

TRAIPSING THE OLD STOMPING GROUNDS: THE FIRST
THREE STORIES OF A NOVEL-IN-STORIES
WITH A CRAFT ESSAY

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ABSTRACT

Traipsing the Old Stomping Grounds is a novel-in-stories about the quest for love and belonging in the life of Emily, a twenty-something year-old who depends on relationships with boys/men as her only resource for fulfillment of these desires. Based on real life events but with fictionalized characters and places, each story in the novel explores a relationship Emily forges while living on her own in small town Oklahoma during the 1980s, where Mackie's, a fast food restaurant, and the people who work there become the center of her life. My craft essay explores the methods of imposing plot on life through the lens of Robin Hemley's *Turning Life into Fiction*, and discusses how the craft elements of point of view and structure play significant roles in adapting life into fiction in my own work as well as in the works that have influenced my creative process.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory to my father, Robert Warren Jones.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Writer Benjamin Hales says that writing comes from three areas: imagination, experience, and research. Depending on the type of work, the ratio of imagination, experience, and research varies. For this essay, I will focus on the second area, experience, and more explicitly, real life experience. I have chosen three works that draw on real life experience in different degrees that have influenced my own thesis project: *Death in Venice*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing*. Using Robin Hemley's *Turning Life into Fiction*, I will examine each author's use of structure and point of view and show how the work has influenced my own thesis project, the first three stories of my novel-in-stories, *Traipsing the Old Stomping Grounds*, a story of obsession set against the backdrop of Oklahoma in the 1980s in the voice of a first person unreliable narrator.

In May of 1911, Thomas Mann and his wife embarked on a vacation to Venice, Italy. While there, Mann enjoyed the luxuries of the Grand Hotel des Bains, read of the death of fifty-one-year-old composer, Gustav Mahler, and became entranced by a young boy. A year later, his experiences from that trip resulted in his most well-known and enduring work, *Death in Venice*. Mann's novel takes place during the time and place of his own Venice trip, but his protagonist, Gustav Aschenbach, sixteen years Mann's senior and the same age as Mahler at his death, is a fictional character who vacations on his own. During his first evening at the hotel, Aschenbach is captivated by the presence of a young boy which mirrors Mann's own experience when on their

first day at the hotel, he and his wife “caught sight of a striking Polish family—the girls rather austere dressed, and beside them a wildly beautiful thirteen-year-old boy in blue sailor suit.” In his novel, Mann embellishes his own enchantment with the boy, turning it into an obsession, which sends Aschenbach on a downward physical and psychological spiral as he desperately stalks the fictional boy, Tadzio, until he has lost all dignity and succumbs to his death. Although the story is far enough removed from the actual events to be labeled fiction, many real-life details are included such as “an old ‘queen,’ [old man with facial cosmetics] hideously made up and surrounded by young people romping about in high spirits” on the steamship to the hotel, and a gondolier who, employed by the Manns to take them across to the Lido, was found to have no license to do so (N. Hamilton 147).

Robin Hemley states in his craft book, *Turning Life into Fiction*, “True stories tend to be episodic, loosely connected episodes instead of a chain of events with a clear cause and effect” (154). Traditional fiction needs a direction or point to reach; therefore, events from life are usually written to fit into an arc with a beginning, middle, and end that enhance the story. *The Weekend Novelist* by Robert J. Ray gives a good beginning guide in structuring the plot of a story by invoking Aristotle's Incline. Aristotle's Incline, as explained by Ray, gives a type of road map to plotting the structure of a novel with beginning, middle, and end. Its diagram, which divides story into three acts, shows specific places to set plot points and catharsis (141). For example, if Mann had simply written his true experience of his trip as a journal entry about a lovely boy who captured his attention, the episode would not engage the reader as one told with a beginning, middle, and end. To create an engaging story, Mann chose to add fictional elements that resulted in a story of a seemingly normal but restless man who goes on a journey, falls into an obsession that becomes so controlling of him that he ignores warnings of sickness, and

eventually dies. If Mann had stuck to only the episodic facts, and had not imposed plot on life, he would not have created the masterpiece that is *Death in Venice*.

Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* serves as another good example of how its author, like Mann, made choices for structural purposes although her novel is almost entirely autobiographical. In *The Bell Jar*, as opposed to *Death in Venice*, Plath arranges some of her life episodes to fit the arc of her novel rather than letting the episodes chronologically guide her story. For instance, in the novel, protagonist Esther's brother is studying abroad during her descent into depression, but Edward Butscher states in his biography, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, "Sylvia altered the time of events to fit thematic progression—her brother did go to Germany but several years after Plath's suicide attempt" (308). But like *Death in Venice*, Plath's climax of her novel is centered around a fictitious death. The death of Mann's protagonist, though inspired by the death of composer Mahler, is still invented since the circumstances are more closely related to Mann's own experiences. In Plath's novel, the suicide of Esther's friend, Joan, is "the only purely imagined event in the book. Jane Anderson, upon whom the character of Joan Gilling was very loosely based, did not commit suicide" (308). Both authors in these instances, arrange episodes in their lives for structural purposes of their novels and both invent deaths to create a climax, even though each work differs in the amount of its autobiographical content.

In addition to structural elements, point of view is another important choice in fiction. Ray states that third person omniscient "brings the reader close while still maintaining just the right distance" (109). In stories of obsession, such as *Death in Venice*, a third person omniscient narrator has access to the protagonist's inner thoughts but also has opinions about the protagonist. Readers can sympathize with Aschenbach's psychological decline but also realize he is falling deeper into an abyss. Aschenbach interprets some of Tadzio's actions as wanting to be closer to

him, or wanting to be like him, encouraging Aschenbach to continue his pursuit but also leaving us, as the reader, to wonder if he is right or misinterpreting. The narrator does not give us his opinion on those instances as the narrator is limited and does not have access to Tadzio's thoughts.

Like Mann, who used a real-life event for inspiration but then uses imagination and research to develop *Death in Venice*, many authors use real life experiences in fiction as part of their own process. In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamont says “Remember that you own what happened to you” (6). However, just as Mann fictionalized his encounter with the young boy, the author can make craft choices when turning life into fiction that can disguise what is real and distort the truth to make what is factual well-hidden, therefore giving all else the guise of fiction. For example, like the fictional family in *The Catcher in the Rye*, J. D. Salinger's real family lived in Manhattan, but Salinger changed his family makeup for the novel. For example, Salinger's older sister is transformed into Holden's younger sister, Phoebe. In other instances, Salinger fictionalizes his story by simply changing the names of people and places he knew in real life. According to Ian Hamilton, author of *In Search of J. D. Salinger*, the fictional prep school that Holden attended was based on Valley Forge Military Academy where Salinger attended and that many of the fictional characters in *Catcher* are based on cadets Salinger knew there, including a young man who fell to his death from a window in one of the dormitories (25).

Salinger's choice of changing Holden's family background to alter the truth in a story based on real life was one I made in my novel-in-stories. I gave my protagonist, Emily, a fictional background in which she lives with an aunt, uncle, and two male cousins after her parents are killed in an automobile accident. This family makeup is different from my own where my parents divorced when I was a toddler and I grew up with my mother, brother, and sister.

Though the fictional aunt and uncle may be composites of and loosely based on other people in my life growing up, only I would know for sure who. By fictionalizing Emily's family background, I was freer to use my experiences as I wished. Changing Emily's family makeup puts the whole story under the guise of fiction and blurs the line between facts and fabrication.

Another craft choice that Salinger makes is in the point of view of his protagonist, a depressed adolescent. Because Holden does not always interpret what is happening around him in the same way an adult reader would, Salinger creates some distance between the narrator and the reader. For instance, there is a scene when Holden is in a hotel bar trying to make conversation with a group of girls at the next table. He interprets their reluctance to talk to him as misguided on their part, chalking it up to their stupidity. The reader might interpret the scene differently: perhaps these girls merely had no interest in talking to Holden; perhaps he was not their idea of the mature gentleman with whom they may have otherwise conversed. This distancing of the point of view from the adult Salinger to an adolescent Holden, provides another way to fictionalize real life experiences.

In addition, I imitated *The Catcher in The Rye* by making the protagonist, Emily, her own antagonist. Like Holden, whose negative outlook on life and the people around him work against him as he tries to search for meaning in his life and relationships with others, Emily makes bad choices in her relationships which leads to more problems in her life and her search for love. Also, like Holden, Emily is an unreliable narrator. She interprets what is happening around her differently than the reader may. Her encounters with women who she feels are dismissing her may not be for the same reasons she feels they are. Her assessment of why Danny breaks up with her may not be how the reader sees the situation. Emily sees things in a way that fits into her

world and view of herself but her view of herself may not be what others see and therefore, Emily's assessments are not reliable; they are based on a distorted view point.

Hemley tells us that “First person is useful in letting a character speak for himself. In a first-person story, the distance between the reader and the character's psyche, what John Gardner calls ‘psychic distance,’ is foreshortened” (57). That is, in the first-person narrative, the reader feels most close to the events that are happening as they are witnessing the events through the narrator’s own thoughts and perspective. The greatest aspect of *Catcher*, in my opinion, is how Holden’s attitude towards phoniness of the world and others is expressed in his voice. Like Holden, I want the voice of Emily to not only give the reader insight into her own character but also to help the reader see through Emily's eyes. Also, when writing fiction based on real life, the voice is important to how authentic the character comes across. Lamont states that “the truth of your experience can only come through your own voice” (199). Just as Holden's voice may be similar to a younger Salinger's, so Emily's voice is similar to mine or what it was when I originally wrote the pages that were the starting point for my novel back in 1987. To change Emily’s voice would perhaps take away from the authenticity of the experience and make it seem less real, more contrived.

In *Catcher*, Holden's point of view takes the reader into his thoughts from a vantage point of knowing only what he sees, therefore, determining for ourselves if he is right or not and questioning if he is. Readers who think similarly to Holden, would identify more with him and agree with his take. If it was told from a third person omniscient point of view, we'd still get Holden's thoughts but perhaps also the opinion of the narrator, giving the reader a more objective view and an insight into whether Holden is reliable or not. In my own work, Emily’s obsession is

told through first person, and I want the reader to question, like Emily does, the realness of her feelings and wonder if Emily's interpretations of Jack's actions are accurate.

Mann and Salinger have both drawn on documented experiences to create their fiction while using different points of view to tell their stories. A more recent work, *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, a novel-in-stories by Melissa Bank, reads as autobiographical fiction, although one cannot say for sure what percentage of the work is experience, imagination, and research. However, the coming of age collection was useful for me because it is a good example of how Aristotle's Incline works in each scene, the individual stories, and the overall arc of the novel. As Sandra Scofield states in *The Scene Book*, "I find it helpful to think of scenes as little stories" with a beginning, middle, and end, therefore, the incline can be usefully applied to the shortest of scenes as well as novels (13).

The novel-in-stories follows its protagonist, Jane Rosenal, from the young age of fourteen to adulthood as she searches for love and relationships in her life. In the first story, "Advanced Beginners," Jane observes a relationship between her older brother, Henry, and his girlfriend, Julia, who is eight years his senior. In the first scene, Henry arrives at the family beach house and introduces Julia to Jane. The beginning of the arc within the scene is Jane's first impression, "I thought maybe she'd look older than Henry, but it was Henry who looked older than Henry." Plot points come as Jane notes the differences in Henry such as, "He'd grown a beard, for starters..." and "He gave me a kiss on the cheek, as though he always had." The inciting incident occurs when Julia asks "Hank" for the wine, and Jane tells the reader, "Whoever Hank was, he had it," confirming that indeed, changes to her brother have been made (5 – 6). In this short scene, much is established that is important to the rest of the story. We as the reader get a good sense of the influence that the relationship with Julia has had on Henry and how Jane feels about

it. This first scene also serves as the beginning of the arc or incline of the story with the middle centered around the growing pains of Jane and her relationship with Julia, whom she comes to like. The inciting incident of the story comes when Henry goes to a party given by Julia's family and feels uncomfortable and out of place. Jane witnesses the aftermath of this event as the turning point to the decline of Henry and Julia's relationship and the story concludes with Jane questioning herself if she would also “fail at loving someone” (43). This first story, which establishes Jane’s early interests and concerns with romantic relationships, also serves as the beginning of the overall novel about relationships.

As the stories in Bank's novel progress, Jane experiences the ups and downs of relationships with men and her family. Many of the plot points concern her relationship with her father and his feelings toward her relationship with an older man, Archie. Jane senses that her father does not approve of Archie: “I remember my father's relief at our breakup, though he'd never said a word against Archie” (145). One of the major moments in the novel comes in the story, “The Worst Thing a Suburban Girl Could Imagine,” when Jane's father is dying of leukemia while Archie is hospitalized with pancreatitis resulting from alcoholism and uncontrolled diabetes. After her father's death, Jane sees a poem in the subway. She says, “Something changed then. I saw my life in scale: it was just my life. It was not momentous, and only now did I recognize that it had once seemed so to me; that was while my father was watching” (189). This moment serves as the inciting incident of the short story as well as an important moment in the novel. After this point, Jane quits her job in publishing and eventually breaks up with Archie. Through the rest of the stories, Jane grows and finally finds herself in a good relationship.

While I can't know how much of her novel-in-stories was based on her real life, the coming of age intimacy of Bank's work, achieved through an intimate voice and delicate structure, is something I'd like to achieve in my own. As Hemley points out in his craft book, life's episodes need to be pruned down by asking yourself "...why you want to incorporate this or that fact in your novel or story. Is it simply because it's an interesting tidbit? Or does it enrich the story?" (152). Scofield states that the structure of the scene should have a situation at the beginning, a line of action, and a new situation at the end and that "Each part of the story is there for a purpose that serves the story as a whole" (14). I find Aristotle's Incline a useful diagram for setting scenes and mapping short stories as well as novels since each scene works as a mini story within the larger story. In turning life into fiction, following this pattern for structure is imperative to determine what should stay and what should go and in knowing what needs to be built upon to make an arc. Like the loosely connected episodes Hemley speaks of above, as writers we tend "to include the kitchen sink and see everything as crucial to the story because it really happened" (162).

