)

Tight Void does just that and more; to prove everyone wrong about the promiscuous female, to show the confidence gained from sexual power, and to solidify the female identity of its complexity as a blend of the "feminine" and the "masculine" on multiple levels. My whole life speaks to this, of this, and I know I can't be the only one. Not only that, but I want my memoir to be a voice for a community that doesn't normally get

one. I don't know a single girl besides myself that is as honest and open about her sexual behaviors. And I know exactly why. Fear. And I'm not afraid of myself anymore.

For much of my life I was a boy's girl. I got along very well with men, and most of them seemed to respond to me in ways they would to one of their own male friends. They enjoyed my explicit, no-nonsense talk about my sexual experiences. They enjoyed my crass, crude sense of humor. They respected my strong personality, my low voice, and blunt ways. They liked my taste in music, television shows, and movies. Aside from loathing sports, I fit right into their "masculine" world, and for a very long time, I stayed there, feeling superior to other women because of my ability to connect with men on that level so easily. Laura Kipnis, author of *The Female Thing*, points to the ways in which feminism supposedly complicates female identity as the movement progresses: "...in the wake of feminism...it's now entirely possible for women to be both different *and* similar to men simultaneously, which promotes a certain confusion...between competing theories of what women *naturally* are versus what women *can become*, or whether women should act more like men ("strong") or more like powerful women ("strong")..." (3). This kind of struggle is constantly shown throughout the narrative, where the balance between being like a man and being like a woman come into play. In reality, these differences are really just genuine human complexity versus socially imposed gender roles and behaviors. Though society continues to suggest putting both sexes into finite categories, *Tight Void* disrupts these views, giving readers a more

realistic perspective of the feminist effects on female behavior which do not comply to general stereo-typed gender behavior.

“You’re not like all the other girls,” the guys would tell me. How many times I heard that. I used to feel so flattered by that comment, but as I grew older, and especially after Matt’s death, I began to hate it. As my feminist conscience grew, so, too, did my inner struggle with my identity as a bisexual women. Kipnis identifies these consuming effects stating that “Feminism (“don’t call me honey, dickhead”) and femininity (“I just found the world’s best push-up bra!”) are in a big catfight, nowhere more than within each individual female psyche” (6-7). For me this idea was, and still is, a constant issue in both my life and in my writing. What I realized from these male friendships was that I *was* like all the other girls. I *was* a girl biologically wasn’t I? I enjoyed the stereotypical feminine things: makeup, fashion, talking about romance, watching *Sex and the City*, feeling pretty. I loved all of it, but the fellas seemed not to notice.

I suddenly became aware of their double-standards against women. I heard the “slut” comments, the female-gendered insults they would use on one another. I saw their constant objectification of women. “What about me? You know I sleep around, am I a slut?” I would ask them. “You’re different,” they would say. “It’s not the same with you.” That was the most intricate explanation I ever received. Still, the knowledge I gained eventually inspired me to break down oppressive archetypes in *Tight Void*. While

most women still tend to get categorized in strictly “good” or “bad” identities, Frye notes similar historical images of the past that still exist today:

It is by now nearly a cliché, evolving out of early feminist works on images of women, that these patterns of myth, legend, and fairy tale have characterized women in one of two dominant polar patterns: saint or witch, virgin or whore, angel or monster. On either side of the polarity, the vision of woman, even when she does act, is basically an objectification through her sexuality, a denial of her own complex subjective reality, a fixed perspective on her as an outsider rather than an agent of her own reality. (265)

But in my own experience, the many men that I was friends with seemed to exclude me from such categorizations. They accepted the many complexities of who I was. They seemed to enjoy me in that way, as if they were refreshed by it. I somehow fended off any possible judgment from them, and instead used what they would normally judge me for as a way to connect with them in friendship. For some strange reason, my promiscuous behavior was glorified by them, but other women’s promiscuity was looked down upon. Gendered insults supposedly didn’t include my own biological sex and identity. And because I was bisexual, I was assumed to be accepting and even encouraging of objectification of women. What exactly made *me* the exception?

Voice.

In my writing, in my head, in my everyday use of spoken language, I have a masculine voice. This is especially true in terms of pitch. According to Rindy C. Anderson and Casey A. Klofstad, “Human voice pitch– ‘highness’ or ‘lowness’ in fundamental frequency as determined by the size of the larynx and length and mass of the vocal folds–is sexually dimorphic (on average twice as high in women compared to men [2]), and influences how speakers are perceived” (1). While my physical voice certainly doesn’t sound mannish, its pitch is clearly lower than the average female’s. Though its pitch cannot be detected in my written word, it does play into the many kinds of experiences I’ve had with men. The pitch contributes to my ability to connect with them so well; years of which have only intensified the masculinity of my voice in terms of content and style. Anderson and Klofstad go on to say that, “Men and women also prefer female leaders with lower-pitched voices, and similarly associate them with traits such as competence and trustworthiness [7]” (1). The view that men are more competent than women, one of many factors fueling today’s sexism, increased these men’s respect for me, thereby immediately establishing a foundation for a positive relationship with them in which they naturally assumed me to be more competent than other women. The trustworthy aspect also played a huge role in that these men’s willingness and ability to open up to me was encouraged by my lower pitched voice.

Furthermore, many associations surrounding the feminine go against my female voice in this memoir. In “The Experimental Feminine” Joan Retallack explains that “The Feminine has been invidiously understood as weak, indeterminate, contingent, fuzzy

thinking...it's been particularly courageous for women to work in the territory of the Feminine, insofar as it can be called distracted, interrupted, cluttered, out of control" (94). Despite the fact that the content I write about is considered feminine (rape, sex, relationships, female friendship), the "Feminine" aspects that Retallack talks about are completely removed from my speaking voice as narrator of the text. My experiences are written with certainty and clarity. Myself as the protagonist is independent and highly focused on each happening, even during extremely chaotic circumstances like, for example, when the character of my mother is screaming at my recently raped eighteen-year-old self. The thought process is one of extreme precision, thinking every step through as it happens in order to achieve my escape and the desired insurance information so I can go to the hospital to have my tampon removed after the incident without her knowledge. What Retallack characterizes in the "Feminine" as "out of control," "distracted," and "weak" among others, are completely absent in the narrative. My voice in the memoir challenges the assumptions of what Retallack describes as the "Feminine," suggesting my voice to be the opposite: that which would be considered masculine despite my biological sex and female gender identity.

The voice of my work breaks down the binaries of what is perceived as a masculine and feminine voice. Retallack talks of the "Experimental Feminine" in terms of male-female opposites. "Feminine is all that is not masculine and vice versa. (Although there are feminine men and masculine women.)...The experimental feminine is all that is not business as usual and vice versa" (90). In other words, "business as

usual” would then be the experimental masculine, but this term implies anything but experimental. “Business as usual” stirs up ideas of orderliness, proper functioning, and ordinary doings as a natural state of mind and in place despite interruptive circumstances. In order to make this idea truly experimentally masculine, according to Retallack’s claims, would be for a woman to utilize this opposite within her work. In *Tight Void*, this is true throughout; especially when the character of Karen randomly announces to the protagonist (me) that she is a prostitute upon my first visitation to her after a number of years without contact. My calm and immediate suggestion that she read the book *Rent Girl* displays this “business as usual” approach in my response to what many would perceive as alarming news. Karen’s reaction of surprise to the relaxed nature of my response shows the confusion of what she would expect from a female, or in this case Retallack’s experimental feminine.

Of course, it’s not as if the two can’t be blended in various ways. Most people do not fit into extreme categories of “masculine” or “feminine identities.” Though it’s much easier to assume that humans are all one or the other, the possibilities certainly range. Retallack discusses this idea in the following:

You can’t have either without both. Masculine-Feminine, Rational-Irrational...are terms that locate limiting conditions for a very complex range of mixes and possibilities that wiggle, slip, slide, elide, combine, recombine, morph, mongrelize. Binaries play the social role of bracketing

the noise, the silences, the messy misfits we don't have the cultural energy or angle of vision to attend to. (99)

Though these combinations are much more common than many people like to admit, they exist in a world that attempts to ignore them. Women must talk, act, and speak in a certain way, while men must talk, act, and speak a in certain way: the perceived feminine versus the perceived masculine. And despite these socially constructed behaviors, I use them to my advantage through my voice, both in the physical world and on the page. I use "the cultural energy" and "angle of vision" that we often fail "to attend to" in terms of gender binaries to gain my readers' attention through my use of the experimental masculine by giving them the knowledge that the speaker (me) is female.

In this sense, my use of a masculine voice destabilizes the text and forces the reader to engage more deeply with the work. For a woman to write about stereotypically feminine things using a masculine voice shakes readers' notions of female sex and gender identity. Theorist Susan S. Lanser discusses this kind of instability in her article "Queering Narratology" using the novel *Written on the Body* as her sole example. She states that "Although the narrator's sex is never identified in *Written on the Body*...that absence surely does not stop readers from looking for *gender* markers through which to constitute that narrator's sex and with it his/her sexuality—and hence to stabilize the text" (389). This effort by readers to stabilize texts through these markings is precisely what feeds the uncomfortable, yet oddly appealing nature of *Tight*

Void. Unlike *Written on the Body*, where no sex or gender is explicitly stated, my work specifically identifies me as female. This causes readers to have specific expectations about style and voice within the work; especially considering the subject matter. Hence, the masculine voice serves as a destabilizing force of the text.

For example, when I talk about my affair with a married man, many people would expect a great deal of emotion concerning such an experience. Undoubtedly, being the “other woman” can be an emotional rollercoaster, but at that point in my (the protagonist’s) life, he is not the first lover I have that has been romantically involved with someone else. My feelings toward him are purely friendly and sexual, mostly physical in fact, and very little emotional turmoil is explicitly stated or even implied. The seemingly conflicted nature of my sex and masculine voice produces the same kind of “anxiety” that “makes *Written on the Body* so compelling a narrative...sex is a far more integral and important component of narrative than narratologists have recognized” (389). Indeed, by marking myself as female, I defy the expectation that I will become attached or feel some sort of love for him. I defy the socially constructed image of the love-torn, rejected, self-loathing woman who searches for security in a man she can never have. But the masculine voice allows me to have him in the way I want: for purely physical pleasure. The masculinity of the voice and the action in the text breaks down the binaries of male-female voices further by situating myself as a woman in a position of power, choice, and control.

This isn't to say that *Tight Void* completely lacks *any* emotion. Emotion concerning the happenings to me in the text is written about, and, in actuality, my strong emotions regarding these events allowed me to write the text using the masculine voice. Many readers, though perhaps surprised by using such a voice in my narrative, would still suspect that there had to be more emotion involved than what is written. This would be correct. Assuming that many readers would believe that because I am a woman, and therefore a more emotional creature than a man, I most certainly must have dealt with deep feelings surrounding the experiences I write about. However, one of my aims is to control the emotional level of the text in order to justify the "emotional" nature of women as being practical. My concern is that of the nature of the emotions themselves. When emotion is expressed, it's used as a way to think practically through different situations. In her essay, "Emotional Rationality as Practical Rationality," feminist philosopher Karen Jones argues the practical nature of emotional response:

Emotions are able to shape both cognition and motivation through their effects on what we experience as reasons for belief and reasons for action. Proponents of quasi-perceptual accounts variously describe emotions as "cognitive sets, interpretive frameworks, patterns of attention," and "species of determinate patterns of salience among objects of attention, lines of inquiry, and inferential strategies" [Calhoun and De Sousa]. (335-336)

In short, emotions can help guide us down the right path. They help us indicate what is right and wrong. They help us understand and interpret the events we experience. In these ways, Jones shows us that emotions should not be viewed as weakness; rather they are tools with which we can use to make the best decisions for ourselves. As long as we realize when our emotions are on super-charge, we can take a step back, cool off, and use what we've learned from extremely intense emotions to better ourselves and our situations. These are ideas I want to get across through my work by carefully choosing the amount of my emotion presented in the text and the purpose it serves, showing readers that women can, in fact, control their emotions and (oh my!) have the ability to use their emotional intelligence for practical ways of thinking and handling life circumstances.

Jones goes on to state that “[a]ccording to quasi-perceptual accounts of the emotions, emotions have at least the following cognitive roles: they (1) focus attention, (2) direct inquiry, (3) shape interpretation, and (4) structure inference” (336). All four of these roles are true for my work, where emotions play a huge role in shaping the text, despite my own character's emotional states being carefully controlled within the work.

Part of this desire is to prove to men that women are not as emotional as they think we are, and to show the character of the extremely promiscuous woman as unattached, unbroken, and in emotional control of her sexual experiences. Too often, people have unjustified opinions about promiscuous women: that we are immoral, dumb, worthless, or emotionally broken. By controlling the emotions of myself as the

protagonist within the text, I reject these popular beliefs by displaying a strong sense of emotional balance in my character. In actuality, the specific situations that take place in my work such as being propositioned for a blowjob in exchange for marijuana, fending off an insane and drunken mother, and being raped by an anonymous male, are particular types of situations in which I am able to turn off my emotional switch for one reason or another, though for what reasons, the protagonist does not know the answer.

Despite my own character's masculine voice and controlled emotion, the other characters in *Tight Void* have clear, strong displays of it. The characters of my mother and Karen continuously feel strong bouts of emotion, both of which are triggered by the same event, leading to completely different responses because of the two kinds of relationships I share with each of them. In the situation where my mother is screaming and throwing papers at me because she is suspicious of my inquiry about health insurance, she is clearly motivated by anger, distrust, various pills, and alcohol. Karen, who walks in on the fight between my mother and I, reacts in anger against her because of the way she is treating me. Karen's emotion causes her to stand up to my mom and get her to back down, which she is successful in doing. Jones clarifies these types of responses in the following:

Because emotions structure interpretation and inference through shifts in perception of considerations as reason giving, emotions can help agents become aware of how their values are engaged by a particular

choice situation (compassion, for example, highlights considerations that call for a helping response). (344)

With this in mind, it becomes apparent that Karen's emotional response is also one of compassion, motivating her to help me because she cares for me as her friend and she recognizes the mistreatment of me by my mother because of similar experiences she has with her own. My mom, on the other hand, though her emotions do "structure interpretation and inference through shifts in perception," responds with emotional irrationality because of external forces: pills, alcohol, and long-term effects of childhood abuse, both physical and psychological. Though my mother's emotions are a result of her suspicions, her reaction becomes that of intense anger instead of caring concern because of her instability. Though emotions can and do produce rational thought, in this case she becomes wildly irrational despite her valid interpretation of the situation. By allowing for the other characters in my work to show vivid emotion during such events, I ground myself as the emotionally stable protagonist.