For example, in structuring "Ghosts in the Clouds," one of my early stories in my novel-in-stories, I took episodes made up of events from different decades in my life and condensed characters to make one story. I had hiked in the white mountains every year from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, long after I had lived in Oklahoma where much of the novel takes place. "Ghosts in the Clouds" takes place in the late 1970s, before the Oklahoma stories, so I am taking my hiking experiences and placing them in a story three decades before they happened. The group of friends are based on a group of friends I went to college with in Pennsylvania, but I combine that group with friends I had at the Christian school in Oklahoma. The scene that takes place at night on the mountain with the group of friends, is based on a life episode which took

place when our group of friends in Pennsylvania snuck out of school one night and rented a motel room just to get off campus and smoke and drink in comfort. However, most of the conversation is made up or told in a different context or setting. For example, during the hut scene, when a hiker asks the crew how often the blankets get washed in a season, an older gentleman from the back shouts out “we don't want to know.” That was said by the retired electrician who organized our real-life hikes in the 90s. So, in my story, my real-life hiking group is sitting at a back table while my fictional group are eating dinner in the same place, but decades apart. Choosing to set the story against the backdrop of a hiking trip, gave the camp story another layer to incorporate Scofield’s advice of building a beginning, middle, and end. I could add meaning out of incidents that took place during the summer, and add coming of age arcs for both Emily and Johnny.

In whichever voice or point of view the story is told in, taking episodes from life and turning them into fiction requires making craft choices that the author may find at once both difficult and liberating. Whether it is taking life's episodes and embellishing them to the point of being unrecognizable, or keeping some the same, or tossing many out, the result should be a story with a beginning, middle, and end with plot points and an inciting incident. My novel-in-stories thesis consists of three stories that chronicle a time in the life of Emily, each with a beginning, middle, and end, but will fit into a novel with the thread of Emily's obsession with Jack running through. Although the interactions between Emily and Jack remain distant throughout my novel-in-stories (they talk but never have a physical relationship) I aim to build enough tension between them to engage the reader in their story and wonder what will happen, how it will end. I also aim to bring the reader into a world that emulates my vision of small town

Oklahoma and its people during the 1980s and hope that it is a place that the reader feels having been there worthwhile.

CHAPTER II
TRAIPSING THE OLD STOMPING GROUNDS

Ghosts in the Clouds

“Rom's!”

That's Johnny. He keeps us motivated—the rest of us who lag behind, sweat dripping from our hair, shoulders hunched forward under the weight of overstuffed backpacks as we struggle over the steep rocks, grabbing onto tree branches to pull us forward.

“Rom's,” we holler back. That is our chant. That is what keeps us going. That is the Italian restaurant in Massachusetts we're going to eat at on our way home once this hiking thing is over.

It's only been two hours since we piled into Jason's old '67 Studebaker and left Jordan Christian Camp. The camp to which my wicked step-aunt sent me to get me out of her house. It was the same camp I used to go to with my cousins when I was a kid. It had been years since I'd been there and I didn't like it much then except when we went to the lake and had campfires. Most of the time they taught us Bible stuff, or maybe that's just what stands out in my memory because it was so boring. This time though, it didn't seem as bad, maybe because I met Wendy and them. This group of friends. We'd been there all summer, first as counselors or workers, then as senior campers ourselves. Now we're hiking for our last hurrah before heading off to college. Reighner University in Oklahoma. Most of us anyway.

Reighner University is a Christian school; Aunt Jane's idea also. She wants to send me off to Christian camps and schools all because, get this—I got into a little trouble stealing some stupid little plaque. It was nothing, really. But she made out like I was a habitual thief. It wasn't that big a deal. I had only shoplifted a couple of times and the first time was only because I got pissed off. We were in a little clothing boutique, my boyfriend, Roy, and me. He wanted to buy a belt. I helped him pick out a nice leather, silver-buckled belt that didn't have a price tag. I saw the cashier talking to her friends and tried to get her attention. She ignored us. She just went on about her haughty-taughty conversation. I motioned for Roy to go with me behind a waist-high clothes rack. I opened my purse, he put the belt in, and we walked out unnoticed. It was easy.

So easy I did it again. Next, I was in a card shop that had a rack of those little wooden plaques with sappy friendship quotes and Irish blessings. I was hanging around the rack looking at one that said, “Friendship is a Rose,” or some stupid crap like that, when a lady came over and asked if she could help me. I told her I was just looking. She finally went away, and I slipped the plaque into my coat pocket. I looked at a few other things, read some cards so I wouldn't look conspicuous, then headed for the door.

The same lady cut me off and asked me to go to the office with her. She led me to a small, dark, back room with a metal desk covered with stacks of paper and folders. She asked me to sit down in a chair by the door. She stood by the desk and looked at me as though she were my teacher, disappointed that I had failed my test.

“I'm sorry to have to ask you to do this, but a customer reported that she saw you put something in your pocket. Would you empty them for me, please?”

She was nice. I took the plaque out of my pocket and put it on the desk.

“I'm sorry,” I said.

“Why did you take it?”

“I don't know.”

“I need your parent's number.”

“They're dead.”

“I'm sorry. Then who takes care of you?”

“No one.”

“If you don't give me someone to call, I'm going to have to call the police.”

I gave her my aunt's number who came to the store.

The ride home was unbearable. If I were one of her own kids, she would have yelled, told me I was grounded, asked me what I thought I was doing, told me I was ruining my life. Instead, she didn't say anything. Just kept her eyes on the road. I wasn't hers. Wasn't her blood. Wasn't her problem. This was just one more reason for her to want me out. My uncle, my mother's brother, would be more sympathetic, but he was ruled by his wife. I had been staying with them since I was fourteen. Since my parents died in the summer of '76. In the three years I was there, she hardly spoke to me except to give me a list of chores to do or to tell me I was using too much toilet paper. If Aunt Jane wanted me out, I was going.

For the next several weeks, I heard muted discussions, phone calls coming in that had to be taken in the next room, and the click of the paddle-lock on the safe at night. Aunt Jane only spoke to me when she had to—no chores, no complaints, just a smug look on her face like she had won something.

Then Uncle Paul sat me down and tried to have a meaningful talk. He asked how long I'd been stealing and said that maybe he could help me stop. He was kind like that. I told him it was only the second time.

“I know your upbringing wasn't the best,” my uncle said, “that was a tough neighborhood. You know I loved your mother, right?”

I nodded.

“Just wish she hadn't gotten mixed up with that Joe; he was always trouble.”

Joe. My father. Well, stepfather, I never knew who my real father was. Joe had lived with us, me and my mom, off and on for as long as I could remember. Sometimes he was home, sometimes he was somewhere else. They'd fight, then he'd leave. Then come back. He drank. That's how they died. Ran off the Grand street bridge into the Peqounnock River coming home one night. There was a newspaper photograph showing my mother's scarf floating in the river. After three years, I'd still wake up, thinking it was just a bad dream but then I'd remember. It was real. They were gone. It was like going through it all over again. Every morning.

“Your Aunt Jane thinks it might do you good to go to Reighner College. Get you around the right people who could help you get straightened up—set you on the right track.”

I wasn't crooked. I didn't even want that damn plaque. I don't even remember what it said.

“We discussed it last night and decided we'll cover your tuition if you go there.”

“Thank you,” I said.

A knot formed in my stomach. I sure as hell wasn't going to no stupid Christian college.

~

“The trees are your friends.”

That's Vincent. He's hiking just ahead of me and gently handing tree branches back so they don't swing in my face. The day is hot. We're all dressed in shorts and T-shirts and in clearings, the sun beats down on our heads. Wendy and Jason are behind me. They're a little older than us, married, and worked at the camp all summer as counselors. Wendy was the first

one I met when I arrived at camp to work in the art building. She helped me to get settled in and showed me around the place, kinda taking me under her wing like a kid sister. My job was to help the little girls with their art projects. We made candles out of wax, jewelry out of beads, and lots of decoupage plaques with those sappy sayings on them. It was fun. The girl's faces beamed over the things they made. During my first four weeks, I realized that I enjoyed working with crafts and with the kids. During my last four weeks, I realized that even at a Christian camp, trouble follows me.

“Let's stop,” Wendy says and drops her pack.

“Hold up,” Vincent yells ahead to Johnny.

We stop and unload our packs, finding rocks with flattish surfaces to sit on. We pull out our water bottles and bags of gorp and start munching.

“You all are a bunch of wusses,” Johnny says, coming back down the trail to meet us.

“We haven't even hit the steep part yet. You're going to run out of gorp before we reach the summit.”

“They have food up there, don't they?” Vincent asks.

“We're staying in a hut, idiot, of course they have food,” Robin calls out from behind, bent over with her hands on her knees, trying to catch her breath. She had been trailing behind the whole time.

“Oh, shut up, Miss Prissy.”

“Didn't you pack enough gorp, anyway, dimwit? You know we're not going home till tomorrow night.” Robin takes a swig of her water.

“Yes, I packed enough, I'd just like to eat something other than good old raisins and peanuts once in a while, Miss...holier than thou.”

“Talk nice to each other, you two,” says Wendy.

Robin laughs, practically spitting out her water. “Miss holier than thou? Is that the best you can come up with, Sugar Cakes?”

“Oh, stop it now. You know you two love each other,” says Wendy. “And don't worry, I packed plenty of dry packs of food for all of us. We're not going to starve.”

“Nice of you to carry that extra weight for us,” says Johnny.

“She's not,” says Jason.

Hikers coming down the trail with hiking sticks pass through our group but don't say anything. They keep their heads down. Unusual behavior on the normally friendly trail. What's also unusual is what they are wearing: ski hats, gloves, long sleeves, jackets tied around their waists.

“Did anyone check the weather on the summit for today?” Jason asks after they pass.

“Uh, no, but don't worry, it's a gorgeous day. I don't know what they're doing in all that get-up, let's go,” says Johnny.

We pack up our stuff and move on. We come to an open field at the base of the ravine. It's filled with wild flowers of every color. I take out my camera and start snapping shots. The others follow suit. Vincent lights a cigarette.

“I thought we weren't going to smoke on this trip?” Robin asks.

“Want one, Pumpkin?”

“Yes.”

Vincent lights one for Robin.

We are all trying to quit, but really, we all smoke. That's how we met. Once I got to camp, it didn't take me long to scout out the kids who smoked. We'd sneak off into the woods together to light up and so became friends.

At first I had a crush on Johnny. But that was before Buddy. Buddy—that's the trouble I was talking about. I hadn't dated anyone since the previous year when my long-time boyfriend from home (the one I stole the belt for) and I broke up. It wasn't because I was that upset over our breakup; we had drifted apart since being away from each other. He was getting into all this mystical, Zen stuff—meditation, self-awareness, and all that stuff back before the New Agey crap became popular. He tried to build up my confidence by teaching me how to play tennis but I couldn't get it. He said I lacked something in my wrist. He wanted a self-assured tennis partner with a competent wrist. I guess he gave up on me.

I hadn't dated anyone since because no one had asked me. No one I liked anyway. I liked Johnny, but I knew there was no chance since he was one of the saints as opposed to us 'lowlifes' who smoked. He smoked too, but tried to keep it more low key. After a while, everyone knew he smoked with us but by then he didn't care. I liked that about him. He wasn't afraid for others to see how he really was. He didn't care about putting up a front but he continued to be one of the big guys at camp involved with all the saint activities as well as with us.

He talked about himself. A lot. About the plays he made in high school football and points he scored on the basketball court. He was tall with straight black hair, long bangs that framed his green eyes. When he talked, his eyes became animated and his brows raised up when he made an important point, creasing his forehead. When he'd finished his last sentence, he'd smile a crooked half smile with a small laugh as though to punctuate his story.

Johnny and I would sometimes go for a walk and smoke, just the two of us. He talked and I listened. It was always about all the prospects he had for marriage. They were all girls who lived somewhere else and were preacher's daughters, pretty and proper.

Another group of hikers pass by us and like the others, are clad in ski outfits, hats, gloves, and red faces, you can almost see their breath floating before their cracked lips.

“How's the weather up there?” Johnny asks.

They muster back a few exhausted shakes of the head and I hear one mumble, *you're not dressed for going up there.*

Johnny watches them continue down the trail. He runs his fingers through his sweaty hair and lifts his brows so that his forehead wrinkles. I love that look about him.

“There was a sign for a lean-to back a ways, maybe we should head there and change clothes,” Jason says.

“Sounds like a plan,” says Johnny.

We cut across the field and find a little shelter shack and take turns changing into long sleeves and sweat pants. We put our hats, sweaters, gloves, and rain ponchos at the top of our packs for easy access and head back up the trail. The plan is to hike to the summit first and then back down a mile to the Lakes of the Clouds hut in time for supper.

Halfway up the mountain, light showers start to come down and the winds pick up. Once we get above the treeline, weather reality sets in. The rains and howling winds become so fierce at times that we duck to the ground and huddle behind rocks as gray as the sky to avoid being blown over. We hike at a snail's pace against the gusts, shielding our eyes from the flying debris.

We can't talk. If someone were to shout, "Rom's!" no one would hear. We keep our eyes to the trail so we don't veer off. We decide to bypass the summit.

Hours later, we stumble into the hut drenched and shivering, dropping heavy, wet packs to the floor, making puddles and looking like everyone else who came in before us. The main dining room is the first thing we see and is packed with hikers wrapped in damp maroon wool blankets either huddled in groups or roaming like ghosts in wool socks on the hardwood floors trying to warm up. We make it in time for supper.

The hut sleeps ninety in co-ed bunk rooms. There are several rooms along a narrow hall, each with bunks stacked four beds high. Each bed has three maroon wool blankets, folded neatly and piled at the foot, and a pillow at the head. After finding our bunks and dropping our packs, we do like the others—wrap ourselves in one of the blankets and go and sit out in the dining area at long wooden picnic type tables after grabbing some hot coffee or chocolate from the urns.

"We made it," Johnny says.

"Damn, it's still August and it's freezing."

"There's been snow up here in July."

I wrap my hands around the warm mug. My feet are wet and freezing. My nose is red and cold. I listen to the others but my own thoughts are elsewhere. This is the first time since leaving camp I've been still enough to let it sink in—I may never see Buddy again.

The thing with Buddy started on a canoe trip he headed up. It was the first week of 'senior camp.' We canoed out to one of the little islands in the center of the lake to camp overnight. Buddy was a youth recreation director who came to camp just for the senior weeks. He was about thirty and popular with the saint kids, especially the girls. My smoking friends didn't go on the canoe trip as they weren't into it so I went on my own.

The first day of the trip was sunny but windy and hard to control the canoes. I noticed Buddy had been watching me. I thought maybe he was concerned over how I handled the boat but he never said anything. He had also been watching me on the bus trip there, I saw his brown eyes under wisps of blond hair meet mine through the rear-view mirror and I got that vibe. He was interested. But I didn't know why. There were prettier girls than me. His attention sent my thoughts flying. I was developing a crush on him. Just a school-girl crush. Nothing to worry about.