Social class and race must also be accounted for within my work. As a white woman coming from an upper-middle class, suburban background, everything that takes place in the narrative is through the lens of privilege. Particularly as it relates to prostitution, the ways in which Karen views the profession are deeply affected by the social standing of white women in current society. Lynn Weber, author of *Understanding, Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*, points out the dominance of white women in the fight against male power: "...White women in

particular have continued to improve their strategic position to resist oppression during the recent period of increased democratization and cultural change” (46). In this sense, Karen’s views on hooking are filled with female empowerment, a step towards something better, a way to control men and reap the financial benefits. She sees her aim to attend school as being supported through her sex work. What she doesn’t take into account are her race and class. Though Karen has the full financial and emotional support from her father to obtain a degree, she still chooses prostitution as her main source of income. However, other women I met through her in the business did not have any such options. Those who did were white. Those who didn’t were women of color. Though my experience with them was certainly limited in the overall scope of things, the fact that this was the case is no surprise. As a result, both Karen and I make decisions based on our privilege, and so, too, are our own perspectives of promiscuity, prostitution, and possibility, impacted subconsciously by the racialization of class in our culture in the story.

My own views come into play more than Karen’s, due to the fact that the story is written in first-person present tense at various ages in my life from sixteen to twenty-seven. In each section, I establish an age or time that indicates to the reader what my possible maturity and educational level would have been at during that experience. It’s important for readers to understand the authenticity of the “I” within my different frames of mind. This “I” shows a true account of the sociological factors affecting my thought process and actions surrounding the major issues of the text: feminism,

promiscuity, prostitution, friendship, family, and success. Certain parts of the narrative are, in fact, very explicit about my own inner turmoil concerning my automatic judgments and responses. Most importantly, these aspects bring out the truly human nature of the work, the flawed complexity of the self against society.

Employing these various feminist, philosophic, and poethical theories, I aim to use the power of my voice to destabilize *Tight Void* in a way that can successfully connect to male and female, young and old, gay, straight, bisexual, and transgendered audiences. My ability to appear feminine on the outside, but still display a strong masculine personality, especially within my writing, serves to connect to this wide range of readership. Being female both in gender and biology disrupts the expectations of readers when they read the clearly masculine and emotionally balanced traits of my voice in this memoir. This is only compounded by the fact that the subjects I write about are typically written by women. More often than not, readers expect a “feminine” voice to accompany such topics as sex, romance, adolescence, and female friendship. The kind of voice I offer here is defiant, yet engaging because of its masculine qualities. My own life experiences have led me to this kind of voice and personality, and destabilize the text in a way that keeps the reader’s attention. This is precisely my goal. I know that if I have the ability to transcend expectations of gender in my everyday life, I certainly have the ability to do the same thing on paper.

I want to reach more than just the people that have come in and out of my life, though I truly value each and every one of them. I want to make another feminist mark

on the world because we need all that we can get; for all women, for all promiscuous women, for the hookers and strippers everywhere, for the scantily clad, for the closeted sex-fiends, the gold-diggers, the models, the sexy librarians, the drag queens, the kings, the cross-dressers, the metro-sexuals, the gay men and their hags, and for the whole damn feminine world. I want the beautiful shades of masculine and feminine to collide, exploding into a thousand sparkling genders.

CHAPTER II

TIGHT VOID

“Yo, there’s someone following us.”

“What?”

“Yeah, right behind. I think it’s a cop.”

“Shit!” I say. “Fuck!”

Karen and I are driving back from Chicago where we bought some weed off a friend of mine from high school who now goes to North Park University. We’ve gotten lost, and we’ve stupidly been smoking in the car with the windows shut. This car has gotta reek. Plus, the weed’s mine, not Karen’s, and I’ve got two pipes on me. If we get caught, it’s my ass, not hers.

“It’s fine. We’re gonna be fine,” she says.

At 19 years old, I trust her. I’ve never been in trouble with the cops before, but Karen has. She’s had way more experience with this stuff. She just got arrested and charged with possession a couple of weeks ago. I’m sure she knows how to handle the police.

Sure enough, cop lights go on, signaling us to pull over.

“Okay, okay, okay. Just let me handle this. It’s gonna be fine,” she assures me.

I believe her. I trust her. Experience counts right?

A young, attractive male cop taps on the window for her to open. I can see he's got blondish hair and blue eyes, probably pretty new to the police force. He can't be more than three or four years older than us.

Goddammit, why did we have to smoke in the goddam car?

Karen rolls down the window. Before he can even speak she launches into a full-scale explanation complete with apology at the speed of fucking light.

"I'm really sorry officer, we're lost. We don't know where we are, we were in the city visiting a friend and we got lost on the way back, we have no idea where we are, we're just trying to find our way back to the highway and we don't know how to get there. I don't even know what suburb this is or how to get back or anything, I'm really sorry we just don't know where—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he stops her. "I haven't even said anything yet. Just let me talk for a second, okay?"

You dumb bitch Karen! What the fuck?! What the fuck are you doing?

I want to kill her. She's practically begging for him to cuff us right now. I always thought acting calm and natural was the way to go, but Karen seems to have her own method. This might explain why she got caught a couple weeks ago. The cop seems really friendly, though, but definitely suspicious.

Please god don't let me get arrested. Please god. This shit doesn't happen to people like me!

“Thank you. Okay, first of all, do you know why I pulled you over?” he asks.

“No, sir.”

“You were speeding 10 miles over the limit.”

“I’m really sorry officer, I didn’t know I was speeding, I never speed. I’m a really good driver I swear! We’re just lost and we don’t know where we are and we don’t know how to get home and I was just trying to get us unlost and we didn’t even think you were a cop at first, we just thought someone was following us until you got really close and—”

“Miss, Miss! Have you been drinking alcohol tonight?”

“No, sir I do not drink alcohol.”

Oh my god, I am going to fucking kill you, Karen! What the fuck is wrong with you? Just shut the fuck up!

I decide to chime in. I think I can save us. Maybe.

“Officer, I’m really sorry. She’s just upset because we got so lost. We really had no idea that we were speeding. We’re just trying to get home. We’re from Naperville, and we just got a little lost on the way back from the city. We don’t go there too often.”

I speak calmly, like a wise queen. I articulate each word precisely and with steady confidence.

He looks over at me, and I give him the most innocent, good-kid look I can muster up. *Hi! I’m Brooke and I’m a good kid! No need to arrest me!*

It's probably a good thing I'm out of my hippy phase so I'm actually dressed like someone who looks like they have their shit together and is going to school. Thank god I decided to start wearing bras again. Image is key in this situation, and Karen has already painted a terrible one. Our eyes must look red as fuck, but at least someone knows how to act normal. I think it's working. I notice he loosens his stance and his eyes soften a little.

"All right, ladies. I know it's easy to get lost coming back from the city. Let me ask you, is there anything illegal in this vehicle that I should know about?"

I answer before Karen can talk so she won't fuck anything up.

"No, officer. We're supposed to go home and watch *Lost* with our friends. We're just trying to find our way back." I smile at him. It's filled with hope and confidence.

"Okay, well, I'll take both your driver's licenses. I'm just gonna run a check on them, and as long as nothing shows up, you girls can go."

"Thank you so much officer," I say just a touch too appreciatively.

We give him our IDs, and he goes back to his car.

"Dude, is your arrest gonna show up when he runs your license?"

"No idea."

"Fuck."

10 minutes pass.

"Okay, ladies, you're good to go. Just make a left at the third stop sign down and keep going. That'll get you to 55."

“Thank you officer. Thank you so much! You have a good night!” Karen says much too excitedly.

“Yes, thank you officer.”



I wanna be a prostitute. Just one time, ya know? I wanna know what it’s like to get paid for providing sexual pleasure. My friend Karen is a prostitute, and she makes good-ass money. And she tells me all about it. Topless massages with happy endings, at her house. She lives with other prostitutes and they seem nice. In a shitty part of Logan’s Square.

I mean, obviously I would want to do it to a hot guy. He would have to be hot. I’m not sucking no ugly dick for money. A nice, handsome dick would do just fine. I have standards. And it could be in a car, though I would prefer a hotel. Not to be confused with a motel.

I want the real deal.

This isn’t an undercover experience or an experiment. It’s just being a prostitute.

I wanna be able to say I did it. I wanna join the prostitute gang. Be the classy one.

I wanna do business and be an academic because it’s possible. I wanna write and fuck and I will.

And at some point, get paid.

It can be a friendly arrangement. This shit doesn't have to be shady. I wanna know the guy and then never see him again, but I probably will and we will always know that I was a prostitute and it will be our little thing.

And that's the only way. Because what's fucking like when it's not free?

What's a dick like for money?

All I can hope is that someone will proposition me. A friend or casual acquaintance.

Even an attractive man at a bar in a nice restaurant in Indianapolis.

No one would suspect Indianapolis.

I did get propositioned once. Shortly after my college boyfriend from years prior died of a heroin overdose. And let me tell you, there's nothing to kill your sex drive like the death of your ex-boyfriend.

It must have been a week later and I'm buying weed from Curtis, this guy I've been sleeping with for a year and a half. He sells me weed, along with providing a rebellious sexual outlet.

Apparently, he is dying to get his dick sucked. I can always tell when he's getting horny because he gives me these hungry looks at work. He'll walk by me and barely touch my ass. Discreetly. No one sees. He'll offer to make me food, give me a discount on a menu item that isn't allowed, rub his dick against me if we happen to both be in the walk-in cooler.

Normally, he treats me like everyone else. He's afraid of anyone finding out, and he doesn't want to give me too much attention for fear that I might develop an emotional attachment to him. Lucky for me we have absolutely nothing in common except for work and marijuana. A romantic relationship would never work. This I know.

Not to mention, this isn't the first time I've been the other woman. I know how these things go.

But either way, we're sitting in his car in the restaurant parking lot way in the back. Smoking a bowl, and he offers to drive me up to where my car is parked. I haven't yet paid for the gram.

"If you don't wanna pay for this, you know how you can."

"What?"

He nods down, towards his dick, which is covered in the pajama-like uniform he wears to work.

"Ohhhhh, shit, I forgot I haven't paid you yet."

"Like I said, you know what you can do if you'd rather save the 20 dollars."

I laugh. "Curtis, you know you're basically propositioning me to be a hooker right now."

"Aw, noo, no, I'm not."

"Well, I mean, yeah, you are. I'm not offended, I just think it's funny, and to be honest I *am* tempted. I've got this story I wanna write about me and my friend Karen who's a prostitute and I just wanna do it once to see what it's like, ya know? I know it

sounds weird, but seriously, for art's sake I just wanna try it, so I can write about it, have a way to relate to her or something.”

“No, I get it.”

Of course he does.

“Look, I would, but seriously, I've just felt weird since Matt died. I don't know, I'm just really not in the mood if you know what I mean. I'll get there, but just, not now. I'm sorry.”

Missed opportunity.

And how many others will there be? In 25 years that's the first time anyone has offered me something in exchange for a sexual favor. The only exception I can think of is when my ex was still alive and we were dating. I used to give him blowjobs in exchange for full body massages.

But that's different, right?

I think it is.

Maybe becoming a one-time hooker is something that's likely to naturally unfold. I'm not gonna go looking for it. God knows, I am not willing to advertise myself as an escort. Much less solicit anyone in real life.

It's also possible that I'm all talk and no action.



Karen's pretty open about her profession. She's never told me not to tell anyone about it. I've told plenty of people, maybe because I find it interesting. I find her

interesting. Her lifestyle fascinates me and part of me wants everyone to know how cool I am for having a hooker friend. Maybe not cool, but having her as a friend makes me seem more fascinating.

I think she feels the same way about me.

“Oh, Brooke, you’re the one I always brag about. I even tell my Dad about you all the time. I mean, shit, you’re the one who made something of yourself. And your mom’s way crazier than mine. I’m just so goddamn proud of you, you have no idea. I’m just so proud that I can call you my friend, that I have you in my life. I mean, you’re Brooke fuckin Burns, ya know? That’s what you do. You stay up late and work long hours and you get your fuckin shit done. And you’ve always been like that as long as I’ve known ya.”

She tends to ramble when she’s coked up.

Maybe our friendship is just based on pure fascination. When we met eight years ago I never would have thought she would eventually have a coke addiction and spend two years in jail for it. I never thought she’d be living in downtown Chicago, running a sex operation out of her apartment. And I don’t think she ever thought I’d be in graduate school for creative writing. I certainly didn’t think so. I spend my days with academics and awkward writers. She spends hers with hookers and drug dealers.

Funny enough, we’re both whores. I don’t know how many people Karen’s slept with and while I’m sure her number’s higher than mine, that number doesn’t make mine any less whorey. About 90 for me. Karen, I’d guess thousands.

I've never charged.

I always thought sex was fun and it should stay that way. I think Karen agrees, but she sees no valid reason why you can't get paid for it. I get it. She makes a fuck-load more money than I do. Shit, if I took up hooking I wouldn't have to take out any student loans and live off a pitiful stipend. I could buy new clothes every day, and pay my bills no sweat.

Then again, I often let only the best qualities become visible to me.



Karen and I meet in high school when I'm 17 because she buys weed from my boyfriend. I have this habit of dating cute suburban, rich boys whose parents give them everything they want and yet still feel the need to not only smoke as much weed as possible, but to sell as much as possible too. Drug dealer boyfriend number two is Nate Benson, and I find myself spending long summer days at his house, his parents never home, smoking joints to the sounds of live Phish albums on the patio.

Most of Nate's customers are male. Very few females, but I'm not one for getting competitive over a guy and Nate is clearly obsessed with me, exactly what I want as a teenager with Daddy issues and a verbally abusive, hyper-controlling mother with deep-seeded psychological issues, bordering on insanity.

Nate's sweet and tells me he loves me after two weeks of knowing him. It's right after we have sex for the first time and my cousin Laura is visiting. She and I go outside on my balcony afterwards, silly clowns bellowing in the night.

“Dude, dude! Nate *totally* just said he loved me!” I practically yell out to my entire apartment complex.

“Are you fucking serious?” she laughed. “That’s hilarious!!!”

“I know, dude! I can’t fucking believe that shit. What an *idiot!*”

I could be kinder, but I like having the power over him that I do, and something about making fun of him for being so emotionally forward and needy makes me feel better about myself. There’s something about him that makes me feel like I have control over something in my life.

So when Karen is over at his house, months later during a dry, suburban summer, I’m not worried. She’s assertive. Friendly. Quite talkative. And has the natural energy level of the Tasmanian devil. I can’t help but notice her perfectly flawless, pale skin and long blonde hair. Her eyes are all hazel and energy. I would kill for her perfect skin. I always feel like everyone can see all my pimples.