The island was covered with trees and rocks. Kids found spots to set up their sleeping bags, claiming their land. I hadn't bothered to look for a place since I had no friend there to camp out with. There was a large clearing in the center of the island with a fire pit and grill for cooking. A rough, wooden bathhouse sat a short walk away, the only building. After supper, we sat by the campfire and sang saint songs. Around midnight, the kids started to disband to their claimed land to sleep where groups of boys and girls set up their sleeping bags together. Buddy said it was alright as long there were at least three in a group. I decided I wanted to sleep in the clearing by the fire pit so I could see the stars.

Buddy was all for it and set up his sleeping bag right next to mine. There were a few other kids sleeping in the clearing also, scattered around different sides of the circle. Crazy scenarios went through my head. I imaged us laying there, talking, watching for shooting stars.

I got in my sleeping bag and waited. I heard him putter around, clanging pots, breaking sticks for the next day's fire, and splashing water on the campfire until he was sure it was out. I heard his footsteps press the ground—breaking twigs and dried pine needles until the sounds grew louder, next to me. I looked up as he got in his sleeping bag.

“Goodnight,” he said and rolled over on his side with his back facing me.

That was it. I mean, I didn't want to do anything, just talk, look at the stars. But all he said was goodnight. I rolled over on my side with my back facing him and tried to go to sleep. I felt silly.

After about fifteen minutes, I felt something on my arm. It was a finger, moving in slow, small, circular motions. Crap.

One summer at the camp, when I was nine years old, I think it was one of the male counselors from the boy's side of camp, or maybe it was the cook, would come in our cabin and sit on my bed, which was closest to the door, in the middle of the night. He'd try to get his creepy hand into my underwear. I'd pretend I was asleep but squirm and move around until he'd finally give up and leave me alone. I'd lay there awake, listening to where he'd go next, if he'd go to another girl's bed. But he'd just walk slowly and softly toward the cabin door, and I'd hear the screen door creak open and closed. I'd listen as his footsteps on the dirt path faded away.

One night, when he came in, our counselor woke up and caught him. She asked what he was doing there.

"I'm making my rounds, checking on the cabins. Thought I saw someone hanging around outside. Wanted to check and make sure everything was alright."

She shined her flashlight around and said, "Yes, we're fine. Thanks for checking."

He left. He never came back again.

That slow creepy finger on my arm was pissing me off. I rolled over and told Buddy to stop. He said, "OK" and closed his eyes.

Morning came early after a near sleepless night. I opened my eyes to look over to see if he was still asleep. I could see his eyes over the top edge of his sleeping bag, looking at me. When our eyes met, he closed his and turned away. I could see movement going on inside his

sleeping bag, like in the middle where his freakin willy would be. I rolled over and closed my eyes. I heard him get up out of his sleeping bag and walk towards the bathhouse. I put my head back inside my sleeping bag and pretended to sleep until I was sure I heard other people awake.

“What's on your mind?” Johnny asks.

I look up and see that he is looking at me.

“Nothing,” I said, wishing I had come up with a better answer because I don't think he's ever asked me that before. “Just tired, I guess.”

“After we eat, we'll get some more coffee. There's some cool ghost stories about this place we'll get the crew to tell us.”

I think Johnny is worried we aren't having a good time because of the weather and all. It was his idea to come up here.

“Great night for ghost stories,” I said.

“Best night,” Johnny said.

I hadn't told any of them anything about Buddy. Nothing about the creepy night on the canoe trip.

And due to the creepiness of that night carrying over to the morning, I had stayed huddled inside my sleeping bag until I heard someone throw logs into the campfire pit. It was Jerry, a redheaded, plump, goofy kind of guy who liked to laugh at his own jokes. Not a guy I would normally want to talk to, but this morning he was welcome company. I went to the bathhouse, washed up, brushed my teeth and hair, and made my way over to help him with the fire. When Buddy came over, I tried to avoid eye contact. He said “good morning” like nothing

had happened. He laid down a bundle of firewood he had collected, brushed his hands on his blue jeans, and then rubbed them over the fire to warm up. Though it was mid-July, the morning was cool. I still had on the same clothes I slept in—jeans, flannel shirt and a hooded sweat jacket. I got up and stood with my hands in my jacket pockets just staring at the fire while Jerry talked on and told camp stories about pranks guys would play on the workers and counselors. Most of it was silly stuff like changing the labels on soup cans in the mess hall and resetting alarm clocks. Every time Jerry burst out in a ridiculously loud laugh, Buddy looked at me and smiled as if to say, “This guy is silly.” I weakly smiled back but kept watching the fire.

Slowly, the other campers started to crawl out of their sleeping bags and wander over to the fire. A group of the girls took charge of getting breakfast ready while the guys started the grill. We cooked bacon and boiled water for oatmeal. There were also pastries and donuts in plastic bags anyone could grab. After we ate, I headed to the showers.

A group of prissy girls were dolling up in front of the mirrors. Blow-drying their hair and putting on makeup. As I dried off and got dressed, I heard them talking about the boys. I approached the group with my wet hair and comb in hand, but could not get near a mirror. I stood back and combed my hair, getting a peak in the mirror here and there through their prissy heads.

“I really don’t think it’s going to go anywhere.” One of the girls said, trying to comfort another who pined for a boy who had been talking to someone else.

“I can’t believe that she’s going along with it when she knows how I feel. That is the part that bothers me most. Plus, she’s so pretty.”

“You’re just as pretty,” Miss Head Prissy said and then turned to the rest of the group. “You know, girls, if you think of yourself as being pretty, you will look even prettier.”

I chimed in, “Oh really?” I looked in the mirror with my head tilted back and my hand through my thin, stringy brown hair as though I were posing for the cover of a glamour magazine.

“Yes, Emily, really.” She had turned around and looked right into my eyes as she said it. Like she was trying to make some kind of point.

We packed up camp and canoed back across the lake. Once back at the main camp we headed to our cabins to put our stuff away and sleeping bags back on our bunks. Since it was Sunday, we went to a chapel in a small clearing in the woods to have church service. The benches were low to the ground and made of wood planks propped up by logs. I got there late—went to smoke first—so I sat in the back. I noticed Buddy sitting up front with a woman beside him and two small girls. I leaned forward and asked one of the girls in my cabin who they were.

“His wife and daughters. They come up on Sundays. Cute, aren't they?”

“Adorable.”

I felt sick.

Then Buddy got up to lead a prayer. I got up and walked back out to the woods for another cigarette.

~

“Hey, listen up.”

Johnny joins several others in the dining room who are banging spoons against cups to quiet everyone down.

The hut dining room is surrounded by large windows on three sides. Though it had been gloomy outside it is now getting dark and the rain seems to be subsiding. Members of the crew, or as they spell it, ‘croo,’ are standing against the back wall between two of the windows. After

performing a little skit to demonstrate how we should fold our blankets in the morning and other useful information, they are answering questions from the guests.

“How often do the blankets get washed in a season?” Someone from a group on the other side of the hall asks.

“We don't want to know,” a gentleman from the back shouts.

The croo hesitates and looks at each other with guilty smiles. One of them says, “They don't get washed until the season is over.”

Groans are heard around the room. Johnny raises his hand.

“Yes?”

“There was an incident here once regarding one of the old caretakers, do you know the story?”

“Ah, George,” says the croo member. “There are actually several ghost stories that involve the huts but this one happened here and has never been explained. Are you sure you want to hear it?”

Everyone is all ears.

“Several years ago, a caretaker named George came up here alone in early April to open the hut and prepare it for the season. The windows were still boarded up to guard against the strong winter winds and storms. He was standing right over there by the coffee pots when he sensed something watching him. He turned and saw faces leering at him, grotesque and distorted. They filled up each window here in the dining room and came toward him, through the glass, bearing down on him. That was all he could remember. Two days later, when the AMC didn't hear anything from him, they sent up a couple of guys who found him huddled under a sink back there in the kitchen, shaking and repeating over and over, 'get me the hell out of here.'”

“Must have found some good mushrooms on the way up,” someone calls out.

“Okay, now I got the creeps,” Robin says.

“Me, too,” I say.

“I don't think I want to sleep here tonight,” Wendy says.

“What are you going to do? Hike down the ravine in the dark?” Jason rubs her back. “Just don't get up in the night and come out here and look at the windows.”

“Oh Lord, I won't.”

I look at Johnny and he smiles.

“That was a cool ghost story,” I say to him. Then I look away, wishing I could say more.

~

After Sunday dinner, Buddy's wife and kids left. I watched from the soccer field as he saw them off then he came over. He saw that I was struggling in a game of Frisbee football and took it upon himself to try to show me how to play. He encouraged and cheered me on. I tried to avoid his attention. I looked around but no one seemed to notice. I'm usually good at being able to tell what others are making of a situation. The look in their eyes, the way they look at others, like that way Buddy looked at me when Jerry was talking, those secret looks and mannerisms that said more than they intended. I knew the vibes and Buddy was sending them. Everything I said and did, he noticed, he remarked on, he helped with. I was the center of his attention. I forgot the weirdness of the night before, the fact that he was married, and welcomed his attention again. None of that other stuff seemed to matter, only how he was making me feel mattered. He was no longer the creepy guy, but the popular youth director that everyone liked and I was getting caught up in it, those emotions that fool you into thinking it's good, it's okay, and that anyone else would see it the same way.

After the game, he asked if he could talk to me. We walked down a hill leading to a side road away from the camp.

“I’m sorry about last night,” he said.

I didn't know what to say; “it's okay” didn't seem to fit. I didn't say anything.

“I guess it was just one of those things.”

One of those things. An excuse for anything. Like I'm supposed to understand what one of those things is and let it go.

“It's okay,” I said.

He asked me about my future plans.

“I'm staying here the rest of the summer and then off to college.”

He asked about my home.

“There isn't much there for me. Most of my friends have moved away and the ones who are still there don't do much but work and go to bars at night. They don't have much ambition.”

I knew that I wanted more. I didn't know what yet. I didn't know how yet, but I wanted to make something out of myself. I vowed that I wouldn't get married until I could afford a house on my own. Until I was independent. I saw how it was with my mother—how she was stuck with Joe, dependent on him and his sporadic whims to come home because she couldn't do anything on her own.

The neighborhood we walked through was quiet except for a boy who rode his bike up and down the road. I saw how pretty the houses were with wooded backyards, decks, and front porches. My house will have a front porch.

“Which college are you going to?”

“There's one in Oklahoma I was looking into.”

“Oklahoma? That’s a ways away.”

“I always wanted to go out west.”

In my third-grade class, there was a large map of the United States on the front wall over part of the blackboard. I’d sit and stare at it and memorize all the states I’d have to go through to get to California. I remember Oklahoma and how it was way out there. It looked big and open compared to Connecticut which was small and crowded in among all the other little states around it. As I followed the states with my eyes from east to west I felt myself getting lighter, freer, more able to breathe. The map gave me hope that something was out there.

“Reighner College?”

“Yeah, you know it?”

“Of course, it’s a Christian school. A good one, you’ll like it.”

“I didn’t want to go at first, but now that I have friends going, I think I’m looking forward to it.”

“Will you write to me?”

“Write?”

“Yes, send me a letter once in a while—let me know how you’re doing.”

“Okay.”

~

After dessert and coffee, Vincent gets up and tries to look out the window. Robin grabs the back of his knee and he jumps.

“Don't let the ghouls get you.”

“Cut it out, will ya? Looks like it stopped raining. Wanna go out for a smoke? Don't forget, we got those beers—let's go outside and make our loads lighter.”

We all get up and go outside with Vincent for a smoke and whatnot. We find a spot behind the hut with a cranny tucked in between two walls to block the wind. We huddle down in the crevice and each light a smoke. So much for quitting. The moon is shining through the clouds now and we can see the outline of the black mountain peaks surrounding us in the distance. The wind has died down but we could still hear it whistle against the hut.

“Look what I got.” Vincent takes a joint out of his pocket and lights it up.

“Careful, they’ll smell it,” says Jason.

“You kidding? They’re college graduates in limbo—they’d want some.”

“That’s what I’m saying. We don’t have enough to share.”

“No one else is out here.”

“Hey, let’s hike up that mountain trail. The wind isn’t so bad now and that way no one will walk out here and find us,” says Wendy.

We hike up to the summit of Mt. Monroe with our flashlights and settle down between some large rocks. I’m awed by how high up we are, in the night, looking out at the shadows of the world.

Vincent lights the joint and passes it around. I don’t smoke, never liked the stuff, makes me too paranoid. They pass it to me anyway. Vincent is the first to pop open a beer and we all do the same.

“This time next year I’ll be in Sacramento.”

Vincent is enrolled to go to a college out in California. He wants to get into film production. A cinematography and film program in Sacramento is a step in that direction.

“I’m gonna miss these mountains,” he says and takes a swig of his beer. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “But I’ll be glad to get out of this dead-end state.” He belches.

“You pig.” Robin who is sitting next to him shoves him away from her but all he does is lean over, laugh, and belch again.

“Disgusting.”

“You won't be far from Oklahoma. We'll have to meet up on winter break or something.” Jason looks around. “All of us.”

“Yeah, we're going to miss you guys. Let's keep in touch,” Wendy says looking at Johnny and Vincent.

“I won't be going anywhere for a while so you all think of me still stuck here in this shit hole while you're out west.” Johnny is downing his beer.

“It ain't so bad here,” Robin says. “I mean, they had a lot of rules at camp but I did have fun. And I met you guys.”

Robin's from Colorado. She heard of Jordan Camp through her church.

“That's the best part,” Vincent says and looks at Robin. “You're gonna miss me, aren't you?”

“I don't know yet. Let's wait till you're gone and see.”

“She'll miss you,” Wendy says.

“I'll miss everyone,” Robin says, “but glad Emily is going to the same school as us.”

I stay silent and drink my beer.

“When I first met you guys, there was no way I thought we'd all be friends like this.”

Wendy loves to get sentimental. She cries over cereal commercials.

“Why?” Johnny asks.

“You guys just seemed so different.”

“You thought I was a straight up geek with his head in the books, didn't you?” Vincent says.

“Right. Hardly. I thought you were scary. With all your talk about gangs and fighting. I didn't know what you were into.”

Vincent comes from the Bronx and likes to play it up with his tough street talk.

“But, you turned out to be alright.”

“What changed your perception of me?”

“It was that time you stuck up for that kid on the basketball court. The one who got shoved.”

“You mean the time I about beat that guy's brains out?”

“But you didn't. You calmed the situation down.”

“That kid couldn't play worth a damn,” Johnny says.

“That wasn't the point. The dude was trying.” Vincent seems to be getting mad about it all over again.