“Hi! I’m Karen! It’s really nice to meet you! I didn’t know Nate was dating anyone. That’s awesome! You’re really pretty! Hey, we should all smoke! Somebody got a pipe I can pack? Do you go to North too? How did you meet Nate?”

I lie on a lawn chair, sunglasses hiding my sticky red eyes, trying to take in the bombardment that is Karen. “Yeah, uhhh, I go to North,” I say, slowly hoisting myself up into sitting position. “I’m gonna be a senior. I—”

“That’s *awesome!* Me too! I mean, I’m gonna be a junior, but I’m graduating early. Are you taking summer school? I am! I’m taking Consumer Ed over at Central.

How did you and Nate meet?" she cuts me off as she starts pulling apart the weed for the bowl we're going to smoke. Nate just gives me a wide-eyed look and an awkward smile.

"Umm, well...it's kind of complicated. Nate liked me all year, didn't you?" I look to him and he grins shyly. "So, I didn't really know who he was, I just knew that some guy named Nate Benson liked me, and then finally a mutual friend set us up."

"That's awesome! I've known this kid for years. He's a great guy!" She nods her head towards him.

Nate's cellphone goes off. "Hey, someone's outside for me in the driveway, I'll be right back." he says, as he grabs a baggie of weed and leaves the two of us alone.

"Here. You get the first hit," says Karen, as she passes me the pipe.

"Are you sure? It's your weed. You should get greens first."

"No, no, no. It's all you girl."

"Thanks!"

"So, hey I just want you to know that I have absolutely no interest in Nate whatsoever."

"Oh, okay."

"I mean, I just know that maybe it might seem like that, but that's seriously not the case at all, and I would never try anything. I've known Nate for years and we're just friends."

“Oh, I mean, thanks. But I really didn’t get that impression from you, and I’m really not worried about Nate going after other girls anyway.”

“That’s cool. That’s cool. Yeah, I just want to make sure, I mean, cuz you know how some girls can be, and I know he doesn’t really hang out with a lot of girls.”

“No, dude. Don’t even worry about it. You seem cool,” I tell her. “Hey, let me pack one since you just did. This one’s done.”

I like this chick. She’s ballsy.

I start packing another bowl. Nate’s still outside.

“Yeah, actually, I’m taking Consumer Ed too. Maybe we’ll be in the same class.”

“That would be awesome! I need more girlfriends in my life. I hate most girls! They’re so bitchy, and fuckin stupid about the stupidest shit.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“But you seem cool.”



Karen’s visiting me in Bloomington, Illinois this weekend. She’s helped move me to this town twice now, but has never stayed for a visit. It’s my first year of graduate school and she’s finally decided to take the trip. I’ve already warned two of roommates, Alex and Jerry, about her coming. But I haven’t seen Mike around. I have this fleeting instinct that he, above any of my other roomies, should know about Karen. Probably because he sleeps with a different girl practically every night, and I can totally see him hooking up with her. But as many chicks as Mike bangs, I’m not sure if he’d do her

knowing she's a prostitute. Part of me feels guilty for feeling like I need to warn him at all, or anyone else for that matter. Is there some reason I need to make an announcement?

Oh well. I'm not gonna make any personal phone calls about this. He can make his own decisions. Most likely, we won't even see him.

But Karen has arrived. I pick her up at the train station and it is so damn good to see her. The girl's got energy, even when she's not amped up. When she first got into the drug I used to have a really hard time recognizing when she was on the shit, because the girl talks so damn fast and intensely when she's sober, a distinguishable difference between Karen on coke and Karen not on coke is slight.

It's been months. She looks good. She's always been a pretty girl, with her wild sunshine locks. She's definitely got sex appeal. And BIG fuckin tits. I mean seriously. These things are ridiculous. It's like she's the whole sky with blimps attached, and they're constantly hovering near you.



Some months earlier, I'm visiting Karen for the first time in four years. I have no idea she's hooking. She had gone to jail for cocaine possession shortly after I transferred back to Illinois State University my junior year. Eventually, she found me on Facebook after getting out early for good behavior and then living in a halfway house for a while. Thank god for social networking sites or I don't think I'd have any friends.

All I know is that she's been living in an apartment with a couple other girls and is waitressing. My step-sister's staying at a hotel in the city and there's little room, so Karen's letting me stay with her.

There is no fucking parking in the city. Goddammit.

I call her in my frustration.

"Oh yeah, just go ahead and park behind the store out front. You won't get towed."

"Okay, fer sure."

She comes outside to meet me, highly drunk and energetic. "Holy shit, girl! I'm so fuckin' happy to see ya! You look amazing! Here, let me help you with your bags! Holy shit this is crazy, I can't believe it's been so long!"

She embraces me in a hug that could kill a baby. But I don't mind. I've missed her and I love the crap out of her. It's good to be with an old friend.

"Come on in! Come on in! Come on in!" She waves me forward into the apartment. The place is nicer than I thought it would be. High ceilings and mediocre cleanliness. I had half-expected a dump. I see fake lemonade and cheap vodka on the coffee table. A droopy Pit bull roams the rooms. Oscar. Three spacious bedrooms all in a row and a giant living area with connecting kitchen. It looks like *Girls Gone Wild* took over and renovated an old factory room.

"You wanna drink?!"

"Umm, sure."

She mixes me the vodka and lemonade. Way too much vodka, I can already tell. Not a huge vodka fan either, but if I'm gonna drink it, I'd prefer it at least be higher-end. I take a few sips and immediately feel sick. My stomach tells me to fuck off.

"Umm, can we smoke?" I ask as I sit down on the large couch, covered in so many blankets, pillows, and clothes, I can't even tell what color it is.

"Fuck yeah! Lemme get a bowl."

Her boobs have tripled in size since I've last seen her. She's put on a little weight, but it looks as if nearly all of it has gone to her tits. They look like giant watermelons attached to a blonde.



I'd only been there an hour when she comes out with it.

"Dude, I'm a prostitute, I'm a fucking prostitute!"

Pause. How do I respond?

"You know, I read this book called *Rent Girl* and I think you'd really like it. It's about this writer who was a prostitute for a long time. It's really good!"

"A book? A BOOK!? I tell you I'm a prostitute and you tell me to read a BOOK?!"

"Welllll, what do you want me to say? I mean... it's your choice and I don't judge you, I'm just not sure how you want me to respond."

"I don't know, but... a fucking book?"

Laughter, laughter, laughter.

“But I mean, I DO think you would really like it. I just think you could connect to it.”

“I don’t know. Where’s my bag? Anyone seen my bag?”

“Of weed?”

“No, it’s coke. Shit, I just had it.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck don’t offer me any don’t offer me any don’t offer me any.

I’m the one who finds it.

“Is this it?”

“YES! Thank you.”

She grabs it and leaps toward her room.

Good, stay in there don’t offer me any don’t offer me any don’t offer me any.

A few minutes later she comes out. No sign of the cocaine. I’m still worried she’s gonna offer me some and if she does I know I will say yes. I can’t even be around it anymore. It’s been over five years since I was a cokehead and even though it was only for a few months, to this day I cannot be in the same room with cocaine.

If I find out someone does coke I immediately stay away from them. Cokeheads are shady. Karen is the exception. Kind of. And right now she seems more drunk than coked up and that’s a good sign. I’m not sure how many of those vodka-lemonades she’s put away, but she is fucking excited and I’m not sure what she’s talking about half the time and it just keeps going on and on and on and on.

“Yeah, I’ve put on some weight, but it’s not bad. I mean shit, look at these tits!
They’re huge!”

“Yeah, they are pretty big.”

“No, they’re fucking huge! Seriously, look at ‘em!”

She tears off her shirt where beneath it lie her bare breasts.

“Do you see this shit!?”

Karen, totally topless, sitting there with her chin perked up and a proud expression on her face. Her roommates incessantly laugh. So do I. I remember my friend Meghan telling me a long time ago that when a girl randomly rips off her t-shirt, she just instantly touches the bottom part of the boob to make it less awkward. For some reason, I don’t think that will work in this situation, and I can’t help to wonder how many times this has happened to Meghan. I think this is a first for me, and I can’t stop laughing and staring.



Karen’s visit to Bloomington gets off to a shaky start. She’s thrilled to be here, but she keeps making frequent trips to the bathroom. She’s been open thus far about the fact that she’s using, but she acts like it’s no big deal.

“Oh ya know, it’s just cuz I was so excited to see ya and I wanted to have a little fun that’s all. It’s definitely not a regular thing. Just every now and then.”

Liar.

Cokeheads are such liars.



If there's one thing I've learned from Karen's addiction to coke is that it will make you do almost anything to get more of it. I was no exception at 20, when Karen offered it and curiosity got the best of me. Three months later, I found myself doing lines in the car with Matt, on the way to volleyball class at community college, playing more games of Rummy than I ever thought possible, and spending a couple of grand on this shit in the process.

I started showing up hours late to work, and Matt would steal his mom's Klonopin to help with the come-downs, which make you feel like nothing in the world will ever be right again. And it hurts, physically, not in the way a stomach hurts or a punch to the face would. It's like your body can sense the depression you're feeling from the come-down and it manifests itself in your bones and muscles, all through your blood and straight to your organs. And there's nothing your brain can do. You just have to sit there for hours and hours, unable to sleep, having to bear the shut-down and recovery of your mind and body with full consciousness. If someone touches you, you shutter in anger.

At least, that's how it was for me.

Other people I've known who've done it or do it currently, claim their come-downs aren't that bad. I'm sure it's different for everyone. All I know is that when Matt did our last line of coke one day without sharing it with me I freaked the fuck out.

"Did you just do that last line?"

“Um, yeah.”

“Dude, what the *FUCK?!?*!”

“What? It was small.”

“I don’t give a fucking shit. You don’t just do the last *goddam* line of coke! That’s *my* shit too!”

“Brooke, I’m *SORRY*. I didn’t know. It was just *there* so I did it.”

“Yeah, I broke out that fucking line, Matt. That was for *me*.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was such a big deal!”

“*Yeah*, it’s a big deal! You know what happens when I come down. I needed that last line, I fucking *needed* it!”

“I have some Klonopin, I’ll just *give* it to you okay?!”

“I don’t want your fucking Klonopin, Matt! I want my *fucking line* of coke!”

“Well, it’s gone now, so get the *fuck* over it.”

“Dude, *fuck* you!”

“*Fuck you!*”

And that’s when I decided to quit doing cocaine.



Karen and I get in some good quality time during her Bloomington visit. We sit in my room, smoking bowls, and I don’t say anything about the constant trips to the bathroom.



Karen: "I wanna be an investigative journalist. I wanna expose the hypocrisies...and the *ironies* of American society. No but I do, I think there's a lot of unjust laws and I wanna get into the forefront and I imagine myself at the forefront.

"Cuz you don't get listened to enough. You need to look like them and *earn* their trust. It's like Tupac pretending he was a thug to get African Americans to listen to him. He was. He went to a white high school, ballet, drama classes, acting classes... When you listen to him talk when he wasn't rapping he almost sounded *gay, okay?* But I'm serious. I'm so serious he wasn't. But he put on the persona so he could get his audience to *fucking* respect him and then listen to him.

"You have to be them. You have to. You have to be one of them in order to get there, to do anything.

"I don't have the connections, I'd have to marry someone really rich who knows a lot of people.

"I want you do to whatever you want. You've been telling me to come down here for a million years.

"I'm telling you if you get fuckin rich bitch you gotta gimme some money. We're gonna write a prenuptial agreement!

"You *have* to pay me royalties.

"Or you would be a corporate boss machine who utilize their workers..

Brooke: "Unless you're like Stephen King you don't make like millions of dollars writing books."

"You know what? You're gonna be a revolutionary, you're going to be a progressive, and that's what I wanna do.

“Brooke, for real, team up, right here, serious. Revolutionary and progressive. I’m talkin’ about women have only started gaining equality for the last fifty years. It’s time for us to get *fuckin* on top.

“I’m hungry.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna keep burning.

“No, I’m not doing that.”

“I know... I didn’t think you would.”

“I can’t.”

“Cuz you have school.”

“No, cuz I... will get addicted to it again.”

“Oh, for real?”

“Yeah”

“Oh okay, I understand definitely.”

“Even like one line will....”

“I’m not gonna give you shit.”

“I will wanna do coke for the rest of the time that you’re here.”

“I’m not gonna like give you shit... Cuz I don’t need to do it either.

“It was just there now that I don’t have a car, I called Mechanic yesterday to drop me something off and he was like, No I can’t, and I’m like okay, so I call him today and I was like, drop me something off, and he was like, No I can’t, and then he came

over but when he came over I was like, well I don't need it anymore cuz I'm going to Bloomington to see my girlfriend..."

"Oh by the way don't tell Chris, that you have that, he'll freak out."

"Okay, that's fine."

"He'll just get all uncomfortable about it."

"Um, fine. It's not even a lie, it's not coming out, it's not coming out. It's not coming out anyways. But anyway, ummm..."

"This is the money I made today. I work like, two days a month and I don't have to do shit the rest of the time. I can do whatever the fuck I want after that. Focus on what I want to focus on. Do my own shit."

"Want another cracker or anything?"

"No, I just wanted to try your hummus."

"I'm gonna eat chicken nuggets in a second."

"I don't care. Eat whatever you want, I already did bumps on the ride on the way here."

"Okay..."

"So I'm, I, my appetite's gone. I ate today already and I did some bumps soo. My appetite will be gone so all I wanna do is drink some wine and then go out for some drinks, and another other thing I use it for is I don't ever wanna get too drunk so if I take a bump then I won't, like it, lowers your drunkenness."

"Uh-huh."

“You know, so you can’t get crazy. I don’t wanna get crazy. Ever. And I haven’t for like, it’s been like eight months now since I drank heavy and blacked out or had like a crazy night you know? Cuz I don’t like waking up in the morning and only remembering *most* of the evening, but not the last couple hours. Which you know nothing about cuz ya been in fuckin school...”

“Well...”

“Imagine not having school and not having a job. Your life is completely partying and... that’s why I believe in hard work and sacrifice and planning.”

“You want an olive or anything? Or a sundried tomato? Or a stuffed grape leaf?”

“No, no.

“You have a weird diet now, what’s up with that?”

“I do?”

“I don’t know I’ve never, um, um, seen, what are you eating a stuffed grape leaf right now?”

“It’s just got like chickpeas and brown rice.”

“It’s like a, like a Greek thing right?”

“Okay, that’s not, I mean I once ate a grape leaf.

“So, what brought about this kind of diet?”

“Ummm, I was just randomly in the mood for olives and there was an olive bar at the grocery store.”

“Do you wanna live to a hundred?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, if you’re in good health then you’ll enjoy it. You’ll be...”