“See, that's what I mean. You stuck up for him. And you could have beat that guy messing with him but you didn't.”

“Yeah, he backed off quick, didn't he?”

“Cause you're so scary,” Robin says.

“You showed your heart, man. That's what got her,” Jason says.

“Nah, it wasn't heart. I just hate bullies.” Vincent takes a swig and belches again.

“Stop it, will you?” Robin waves her hand in front of her face to clear the belch fumes.

“Now Johnny. You're the one that surprised me the most.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, big man at camp.” Jason threw a twig at him.

“Shit. I'm no big man.”

“Come on.”

“Seriously. I'm not any different than I ever was. Just maybe more mellowed out.”

“How's that?”

Johnny shakes his head and takes a swig of beer. I know something is coming.

“I thought at the beginning of the summer I could get any girl I wanted. Boy, was I wrong.”

We are stunned and silent.

“People just don't know what it does when they come up and tell you how great you are all the time. When girls are always after you.”

“Sounds like a real problem, man,” Vincent says.

“Shut the hell up.”

“Yeah, listen.” Jason puts his arm out to shush Vincent.

“Sorry, I was just messing with you.”

“I know how conceited I am and I'm trying to mellow out.”

Johnny looks up at the sky. I swear I can see a tear in the corner of his eye. He looks around at the rest of us.

“I feel like a real asshole.”

“You're not an asshole, Johnny. I was just playing with you.”

“I know. But I am or I have been and I'm going to change.”

“You know we all love you, Johnny, just the way you are.” Wendy always has the right words to say.

“Yeah, we do. Things will change for you once you leave here. Come out to Oklahoma with us,” Jason says.

Johnny laughs. “Maybe next year.”

The group continues to talk and drink, telling stories. I look up a few times and see clouds rolling in covering the stars.

“We haven't heard much from you, Emily,” Vincent says.

I hate it when the conversation turns to me like that, when everyone is all emotional. Like I'm supposed to let out some deep revelation about myself or something but I don't know what to say. I have nothing. I smile and say, “I'll miss you guys, too. It's been a great summer.”

Thunder sounds in the distance and the wind picks up, hollowing through the trees.

“I think we got another storm coming,” Johnny says.

“Yeah, maybe we should head back to the hut.”

“Oh, I love it out here,” Wendy says.

“We can't stay out here in the rain.”

“Maybe it'll pass.”

We wait it out, drink beer and once the conversation dies down, Vincent puts his Meatloaf tape into his battery-operated boombox and we sing along. When it starts to drizzle, we pack up and with our flashlights head back down the trail. Halfway down the mountain it begins to pour but we keep on going, singing “Bat Out of Hell.” We are soaked by the time we get to the hut. It's two o'clock in the morning. We fumble our way to our bunks with no lights so we won't wake the others and crawl under our wool blankets that haven't been washed all summer and sleep.

Or try to. I lay in my bunk staring up at the one above me where Johnny is sleeping. My thoughts drift from him to Buddy to I shouldn't be thinking about either of them as neither are mine to think about—one is out of my league and the other is married. Still, I try to sleep, imaging strong arms around me.

~

After the canoe trip, I couldn't get Buddy out of my head. The way he looked at me, tackled me during Frisbee football. Even the creepy night didn't seem so creepy anymore. He stopped when I asked him to. He didn't try it again. I guessed it was just one of those things.

I ran into him everywhere. In the mess hall, on the paths leading to the chapel and the sports field. When we'd pass by each other, he'd just say hi and smile. I could feel the vibes, the tension between us. He smiled like he always had the sun in his eyes, one eye squinting more than the other, almost a wink. It was getting to me. I started looking for him but trying not to. Expecting to see him, half hoping I wouldn't, then I would. But we never talked.

On campfire nights, the whole camp would gather around the huge fire for devotions and sing. He'd always be in a spot where he could see me directly across the flames. I'd feel the heat on my face when he'd look at me, the glow of the fire on his, like the flames made the vibes stronger.

Towards the end of the summer, he came up to me while I was sitting at a table in the mess hall after lunch filling out last minute paperwork my aunt sent me to complete before I could go to Reighner University in September. He sat down and asked if I had everything I needed.

“I need another reference.”

“Put my name down.”

“Really? I haven't had you as a teacher or anything.”

“That's okay. I've heard good things about you from your home church.”

That I didn't believe. I hardly went to my home church, only when I got tired of fighting it out with Jane.

“From who?”

“The preacher. We're good friends. I'm actually thinking of switching to it, we don't live that far away.”

“That's nice.”

“Plus, I've known you for a long time.”

“Long time?”

“You probably don't remember, but I was a counselor here when you came to camp with Jane's boys years ago.”

Stung, a rush of adrenaline ran through me, like I just saw a ghost. Like someone just messed up my reality and changed it to something else. But I brushed it off quick. It couldn't have been him. He wouldn't do that. Yet, I didn't even know he knew Jane, let alone he knew me and who I was all along.

“Want to take a cigarette break?” he asked.

“I didn't think you smoked.”

“I don't, well, I used to, it doesn't hurt me to have one occasionally.”

I looked around and said, “Sure.”

He led me out a side door of the mess hall and down the path that led to the smoking area. I took out my pack and tried to offer him one but my hands were shaking. He grabbed the pack, took out two cigarettes, lit them both and gave me one.

He took a drag and coughed.

“It's been a while.”

He ran his hand through his wavy blond hair and looked at me with a frown.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No. I just wanted to talk to you alone. I wanted to make sure you were okay with me and all that happened on the canoe trip.”

He offered to be a reference for me. Now he's worried how I felt about what happened. I got it. He's worried I might tell.

“I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I wanted to go back to the mess hall.

“You should quit this. Smoking. Have you thought about it?”

“Yes, I've tried. Just can't.”

“You know, I've been watching you. You remind me of myself at your age.”

“Yeah?”

“I was shy. Didn't think I could do anything. I was a klutz.”

I laughed. Nervous like.

“You can do anything you want. I hope you realize that.”

“Thanks.”

“I know you've been through a lot.”

He stomped out his cigarette. “I gotta go. Don't forget what I said.”

I watched him walk back towards the boys' cabins in his usual confident strut. I didn't know what to make of it. He probably felt guilty and was just trying to make up for it. Or clear

his own conscience. Still, I couldn't help but feel that a wall between me and the rest of the world just crumbled down. And he was giving me a hand out over the rubble.

“Emily, wake up.”

Johnny stands over my bunk.

“You got to see this.”

He points out the window. I look out and see how the hut got its name. Stretched out in a great expanse as far as I can see is a sea of white clouds under blue skies with the peaks of mountains sticking up out of them like islands.

We hike along the ridge-line under blue skies and then back down Tuckerman's ravine. We shower and put on fresh clothes at the Welcome Center and pile back into Jason's '67 Studebaker. I hold a hot cup of coffee close to me as we head down the highway, leaving the New Hampshire mountains and its ghosts behind.

Next stop, Rom's.

Danny in the Early Years

In the Spring of 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon, a Unabomber bomb was set off at an American University, and Aldo Nova released his debut album with the hit single, Fantasy. But I was aware of none of these things at the time.

All I knew was that I was on the verge of flunking out of college.

I had just finished my third year with some failed courses, barely a pass in others, and nowhere near having an end in sight that resembled a graduation. My roommate, Robin, was set to graduate the following May and get married to her longtime sweetheart, Joey, who she had met our first semester at Reighner.

If I had paid more attention to my instincts back then, I might have left, might have realized that it wasn't the place for me, that the forces beyond my control would keep me down, put me in a place that I would not be able to emerge intact from without changing who I was, whoever I was. Without going back, being born again (physically), and growing up right, or the way they wanted. When we first got here, I should have gone by my gut, my first impression, and hopped back on the bus, but thought I just had to get used to it. So, I tried. Besides, Robin was here. And Wendy and Jason. Friends I had made the summer before I came.

When we first arrived on campus, I felt the emptiness. The flat terrain had a vastness to it that accentuated the wind and the fact that it had no trees made it stark and feel colder than it was. It was early September and the grass was already brown and the brick box-like buildings stood out against the dreary gray sky.

“It's really weird here,” I said. Robin and I were walking around looking for our first classes which wasn't easy because all the buildings looked the same—like square lumps of clay scattered on a brown landscape. And everywhere we went we were surrounded by pretty and proper potential preacher's wives with painted on apple-cheek smiles who only seemed to be here for their MRS degree. And the guys—it was like they were constantly trying to prove their intelligence to each other. It was like every guy who was a nerd in high school came here to vie for top rank.

I wasn't going to fit in with any of them. I could tell. Their presence alone made me feel like I was doing something wrong when I wasn't doing anything at all.

“Never thought I'd say this, but I miss Vincent,” Robin said.

“That's big.”

Vincent was a friend of ours from camp we hung out with that summer before coming to Oklahoma. He and Robin argued the whole time.

“Yeah, I guess he wasn't as bad as I thought.”

“It took you being around these geeks to figure that out.”

“I don't know. Maybe it just took being away from him, but the geeks kind of help.”

“Maybe you should call him.”

“Don't know that I miss him that much.”

“Should we ask these girls where this damn class is?”

We passed a couple of apple cheeks with too much mascara on, chatting animatedly with squeaky, high-pitched voices.

“Heck, no. They'll just snub their pretty little noses up at us.”

Robin was so cool like that. She was ten times prettier than them but so down-to-earth and real. And as much as she tried to play down her looks with hardly any make up and fuss-free hair, she was still gorgeous.

“We must be the only ones here that don't know what we're doing.”

“Yeah, we must've missed the instructional pamphlet everyone else got.”

It was true—people here looked at you funny if you didn't seem to know what you were doing. It's like they were embarrassed for you and didn't want to offer help because then they'd be associating with you and the fact that you look stupid might rub off on them.

“That guy that asked you out last night seemed nice,” I said.

“He's gay.”

“How do you know?”

“I can tell.”

“Maybe he's one of those that just act like it but aren't.”

“If they act like it, they are. Just not out yet.”

“Then why would he ask you out?”

“I don't know. Maybe he doesn't know it yet.”

“He would have to know by now, I mean, he's got to be eighteen years old at least. Either you are or you're not.”

“Maybe he wants a girl to make it look like he's not. I hear they do that sometimes. Get married to women, have kids, then have relationships with men on the side.”

“Well, maybe he'll be a good friend, then.”

“Maybe. Just kind of awkward with him asking me out and all.”

“Maybe he just wants to keep up appearances so he doesn’t get kicked out.” We heard of guys getting kicked out for just appearing to be gay.

“You got a point there. Maybe I should go out with him.”

I enrolled in business and computer classes and Robin and I found a work study job in the cafeteria. The cafeteria, that's where we started to have some fun and meet more people. One was a funny guy, Troy Chung from Brooklyn.

I managed to get myself through three years of boredom and classes at RU with the help of Robin, Joey (her boyfriend), Earl (our in-the-closet gay friend), Troy, Wendy and Jason, and a few calls to Buddy, the married camp counselor I had a crush on over the summer before starting college. I called my aunt and uncle, too, but only to let them know I was still alive. I'd go to their house for holidays sometimes, but mostly I stayed at school or went to Colorado with Robin where her family lived. Over the years, I acted in some school plays; I dated a couple of guys I met in the cafeteria but lost interest fast. One always had an odor to him that I at first attributed to the fact that he worked the dishes, sweating all the time. I noticed it never went away, and when he kissed me once, I about gagged. I decided that something was not right with him and that was it. The other, I don't remember what happened. Maybe that is why I lost interest.

By the end of our third year, Robin and I decided we were going to stay on at the college for the summer and make up some classes. I renewed my determination to try and make something out of this college education opportunity, because I still wanted to make something of myself, so thought if I made up some classes, there may be hope for graduation.

The cafeteria no longer needed us, so Troy took us out job hunting. Up to that point, we hadn't been off campus much except to go to movies and Taco Bell, so didn't know much about Delmont. It had a wide four lane main street with turning lanes and a grassy median in the

middle, lined with fast food restaurants and other assorted chain stores on either side. It was flat and open land that let a lot of sun in—it seemed you could stand at one end and see everything that was on the street for a mile covered with blue sky to the horizon in either direction. We stopped to eat at Mackie's, a fast food burger joint, for lunch. While we were there, we filled out applications and were hired on the spot.

Paul, one of the assistant managers, a young good looking guy, interviewed us together. He looked at Robin a lot as she was the looker. Not saying that he wasn't nice to me, too. He was. But it was obvious she was the one he was trying to impress. I was the one he'd like to pat on the head. He hired us to work the night shift with him.

We soon discovered that the main store manager was not well-liked. She was known as “the warden” or just plain “bitch.” I noticed before long that a lot of employees were stealing food or money out of the cash draws simply because they didn't like her. I soon found out why. My first paycheck was short ten hours. I kept all my clock-in receipts. I brought it to her attention, and she seemed surprised that it happened. I think what really surprised her was that I caught on. She fixed it, and it didn't happen again.

The money stealing was so common that one of the guys working the back line came up to me while I worked the drive-up window and asked, “how much did you get?”

“Huh?”

“Money, didn't you get any money?”

“What money?”

“It's easy, if the customer gives you the correct change you just clear the order and pocket the money.”

“Thanks, but I don't think I want to do that.” I didn't tell him that my stealing days were over.

“See that guy back there on the grill?”

I looked over the transfer bin (where they shoot the burgers from the back to the front line) and saw Danny quickly turn away; he was waiting for hamburger patties to roll off the revolving grill so he could dress and wrap them.

“You mean, Danny?”

“I think he wants to ask you out.”

“How old is he?”

“Older than me and I'm seventeen.”

Danny had a skinny build, long brown hair he wore back in a ponytail at work, and squinty eyes when he smiled. I knew he was still in high school but from what the guy said, I figured he must be eighteen, at least. I was twenty. He was sure a breath of fresh air compared to most of the geeks on campus, and he liked to party. I hadn't had any real party friends since high school besides my days at camp and of the hiking group. Robin and I did go bowling once and got beer. But then a couple of apple cheeks and a brain came in and got the bowling isle right next to us. Drinking beer was grounds for getting kicked out, and they looked to be the type who would tell. We had to pretend that the beer was left by someone else and didn't get to drink it. In fact, we were so nervous we finished our game as fast as we could and got the hell out of there.

Anyway, Danny asked me to a concert.

“Do you know who Aldo Nova is?”

“No.”

“He sings 'Fantasy.'”

I hadn't been keeping up with the new music. When I first got to Oklahoma, I had played a lot of country stations on the radio to try and get into the Oklahoma mood of things but eventually gave up and found a classic rock station and stuck with that.

“Never heard it. I'll have to listen for it.”

“He's coming in concert. Want to see him?”

“Sure.”

“Great. Some of my buddies are going, we can ride with them.”

Later I heard an announcement for the concert on the radio and learned that Aldo Nova was just the warm up. The main attraction was Cheap Trick. I was surprised Danny hadn't mentioned that. I listened to them during my early high school days. Brought back foggy memories. I was never a big pot smoker, made me too paranoid, but all my friends smoked it, and in the early days I would, too. We'd somehow end up at this house out of town in a neighborhood with lots of trees and big old one-family houses. It was white and had a large front room leading to a big country kitchen with a long kitchen table. An obese middle-aged woman sat at the head of the table, with her glass of whiskey and overflowing ashtray in front of her, dominating the conversation amongst a room of kids mostly my age, some older, some younger, sitting around the table or wandering in and out of the room. In my vague memories of it, I imagined the house always being that way with the front and back doors open and a steady flow of alcohol and potheads streaming through to the sound of Cheap Trick or Pink Floyd playing from somewhere. I never knew who actually lived there except for the fat lady or why we even went except as just some common drug-induced destination.

Once I knew Cheap Trick was playing, I was more excited about the concert and more at ease about dating this high school boy.

~

Like any of the surrounding wealthy suburbs of Oklahoma City, Delmont had its lower classes—the poor kids who dropped out of high school because their parents couldn't afford to buy them Izod polo shirts, the kids that cruised down main street in beat-up pickup trucks instead of BMWs, or had souped-up hot rods that sat like clunkers on their overgrown, brown front lawns, the kids that lived in little run-down, square houses on the west end of town, in need of paint jobs and new wooden porch steps; they were the ones that worked the night shift at Mackie's. Except for Danny. He wasn't one of those kids.

Danny's family lived in one of the upscale neighborhoods of the north end. Where the wide, newly paved roads were lined with ranch homes, year-long green trimmed lawns, and basketball hoops hanging off garages at the end of driveways. The neighborhoods that had built-in swimming pools in the back yards and rules like “no clunkers in the front yard.” Still in high school, Danny had his own checking and savings account. He planned to go to college. But he worked at Mackie's, wore his hair in a long ponytail, and hung out with the drop-outs. He was a straight-up kid from the suburbs who could afford them dang little alligators but didn't want them.

The poorer kids of Delmont were more like the middle class of the town I came from. Me and most of my friends didn't even grow up in one-family houses. We grew up on streets lined with a mix of two, three, and six family houses. We lived in apartments that were generations old with porcelain coated cast iron bathtubs and narrow hallways. If we were lucky, we had a grass backyard, if not, we played at someone else's house who did. Me and my mom, and stepfather when he was there, had lived on the first floor of a six-family house in an apartment with four rooms. The rooms lined up from the front living room to the kitchen in the back with a hallway

running the length of them ending with a bathroom with one of those clubbed-feet tubs and a window looking out to the back yard. In the hottest months of the summer, our only air conditioning consisted of fans in the windows faced to blow the hot air out.

Being a foreigner from the Northeast, Danny liked to show me around town and introduce me to the fast food restaurants unique to the Midwest like Taco Tico, Bueno Taco, and What-a-Taco. We'd been dating a month when he drove me up to a new one.

“What are those things?” I asked.

“What things?”

“Those red things all sticking out in a row?”

He slapped the palm of his right hand to his forehead.

“My God, you don't know what that is?”

He pulled up to one of them and ordered our food through a speaker.

“Cool. Just like *Happy Days*. Do the waitresses wear roller skates?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes.

But he loved this. Soaked it up. I could tell. I loved it, too. The attention it got me. Getting to feel different but in a good way. At home, in high school, I was just weird, or the strange, skinny, quiet one with long stringy brown hair. But here, being from somewhere else made me interesting. I had never felt interesting before. Or pretty, let alone gorgeous. Danny would sometimes stop in mid-sentence and tell me I was gorgeous. Guys my age never paid that kind of attention to me. Not guys I wanted to, anyway.

We browsed the record section at Wal-Mart where I met some of Danny's favorite artists like Duran Duran or Dire Straits. I'd go home and put my new Billy Squire album next to my

Eagles and Led Zeppelin. I'd later play it for my roommates, advancing us all into eighties music like a new adventure, thanks to Danny.

When the Cheap Trick concert came around, Danny and I rode in the back seat of a car full of potheads passing the joint and stinking it up. I had already gotten to like Danny so I didn't care. It was just fun being next to him. Sitting close. He wanted me to wear my moccasin boots because he thought they looked cool. He was all into appearances. He liked to tell everyone I was from New York City, though he knew it was really Connecticut.

We drove through Oklahoma City to another wealthy suburb that probably mirrored Delmont but had a concert arena. We played the radio and jammed all the way there to loud music, pot smoke filling up the car. We cracked the windows to let some escape.

“I bet we look like Cheech and Chong riding down the highway,” I yelled.

“Or like we got hit by the fucking Unabomber,” said Danny.

I laughed along not sure exactly what a Unabomber was. I'd heard the name and something about explosions in mailboxes but that was about it.

“You mean we're smoking dog shit, man?” One of the kids imitated Pedro.

“Whatever this shit is, it's good,” said another.

“Homegrown.”

They passed the joint to me but I passed it on to Danny.

“You ain't going to smoke?” The kid practically sitting on my lap said.

“No, thanks.”

“Why not?”

“Just don't like it.”

Back in high school, I went on a double date with my friend and her boyfriend. The three of us went to pick up this guy who I had met briefly before and thought he was cute, and was all for it when they said he wanted to go out with me. When he got in the car, into the back seat with me, he pulled out this huge bag of weed and started rolling joint after joint. Me being the dumb googly-eyed smitten idiot I was, smoked every damn joint with him because he kept passing them to me. My friends up front had stopped after the first one but this guy just kept lighting them up, toking, and passing to me and well, I wanted to look cool, so I kept smoking. Instead of cool, I got frozen. Paranoid like all get out. I couldn't talk, move, breathe. Well, I guess I did breathe, but it wasn't easy. I was self-conscious of every inhale and exhale. I felt like the sound of every pass of air through my nose was amplified over a loud speaker. I did nothing, just sat and took another toke when it came my way and even that got to be hard. If I moved my pinky I just knew everyone was going to see, and well, I don't know what I was afraid they'd do if they saw me move my pinky but I wasn't taking any chances, so I stopped taking tokes. I just sat there like a zombie, wide-eyed, staring straight ahead wondering when the hell it would be over. Just wanted to get back to normal. I don't remember anything else we did or where we went. All I remember is an 8-track tape of The Cars playing and the instrumental part of "Moving in Stereo" kept repeating the same riff over and over. I was completely zoned into that song. That guy never asked me out again.

Danny got drunk at the concert. We snuck in some Jack Daniels and put it in our Cokes. He told some cute, petite, little teeny-bopper we passed on the way to our seats that she was gorgeous. But he held my hand and kept walking. She looked at me, and I just shrugged my shoulders. After all, he was holding my hand. Things kind of went downhill from there.

Bluntly, he acted like a dork. Half the time. One moment he was pissed off at me for no reason and would get up and sit several seats down, and then the next moment he was back beside me, kissing me and wanting to dance to the music. And the way he danced, maybe it was just his way of getting into it, but he looked like he was in pain. He'd grit his teeth, close his eyes tight and jolt himself around. He was trying too hard to be a druggie. I could tell. It just wasn't him. But the fact that he was trying so hard made me like him all the more.

We were stuck in the parking lot after the show while waiting for the traffic to thin out. We stood outside the car and smoked cigarettes. There were hookers walking around, I guess looking for after show business and one of the kids with us called one over. She had straight, long brown hair and walked over in her tight jeans and cowboy boots and in a throaty, cigarette voice, asked him how old he was.

“Eighteen,” he lied.

She looked at him then turned around, strutting off with a long, dragged out, “shit.”

I looked at Danny.

“Well, you're eighteen, aren't you going to go for it?”

“He ain't eighteen.”

That came from the kid.

“Shut up,” Danny said to him, but I could tell, the kid was telling the truth.

~

I was only exploring my feelings when I called to talk. When I mentioned the difference in our ages, it didn't mean I was looking for an excuse to break up; I really didn't know what I was looking for. For him to say he is older? That he amazingly had at least two birthdays since

the concert? At the first mention of it he broke up with me. That was it. He said it's over and goodbye. He hung up before I could say anything. No explanation.

I tried to call him back.

“Why?”

“I just want to see other people.”

“Can we talk about it?”

“No. Bye.”

He was cold. Mean. I didn't understand. Then there was the terror to face: who else would I go out with? What would I do with my Saturday nights? Suddenly, the difference in age seemed trivial. I didn't care, I just wanted him back. He was my friend, and suddenly it disappeared. Too quick, too final.

I walked over to his house and begged, cried. Even though I had this feeling in the pit of my stomach telling me I shouldn't, I didn't care. All the good things he made me feel were gone and I wanted them back. I just wanted to understand why, wanted to talk. I stood outside his door pleading with him to talk so I could try and get him back, make him like me again. The more I tried the worse it got until finally he said I was crazy and slammed the door. Now he thought I was nuts. I was no longer interesting, I was weird again and I wanted the interesting back.

After a few days, I felt silly, back to my normal self and realized what a fool I was. Robin said that it was probably for the best, that I needed to concentrate on my studies; that's why I was staying for the summer. She was right.

~

Robin and I shared a room in a two-bedroom on-campus apartment with two other girls. Robin's boyfriend, Joey, had gone home for the summer, so Robin and I read Gothic novels by

Phyllis Whitney and Victoria Holt, ordered pizza from Domino's, summer clothes through Avon, and gossiped about our roommates. One was a hermit who just stayed home and studied in front of the T.V. We'd always find her sitting cross-legged on the floor with one of those cushion desks on her lap doing homework and watching her soaps. She had a Princess Diana haircut and dressed like her; shirts with ruffled collars and pullover sweater-vests. The other was kind of spacey. Once while Robin and I were walking to class, crossing an open, otherwise empty field between the apartments and the college, Spacey passed us but didn't see us. She walked right by us in her own world. There was no one else around. And nothing else. No trees, buildings, nothing. We passed on this empty field so close we could have touched her. Robin and I stopped and looked at each other perplexed.

“You think she's mad at us?”

“No, I think she really didn't see us.”

Spacey was engaged to be married to what Robin and I thought to be a doofus of a guy who looked like he slobbered when he ate and probably farted all the time. Spacey once said that she worried married life would be nothing but him playing video games and her watching. Robin and I agreed that that was probably what she was in for. Her assessment of marriage struck me, though. Got me to thinking. It was like she put into words to my own worries of marriage, only instead of video games, I saw marriage as two people sitting around watching T.V. Going nowhere. I'm guessing that is why she didn't see us on that field. She had a lot on her mind.

I was working full-time at Mackie's. They put me on the drive-up window because I was quick. After things cooled off a bit, Danny got a little nicer and offered to pick me up for work so I wouldn't have to walk. Robin was working part time and we usually worked nights together so Danny would drive us both home when he closed with us.

All the guys had a crush on Robin as, again, she was the looker, always smiling, and the kind of person that can get along with anyone. I was the more quiet one. Some people I'd talk to, some I wouldn't. It just depended on who they were and how easy to talk to. I usually made friends with girls who were more outgoing than I was. Girls who were always up because it brought me up more. If I hung around a girl who was as quiet as me or in-between, it brought me more down. Well, Robin was the 'up' one and I was more quiet and reserved but we seemed to meet in the middle somewhere and always felt like we were on an even keel.

Now there was this one other chick who worked at Mackie's who was beginning to weigh on my nerves. Roxanne was a supervisor and constantly on me about whatever she could find.

“Haven't you gotten the trays yet?”

“You better get out there and start mopping the lobby.”

If she wanted me to do something, it was usually said in her cranky voice with a snotty tone. Apparently, she was going through a divorce and some of the others thought that was why she was being this way but I swear, she was harder on me than anyone else. I just didn't get it. I was convinced she hated me which was fine because I didn't like her much either.

One hot, summer day after the lunch rush, I was restocking cups and lids by the soda machine when she walked up front to get a drink. I just busied myself with wiping down the counters and refilling the salt, pepper, and ketchup packets at the window when she came over and looked out the drive-up window toward Wal-Mart in the back. I was waiting for her to find something I hadn't gotten done yet so she could puff herself up by giving me orders.

“We ought to go shopping at Wal-Mart sometime,” she said.

I looked around but didn't see anyone else.

“Someday when we both get off work at the same time,” she said.

Crap, she was talking to me.

“Yeah, sure.” I said.

Then she walked off to the back.

I gradually started to accept both her bitching and her invitations out for a Coke or to the mall. We rode around a lot in her car but didn't talk much. She played the stereo so loud we couldn't talk. But when a song came on we both liked, she'd pull over so we could jam, pretending we were playing drums on the dashboard. She also gave me and Robin rides home from work when we all closed together and Danny wasn't there. One night Robin and I walked into the apartment after Roxanne dropped us off and there was a message by the phone for me. All it said was “Danny called to say goodnight.”

~

Then we went to the mall. Danny wanted me to help him pick out a present for his mother. Christmas was approaching, that lovely time of the year I dread because it punctuates my awareness of belonging nowhere, like most holidays now.

We found a nice jewelry box, dark wood with little glass French doors lined with tiny hooks on the back so that dangling necklaces could be seen through the glass. It was pretty. We looked at the jewelry also but Danny said he only had enough money for the box and that his mother had plenty of jewelry. While Danny waited in line to pay, I browsed the jewelry at the boutique counter, looking at the earrings and necklaces.

“Can I help you?”

A lady standing on the other side of the counter grinned at me with pearl white teeth and enough make-up packed on her face to plant potatoes.

“No, thanks, just looking,” I said.

“Are you looking for you or for a gift?”

“A gift. Do you have any necklaces that would look good dangling in a jewelry box?”

She went to one part of the counter and opened the sliding glass door from behind and pulled out a long beaded necklace in a box and held it out for me.

“That's pretty, how much?”

“\$149.99,” she said.

“Oh, do you have anything a little less expensive?”

“How much are you wanting to spend?”

“About twenty dollars.”

She put the box away and looked around.

“You might find something on that rack down at the end.”

She walked off and found another customer, someone dressed more business-like and professional—like a Bus Person, one of those people we watched out the drive-up window who get on a bus to go work in the city, as opposed to me in my faded jean jacket, jeans and dirty sneakers.