“Yeah if you’re in good health, I tell ya what, I wanna die if I can’t wipe my own ass and feed myself and walk. I can’t. If I can’t wipe my own ass and shower and feed myself please kill me. I’m just saying.”

“Okay, well, I don’t wanna kill you...”

“No, I’m not telling *you*.

“In general someone.

“In general if I can’t take myself to the bathroom and wipe my own ass and take a shower and feed myself then I don’t want to really live... anymore.

“Like if I’m 65 and you find cancer in my body just don’t tell me. I don’t wanna go through the radiation and the therapy and that pain. What? To live another five years in pain? I’m done. Kill me. I love this music by the way. Make me a mix tape and send it.”

“Yeah, it’s Pandora.”

“I know that! I know that we already discussed it. Send me your artists.

“Brown eggs?”

“Yeah, these are the eggs I buy.”



In a car giving head and I am NOT in high school.

That's what I say, I say, "I haven't done this since high school." Because then you didn't have a choice cuz your parents were home and you were a girl so they'd be extra worried about that kind of stuff anyway.

I'm off the clock though. I mean, I'm at work but I'm not working.

Am I?

He asks me, "You trying to take your clothes off?"

Hmmm. It's freezing. We're in a car in the parking lot of the place I'm employed at. I'd like to take my clothes off. Really, I *would*.

"No, dude."

"I was gonna say, it'd be fun if ya did."

"Yeah, but too risky."

"So I guess I'll owe you one then?"

"I think you owe me more than one."

"What? You owe ME more than one. All that food I bought you."

I assume he's joking. I don't ask if he is. I don't care. I move on and down.



The first time we do it he doesn't want to. I've never had this problem before. I always thought it went the other way around. But in this case, it's because Curtis loves his wife. He really does. As much as he enjoys hooking up with me, she's the one.

On this particular night, he's the one who initiates the entire arrangement.

-What r u doing?

-At home. About to take a shower.

-What r u gonna do in there?

-Get clean.

-Oh yeah? Can I watch?

-Maybe...

-I'm serious.

-Me too.

-You wanna come over here?

-I'd prefer if you came here. I don't feel comfortable at ur house when ur wife's outta town.

-K. Be over soon.

So I get clean. I shave. I lotion. I put on cute underwear. Not that Victoria's Secret shit though. Fuck that shit. Bright pink cotton panties with blue and green ruffles. Blue sports bra with white polka dots. Little green t-shirt over little boys' long underwear with yellow shorts on top.

This is not a candles and dim lighting kind of a thing.

He gets here and we usually hang out before anything happens and my roommate knows about it, but at the moment he's drunk and clueless and he smokes a blunt with us and doesn't FUCKING leave and go to his room and I want to beat him over the head with a wine bottle.

I mean shit, it's getting late. We both have to be at work early and Adam's killing me.

I try body language. On the love seat. I sit facing Curtis, my feet tucked under his thighs, my legs spread open and relaxed. Adam seems not to notice. He says, "Blah blah blah blah blah....."

I give him the silent treatment and close my eyes and after 45 minutes he goes to his room finally Goddammit. I grab Curtis's hand and pull him to my room, push him on the bed, and shut the door.



"Before we do this you have to promise me you will not tell ANYONE."

"Not even Adam?"

"Not even Adam."

"But he's my roommate and best friend. I have to tell him."

"No. You have to promise."

"I promise."



"So, yeah, we had sex."

Like he couldn't hear us having sex all night anyway.

"Yeahhhh, I figured."

I feel bad, but then I think about last summer when Adam was dating this guy Mitchell, and I was literally about to leave for work in ten minutes and all of the sudden

I'm hearing some mad gay sex coming from his bedroom. So, no, I don't feel that bad about it.

"But please DON'T tell anyone."

"I know, I know. I won't."

"Seriously, Adam, please."

"I *won't*. Jeez."

"And don't let Curtis know that you know. He'll get super pissed."

"I won't say anything. *Jesus*, Brooke you're so paranoid."



Six months before Curtis and I had sex we had hooked up once.

He had invited me over that night to hang out with some friends while his wife was out of town. It was a small gathering: a few kitchen staff members, a couple food runners, and me, the only girl. Nobody thought it odd that I was the only female. Of course, no one knew that Curtis and I had been seriously talking about getting together either.

I was tired and really didn't want to be there save for getting some action from Curtis. Eventually, I pretended to fall asleep on the couch in the living room so I wouldn't have to talk to anybody and explain why I wasn't just leaving. Certainly, I had no reason to continue to be there.

Maybe if I lay here long enough everyone will just go away so I can fuck him.

Please, everyone just go away!

I open my eyes around three am. Curtis is sitting on the other couch with a light blue blanket over his lap, T.V. remote in hand.

“Hey,” I say with a big drowsy smile. *Everyone’s gone. Yes!*

“Hey, sleepy head.” He grins back, red-eyed from marijuana smoke, only slits to see through.

“Where’d everybody go?” *As if I care.*

“They went home. Horatio’s sleeping in the guest room.”

“Ah, okay. Can we smoke?”

“Sure.”

So for the next hour we smoke bowls and try to watch television shows that we both like, which is impossible. I like *Futurama* and *Frasier*. He likes rap music videos and reality shows.

I’m not sure how to go about this. It feels like neither of us knows what to do next. I know from experience that he’s hoping I’ll make the first move. Guys with wives or girlfriends always want you to make the first move. It makes them feel better about what they’re doing, as if somehow they can rationalize in their heads that because you’re the one initiating, they’re somehow less responsible and guilty for their actions.

Obvious bullshit, but it never fails.

I wouldn’t have a problem coming on to him if we weren’t at his house. I feel uncomfortable: like his wife will be standing on the other side of the glass door leading out to their porch and start screaming and calling me a dirty whore.

“Sooo, I’m tired. You can sleep here if ya want, or you can come sleep upstairs.”

“I’ll sleep upstairs.”

“All right.”

Curtis leads the way. I follow.



So, I’m just as bad as Karen. Maybe even worse. She doesn’t fuck somebody’s husband just to fuck somebody’s husband. There is a pure financial purpose.

And why do I do what I do? I do not know the answer to that question.

It makes me wonder though. People look down on Karen knowing she’s a hooker. She’s way more forward about her sexuality than I am. Skimpy clothing, flirtatious attitude, outgoing demeanor. I dress more conservatively and pretend to be an academic. I wear black-framed glasses and like to look like a boy sometimes. No one suspects.

I remember being out with this girl I worked with during my undergrad and we didn’t know each other all that well. But we got along and were getting chatty at the bar one night. I’d had a few too many and was starting to reveal some personal information. I don’t even remember how we got on the topic, but at some point we were talking about dating and sex and boys and relationships.

“Dude, Talia, I’m a huge slut.”

“What?”

“I am, I’m a whore.”

“Whatever, Brooke, shut up.”

“No, seriously, you wanna know how many people I’ve slept with?”

“Sure.”

“Like, 75.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Seriously! I *have*.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “No way, girl, no way.”

“Talia, I am so serious. I have seriously slept with around 75 people, no joke.”

The truth slowly creeps into her eyes. She knows I wouldn’t push it unless it was true. I’m not one to fuck with people.

“But... but...you just don’t seem like the type, you know?”

“I know I don’t, *believe* me. But anyone can be a giant slut. *Anyone*.”

“But seriously, you really, *really* don’t seem like the type.”

“I know. Sometimes I wish I did.”



I’m at a party and I’m on my period.

Probably the fourth day, medium flow.

It’s a hotel party for my friend Zoey. 18 years old. The big one-eight. She’s one of those people I’m not sure why I’m friends with. I suppose she’s entertaining. I admire her for being so confident and comfortable in her personality. Some might describe her

as vain, loud, and obnoxious, and I'd have to agree with them. I have class with her at school and she's always talking about being a model despite her 5'2 stature.

"Oh my god, I just *love* taking pictures of myself! It's so much fun! I take all these pictures of myself and I put them all over my room and I just *love* to look at them. I'm *totally* going to be a model. I had a meeting with this agency and they're setting up a photo shoot for me for head shots. Oh my god, I can't *wait!*"

But Zoey has a pretty good sense of humor and she knows how to have fun. She's also not competitive. I've noticed that some of my girlfriends seem to get competitive with me and that shit really pisses me off. Just last year three of them, Kate, Allison, and Melanie, purposely didn't invite me to one of their brother's gymnastics meets. They wanted to meet boys, and Kate told me in secret that I wasn't invited because the other two were afraid I'd take attention away from them. Thanks, jealous cunts. In general, they seem to be insulted by my perpetual thinness and sexual experience. I know they call me a slut behind my back.

But Zoey's not like that. She invites me to hang out all the time, even when there are boys. In fact, she encourages it. She seems completely unthreatened by me, and it's pretty damn refreshing after three years with "my" girls. Plus, she knows a lot of boys, and though my eighteen-year-old self has fucked four people, I wish I had more boys in my life, at least to pay attention to me. I like male attention, but I'm not willing to work for it. Maybe I'm selfish.

Maybe this friendship is selfish.



The hotel is located just a few blocks away from the apartment complex I live in. The Holiday Inn Select. It's January, and the weather is what you would expect from a Chicago suburb. Steel grey skies stunned by ice and snow; the sun, just a faint nightlight, hides behind tired clouds, and the wind pushes and chases you all at once.

The hotel room is divided up into three sections. When you walk in there's a sort of sitting area with a couple of wooden chairs and a mini-coffee table. Just around the corner is the bedroom with a giant king-sized bed, a television, a dresser, etc. Maroon drapes cover the windows. Between these two areas is the bathroom. There is no door separating the bedroom from the sitting area.

Open space.



The party is fun. I don't really know any of Zoey's friends—maybe some of them loosely. We listen to the latest hits and play drinking games. I start to relax up once I've had a few beers. I don't know most of these people, and I'm usually very, very timid around groups of strangers larger than five, but I'm doing okay. That's one of the reasons I came. To get over my shyness. I figure putting myself in a hotel room with a bunch of people I don't know and some alcohol should break me out of my shell—at least prep me for college.

Zoey has no qualms about shyness. Her wild, curly brown hair is loud like her personality, a part of her personality.

“Hey, guys! Let’s do shots! Everyone *has* to because it’s *my* birthday!” She shouts the hesitation right out of me.

And there’s lots of alcohol, not a shit-ton of people, but enough to half-fill a decently sized hotel room. It’s mostly silly suburban girls Zoey is friends with, her smart, butch little sister Hannah, and a handful of guys Zoey knows outside of school. They’re a little older, but I happen to know one of them from work, DJ, and I’m glad there’s someone I can really talk to besides Laya.

I’m barely 18 myself, and I’ve hardly ever gotten drunk before. I smoke pot mostly.

So naturally, I get wasted.

I remember Karen stopping by at some point, but she leaves after a half hour. She’s just there to make an appearance. She brings a couple of her friends I don’t know and we chat casually.

“Hey, girl. How’s it been goin over here?” she asks.

I grin. “Oh ya know, just hangin out and drinkin. I really wanna smoke though.”

“I hear ya. Actually, my girls and I are probly gonna leave soon if you wanna come with us and we can do that.”

“Ahhh, no thanks, it’s cool. I don’t really wanna have to go anywhere in this weather.”

“You sure?”

“No, don’t worry about it. But thanks!” I smile at her appreciatively. Karen’s always looking out for me.

“Call me tomorrow,” she says.



As the night goes on, Zoey kicks out the guys. I’m not sure why. I’m too drunk to understand why she’s mad at them, but that seems to be the situation. I’m sad to see my work friend go, but I’ve had a fair amount of alcohol by this point, so really, anything could happen and I would probably go with it.

More people show up a little later. People I’ve never seen before. People that definitely don’t go to our high school. They look older, probably in their early-twenties, all male. They have a bit of a rough edge, definitely not native to the burbs, or at least, burbs like Naperville. I don’t mind though. I need a break from all the Naperville yuppies.

We’re all sitting in a circle, playing some sort of drinking game, I can’t remember what. I’m pretty sloppy. I sit with my legs spread out on the floor, no shoes, smiling like the drunk, naïve teen that I am, long blond hair and acrylic nails to boot.

I feel cozy in the suburb of my reality.

One of the new guys starts to massage my foot. He acts like he’s doing me a favor, despite me having not asked him for this service. I’m practically falling asleep and it’s getting pretty late. My eyes open and close, slow, fast. I’m trying to stay awake.

Massage Guy is giving me a sexy look. I guess that's why he's massaging my feet.

Whatever. I'm a massage whore.

The rub has taken effect.

I'm dreary. The drowsiness makes me want to drool into nothing. I want to go to sleep before my body can remember to throw up.

Without saying a word, I stand up and stumble toward the bed around the corner. I let myself fall face-first onto the mattress, and slowly shimmy up towards a pillow. I turn myself around and Massage Guy has followed me. I hear laughing and talking in the background. I remember there's no door separating us and the rest of the party.

He starts to kiss me and I let him. He puts his hands under my shirt. I let him.

Under my bra. I let him.

I'm not too drunk to remember I'm still bleeding. In fact, there's a super-sized tampon in me at this very moment.

Massage Guy unbuttons my jeans and I'm still letting. I have yet to break the news that I'm on my period, but frankly, I do not want to fuck this guy. I've known him for about an hour, I'm tired, and I'm not attracted to him.

He's not ugly, but...no thanks.

Why have I let him get this far?

Maybe I like the attention. Maybe I need to be kissed.

He rubs his hand over my underwear and I speak. "I'm on my period."

The words come out like melted slushy; soft, like his hands.

“Oh, you are?” he croons. “I don’t mind.”

His hand is beneath my panties now. I feel his fingers slide between the cotton string and my slippery flesh.

“Oh, you’re wet,” he whispers.

My brain splits. I hear the others in the sitting room; I hear clinking glasses and the obnoxious sounds of Zoey’s voice. My head is spinning, but I can still see Massage Guy’s fuzzy image, his smell. Sweat and citrus.

His dick is out now and he’s rubbing it against my pussy.

“No,” I say, but not loudly. It’s a lazy “No.”

He pushes it in. A partial push.

“Oh, I can feel it.” He refers to the tampon.

“Yeah...I’m on my period...don’t.”

The words slide from my mouth and he pushes in further.

“Oh, come on, don’t you want me to fuck you?” *No.*

I giggle. I always giggle during inappropriate situations. I giggle out of fear, out of confusion.

It’s all in the giggle.

“Noooo,” I moan weakly. “Nooo.”

“Aww girl, lemme fuck you, come on, you’re so wet.”

Giggle.

“No, really...”



My eyes pop open. I’m in the bed, lying between Hannah and Massage Guy. I lift my head a little to see this girl, Cassie, next to him, another dude, and Zoey. We’re all crammed onto the mattress. Everyone is dead asleep. The clock says 11:30.

The first thing I think is *tampon*.

The fucking tampon.

I’m fully clothed. Even my jeans are buttoned up. I crawl out of bed and immediately go to the bathroom, lock the door behind me.

What the hell happened?

The last thing I remember is Massage Guy trying to fuck me, but he didn’t fuck me. He *wanted* to fuck me but he didn’t. I know he tried to put it in me, but he didn’t get in all the way. He just tried, that’s all. Just an attempt.

But I said no, so it’s fine.

I remember saying no. I remember him trying and me saying no. I remember that. I remember feeling his dick a little inside me, but that’s all. Just a little. Not all the way, and I said no, so it’s fine, it’s fine, it’s fine.

I pull down my pants to pee, expecting to see the comforting image of the cotton string innocently dangling from my vagina.

No string.

There is just pee. Just yellow yellow yellow coming out of me, but I need something solid, something red.

I push. I push like I'm trying to give birth, but it's a tampon, not a baby. Push push push, it'll come out, you'll see the head and it'll come out if you just push harder.

Nothing drops.

Not even blood. I'd be delighted to see a little blood right now. Nothing but air and odor.

Fine, I'll just do it myself.

I take my hand and reach inside me as far as I can get, which isn't very far. I feel around for it, for any of its existence.

Did he pull it out and I don't remember?

I don't remember.

I start to panic.

Outside is winter and I haven't yet learned to appropriately dress for the season. I contemplate walking home to my apartment complex, but that would be too pathetic. I am *not* walking home. My mother would see signs of the outside on me and she would know I walked. I can't walk. It's too cold. I don't wanna cry on the way home; my mom will know something is wrong.

Where the FUCK is this tampon? Goddammit goddammit goddammit.

And why should I be crying anyway? Everything's fine. It's just one lost tampon. It couldn't have disappeared. I'm sure there are thousands of lost tampons all across the world that no one can find. A whole world of mystery tampons.

I hear voices outside the bathroom.

Stay calm, stay composed. Everything's fine. Stay calm, stay composed.



I have to wait an hour before I get a ride home, from Massage Guy of all people. Thank god it isn't just me and him. That would be too much. He's already acting like nothing happened. Why would he say anything, anyway? Everyone else is around and there are a few more of us in the car. How nice of him to have offered us a ride home. I only take it because there's no other option. It's clear the others have no idea what happened with us last night. No one's acting weird or awkward, no one's teasing us. They all seem completely oblivious.

I go with it. It's a short ride. I just want to be out of the car. Away from Massage Guy forever. I don't want to ever have to see his face again. I just want to forget this ever happened. Even if I told Zoey she would probably just laugh it off and say it was probably nothing. I don't know. I don't know what she would do really. I'm not close enough to her to be willing to find out.

I sit in silence and the others talk about the drunken festivities of the previous evening. I always get quiet when something's wrong. I can barely speak to anyone. I'm freezing, staring out the window in the back seat. I know I should feel hung-over, but the

lost tampon has somehow overpowered the effects of the alcohol. My brain is buzzing, but I keep quiet. One step at a time. We finally pull up to my building and I try to act casual as I get out of the car.

“Bye, guys, thanks for the ride.” I’m sitting on the left in the back seat. Instant access to escape from a car filled with people I never want to see again.

Exit vehicle. Exit memory. Exit time.

“See ya! Thanks for coming, Brookey!” says Zoey.

Freedom.



Despite my mother’s craziness she is pretty good at reading me. I’ve mentally prepared for this. I hope she’s drinking and on pills. She usually is, so everything should be okay. Maybe she took some extra Xanax today.

My mother is the classic ex-model from the South. Pancake makeup with bronzy-red lipstick. Teased blond hair in a ponytail sits on a still beautiful face. People tell me my mother is gorgeous, but I often have a hard time seeing this. Her emotional ups and downs, furious temper, hyper-controlling tendencies, and all-consuming insecurities have jaded my perception. I mostly hate her. I just play as nice as I can until I can escape to college.

I walk in and she and her boyfriend, Rob, are watching a football game.

“Hey, Beeda, how was the sleepover?” she asks much too sweetly, glass of chardonnay in hand. It’s early afternoon and her pill bottles are next to the overloaded ashtray on the table beside her.

“Oh, it was fun. I’m just really tired. We were up super late.”

“Oh, okay, glad you had a good time!” The tone in her voice goes up at the end; that means she’s pleasantly pilled. Plus, she gave me an extra wide smile. She quickly turns her head back towards the game, sipping her wine like a diva.

I go into my bedroom and call my friend Lisa. I’ve known her since I was nine and her mom’s a nurse, so maybe she’ll know what to do.

I quickly describe what happened and she sounds very concerned.

“Brooke, are you okay?...Did this guy rape you?”

“No, he *definitely* didn’t rape me. I mean, he *tried* to have sex with me and I said no. He just tried, but he didn’t, don’t worry.”

“Are you sure? And you can’t find the tampon?”

“No, I mean, I don’t know. Maybe when he was trying it just went further up or something, I don’t know. What the hell do I do?”

“Umm, okay...try taking a warm bath and see if that loosens anything up. Maybe it’ll come out in the bathtub.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“I don’t know, you’re probably gonna have to go to the doctor because if it’s in there, you have to get it out ASAP. You don’t wanna get Toxic Shock.”

“But it’s Sunday, and I can’t tell my mom. I’m freaking out.”

“Look, just take a bath and see what happens, and then call me, okay?”



So, I take a bath.

Nothing.

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I’d call Lisa back, but she lives about forty-five minutes away and I’m pretty sure she’s busy with family stuff. I gotta get this shit outta me right *fucking* now.

So I call Karen. I tell her what happened.

“I’m coming over right now, okay? We’re gonna take you to the hospital. On my way.”

I suddenly remember that I don’t have any of my health insurance information. I’m under my dad’s, and I remember my mom pestering me the last few weeks to remind her to give me the new insurance card. She’s always asking me to remind her to do things, and then becomes infuriated when I forget, especially if they have anything to do with my father.

“Don’t let me forget to pick up my medication.”

“Be sure to tell your father I need the check on the first instead of the fifth of the month.”

“Remind me we’re out of Dura-Flame logs.”

“Beeda, can you remember to tell me call my doctor in the morning? I know I’ll forget if you don’t remind me.”

“Beeda, you have to let your father know that I need you for Thanksgiving this year and *not* Christmas. Be sure to get that all worked out with him, and then let me know the details *as soon as possible*.”

Of course, I have forgotten about the insurance. Plus, I resent her for putting the responsibility on me when she’s supposed to be my mom doing mom things like giving your daughter her health insurance card because that’s what good moms do for their teenage daughters. This insurance thing is going to be tricky. But she’s off from work today, which means there’s a much higher chance she’s extra fucked up.

So what the hell do I do? Just randomly ask for it? Is that going to work? Am I a good enough actress for this?

Stay calm. Act casual. Just act like the thought suddenly came upon you and you’re trying to be the responsible daughter that she thinks you are.

I make my way slowly down our hallway toward the living/dining room area. It’s filled with dirt and wine bottles, the two humans on the couch, one screaming at the game like a drunken sailor, and the dinner table—completely covered with various papers, bills, notices, envelopes, ash.

“Hey, Mom?” My voice sounds a little too high pitched. Not too loud, but a little on edge.

“Yeah, Beeda?”

“Remember that insurance information you were bugging me about?”

“Uh-huh, yeah,” she’s still half-watching the game. “SHIT GODDAMM MOTHERFUCKER! GET HIM! GET HIM! GET HIM YOU FUCKING ASSHOLE, GODDAMMIT!”

Good. She’s more interested in the game. Keep watching. Don’t look at me. Don’t look at me.

“I’m sorry...what, Beeda? What did you say?”

“I was just wondering if I could get that insurance information you were bugging me about. Sorry I kept forgetting. I just remembered now, so I figured I could remind you.”

I’m calm. I sound normal. It’s just another day.

She seems unfazed. “Oh yeah, sure...” She walks over towards the dinner table, begins shuffling through the pile of papers.

“Lemme just...” She freezes in motion. “Wait... *wwhhhhyy?*”

The “*wwhhhhyy*” is low. Deep—like it’s been in the ground and she just discovered it. I hear the suspicion in her voice. *Stay calm stay calm stay calm stay calm stay calm.*

“Oh, no reason, I just randomly thought of it, so I figured I’d ask.” I say it like it’s no big deal, nothing to analyze. I wish to god she was drunker.

“*No. Tell me why. Why do you suddenly need this information?*” Her eyes start to bulge.

“I told you, I just thought of it, I figured I’d ask.”

It starts.

“Don’t you fucking try to pull one over on *me*, Brooke. I wasn’t born yesterday. You tell me *exactly* why you suddenly want this information. Out of the fucking blue, *jesus!* Do you think I’m a fucking *idiot?*”

“No, Mom, I swear, I was just wondering about it. It’s no big deal. Just don’t worry about it. It’s fine.”

“*NO!* Tell me why you need it. You tell me right *fucking now!*”

“Mom, please, just leave it alone. Don’t worry about it. I don’t wanna fight with you.”

“Listen, you little *bitch*, you tell me exactly what’s going on or you are going to *regret* it!”

No escape. Once she starts it’s bound to go on for at least two hours.

Goddammit, I was so close. I almost had her.

I want to avoid the conflict so I go to my room. I hear her shuffling papers and screaming obscenities in the background. “You want your fucking insurance, *Brooke?*! Is that what you want? ... Gee, lemme just interrupt *my* life for your irresponsibility! ...

Fucking little *bitch!*”

I’m gathering my things, looking through my wallet. I have an old insurance card, maybe that will work. I need to get out of here. *Where the hell is Karen?*

Mom comes storming into my room. She’s fireworks and poison. I’m huddled on the ground, looking through my purse, trying not to make eye contact because I don’t

want to start crying. If I can just avoid crying, that will be the success of my day. Well, that and getting this tampon yanked out of me.

“*Here, Brooke! Here!*” She starts tossing papers at me. “You want your goddam insurance information? *Here!*”

Papers are flying everywhere around me. I break. Cry. Break again. Cry harder.

“Mom, please! *Stop!*”

She continues chucking papers at me. My room is a tornado of flying sheets, clothes everywhere, me pitiful, letting the paper fury bury me beneath pink walls.

“*There!* Is that what you wanted, *Brooke?* Are you happy now? Are you happy you’ve made your *mother* so upset? Do you even *give* a shit?! *God,* you are just the most *ungrateful, spiteful* daughter I have *ever* known!”

I can’t let her keep doing this. I stand.

“Fine, Mom. *Fine.* You’re right. I’m leaving soon.” I’m still looking down to avoid eye contact. I always do this when I cry. Because it’s ugly and vulnerable.

“And where the *fuck* do you think *you’re* going, young lady? You don’t go anywhere unless *I* say so!”

Doorbell rings.

Thank you god in heaven, it’s gotta be Karen.



At this point, I’m attempting to go to the bathroom. I was going to freshen up for the hospital, try not to look so pathetic.

I hear Karen by the front door. She's saying something to Rob, but I can't make it out over demon-mother hollering in my face as I try to put on makeup.

"Where the hell do you need to be going? Oh *no*, you're not going anywhere, missy! You'll do exactly as I say, which means you will be staying *right* here."

"I'm sorry, Mom, I just need to leave this. I can't be in this right now. I'm leaving."

Karen's suddenly there in the doorway, beautiful blonde hair and gritty beauty.

"Excuse *me*, but you do NOT treat your child this way. You have *ABSOLUTELY* no right to outright disrespect her like this! *Back off of her.*" Karen's boobs are as proud as her voice, and I see my mother pause, eyeing her strangely.

"Well, Karen, I think you don't tell me what to do in my own home and you can just go to hell. I have had enough of this *witch*, and I don't really give a *shit* what you do." She heads out of the bathroom, makes her way towards Rob, whose all the while been sitting patiently on the couch.

Karen takes the lead. "Come on, let's go. This is fucking bullshit."

She looks hard at my mom, disgusted by the wine and pill bottles, by the all too familiar similarities of her own mother. "And you need to stop abusing your daughter the way you do. You have a wonderful daughter and the way you treat her is totally unacceptable!"

“Thank you, Karen, now please leave my home,” she says with a splash of venom. She sips her wine, glaring at us like a Disney villain as we walk out the front door.



We head to the nearest hospital, which is by downtown Naperville, the emergency room. They send us to a waiting area and tell me to speak to the nurses at the front desk, instructing me to tell them exactly what happened last night. They’re very friendly.

I tell the story in full detail. A nurse takes notes. I am stable, composed.

They don’t act shocked or disturbed by my story. The more composed I remain, the better I feel. I have control over this. This is my situation, and I have control. This is just a blip on the huge timeline of my life. How do years of an abusive mother compare to one night of attempted rape? Would I choose one over the other if I had the choice? Am I better able to handle this situation because of the strength I’ve developed from having to deal with her all these years? I’m not sure. I guess I don’t get that choice. But I’m okay. I’m fine. In just a few months, I’ll be in college, away from all this. So many people in the world have to deal with things that are so much worse.

I’m the lucky one. I have hope. I have a future. I have college paid for thanks to Dad. I’m getting away from my mother. I’m an adult, about to have full control over my life. That keeps me holding on. Keeps me strong.

The overweight, matronly nurse is kind. "Okay, sweetie, I'll let the doctor know. You and your friend can just wait over there until he's ready for you." She points to a row of chairs by a window, a coffee table filled with gently-used magazines to entertain us.

I suddenly remember the insurance.

"Oh, wait, I just have one more question."

"Yes?"

"Well, I'm under my Dad's insurance, and I just want to make sure all of this will be confidential. He won't get anything in the mail or anything that says stuff about this, right?"

"Oh, no, don't worry, sweetie. All of this is completely confidential, I promise."

"Really? So he won't see anything? *Anything* at all?"

"Absolutely not."



We have to wait about 20 minutes.

"Dude, what is up with your mom's boyfriend?" Karen asks.

"Rob? Oh, I don't know. He's a really nice guy actually, kind of on the quiet side."

"I couldn't *fuckin* believe he was just sitting there like that when I came into the house. I was like, '*Seriously*, dude? You're just gonna sit there and not say shit while this crazy woman is abusing her daughter?'"

"Did you *say* that to him? I thought I heard you talking when you first came in."

“Yeah, I heard all the fuckin’ screamin’, and I knew exactly what was goin on because my mom does that exact same shit to me. I straight up said to him, I was like ‘So, you just sit here while this is going on? Is this your *normal* response?’ And he just sat there for a second and just said, ‘Yeah,’ and I was like, ‘Yeah, that’s real nice of you, it’s really respectable for you to just sit here and let this shit happen and not say a damn word’ And he didn’t even *fuckin say* anything back to me. He just kind of nodded and went back to watchin the game. That’s when I came in and yelled at your mom.”