I went down to the end of the counter and looked at the necklaces on the spinning display that sat on top of the counter. She didn't even look at me again as I spun the display, just kept talking to her new customer in her snooty way. I slipped one of the necklaces into my jacket pocket. It was a thin gold chain I thought would look pretty in the box.

Danny and I grabbed a bite to eat at the food court and sat at one of the little round tables in front of the mall water fountain.

“I've been thinking about us,” he said. “I'm glad we're friends again.”

He was so cool the way he just effortlessly came out with that.

“Me, too,” I said, getting nervous.

“So, do you want to date again?”

“Date?”

“As in you see only me and me see only you.”

“Okay.” He was eighteen now, I was sure of it. “You think they'll be okay with that at work?”

He was a supervisor now, in a position over me.

“We don't have to tell them, but I don't care if they find out.”

“Look what I got.” I took the necklace out of my pocket and passed it to him.

“Huh? Where'd you get this?”

“Back at the boutique.”

“But how, I didn't see you get in line.”

“I took care of it with the lady behind the counter.” Which really wasn't a lie. “Put it in the jewelry box for your mother.”

“Great! Thanks! I'll tell her it's from you.”

“You don't have to.”

“She'll love it.” He put the necklace in the bag with the box.

The late afternoon air felt like snow when we left the mall. We decided to go see a movie, *The World According to Garp*. We got popcorn and cokes and sat in the back row so we could snuggle up without being watched. He sniffed my hair and asked what kind of shampoo I used because it smelled so good. He was a flatterer like that. I loved it.

We each went to the restroom when the movie was over and, after meeting back up in the lobby, we walked to the car fighting against the cold wind and snow flakes flurrying in the air. I

noticed a distinct difference in his demeanor. He was quiet. Not until we got in and shut the doors did he say anything.

“I was hit on in the men's room,” he said.

“Hit on? By who?”

“Do I look gay? Do I come across as being gay?”

He was genuinely worried. I laughed it off.

“Of course not,” I said.

Danny had long ago cut off his beloved ponytail and now wore his hair in a spiky short fashion more in keeping with the times. He no longer tried to fit in with the druggy guys; he was going more for the intellectual persona now. He was still thin but built well for it with moderate muscles, not too athletic but certainly not flabby. He didn't look gay, but what does gay look like? Flamboyant, maybe? Like Elton John with the funky hats and eye glasses? Danny wasn't flamboyant, he was just Danny. He remained quiet all the way home.

I had arranged a ride up to the Northeast for Christmas with Troy Chung and a group of students traveling to New York and New England. We planned to leave on Sunday morning. About everyone else on campus, including Robin and our roommates, had left Friday night so the place was empty on Saturday night. I snuck Danny into our apartment through the back window and we talked, drank some wine, and made love. He even brought a couple of joints. We were breaking every school rule.

Later we laid in my bed in the dark and he smoked a joint while I smoked a cigarette.

“What do you think of all that stuff going on in Lebanon?” He asked.

I had no clue what he was talking about. Didn't pay much attention to the news.

“Sorry, I haven't been keeping up with it, too much studying.” I really wasn't doing much of that, either. “What's happening?”

“You know about the civil war, right?”

“Sure.” I took a drag of my cigarette. Didn't know if he was talking about our Civil War now or what.

“The Lebanese president elect was assassinated in September. You didn't hear about that?”

“Oh, yes, I forgot.” I lied.

“It was pretty big news. Israel and the Christians retaliated by killing hundreds of Palestinians in refugee camps, but it was really a Syrian Christian who killed him.”

Christians? I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't even know there were Christians there. Finally, I said, “That's sad. There will never be peace over there.” I once heard my old friend, Johnny, say that so figured it was an appropriate thing to say.

“No, probably not,” Danny said. “The U.N. called it genocide.”

“Weird that the Jews would do that after what happened to them.”

“It was the Christian militia that did the killing, but the Israeli army knew what was happening and let it go on. They surrounded the camps and even sent up flares at night to help.”

“Still.”

Danny looked at me and smiled. Maybe he figured I knew something after all. I didn't know a lot about the Holocaust back then but I had read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and had seen the film, *The Hiding Place*.

On Sunday morning, I woke up in the best mood I remember having in a long time. I was excited to go on the trip plus happy about the night with Danny. He had snuck back out of the

window early in the morning so he could go home and get ready for work. He was opening the store at five am.

Seven of us piled into a rented van for the thirty-six-hour trip to the Northeast. I talked the group into stopping at Mackie's for breakfast. I wanted to see Danny again and say goodbye. We got in line to place our orders and I waited to see if he would come up front so I could surprise him. I had a clear view over the transfer bin to the back-line where against the back wall, the biscuit table could be seen. There was a new biscuit maker who I hadn't met yet. Her name was Amanda and she had dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She faced the biscuit table rolling the dough. She looked thin and petite, typical eighties valley girl with a high-pitched, squeaky, annoying voice. Danny was standing right next to her. He was leaning with one arm on the raised edge of the biscuit table as she rolled the dough. I could see his profile as he talked to her. I couldn't hear what he said but I could see the gleam in his eye. He kept laughing with her. I suddenly dreaded the trip, going away to no real home, no one, and the one I thought I had here was having way too much fun with the biscuit maker. I decided I wasn't even going to try and say goodbye. He obviously wasn't missing me. When I got up to the register to order, Regina, one of the supervisors, came around to the front line and shouted my name.

“Emily, I thought you were on your way.”

“We're leaving now. Just stopping for breakfast.”

I was so upset I couldn't count my change right. My face was hot and my hands shook.

“Come on back to the office, I want to show you something.”

I went back and she slipped a twenty into my pocket.

“For your trip. Merry Christmas.”

Danny came around the corner to the office about then.

“Hi, Baby.” He threw his arms around me and gave me a kiss and hug. “What a wonderful surprise.”

Thirty-six hours in a van with seven people bonded us in more ways than we would have wished. Trying to sleep on the van floor with someone snoring in my face and someone else digging their knee in my shin beat walking but the first thing we all did when the van made a pit stop was get out and walk. Sore legs stretched to the fifties music of road-side gas stations from Missouri through Ohio and Pennsylvania, and finally to New York City.

When they dropped me off at my aunt and uncle’s in Connecticut, the rest of the van crew headed up deeper into New England while I unpacked my bags and settled back in my old room, which really wasn't mine anymore. Jane had turned it into her quilt making room. There were tables topped with scissors, cutting boards, plastic fabric rulers, and plastic containers stacked and stuffed with material everywhere. My bed was hidden in the corner pushed up against the wall with the blankets and sheets folded up, sitting on top, waiting for me to make it up.

When my mother and grandparents were alive, we'd spend Christmas eve at my grandparent's who'd spend the night drinking but we'd have fun staying up all night smoking turkey and baking pies. Christmas day we'd eat, open presents, and crash out on the floor while Christmas movies played on the T.V. all afternoon. I'd wake up to Clarence getting his wings or the Whos passing the roast beast and feel full, safe, and warm. Christmas with Aunt Jane and Uncle Paul was strained but at least I could hang out with them for the minimum opening presents and eating and then go find my friends somewhere for the rest of the day.

We had dinner with Jane's parents who, surprisingly, were nice people. I don't know how they ended up with such an evil daughter but they didn't seem to notice. Jane's father talked to me about school, career options, and he gave me advice—do what you love to do. I liked hearing that. Maybe that was why I wasn't doing well in school. I was taking computer classes only because I figured that as an up and coming field, that was where the jobs and money were. I didn't love it. Problem was, I didn't know what I loved. I also liked that he talked to me like I was important and worth talking to. I saw Jane eye us a couple of times. I got the sense that she didn't like it.

I had one of my old girl friends, Trudy, pick me up from Jane's parents' house later in the afternoon so we could go ride around and see if we could find some of the boys. We went over to Beardsley Park where in the summer, kids hung out. It was barren as we drove through, and it started to get dark so we decided to go down to the movie theater to see what was playing. The theater had a line out the door. We ran into a couple of guys from high school who wanted to see the new *Airplane* movie but we talked them into seeing *Tootsie* with us. The familiarity of Christmas' past came back to me as we stood in line for tickets, in the cold air, on sidewalks lined with dirty snow, and talked with guys wearing soft black leather jackets that looked and smelled like Bridgeport. It briefly felt good to be home.

Once we got our tickets, we got loaded up on popcorn, nachos, cokes, and candy, and sat in the back row and laughed our asses off at Dustin Hoffman in drag. As we were leaving the theater, I saw Buddy standing outside the woman's restroom. I went over to say hi.

“Emily!” He took me and hugged me. “How's school?”

“Going okay, I guess.”

It had been a while since I talked to him. The letters and phone calls drifted off after my first year at Reighner.

“Listen, my wife is in the restroom and is going to come out any minute, then we need to leave. Why don't you come to church tomorrow and we can talk more.”

He seemed a bit nervous. His voice a little shaky. I'd forgotten how good-looking he was and it felt good to be back in his presence. Like with an old special friend. Someone who was on my side.

“I'll try.”

We parted and I caught up with Trudy and the guys and we decided to hit the clubs to continue the Christmas party but ended up driving to New York City to see the lights at Rockefeller Center. We didn't get home until two in the morning.

Aunt Jane woke me up at eight o'clock and urged me to get up and get ready.

“It would be nice if you made an effort to go with us to church since you're only home for a week. How would it look to the people at church if you didn't even bother? You *are* going to a Christian school and we *are* paying your way, after all.”

It was all about appearances with her. She wanted to display to the church ladies the results of her good deeds. Well, it didn't take much talking on her part to get me out of bed. I was happy to go. Buddy would be there.

I got up, took a shower, and put on my jeans and a nice Christmas sweater.

“Don't you have anything more appropriate to wear?” She asked when I walked downstairs.

“No, just jeans and sweaters,” I said. “It *is* a Christmas sweater, ain't that appropriate?”

“Isn't. And not with all those gawky bulbs all over it.”

“It's a Christmas Tree—with decorations, like they usually have.”

She suddenly turned all nice on me and thoughtful.

“I wonder if you might fit into something of mine? I believe I have a nice dress that would flatter your thin figure, give you more of a womanly curve.”

Was she for real?

“No, I'm going like this. Others wear jeans. I won't stand out and embarrass you, don't worry.”

She shook her head and walked off.

I sat in the back at church and half listened and half daydreamed. Buddy was sitting in a pew about half way up on the right side of the auditorium. I had a good view of him. He kept turning his head to look at me, always with a deep thoughtful look in his eyes.

As the preacher preached, my daydreams turned to Buddy, growing more wild with each look and bit of eye contact. His pretty little wife and girls sat next to him, eyes dutifully straight ahead on the preacher.

After church, we had a potluck downstairs. I got my plate of food and sat down next to my cousins.

Buddy led his wife and kids to sit at our table, and Buddy's wife, Trisha, ended up sitting right across from me. Buddy sat next to her, and the girls sat on the other side of my cousins so they could talk to them.

“Trish, this is Emily, she helped out at the camp a few summers ago and is now going to Reighner U in Oklahoma.”

“Hello,” she said to me with barely looking at me. I'm sure she was one of the ladies Jane told.

“Hello.”

“So, what is it that you’re majoring in?”

Her tone was stiff as if she felt obligated to start a conversation with me.

“Computer Science right now, but I’m not sure I will stay with it...”

I didn’t get to finish my sentence. She stopped listening when someone more important showed up and sat down next to me. The new person just barged in with her own haughty-taughty conversation about something stupid like how the new Sunday school teacher will need more instruction on how to conduct her class. They could talk about other people negatively as long as they make it sound like they’re concerned and trying to be helpful. Trisha and she continued talking without even looking at me.

I felt slighted until Buddy looked at me and gave me a quick wink.

After I finished eating I got up to throw out my paper plate and utensils. Then I went outside to find a spot to smoke.

Behind the church, there was a wooded area that lined the parking lot. I headed out there and walked up a little path to get out of view and sat on a rock. I didn’t care who saw me smoke but I didn’t want to give Jane reason to reprimand me. Not that I cared, but just wanted to keep the peace as best I could. I lit up in the woods and smoked while I drank my can of coke.

Within minutes, Buddy showed up. He must have seen me walk out. He came up the path and sat down next to me.

“Still smoking, huh?”

“Yeah, you want one?”

“No,” he laughed.

He was acting nervous again.

“Pay no mind to the women in there.”

“I don't.”

“You looked upset when Trisha let Ms. Harper interrupt you.”

“I'm used to it from women like that.”

“You're not like them. Don't ever try to be, promise?”

“What do you mean?”

He changed the subject.

“I've thought of you from time to time,” he said.

“I've thought of you, too.”

“Really? In what way?”

“What way?”

“Have you thought of me, you know, affectionately?”

I looked at him. I don't know why I let this happen, we were sitting so close and I felt the old vibes. I really hadn't thought of him that way in a while. I liked and missed Danny. He was who I thought about. But being there in his presence brought back the feelings I had before, I could feel the warmth from his skin. I just looked into his eyes, and we kissed. The rest of the world became a blur, and it didn't matter what else was going on in it.

“Emily.”

We broke away and I heard Buddy say, “Oh, Christ.”

I turned and looked down the path and saw Jane looking up at us.

Her concern for appearances probably saved Buddy's marriage, but did not save me from losing a home. For her to tell what had happened would mean that she would have to tell that I

was an adulterous wannabe, and that she failed in her rehabilitation of me. Instead, she kept it quiet, didn't even tell Uncle Paul, but made sure I knew I was no longer welcome in their house. She brought me a bus ticket back to Oklahoma, said they would continue to pay for my education for the rest of the year, but then I was on my own. She said I could get grants and student loans to cover my tuition, and it was time I started fending for myself anyway. She said maybe that was what I needed to grow up.

When I got back to Reighner's, I didn't call Danny right away. I was worried of what I'd tell him of the trip and didn't want to lie to him. Not yet. I tried to call Buddy at his work just to check and make sure he was okay, but I couldn't catch him there. He finally called me the Friday after I got back and said that he needed to distance himself from me.

“That was a close call, Emily. Too close. I'm constantly worried Jane will tell someone, and it will be over for me. I'll lose my family and church. Do you understand?”

“Of course,” I said. “I just wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“I'm sorry for doing this to you. I feel like I've messed up your life.”

“No. You haven't. I'll be okay. I was never happy at Jane's anyway.”

“If you are ever in trouble, let me know. Keep my number. But in general, I think it's best if we don't talk.”

“Okay. I will.”

“Find a church there. People will help you if you need it.”

“I will.” Though I didn't think I would.