“Yeah, I mean, thanks for saying something, but honestly, I totally understand why he does that actually.”

“What? *Why*? How is that acceptable behavior?”

“I mean, the thing is, he’s been with my mom since I was like, in the fifth grade, so he’s had his fair share of her craziness too, and really, if he stood up for me or got involved, it would just make everything so much worse. It just makes everything explode.”

“Ahh, I see.”

I think she’s taken aback by my response. Karen’s not afraid to fight back, or at least, isn’t savvy enough to know when it’s the right time to fight back. I’m not really sure. It’s her go-to. I, however, try very hard to pick and choose my battles. I face much worse consequences than her. Though Karen’s mom abuses her in the same way as my own, she doesn’t get grounded or punished for any of it. They have their wars. And then they’re over. But my mom makes sure I suffer. The difference between the two?

Control.

My mom needs, wants, must have total control, and it's clear from Karen's experiences that her mom isn't nearly as controlling as mine. I suspect that her mom probably has a different reaction to alcohol too. Instead of getting riled up, she ends up being too drunk and lazy to bother doing anything.

"I mean, I know you have no qualms about standing up to your mom. But at least she lets you leave the house. You know my mom will just ground me forever if I backfire. Not that I don't. I just try really hard not to."

"Yeah, our moms are so much alike it's ridiculous. But mine pretty much lets me do my own thing. She knows she can't control me. You shouldn't let yours do that to you. I mean, shit, you're goin off to college soon. You're 18. Fuck it. Just do what ya want."

"I know, I know. I just keep telling myself that I don't have much longer. I'll be out soon enough. I've gotten this far, haven't I?" I smile weakly. Proud that I've survived eighteen years of the mother from hell. Bizarrely, my mother often refers to herself as "the mother from hell." She thinks it's some funny joke, and I always pretend to laugh, but secretly I completely resent her for making a joke out of what she's inflicted on me for my entire life. Yeah, it's real fucking funny.



A nurse walks up. "We're ready for you, Brooke."

"Okay, thanks," I say. "Is it okay if my friend comes, too?"

“Sorry, sweetie, policy stands that it has to be just you.”

“Okay.”

I leave Karen in the waiting room and follow the nurse down a hallway into one of the examination rooms.

“Go ahead and take off your pants and underwear, everything below the waist, the doctor and I will be right back to examine you.”

“Okay, thank you.”

I take off my jeans, socks, underwear. Cover my lower half with a scratchy blue paper gown. Goosebumps cover my legs. They really don’t make these hospital rooms all that warm and friendly, do they? The room is plastered with informational posters about birth control and STDs. Some of them even have graphic pictures on them. I’d kill for a picture full of puppies right now.

Minutes later, the nurse and a male doctor have arrived. I don’t see their faces. Now that I’m sitting here I just want this tampon torn out of me immediately, and then everything will be better and it will all be over.

I know it’s in there. It doesn’t hurt. I just feel a slight uncomfortable pressure. I wonder if it’s in my head.

The doctor speaks. “All right, Brooke, so we have two options here.”

“Okay.” I retain my composure. I’ve chilled out a lot since leaving my apartment. I started to feel better the instant Karen showed up. My savior. The further I get away

from last night, the calmer I am. The closer I get to having this tampon taken out, the more stable I feel. Maybe it's not even there and this whole thing is just a big mistake.

“What we can do is just take the tampon out and test you for STDs, *or* we can do what's called a rape kit. Basically, what would happen is we would still take out the tampon, do the STD testing, but afterwards we'd have a police officer come in. They'd ask you some questions about what happened and document the occurrence, and it would be up to you whether to press charges or not.”

This option kind of freaks me out.

I really don't think I was raped.

I don't even know the guy's name.

I hardly remember what he looks like.

I guess I could ask Zoey who he is, but I would feel bad doing all of that.

Especially since I really don't think he raped me. I know he wanted to have sex with me, I mean he kind of pushed it in, that's all I remember, but it never went totally inside. I don't think. I mean, maybe that little push is what did it. Maybe it just slipped up in there or something, I don't know.

I'd be too scared to press charges anyway. I'm fucking 18. I'm about to go off to college. If I did press charges then my parents would definitely find out and that would be horrible. And what if he didn't rape me? What if I pressed charges and he went to jail for doing nothing? I would feel awful.

“Ummm, I think I just want the first option.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. “Remember you don’t *have* to press charges. It’ll just be on file if you *do* decide you’d want to in the future.”

“Uhhh, no, I think the first option’s fine.”

“All right then, Brooke, let’s go ahead and take a look.”

“Okay.”

I hoist my legs onto the stirrups and he opens me up, shines a flashlight into me.

“Yes, it’s in there.”

“You can see it?”

“Yes. We’ll just have to pull it out now.”

The nurse hands him what looks to me like a giant pair of tongs.

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt. You might feel a mild discomfort, but it will only take a second.”

“Okay.”

I watch him while he does it because I want to see it. The process doesn’t hurt. It reminds me of getting a pap smear, but less uncomfortable. Maybe it’s just the relief of knowing it will be out soon. He slides up and in. The doctor grips the tampon gently and it appears, caked with blood. Nothing scary. Except that it happened to be deeply, deeply lodged into me by accident.

And the smell.

It fills me.



Karen and I hang out for the rest of the day. We drive around and smoke pot. I relax more and more. No more tampon, no more risk of toxicity. The night is past. The marijuana creates a hazy reality that I can sit comfortably in.

We decide to grab a bite to eat at Panera.

“I am so glad that shit is outta me.” I tell her. “And fuck, I’m starving!”

“Yeah, I’m glad we got that shit taken care of too.”

“Yeah, and at least I was able to hide this from my mom. She would have gone fucking nuts.”

“Well, your mom is a fuckin psycho and that’s all there is to it. No reason you ever need to tell her.”

“Fuck no.”

“You know, when I was waiting for you while you were in there, I heard the nurses whispering and they looked over at me a few times.”

“Really? Did you hear any of it?”

“Yeah, a little. They just looked really concerned. And I heard a couple of them say they thought you were raped.”

“*What?* Are you serious? Where would they get that from? I *specifically* told them I wasn’t raped. I told them what happened, and that it came close, but I wasn’t raped. Goddammit that pisses me off!”

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t know. That’s what I heard.”

“Well, that’s weird. Why the fuck would they say that?”

“I don’t know. I guess from what you told them, that’s what they thought.”

“God, that makes me so fucking mad! Who the fuck are they to say that? I know what happened. I was there. I remember it.”

Karen looks a little uncomfortable.

“Just don’t worry about it,” she says. “Fuck those nursing bitches. They don’t know what they’re talkin about.”

“I guess. That still just makes me so fucking mad though. *God*, fuck them!”

She changes the subject.

“What about your mom? I still can’t believe that shit!”

“I mean, it’s nothing new really. She’s been doing that stuff to me all my life.”

“Yeah, but still. My mom does that shit to me, and I’m just like ‘I’m out,’ and I get the fuck outta there.”

“Yeah, but your mom won’t punish you like my mom will.”

“Fuck it, dude. Your eighteen now. Do what you wanna fuckin’ do. I mean, what power does she actually have over you? Doesn’t your *dad* pay for everything?”

“I mean, nothing really. She’s in major debt and she uses the child-support to pay for everything. I guess there’s the car, but I put most of the money into that, but she won’t put the car in my name. I asked her when my birthday came and she said she’d look into it and she never did.”

“See! There ya go. Even if she tries to take away your car, just take it anyway. Your name’s on the insurance, right? You can just hide it where she won’t find it in case you need to get away.”

“Maybe.”

“No, seriously, Brooke, you gotta stand up for yourself more. Don’t be afraid! You’re eighteen, and you’re almost in college. Then she can’t do shit to you. Why do you think I moved in with my aunt and uncle? To get the fuck away from that bitch. Trust me, it’ll be okay. If things get really bad, I can just talk to my aunt about you moving in with us temporarily.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, they had their entire upstairs attic renovated into a master bedroom, but when my aunt got breast cancer she couldn’t go up and down the stairs anymore, so when I was having so many problems with my mom they let me move in. It’s huge! There’s a huge walk-in closet with its own washer-dryer, and the bathroom is big and has a huge shower, and the bedroom has two matching twin beds and super-high ceilings. It’s awesome. Best place I’ve ever lived *ever*.”

“Wow,” I respond, shocked at such an offer. “Thanks, Karen. Thank you so much!”

I smile. So glad I have a friend who can actually understand what it’s like for me.

And who actually might have the power to help.



Karen's one of two people in my life that really gets it. My other good friend, Sam, has it even worse than me. Her mom's temper is way more volatile than my mom's, and she drinks far more. She can't hold down a job, and Sam ended up being moved around several times her junior year because her mom would get a new boyfriend, and that's where they'd live. Finally, social services took over. She ended up getting placed with a family in Naperville that was part of some program that gives temporary homes to teenagers in special circumstances so they can at least finish out high school.

And we go way back. Since the first day of sixth grade. She's known me and my mom long enough for us to have a tight bond over it.

But "my girls." Different story.

I remember one them, Kate, telling me that Allison and Melanie questioned the validity of the stories I would tell about my mom.

"Her mom's just so nice and fun, I just find it hard to believe that she's *really* that awful."

"Yeah, her mom's always been so nice whenever we've been over there. I really can't picture her mom doing any of that stuff."

"No," Kate told them. "I've known Brooke since junior high, and I've her mom on *more* than a few occasions go completely insane. Trust me. She's telling the truth."

Good old Kate. Thank god one of them has my back. What the hell is wrong with Allison and Melanie? You can't make that shit up. How many times have I shown up to

school crying because my mother had been screaming at me the entire time I was trying to get ready? How many stories have I told them? It's always something. Not a week passes that something doesn't come up with my mom. God, it would be pretty hard to keep up lies like that.

The problem is that my mom, on the surface, is beautiful, funny, engaging, entertaining, and young at heart. If you don't know her well, it's easy to get wrapped up in her seemingly fun personality. But once she gets comfortable around you, the beast comes out.

Even though I hate her, I know why she abuses me. I can recognize the signs of child-hood abuse. My mother has flat-out told me that her father beat the living shit out of her growing up. He told her she was ugly and stupid on a regular basis, and her mother never did anything to try and stop it. Not to mention, her uncle molested her all through her teens, and even stalked her off and on until his death, when he shot himself in the head.

I've heard stories about a vase being thrown in her face in a garage. Being choked and pushed up against a wall by her father in the middle of the night for no particular reason. Being beaten before a big dance and having to bring enough tissues with her so her date wouldn't notice the blood running down her legs.

She must think that just because she doesn't beat me, that she's being a good parent. But the abuse she's suffered has blinded her to the abuse she inflicts.

Allison and Melanie haven't been around long enough to see it. But Kate has. Countless times I ran away from home in middle school to her house. Countless times her parents took me in and let me stay the night. Calling my mother, who in her hysteria, was able to calm down for the sake of her image. "Of course, she can stay the night, Shirley. She's just going through normal puberty stuff. We'll get it all worked out tomorrow."

And then I would come home the next day to her wrath. "Don't you *fucking* try to embarrass me in front of Kate's parents. How *dare* you! You'll pay twice as much for this. You're grounded for two weeks! And you'll be spending all your time at *home* with *me*. And you'll be coming to work with me on the weekends and we can put you to work at Barbizon. I'm sure Sheila could use your help at the front desk."

For my mom, it's all about image. It's all about beauty. She's only concerned with the surface of things. I think that's all she's capable of feeling and experiencing.

But I'll be free soon. I will survive and I will get the fuck out of here and I will never come back.



A couple of months pass and I get a phone call from my dad. The phone call isn't out of the ordinary. What's strange is that a little over two weeks have passed since he's called. We always talk at least once a week, if not twice. Sometimes, I make extra calls when Mom's really going off the handle. But this time, something's different in the sound of his voice.

“Hi, Brookey, I, um, I’m sorry it’s been a while since we last talked.”

“Oh, it’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

“Well, there’s actually a reason I haven’t called you.” He pauses. I wait. *What’s this about?*

“Okay,” is all I can think to say to that.

“Well, basically I got some information in the mail a couple weeks ago, and the information...well...I just needed to take some time to think about it and decide what to do.” His voice is slow. I can tell he’s planned exactly what he’s going to say. *Oh, fuck! He knows. Goddammit, he knows! How is that possible?! They promised! They promised!*

“Okay.” I say it again. I can’t think of an intelligent response. I’m totally caught off guard.

“Well, I recently got some papers in the mail from the health insurance company about you. It was a very detailed explanation about a visit you made to the hospital.”

Fuck my life. Fuck my life. Fuck my life.

He continues. “There’s a list of the procedures that were done as well, and a whole lot of other graphic information.”

His voice barely moves as he speaks. Quietly. Rigidly sympathetic. *Graphic information? How is that even possible? How the fuck did he find out?*

“Ummm...” is all I can stammer out.

“Why don’t you go ahead and just tell me what happened. Let’s just start there. I promise I won’t be mad at you. You won’t be in trouble. Just please be honest with me. I need you to be honest with me, Brookey.”

“But, Dad, I really, really, *really* don’t want Mom to know. She will *kill* me.”

“You have my word that I won’t tell her. Okay?”

“Okay.”

So I tell him. Everything.

How I was on my period. The party. The lie I told my mother so I could go. The alcohol. The drinking. The boys that were there. The foot massage. How he followed me to the bed. How he started kissing me. How he tried to have sex with me. How he took out his dick and tried to put it inside me. How he kind of did. But not really. How I passed out. Awoke to the missing tampon. The fight with mom. Karen. The visit to the hospital.

All of this I tell my father. What choice do I have?

“I mean, he tried to have sex with me, but he didn’t. I said no, and I mean, he tried and everything, but that was it. Just *please* don’t tell Mom, Dad. Please, please, please, *please* don’t tell her. She will totally *flip out*. Please—”

He cuts me off. “Brooke, I’m not going to tell your mother. More importantly, I think you made the right choice in *not* telling her.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, I mean, come on, it would have only exacerbated the problem. Your mom would have just flipped out even more and it would have been three times as bad. So, trust me, you have my promise that I won’t tell her.”

“Okay.”

“But I mean, Brooke, you basically got raped.”

What is he talking about? I know I came close, but that was *not* rape. Rape is when some guy holds you down while you scream out “no!” and there’s no one there to save you. That’s what rape is. Rape isn’t some drunk girl who lets some dude make out with her and kind of push his penis in her a little with six people casually sitting around the corner twenty feet away.

And I don’t remember anything. You’re supposed to remember that stuff. Why wouldn’t I remember it? I mean I was pretty drunk, but I don’t know. I just don’t think he raped me. I would have remembered a penis being thrust inside of me. And I remember that the guy had a pretty decent sized dick.

Why would I remember *that*? It doesn’t matter. The tampon must have just gotten nudged a little and just slipped up in there. That’s all it was.

That’s all it was.

“No, Dad. I wasn’t. I told you. He tried, but he didn’t *actually* succeed.” I say this as brightly as I can. With confidence. Why the hell is my Dad trying to tell me I was raped when I so clearly wasn’t?

“I mean, yeah, Brookey, you were.” He sounds sad. It’s as if he truly feels sorry for me. He never feels sorry for me. Except with my mom. That’s usually it.

“No, Dad, I wasn’t. Seriously. He just *tried*. That was all. He just tried, and that was it, I *know* what happened.”

He pauses.

“All right, that’s fine.” He sounds a bit defeated. I was so sure he would be infuriated with me. He’s never this sympathetic. He’s a learn-it-the-hard-way kind of dad. His concern is confusing. I just don’t want to get in trouble.

“I’m glad you’re okay, and that you got everything taken care of,” he says, and I note the pity in his voice once more. “You did the right thing going to the hospital, and Karen’s a good friend for standing up to your mom like that. Let’s just move on from this, and we don’t have to talk about it again.”

*Yes. Let’s **never** talk about it again.*



Despite Karen’s habitual coke use throughout her Bloomington visit, we *do* have fun. She drinks while she does it, so that seems to balance her out enough that it doesn’t feel like it’s as big of a deal as it should be. I justify it in my head, and even though I know cokeheads are liars, I choose to believe that what she tells me is true.

It’s just an every now and then thing. Not all the time. For special occasions.

I’m sure it’s fine. She’s back in school, and living with her dad! No way she could be doing it that much and still be pulling school off.

We hang out with one of my grad student friends, Chris, whose life experiences haven't come even close to that of cocaine use. He has no idea what's going on. He just seems annoyed and confused about Karen's incessant talking and stubbornness. He's a stubborn ass himself, but he's not on coke.

Big difference.

He drives us to one of the bars in town, and on the way they get into an argument about religion.

"Yeah, because if you consider yourself Christian, then that's a denomination of Christianity."

"No," he says. "Christianity itself is the faith. If you just consider yourself a Christian, and nothing else, that makes you non-denominational."

"No. You're wrong, because it's the Catholicism, and the Baptists, and all that shit that's the faith. Christianity is the denomination of those."

Chris appears to be utterly startled at her ignorance. And really pissed off because she won't let up, or listen to him, for that matter. "No. That's completely wrong," he argues back. "*Christianity* is the faith, Catholicism and Baptism are *denominations of* the Christian faith."

I decide to step in. "Yeah, he's right Karen. Christianity is the faith. The others are denominations of that faith."

"Oh, for real?" She actually listens to me.

“Yeah, I promise.”

“Well, shit, I got my shit all mixed up! Fuck! I totally thought it was the other way around.”



Once the bars get out, we head home, and I want nothing more than to go to sleep. Karen, on the other hand, seems wide awake and ready for more. We're up until three talking until I finally tell her I have to get to bed.

“I mean, you can stay up and watch TV, do whatever, and then you can just sleep in my bed when you're ready. Sorry, I'm just so tired.”

“Aw, no girl, it's totally cool. I'll be all right. Night!”

“Night!”

“I had a lot of fun tonight!”

“Me too! Night!”

I lie in bed for about 10 minutes, slowly drifting off to sleep. I'm semi-conscious when I hear my roommate, Mike, come home yelling into his phone about god knows what.

“Dude, seriously, that's *fucked up* man! What the hell is wrong with her?!”

His door slams. I can still hear him, his room being right next to mine and all.

“I mean, seriously, these girls are fucking *crazy*, dude. Like, seriously, bro *psycho* bitches!”

Someone knocks on his door. He doesn't hear.

“Yeah, like that girl Chelsea! I mean what the fuck was she trying to do tonight?

It’s like, if I *wanted* to fuck you I would, but I don’t. So, just fucking stop, whore!”

“Hey, who’s yellin?!” Karen keeps knocking. “What ya yellin about in there?!”

He opens the door. “Who’re you?”

“I’m Karen, Brooke’s friend. I’m visiting.”

“Oh...Hi, I’m Mike,” he responds.

He talks into his cell. “Hey dude, I gotta go. Call ya tomorrow.”

“Can I come in?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You smoke?”

“Fer sure.”

Goddammit she’s gonna fuck Mike.

Oh well.

He makes his own decisions.

My last thoughts as I settle into darkness.



My mother is currently in the process of menopause and believe me, it’s not fun.

All the suffering that comes with it gets directed at me; as if I inflicted the aging process upon her. As if being 16 is the easiest thing in the world.

Hot flash upon you Mother! Weight gain all around! Mood swings, unleash!

If only I *did* have those powers.

I'd be delighted for her to stop getting her period. Every month it's "Stay outta my way this week. I'm having PMS. You know what *THAT* means."

Why yes, mother I do. It means I get grounded for not saying I love you in the right tone of voice. It means I get yelled at for having no desire to watch *The Golden Girls* at midnight. It means I'm in trouble for not being your best friend.

I'm used to it though. Her turbulent emotions and deep-rooted loneliness are tradition. Menopause has merely increased their intensity.

I can put up with a lot. I can put up with the constant cosmopolitans, the Marlboros in the toilet, the never-ending pile of dirty dishes. But menopause? I can't handle that.

And then I wake up on a fine, clear January morning.

My brain registers: "Cold! *Too* cold!"

What the hell?

I hear, "FUCK!... FUCK!....SHIT!.....GODDAMMIT!"

This is my alarm.

Rage is the morning. Hot is the mother. Cold is the daughter. One is barefoot pajamas. One is half-naked screaming.

I haven't yet adjusted to the conscious world. I feel frigid, anger guiding me through the wake-up process.

I half-roll, half-stumble out of bed. Yank the bedroom door open to the scene of a dirty apartment. Empty bottles of cheap vodka. Papers on the floor. Lean Cuisines trays and bowls filled with solidifying chicken and rice soup.

Snapshots of stale living space. I expect it.

And there she is. The monster.

“Mom! It’s freezing in here!”

“I know that, Brooke! I turned the *god dammed* air-conditioning on!”

“What the hell? It’s *January!*”

“Shut the fuck up, Brooke. Just *shut* the fuck up! I’m having a hot flash!”

She’s running around the apartment in her Walmart underwear. Red from the chest up. It’s quite possible she’s also having an anxiety attack. It’s hard to tell.

Everything depends on what kind of crazy she’s feeling that day. I have little sympathy. She likes to play the victim and if I don’t agree with her at all times there’s hell to pay. At my age, there’s little I can do to assert myself.

It’s a shame she had to give birth to such a stubborn, hard-headed daughter. I often find myself so outraged by her blatant disrespect, that I carelessly fight with her, knowing I could have easily avoided the conflict.

Usually, I just pretend. To care.

I never do.

I’m too busy envisioning a future of freedom, too busy enjoying my own life, separating it from my home. I work extra hours at my job as a vacation. I neglect to

invite my friends over because I want to be far away. I go on pointless drives. Alone. It's the only place I find solitude. When I go to school, the drama gets filed away somewhere in my brain. It's a switch, a button. Push it and ignore everything else except for what's in front of me.

Then, suddenly, I can breathe.

But these moments. These situations I don't see coming. Waking up to chaos, to cold. There isn't time to take anything into consideration. No time to think logically.

Unfortunately, I'm running on instinct at seven AM, furious at her loss of temper. Appalled by her screaming.

My guess? She probably forgot to take one of her seven medications the night before. Her best bet would be to pop a couple of Xanax and have a goddamn cigarette out in the snow.

"Mom! This is ridiculous! I have to get ready for school!"

She breathes hard. Ready to pounce.

"Fuck you, ya little *bitch!*"

She lunges at me. Hair wild and singed, only half the blonde it used to be.



I'd do more to defend myself, but it's getting pretty close to the weekend.

Please don't ground me. Don't ground me so I have to stay at home and watch you get drunk and listen to you complain about work and then you'll blow that fucking cigarette smoke in my face and act like a fuckin bitch when I ask you to please be polite

for once in your goddamn life. Please God don't let her ground me. I've got cars to ride around in, movies to see, a boyfriend to have sex with.

"Mom! Please! Stop!"

She pushes me. Grabs me by the shoulders and turns me toward the doors leading out to our balcony. I'm much stronger than her. If I needed to I could fight. I try not to think about it.

"You think you can just get up and start telling me what to do? I'm burning up, do you hear me?! Do you?!"

I shouldn't have gotten so angry. Fuck, why did I get so mad? Shit shit shit. I shouldn't have complained, I am so fucking grounded.

"Mom! I know! I'm sorry! It's just so cold!"

"Oh, I'll show you cold!"

Door. Slides. Open.

Me. Shoved. Outside.

Snow.

"Mom! Please!"

She locks the door and heads to the kitchen. A jug of chardonnay awaits. No coffee. Just the right cup for the wrong liquid. Prescription pills like Jackson Pollock on the table. Her acrylic nails jab at the chaos. Has to be Xanax.

My breath is anger and white dust. Snow between my toes. Hard nipples and greasy morning skin. Matted blond hair loose and sticky.

I cry.

I cry for a lot of reasons.

For the childhood I can't forget. For the long distance father who can't help me.

For the sad creature, my mother.

"Mom! Let me in! Mom! Please!"

What the fuck? What the fucking fuck Mom?!

She smiles and waves. Like dying Miss America. I see joy in her eyes. Making me suffer is helping her calm down. She needs to share the misery because she's already filled to the brim with it. Nothing unfamiliar.

Old news and repeated behaviors, amplified by the menopause. I'm only trying to escape punishment. If I can get through it, maybe I'll get some freedom this weekend. I need it to stay sane.

How many minutes pass on this balcony? I'm not sure. My hands are stiff, pink and hard from wasted blows against the glass door. I seriously consider climbing down the two-story apartment building. I think I could survive if I fell. At least then, she might stop yelling. Or redirect her nastiness to someone else. A doctor. My father, maybe.

Maybe I'll just jump off Mom. Maybe then you'll feel bad. Maybe I'll jump and break my leg and then you'll feel really fuckin guilty won't you? Won't you? Then your hot flash won't seem so goddamn bad will it?

Dramatic. I find myself getting caught up.

I don't want to be like her. I think I am better than her. I *pray* I will never be like her.

I'm afraid she's going to fuck me in the head. That I'm not strong enough for my personality to survive. I think about when I was small. When I didn't know who she was. What damage did she do that I don't even know about?

Am I already fucked up and don't even realize it?

Even scarier. Because what if it's too late?

So much I've had no control over. It doesn't matter.

I'm not a victim.

And I won't end up like that because I won't go jumping off balconies to make a point.

Maybe if I just pretend to start climbing down the balcony she'll see and freak out and let me back in. But will that just piss her off? Fuck, I don't know! Where is she? What is she doing? It's fucking freezing!

I let my forehead fall to the glass. Apparently, I have a pimple there because the pressure of the pain jerks me back into standing position. Still no mother.

I give up. So fast.

I'm too tired for this.

Turn around. Numb to the cold. Rest myself on the ledge. My skin's hard with goose bumps. It doesn't matter. I can barely see. Tears and ice are salt and wind on my face.

The door slides open. My head jerks around to face her.

God, just when I've given up. Now? After all that? NOW, you let me in? How much energy did I just waste? What time is it? I'm gonna be late. Fuck!

I don't say anything to her. Tears are still falling. A/C off.

It's good to be warm.

She is silent. Gives me a dirty look. Sits on the off white-couch, once white, stained from cigarette smoke and poor cleaning strategies. Lights a cigarette. Drinks wine.



I practically tip-toe through the living room. Too intimidated to make noise. She could go off again at any moment. I make a left towards the bathroom that we share.

The shower is the safest place. Always has been. It's an excuse to lock the door. And it's quiet. Blessedly quiet.

Okay, it was a panic attack, that's what happened. Hot flash with panic attack. How many Xanax did she take? Jesus! What's her work schedule today? Nine to five? Twelve to nine? Fuck, let it be twelve to nine, let it be twelve to nine. I need to be alone after school. Shit, I just need to get through school.

I'm all revved up. Anxious. Nervous at the impending repercussions of this incident. What is she planning? What will she threaten me with? Or will she just forget about it in a few hours?

Her silence is my panic. At least when she's screaming I know how she's feeling, but this, this dead quiet, her spiteful eyes. It's a furious mystery. Meanwhile, I try to hold back tears as I put on makeup. Flat iron my hair. Put on a cute outfit.

Focus. Focus.

If you look great, you'll feel great.

A motto I live by. And if you don't feel great no one will know.

Almost out the door. Grab a purse to match my outfit. Magnolia perfume.

Hairspray.

I'm walking, walking, so close, so close.

"Brooke!"

Stop. Turn. Stand-off.

"Yeah?"

"You are to come *straight* home after school and call me to tell me you've arrived. I'll have instructions for you and you are to do exactly as I say *without* question.

Do you understand me clearly?"

"Yes."

"Yes, *what?*"

"Yes, Mom."

"Now, go to school. It makes me *sick* to look at you right now."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

“Just get out of here, Brooke. You can think about how you treat your mother when you’re grounded for the next two weeks.”

“Mom, *please*. A.J. and I have plans this weekend.”

“Well, I don’t really *give* a shit, now do I? When you treat your mother with such *disrespect*, without *any* consideration for my feelings, ya pay. Ya *got* it?”

“Yes.”

“You look very pretty.”

“Thank you.”

“Have a good day at school.”



Karen visits Bloomington one more time before the Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference in the spring that’s being held in Chicago. It’s my 26th birthday and we go to a restaurant called Miller’s Steak House for dinner. There’s 10 of us at the table and the two older ladies seated next to us are clearly horrified by Karen’s skimpy attire, balloon boobs, and obnoxious speech. My friends find her hilarious. According to them, while I’m out smoking a cigarette she stands up at the table and practically announces to the whole restaurant that she’s a private escort.

I am not embarrassed. I think: *These fucking conservative Bloomington assholes could use a reality check.*

Then, it’s my turn to visit her. I’ve stayed with her a handful of times before, never once seeing a customer come through.

I've gotten to meet her prostitute friends though. They range in age and reason. Most of them are younger than her and Karen lets them live at her apartment. She's just started going back to school this year, so during the week she stays with her dad in the suburbs, while the girls remain on the home-front and take care of business.

This year AWP is in Chicago. It turns out that Karen lives just 15 minutes from the site. I ask her if I can stay at her place and she happily agrees.