I sat on my bed and cried till my eyes were bloodshot, my face was streaked, and my nose was running all over the place. Once I stopped, I felt better and more hopeful. I remembered

that Robin was returning the next day, and I was sure I would soon see Danny. I got up and took a shower and read before going to bed.

~

For the next couple of months, Danny and I went to the movies, concerts, and a last *Mash* episode party at Earl's house. Earl had gotten kicked out of Reighner's for drinking a beer, or so he said, but we all wondered if it was really because he was gay. He rented a house in Delmont and invited Robin, Joey, Danny and me over for cookouts and parties. He and Danny got along well. So did Danny and I, but by the beginning of spring, he was finding it hard to find time for me. It seemed more like he was just coming up with excuses not to see me. When I mentioned this to him, just expressing concern that he may not want to be in a relationship anymore, in other words, giving him an opportunity to get out if he wanted, he'd tell me it was all in my head.

Then I started to sense him having a growing attraction for Robin. Whenever we were all together, I'd notice little things. At work, we'd all sit out in the lobby on break, talking and he would look at her more than me. Talk to her more than me. She was nice and polite about it, but he was showing interest in her, I could tell.

I delicately mentioned this to him, trying to be mature and adult about it.

"It's okay if you like her, a lot of guys do. Just be honest with me."

"Don't be silly, it's all in your head."

"I can tell that you like to talk to her."

"She's good at intelligent conversations."

That stung. I guess I wasn't?

And then there was Amanda, the biscuit maker. He'd laugh and joke around with her while we worked. I'd catch him watching her from afar; little glimpses here and there.

I was thinking of breaking up with him but I also didn't want to, I didn't want to face lonely nights ahead, and I still liked him. So, I called one night to see if he wanted to do something.

“I can't. I have to open the store in the morning.”

“That never stopped you before.”

“I just don't feel like it, need to get my sleep.”

“Why do you not want to see me?” I finally came out with it.

“I do want to see you, just not all the time.”

“It's turning into hardly ever.”

“Maybe it's better if we don't see each other for a while.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. Maybe we should just see other people.”

“But...”

“I have to go.”

“Wait, talk to me.”

“I'll see you at work.”

“Why don't you want to see me?”

“We don't have much to talk about.”

I didn't say anything.

“I got to go. Bye.”

And he hung up. I put the phone down and cried.

When I went over to his house the next day, it wasn't to try and get him back. I knew from experience that wouldn't work. I went over just to talk and see if we would be able to get

along as friends. This was more important now that he was one of my supervisors at work. I didn't want the same thing happening as did before. And somewhere in the discussion, I don't remember who brought it up first, we talked about 'seeing each other' like before we became 'boyfriend and girlfriend.' He seemed happy about it, and so was I. We did go out occasionally, and we got along good. It wasn't the same as before, but it was okay. I guess I was thinking it was better than nothing.

Then one day, as Danny and I were clocking out after work and he was to drive me home, I heard Rex, one of the guys working back-line, say to Danny "do it once for me."

Once in his car, I asked on a hunch, "Are you going to sleep with Amanda?"

"Yes." He didn't try to hide it.

"Then I don't think we should sleep together anymore."

"She's just a friend. She's clean, not a slut or anything."

"That doesn't matter. I think it's best that we're just friends. Nothing else."

"Okay, if you feel that way."

We rode in silence for a while.

"Did you hear about what happened in Lebanon?" I asked.

"No, what?"

"There was a bombing yesterday."

"There's bombings over there practically every day."

"But it was the United States embassy that got hit."

We got to the school and he let me out. That was it, our relationship in that respect was over for good. He watched me walk to my door. I could feel it. It felt good.

The Party Apartment

Roxanne turned the radio up when Russ Ballard's "Voices" came on. We beat the dashboard to the rhythm with our imaginary drumsticks and chanted *I. Got. The. Key.* as we cruised down Main street in the dark. Cruising was so high school, but Roxanne seemed to like it so I went along. Besides, I had nothing else to do.

The end of May 1983 began one of the loneliest summers I remember. Reighner became a desolate emblem on the vast flatlands. The campus turned empty and the buildings hallow. All my friends left. Everyone. Troy Chung headed back to New York. Wendy and Jason had graduated and were gone. Robin went home to Colorado to prepare for her wedding. She was to marry Joey in August, and I was to be a bridesmaid. She offered for me to go with her and stay with her family for the whole summer, but once she got there she couldn't find a job. I decided I'd stay on at the school and continue working at Mackie's. Danny, who I had dated off and on for the past year, was no longer a part of my life. And besides riding around with Roxanne once in a while to listen to her stereo, smoke cigarettes, and drink cokes, I had no one to talk to.

I took up jogging. Worked more hours. Got into wearing more pinks and purples by ordering clothes through Avon. Tried to brighten my mood while trying to figure out what to do next. It seemed pointless to stay in school. Except for two Fs, I had barely passed my classes. Computer science just wasn't working out. I felt I was constantly treading water, and I had to pay someone to do my final Cobol project because, besides sleeping through too many classes, I had thought more about Danny than programming and didn't have a clue what to do. I did, however,

come out of calculus with a C. Out of a class of thirty-four students that dropped down to twelve, I was one of the few stragglers, hanging on until one quarter I saw the light. It clicked, and I was magically able to do those damn integrals, definite or indefinite, and make an A on that quarter's test. The A combined with the rest of my grades to make a C for the semester. I am proud of that C.

Wendy and Jason went back home to Texas. The plan was that they were going to pick me up in August and we would drive up to Colorado for Robin and Joey's wedding. They also talked to me about moving to Texas and staying with them for a while. I was thinking about it. In the meantime, I tried to busy myself with whatever I could find.

I started hanging out with more of the Mackie's crew. We'd sometimes go over to Rex's apartment and hang out after closing the store. We'd sit on the floor in Rex's living room and watch as he and his buddies worked out. Rex was one of the druggy kids who had dropped out of school and we really went over there for pot, or the others did. I was just there with the gang, along for the ride.

Rex and his buddies had the weights out. Lifting them on barbells. Rex's face would get red as he grunted to get the bar from his chest to over his head. Once there, he held it as long as he could before he let it down in a swoosh to the floor. Now, I was never one to be overly impressed by muscles, but Rex's muscles were starting to impress me. I was struck by the determination in his face and strain in his voice as he struggled to lift the weight and hold it a little longer each time. I never thought of him as particularly attractive before; he was just one of the guys who worked back line, friendly, and outgoing. He'd come up to front line and talk to Robin and me, teaching us the right way to do push-ups and whatnot. Not that I thought of him as unattractive either. His curly dark hair sat almost like a fro on his head and seemed to clash

with his pale skin. Not in a nerdy way, more like a ruffian. Leader of the druggy kids. An average face. But now he was getting more attractive with each lift.

Over the summer a few other employees moved into Rex's apartment and it soon became the Mackie's party apartment. We were over there most nights after work, hanging out and sleeping on the floor. Wine, beer, cigarettes, pot, and VHF movie tapes were the staples of our time spent there. We'd get drunk and go jump in the apartment community swimming pool after hours while listening to a Journey tape in the boombox. The party apartment elicited a steady flow of drifters in and out—always bodies in motion and something going on. One guy sat in the same chair for two days straight bullshitting non-stop about all the experiences he'd had hitchhiking across the country; everything from being picked up by gay men to making friends with a rich guy who let him stay at his mansion, then took him to his destination in his private plane. The guy told us these stories from the same sitting position, cigarette in one hand, beer in the other, and an authoritative expression on his face like he knew he was telling us things we've never experienced—fully aware that he was impressing us whether he was or not. No one knew who he was or where he came from, but he eventually left as mysteriously as he came.

One of Rex's friends had a sister who had a crush on Rex. She was a younger girl. Straight laced and sweetly innocent. Not one you would expect to see hanging with this crowd. Perhaps my knowing that she liked Rex egged me on more. I aimed to get him first. I splashed around with him in the pool, tried to sleep near him on the floor, and show that I was the mature woman to this young girl until finally he kissed me, and I wondered if it was really what I wanted after all.

Rex and his friends would always drive me home in the morning. Back to campus.

One morning I came home and the gig was up. They had checked the room early and knew I was out all night. I had to go for a disciplinarian talk with the dean of women. I knew this was serious. I could be kicked out. I really didn't care, just didn't know where I'd go so was kind of scared.

She asked me to sit down in front of her desk. She had pictures of all her rosy cheeked, smiling children, or probably grandchildren judging by her age, displayed on the bookcase behind her desk, facing me. She was dressed in a business type skirt and jacket and wore high heels. Her white hair was neatly primped up on her head with a can's worth of hairspray. She wore large pearl earrings and rocks on her fingers. She was the queen of the apple cheeks, I could tell. Born, bread, raised, and lived "in the church." Her power of authority over me was more than just that of a dean. She had God on her side, and I was sitting there before her, a sinner. Not worthy of staying in their school. She looked down at me from her side of the desk.

"When we didn't find you in your apartment this morning, we called Mackie's. Your supervisor said that she thought you had slept at a man's house. Rex?"

She said "Rex" like she was talking about a monkey. She was talking to me like I spent the night with a monkey.

"She didn't know where I was. I spent the night at my friend, Roxanne's, house."

"Then that is awfully presumptuous of this manager to assume that you would sleep at a man's house, isn't it?"

I just looked at her and shrugged my shoulders. I knew I was lying, but I could have been telling the truth. I could have been at Roxanne's and the supervisor might still guess that I'd be at Rex's, and she would think nothing of it. This woman didn't understand that not everyone thinks like her. That the world out there is not what it is here.

“Now what would your parents think if we had called them last night and said you weren't home?”

“My parents are dead.”

“I'm sorry, but there must be someone who has guardianship of you. I'm sure they would have been very concerned and upset.”

I had been looking down, avoiding eye contact, just wanting to get this over with. I wished she would just kick me out and stop this unnecessary stupid talking. I saw that her purse was sitting on the floor to the side of the desk. She had a pretty little wallet made of embroidered leather sticking out of it. I'm sure it was loaded. Her hubby probably stuffed it full over the breakfast table before she left for work this morning.

“Well, it seems you don't care for your own personal wellbeing. I don't know how much I can do for you, but I will call Roxanne and ask her if you had stayed there last night. What time do you go to work?”

“I need to be there in an hour.”

“Do you have Roxanne's number?”

I got my address book out of my bag and wrote down the number for her. She stepped out of the office to call her. I suppose that she didn't want to give me a chance to talk to Roxanne before she did. But there was no need, Roxanne and I had already planned what she would say.

While waiting, I took the little embroidered wallet out of her purse and looked at it. I just wanted to hold it and feel the soft leather. I opened it up and saw that there wasn't such a big wad of bills after all, but a few ten's and twenties. I folded it back up just as I heard her come back into the office. Startled, I slipped the wallet into my own purse on my lap and closed it up, trying to figure out a way I could get it back in her purse without her seeing.

“I just talked to Roxanne, and based on our discussion, I feel that there is no other option but to expel you.”

“What did she say?”

“That’s not important. The fact is, you broke school rules regardless of where you spent the night, and I don’t feel that there is anything I can do to recommend to the school board that you stay.”

She had a different demeanor than before. Before, she was just haughty and condescending. Now she also had an air of having been offended.

“We will have the final decision tomorrow, but I advise you to begin making plans to leave right away.”

Suddenly, I felt glad I had her wallet in my purse. I just needed to make it back to the apartment, get changed for work, and get out of the apartment before she noticed. They wouldn’t be able to pin it on me once I left the campus.

When I got back to the apartment, I hid the wallet in one of my winter boots, just in case. I called work to tell them I was running late and if I walked, it would take me about forty-five minutes to get there. Danny answered and said that he would come get me. When he pulled up and honked, I put the wallet back in my purse and left quickly.

I clocked in at work and went to the break-room to put my purse in a locker, and found two police officers standing there with Ms. Dean Haughty. Russ, the night manager put his hand on my shoulder and said, “Sorry, Emily. They have a warrant to search you.”

“Hand me your purse, we’ll start with that,” said one of the officers.

Right away they pulled out the wallet and Ms. Haughty said it was hers.

“Did you take this?” the officer asked.

“I was only looking at it and she came back in the office. I got nervous and put it in my bag. I wanted to give it back but was afraid.”

“She's lying,” said Ms. Haughty. “I want her arrested.”

They walked me out through the back doors where their police cars were parked and took me down to the station. They booked me on theft. Russ came down and bailed me out. They let me go, but said I needed to stay in town until they decided on a court date.

“Why did you take it?” Russ asked me back at the store. We were sitting in the office that had big windows facing the back line. Employees kept walking back and forth looking in at us. Me. Not in a nosy way but more in a curious way, sort of caring like.

Russ stood there, leaning against the counter with his arms folded across his broad chest and looked down at me sitting in the chair like he thought I was his kid.

“I've got my reasons.” Though I really didn't have any.

Bad thing to say. His face turned a beet red. I instantly felt ashamed.

“I just bailed you out of jail, brought you back here trying to convince myself of why I shouldn't fire you, and the only thing you got to say is 'I got my reasons?’”

I started crying.

“Let's try this again. Why did you take that wallet?”

“I was telling the truth. I took it out of her purse to look at it, and then she came back in quick and I got nervous and stuck it in my purse. I really didn't want it.”

“There must have been some reason you took it out of her purse. Were you thinking of stealing it?” He was being nice now. Real nice.

“I thought it was pretty. I wondered what she had in it.”

“So, you were just admiring it because you wanted one like it. Not that particular one?”

“I guess. I don't know. But then I was glad I had it when she was fucking kicking me out of school.”

“Did you think you were getting even with her?”

I sat on the floor to try and hide from the window and cried my eyes out. Like hysterically. I couldn't stop. Russ said it was okay. I needed to let it out. I really didn't know why I was crying. If he did, I wished he would have told me. But he didn't. Just said that I had a job, I won't be fired. Employees kept walking by and looking in. Danny did, too.

“This isn't you, Emily. I know you're better than that. I wouldn't have bailed you out if I didn't think you were. But I've got a store to run here and last thing I need is the police showing up to arrest my employees right before the dinner rush.”

I laughed at that.

“I need you here. So please, don't ever do that again. Understand?”

Still laughing and crying, I nodded my head. I still couldn't talk.

Ms. Haughty dropped the charges. but I was kicked out, of course. I still had a job, but I needed a place to stay. I knew where there was one. And to become an official resident of the party apartment, I became an official girlfriend of Rex's.