"Of course you can stay here! I love having you. Shit. girl, I'm this close to givin ya a fuckin key to the place. I want you to feel like you still have a home up here since your mom's back in Georgia."



I've been having back problems since grad school started, having strained my trapezius muscle during the first three weeks of class. The doctors told me it would heal within two weeks, but that never happens. As a result, my entire first year of grad school consists mostly of me trying to do my best to keep up, and not cry from the pain despite all the pills the doctors give me. I see a chiropractor three times a week, which helps. Still though, the pain just comes and goes on different levels.

The night I drive to AWP my back is killing me. On a scale of one to ten, I'd give it an eight. And the drive doesn't help. I half-think of backing out, but I made a commitment, so I gotta go. I figure I can at least relax when I get to Karen's. Usually, we just smoke and drink a little, watch movies and go out to eat when we visit. She lives in a fancier part of the city now, having attained some sort of contact through her hooking

business. She lives alone to my knowledge. I'm looking forward to getting in some girl time while I attend the conference.

But when I arrive, there are three other women in the house who I've never met. Two are young, probably 20, maybe 21, both African American: Ashley and Tonya. The other is an older Latino woman, Camilla, probably in her early 40s. She looks like life threw a bunch of vomit at her. Like she really had the sky just shit on her since the beginning. I'm afraid of these women. But I feel such pity for them too, and I'm unsure of what's going on. Karen's always kept her business pretty much under control and away from me as much as possible. Never been any problems. My gut talks to me, yelling "Leave! Leave!"

But I stay. I'm sure this is nothing. Karen's got my back.

"Brooke! I'm so glad you're here! Meet the girls!"

"Hey!" I say and try to act normal. Like someone who doesn't go to grad school and is surrounded by highly educated people all of the time.

Don't be a fucking elitist, Brooke. Stop being an asshole.



That night, Karen invites three guys over to her apartment, all of whom are current clients. They're nice enough, but I have nothing in common with them except for marijuana. I wonder if they think I'm a hooker too. And if not, do they think I would be willing? What *does* a female prostitute look like? How does she act? Where does she

come from? And why does she do it? I think about how easy the money is, how much of it they make, even the idea of it is enthralling to me.

But no.

I couldn't.

I just couldn't suck a stranger's cock for money.

But then again, what the fuck do I know about these people's lives and experiences? Who am I to judge? I know how Karen ended up here, though I really don't see why she couldn't have just bucked up and gotten a waitressing job, especially considering her dad is paying for her school and lets her live with him. Apparently, this apartment is just for business, a fact I was unaware of the two previous times I have visited.

It doesn't matter. I'm not better than any of these people. Don't be such an elitist bitch.

The contrast between my dress and manner and Karen and the other girls' is striking. I'm wearing a pink and white, button-down collared shirt with a Kelly green cardigan, skinny jeans, converse, and black-framed glasses. I smoke Parliament light 100s and I politely decline the offers of cocaine. The other women wear brightly colored, loose revealing shirts or tiny tank-tops with flared jeans. Everyone's snorting coke and smoking Newports and they want to get alcohol. There's hip-hop blasting on the stereo and no one knows what to say to me when I say I'm in graduate school.

"So, you go to school?"

“Yeah, I’m a graduate student.”

“Oh...So what do ya study?”

“Creative writing and publishing.”

“Oh...That’s cool.”

“Yeah.”

I don’t really know what to say to any of them. I ask about their lives, their plans, their romances. I try to find common ground, but my back is a painful distraction and I’m exhausted, needing to get up at seven AM for a panel at the conference.

When I go to bed I have to ask Karen and her friends twice to be just a little quieter. I feel terrible about asking, but I’m having a hard time understanding why she would have such a gathering knowing well in advance that I was coming here for an academic conference. I eventually fall asleep from pure exhaustion.



In high school, none of my friends except Zoey like Karen. My two main groups are “my girls” Kate, Allison, and Melanie, and some Indie kids. They’re the haters. The other people I’m friends with, stragglers let’s call them, outcasts, nerds, weirdoes, a few popular kids, they don’t seem to give a shit either way, but I think that’s probably because like me, they float from clique to clique, never staying totally grounded in one. We appreciate what different kinds of people add to our lives, so there seems to be no judgment.

But the others. Those two groups.

“Dude, why do you hang out with that girl?” asks my Indie friend Christa.

“I don’t know. She’s cool. We have fun. We have a lot of family stuff in common.”

“But she’s soooo loud and annoying. And she never stops talking.”

“I know, but you just have to stand your ground with her. When she smokes, she’s a lot more chill.”

“Yeah, but she hangs out with *Black* people,” chimes in my other friend Danny, as if it’s something to laugh about and make fun of her over.

“So? Who cares?”

“I don’t know. They’re so fucking *loud* all the time, and the way she talks. Why the fuck does she talk like that?”

“Danny, I really don’t know. I’ve never really hung out with them before. It’s pretty much just her and me when we do.”

“Yeah, but why the hell would anyone want talk like that. I mean seriously, that’s TERRIBLE.”

“Danny, I don’t know. Who cares? *You’re* not hanging out with her.”

“Yeah, and let’s keep it that way.”

Fuck you, Danny. Jesus. I don’t really get the talking thing either, but it’s not like it really matters that much anyway.

Though, I have to admit, the few times I’ve been around her Black friends, I’ve been extremely uncomfortable. And it’s definitely been because of the talking. Karen

always immediately starts talking Black, and I don't get it. I just want to be like "Why don't you just talk like a normal person? You talk that way to me. Why do you change the way you talk when you're around them? Why can't you just be yourself?"

It makes me feel like an outsider. I feel awkward speaking the way I do when I've been in those situations. It's clearly just a thing within the group, and it seems like a *Black* thing, so I feel like it would be offensive to even *try* and talk like that. Better to be myself than to miserably fail at being someone else. And I don't want to be racist. I am *not* a racist.

I mean, I'm always nice and shit, but I always feel like Karen's Black friends are wary of me or something. Or that they don't like me, don't trust me or something. I don't get it. I really try to be nice to everyone.

I've never asked Karen about it though. We're both social floaters, so I figure that's just one of her things, and as long as we stay friends, that's all that matters. She can do what she wants, and she's a good friend. Shouldn't *that* be what matters the most?

"My girls" don't like her either, though none of them explicitly states that it's because she hangs out with Black people, though it's clear to me that that's part of it.

"Brooke, that Karen girl is so weird," says Melanie.

"Yeah, she's SO obnoxious. Why do you hang out with her?" asks Allison.

“I don’t know. I like her. I think she’s cool. I mean, I can see what you’re saying, but she’s a good friend, and we both have crazy, alcoholic mothers, so I don’t know, I guess that just really bonds us.”

“Ugh! Why does she talk like that?” asks Allison.

“I don’t *know*, Allison. Who cares?”

“Whatever, I just don’t get it. Half the time it seems like you’d rather hang out with her and those Indie kids than with us.”

“Well, *sorry* I have other friends. I’m not exclusive to one group. I like different people.”

“*Yeah...okay*”

Kate comes to my rescue.

“Leave her alone you guys. She can hang out with Karen if she wants to. Don’t pick on her friend.”

Out of “my girls” I’ve known Kate the longest, since the sixth grade, and she’s always seemed to have a stronger sense of loyalty and individuality than the other two. I’ve only known them since high school, and I’m only friends with them because of Kate. I mean, we’re all good friends, but Allison and Melanie always seem to want to pick on me or challenge me in some way. If I had to guess, I’d say it’s because I’m super-thin and have no trouble getting boys interested in me, despite my shyness, and both of them struggle with their weight and have a harder time getting dates. Which sounds terrible, but it’s the only thing I can think of.

I mean, it *is* high school.

I never try to compete with them or criticize them, though, sometimes it's difficult since they all shit-talk each other, and I find myself getting sucked in, and then I hate myself for it. I try to be a good friend, and I try to let their bullshit go because I figure it comes from insecurity. So they want to brag about being in their advanced classes and their perfect GPAs, so they want to prove that they're so much smarter than me, than each other. Allison and Melanie just keep trying to draw me into some sort of competition whenever they can, claiming we're all besties, meanwhile calling me a slut behind my back. Not that I have proof, but I'd bet my first-born child on it.

I fucking hate high school.



The next day, Karen has clients coming in and out of the apartment all day. I come back from the conference for a few hours and three different Johns pass through. I actually get to see one of them.

"Say 'Hi!'" one of the girls says.

A 20-something, fairly attractive Asian American in a suit and tie pokes his head through the curtain by the doorway. I'm surprised. I guess I always pictured all Johns being creepos in some way. I mean, maybe this guy is a creep, but he flashes us a bright, white smile, waves, and says "Hi!" in a genuinely friendly voice.

If I saw him walking down the street I would never think this guy would come to some random apartment to pay for sex with total strangers. Then again, it's a lot easier

for a girl to get laid than a guy. Girls can get it whenever they want. But guys, there's no guarantee. I mean, this dude looks like he works for some corporate office making a good living. He's not ugly. From the snapshot I got of him, he seemed like a nice guy. He put out good vibes. He didn't seem like a bad person. But why do I automatically assume that guys who pay for sex are bad people?

Maybe this dude is just a wuss with girls, and can't get anyone to sleep with him. But he's kind of cute! I don't get it. Maybe, he's not what he seems. Jesus, did they even use a condom?

"Okay, bye ladies!" He's quick to leave.

I wonder if he thought I was a hooker too.

I don't look like a hooker right? Isn't it about looking like one? Acting like one? I've heard of up-scale hookers before, but what are they like? They've gotta carry themselves better than this. They've gotta dress classier than this.

I hate myself again for judging and worrying about myself. Who gives a shit if this guy thought I was a hooker? Maybe I'm the sexy librarian or something. Maybe that's my fake hooker persona, except, of course, for the fact that only my head and my hands are visible.

But when it really gets right down to it, I don't know shit. All I know is what Karen has presented to me since first telling me she was in this profession. I realize my experience is extremely limited and I'm guessing subconsciously biased in a lot of ways.

Sometimes I think that Karen is better than these girls, that she's smarter. But of all the hookers I've been introduced to, it seems pretty clear that a lot of them don't come from upper-middle class backgrounds like Karen and I do. Some of them don't seem to realize there are other options, or they're desperate. And then some of them just like to party. They say they're hooking just temporarily so they can go back to school, but they never do.

Just keep hooking. Keep partying.

The two African American girls are here, and they seem really sweet, especially Ashley. I don't ask her age, but boy does she look young. Maybe even fresh out of high school. I feel so sorry for her because she seems so friendly and caring. I want to yell at her and say "Stop it! You're better than this! Get out before it's too late! You have your whole life ahead of you!"

But I don't.

Tonya and Ashley are doing all the work. I guess it's part of training, and Karen gets a cut of the money.

At least I don't see cocaine anywhere.



I decide to tell Karen about my concerns over the situation. I don't feel safe, and all of this is a huge distraction from the conference. I've even been texting my friend, Lisa, to see if I can come stay with her in the burbs. She seems extremely concerned

-Brooke are you okay? This doesn't sound safe.

-I'm fine. I just think I should get out of here.

-You can stay at my place but I need to know ASAP cuz I gotta get up for work in the morning.

-Ok. Let me talk to her. I'll get back to u.

I've come back from the conference for a break, and this time, no one's in the apartment except for Karen. Perfect timing. We smoke cigarettes by the coffee table together.

"Hey, can I talk to you about something?"

"Of course! What's up?"

"Well, I was thinking about going to stay with Lisa in the burbs for the rest of the time I'm here."

"What? Why?"

"I mean, it just seems like you've got stuff going on here, and I don't want to get in the way of that, and Lisa says I can stay with her as long as I get there by ten."

"No, no, no! You're not in the way at all. It wasn't supposed to happen like this, it wasn't supposed to be like this."

"Karen, it's fine. You've gotta do what ya gotta do, but I mean, I'm also here for a conference for school, and I really can't be distracted, so—"

"No, no, no. I want ya to stay. Everything's gonna be fine. It wasn't supposed to be like this, I'm sorry. All of this shit just took me by surprise. I'll make it all stop, I promise. No more clients coming in after eight."

“But Karen, it’s not just that. There’s all these people here, and coke, and everyone’s drinking and being loud, and seriously, that’s fine. It’s your place, but I need to be in a place that’s good for me so I can be at this conference. Plus, my back is killing me, and I’m just so tired. I feel like it would just be best if I went to Lisa’s.”

“No, seriously. I want you to feel like you have a home when you come here. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Your mom’s not here anymore and I want you to know you have family when you come up here. I’m your family here. You know that. Just trust me.”

“I know you have good intentions, but—”

“No, I promise. No clients after eight and no people over the rest of the time you’re here. Ashley needs a place to crash, but that’s all. I swear that’s how it’ll be the rest of the weekend. I swear. Please stay.”

I think about it. Karen really does feel like family. She seems genuinely concerned. My head says leave, but my heart says stay. My gut says get the fuck out of here right now you dumb, trusting bitch.

“Okay, I’ll stay.”



When I get back to Karen’s that night after a poetry reading, she and Ashley are in the other room with a customer. It’s after eight o’clock. I don’t know what else to do, so I just sit in the living room, nervously smoking pot and cigarettes.

Karen comes out about 15 minutes later.

“I don’t like that guy, I don’t like that guy, I don’t like that guy.”

“Wait, what? Why? What’s wrong?”

“He’s just weird, I don’t know. He took forever to come and he kept sayin weird shit.”

“Like what?”

“Just like ‘Yeah, you ladies are really cool, you seem like you’d be cool to hang out with, but you probably don’t wanna hang out with me, do you?’ and just weird shit like that. And now he’s done and he’s taking forever to put on his clothes.”

“Dude.”

“It’s fine. He’s just some fuckin weirdo. He just needs to leave.”

I can’t even respond at this point. I’m instantly terrified. I go into survival mode and start darting my eyes around the apartment looking for escape routes. *I’m sure it’s fine. I’m sure he’ll just leave in five minutes. Everything’s fine.*

Karen comes back out pretty quickly. “This guy won’t fuckin leave. Oh my god. He will *not* put on his clothes.” She seems concerned, but not as much as I wish she would be. I wonder how often this kind of thing happens. Has she just gotten so used to it that she doesn’t realize how dangerous this job really is? I still can’t speak. Karen returns to the conflict and I await with my cell phone out.

Do I call the cops? Can I? Won’t everyone get arrested and their lives be ruined if I do? Would they think I was a prostitute? Shit!

Now I can hear voices coming from the room. I pay close attention to the John's. It's deep, and he sounds like he's probably a pretty large guy.

"I'm not tryin to make you mad, I'm not tryin to make you mad," he says a little too loudly.

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