~

Our apartment had no phone, so we never knew who it was when we got a knock on the door. Many times we would find an employee from Mackie's standing there, sent over by Russ to recruit any one of us in because they were short-handed. Whoever had a clean uniform changed out of their shorts or bathing suit and headed up to the store. Or sometimes we all went. We'd carry the party there so we'd get some work hours in—because we were all broke.

Russ also brought beer into the store and put it in the ice bins to keep cold. After close, we'd ride out to a river by a bridge near his house and hang out. One warm summer night in late July, it was me, Rex, Roxanne, Danny, Sean and a few others on the night shift. The crickets were out and we built a campfire to roast some hot dogs. After a few beers, someone suggested that we all go skinny dipping in the river. I sat on the bank, watched everyone else take off their clothes, and get in the water. Rex and his buddies called for me to come in, too, but I wasn't about to get naked in front of everyone. I noticed that Danny and Roxanne were flirting and talking a lot to each other. Intimate like. It surprised me that Danny would go for her; he never seemed to like her that much before.

I later spotted Roxanne sitting in her car by herself in the passenger's seat with the door open. I went over to see what she was up to. She seemed to be trying to avoid me.

“You and Danny hitting it off, now?” I asked.

She just shrugged her shoulders with a smirk I would have liked to slap off.

“How long has this been going on...?”

Before I could finish the sentence, Rex and Sean barged in and circled around me.

“Hey, you rolling a joint in there?” Rex asked, looking at Roxanne over my shoulder.

I hadn't paid attention to what she was doing, but now I looked with Rex and Sean. She wasn't rolling a joint. She was getting some type of birth control gel prepped.

“Will you all go find something else to do,” Roxanne said.

Rex and Sean walked off laughing. I turned and walked back towards the campfire, and saw Danny standing there looking smug.

“Didn't know you had the hots for Roxanne. When did this start?” The words flew right out of my mouth. Like I had a right to avenge him if it had overlapped with our relationship. The

anger rose in me, but I didn't know if it was more for him or her. She and I weren't the greatest of friends, but I had shared my breakup grief with her, and this seemed like a total betrayal.

“It's none of your business,” he said.

He looked at me quick out of the corner of his eye while I stared him down. He was uncomfortable. He had a glint in his eye, like he was embarrassed. He really didn't like her. I could tell.

“Calm down, you two,” Russ said.

“She's just pissed off because I broke up with her.”

“Yeah, I really look upset about it, don't I?” I stood closer to Rex who put his arm around me.

Danny grabbed a beer out of the ice cooler, moved a little further away from the fire, and sat down on the ground to open it. Rex and I sat down where we were. We watched the fire while Russ, still stark naked, moved around the fire with his jiggly butt facing us as he stoked the wood to get the flames going.

Someone's car radio was playing. We listened to The Police's “Every Breath You Take” as we all drank our beer and idly talked. Danny sat by himself until Roxanne came up behind him. She put her hands through his hair as she leaned over him. He tilted his head back with his eyes closed and said, “Emily.” Affectionately.

Roxanne leaned over, “What?”

He shook his head, “Nothing.”

She let go of him, stood up straight, and lit a cigarette.

Then Danny looked at me.

He knew I heard.

~

The smell of percolating coffee woke me up and brought me straight out of bed the day Wendy and Jason were to pick me up for Robin's wedding. After my shower, I threw a few last-minute items—tooth brush, tooth paste, deodorant, hair dryer, and other assorted toiletries—into my zip-top suitcase I packed the night before—well, more like rearranging than packing. I'd been living out of my suitcase since moving into the party apartment. I unpacked my winter clothes and put them into boxes, while taking piles of summer clothes from where I kept them folded on a coffee table that we'd pushed up against the bedroom wall, sort of as a makeshift dresser, and packed them in the suitcase. After weeks of sleeping on the living room floor, Rex and I had graduated to the bedroom since we were a couple and now paying most of the rent. We were still sleeping on the floor, but at least now we had a mattress. I checked around the room to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything. There wasn't much to pack since I'd been wearing mostly just jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers or moccasins. I didn't have a lot of nice things except some pink and purple shirts from Avon, including a purple windbreaker I packed in case it got cool in the evenings.

“Here, take Ralphie.”

Rex's big burly arms threw his teddy bear to me.

“Why?”

“To remind you of me. So you'll come back.”

The bear was extra squishy and whenever I saw Rex with it, it looked like an image of an oxymoron. Little teddy bear—big muscular guy. He'd had the bear since he was a kid. It was missing an eye.

I stuffed him into my suitcase.

It was still dark outside as Rex and I tip-toed through the living room with my suitcase, careful not to step on bodies still crashed on the floor from the night before. Sean was getting dressed in the bathroom and almost ready. He and I were both opening the store and had to be in by five am. Rex didn't have to start his shift until ten, but since Sean was driving us in, Rex would take the ride and sleep in the truck until we woke him up for work.

I set my suitcase by the door, and got Rex, Sean, and me each a mug of black coffee. Out of sugar and milk again, Rex took a piece of chocolate candy bar that was left open all night on the table and stirred it into his coffee. I was fine with it black. I had gotten used to it. It was just easier that way.

“Did they say anything more about Texas?”

“No, not really. We'll talk about it on the way up.”

“Maybe they forgot.”

“Maybe,” I said. And winked at him over the rim of my mug.

“You guys ready?” Sean was in the kitchen, grabbing a Coke out of the fridge for the ride.

“Ready.”

Wrapping biscuits to shoot down the bins all morning, non-stop, kept my mind busy so I wouldn't have to think about it. I was never good at decisions and this was a big one. Wendy and Jason were sure I could get a job in Texas where Jason worked for the newspaper. They owned a grand old Victorian house from where they were planning to rent rooms. I would have a job and a place to live if I moved there. Recently divorced, Roxanne was trying to talk me into getting a place with her. She was still in the house, but would have to move out soon. The thing with her and Danny never panned out. Instead of holding a grudge over her for trying to hook up with my

ex-boyfriend, I kind of felt bad for her about it so we got to be friends again. But I wasn't sure I wanted to go so far as to move in with her. She wanted to move out to the country.

“But I don't have a car,” I said.

“I'll take you anywhere you want to go.”

That concerned me.

Wendy and Jason were to pick me up at the end of my shift at eleven o'clock. I didn't tell them where I was living or even that I had gotten kicked out of Reighner. I would tell them later. I didn't want to have to explain why I was living in an apartment with three other guys, if you counted just the permanent residents. Not just yet. So, I asked them pick me up at Mackie's.

“What time are they coming to get you?” Roxanne asked. She had just started her shift as I was getting off.

“They'd planned to get here at eleven but they are driving from Texas—might've hit traffic.”

“It's eleven-thirty now.” She leaned on the wall of the break-room smoking a cigarette.

“I know.”

“Maybe they forgot you.”

She always had supportive, uplifting things to say.

“I don't think so.”

Wendy and Jason pulled in at noon after driving five hours. We ate lunch together at Mackie's, and then got ready to hit the road.

Rex carried my suitcase out to their car and we said goodbye at the door with a kiss.

“Don't forget to bring back my bear.”

Wendy took note of our parting. When I got in the backseat of the car she said, "Maybe you won't be that interested in moving to Texas after all."

"I don't know."

I didn't know. Rex would have been the only reason to stay, the only thing holding me here, but I wasn't sure that it was enough. I liked him. he was a good guy. But with him, I didn't see things changing much. Wasn't sure his world was all I wanted. He had dropped out of high school and besides working at Mackie's, he worked mainly with family or friends who would offer him odd jobs, helping at construction sites, doing flooring jobs, and the like. He was a good and hard worker but didn't seem to have any plans for the future, or ideas of what he wanted to do. He was okay with working a hard day and then going home to drink a beer. I saw a dead end there when I pictured myself staying in Delmont. The thought of moving to Texas brought about visions of opportunities, more possibilities. Like there I could move forward. But I was comfortable here. Had people I knew around me. Texas was unknown territory.

"Are you sure you want to leave school? You've invested a lot of time. I know you're not crazy about Reighner's, none of us were, but if you tough it out another year or two and get your degree, you'll be much better off," Jason said.

"I can't now." I might as well tell them. "I got kicked out."

They both turned their heads back toward me.

"Got caught coming home in the morning after being out all night." I didn't tell them about stealing the dean of women's wallet.

"Well that sucks," Wendy said. "Leave it to a Christian school to kick you out for something like that."

“While guys who get arrested for flashing women at drive-up windows stay because their parents are in the church hierarchy and give money to the school,” Jason said. He was right; that did happen.

“Yeah,” said Wendy, “You could probably fight it and bring that up.”

“It doesn't matter—I don't want to go back there, anyway.”

“So where are you living now?”

“With some work friends. We share an apartment.” It didn't sound so bad put that way.

~

Held outside under a clear August blue sky, Robin and Joey's wedding was beautiful. It was at her parent's house, a white farm house on the open land that seemed to go on uninterrupted for miles in every direction you looked. The landscape was decorated with little white farmhouses scattered across green hills. The silhouette of the Rocky Mountains in the distance.

After the ceremony, I helped in the kitchen getting the food ready for the guests. I was overwhelmed by all the people there I didn't know and felt best keeping myself busy by loading silver trays of hors d'oeuvres, crab cakes, and cheese and crackers to carry to the guests. I also poured the wine. I found that at events like this, if I busied myself with serving the guests, they treated me with respect, like I was important—I had the food. And the wine. If I'd just been standing around awkward like, trying to mingle, after two painful minutes of trying to come up with something to say to someone I have no clue about, I'd see them start to turn their head in different directions, looking for an opportunity to get away from me—to escape, to bow out without seeming rude. Then when someone would approach and apologize for interrupting, the

person I'd been boring to death would light up, "Oh, you're not interrupting." And I'd hear the relief in their voice. I've always hated crowds, they can be the loneliest places.

We took a day trip after the wedding with Robin's family, Wendy and Jason, to hike in the Rocky Mountains. We drove up to a high point where we could get out and hike the rest of the way to the summit covered with dry snow that never melts.

As we drove back down the mountain, we stopped at a park to picnic and pick wild flowers. It reminded me of the summer before my parents died. We had gone on a rare family road trip up to Vermont. They let me pick a bunch of wildflowers from a field we walked through. I brought them home and hung them upside down in my bedroom to dry. There were several bouquets, bunches with Purple Bluets, Milkweed, Violets, Golden Rods, and Buttercups. They filled the room with a scent that will always remind me of that trip, the most vivid image of us being happy.

That Sunday, we went to church before heading back. Robin's family had always been members of this church, the same that Reighner's and Jordan Camp was affiliated with, so it was just fitting and respectful of us to go with them since they'd been hospitable to us, making us feel at home while we stayed with them. Everything about the trip was wonderful, but the church experience turned out to be disappointing. I'd looked forward to church as I hadn't been since Robin left and I got kicked out of Reighner's, but as the preacher talked he turned his focus to the Christian family (meaning the church) versus the world. He said we as Christians should only associate with members of the church and stay away from those in the world. I looked around at the people in the pews. They listened as though there was nothing wrong with what he was saying. I saw heads nod instead of questioning expressions. I saw a woman dressed in a blue tailored suit get up with her unruly child to bring him to the back. As she walked down the aisle

toward the foyer, two women looked at her and whispered to each other with snide smiles. I saw one man check her out, looking her up and down. I thought of Miss Dean Haughty and I thought of Russ. A rush of heat came over me and I felt a desire to get up and leave. But I looked over at Robin's parents, Wendy and Jason, quietly listening and I sat it out. I wondered if I was the only one screaming inside.

~

Interstate 35 stretched for miles through Kansas farmland, now barren hay fields after harvest. Wendy, Jason, and I traveled in their little Ford Pinto south back to Oklahoma. We talked of my possible move to Texas as I sat in the back seat clinging to Rex's teddy bear, thinking about "going home." It was just getting dark when they dropped me off at Mackie's. They promised they'd be in touch, and then left quickly to get back on the road as they still had a five-hour drive ahead of them.

Almost as soon as they left, I wished I'd just kept going on with them. Rex wasn't at the store and no one knew where he was. The plan was he'd be working and I'd hang out there until he got off at midnight and we'd go home together. Since the apartment didn't have a phone, the only way to contact him was through Mackie's and he was usually there every day. They said that he had called out sick.

But wait, didn't he leave a message for me? Didn't he know I was coming home tonight?

Jay was working and said that something had happened at the apartment. They all had to move out. Something to do with complaints from the neighbors, but he didn't know what exactly happened or where they were now.

I called Roxanne to see if she knew anything. She said that she thought they moved into someone else's house but not sure whose.

Roxanne said I could spend the night at her house, and Jay said he'd drive me over after close.

Feeling hurt and abandoned, I drowned my sorrows in bacon cheeseburgers and french fries in the breakroom until it was time to go. I climbed into Jay's red pickup and we stopped at a store for some beer as he wanted to go sit in the park and “talk” for a while.

I didn't care. We ended up kissing. To heck with Rex. If he cared, he would have been there for me, so what the hell did it matter what I did with Jay? But kissing was all we did, then he dropped me off at Roxanne's. He acted kind of nervous and kept telling me not to tell anyone. He seemed worried that his girlfriend would find out. Strange since it was all his idea to begin with.

I slept on Roxanne's couch, and she held me hostage. She sat on the arm of the couch in her terry cloth bathrobe and hair in curlers, trying to talk me into moving in. I kept trying to avoid the conversation by telling her I was tired and that I needed to talk to Rex first.

“Why do you want to talk to him about it? He abandoned you.”

“There must be some explanation.”

“Doubt it. Maybe he just doesn't want to live with you anymore.”

I hated her sometimes.

“He gave no sign of that before I left.”

“People change.”

“In one week?”

“Well, I'm sure you'll find out tomorrow, then we can talk. I'm not going to leave you high and dry. You need a stable place to live.”

I saw her point there. As fun as it was, living in the party apartment was also just plain crazy. All of us broke, and the lowest point came when we ran out of toilet paper and I got my period. I had nothing to use and no money to get it with. I walked down to a gas station about a mile away to use their restroom but they wouldn't let me even though I pleaded that it was an emergency. I had to walk back to the apartment, cramping and flowing with just some paper towels I had to catch it. When I got back I barricaded myself in the bathroom with a blanket over me until someone had somehow gotten what I needed.

Texas was looking better and better. But, in the meantime, moving in with Roxanne might not be too bad.

I went in to work with her in the morning. Around two o'clock in the afternoon Rex showed up. He took me aside and hugged me and apologized.

"I'm so sorry. A lot happened after you left."

"So much you couldn't even come get me or call me. You knew I was coming back last night."

"I forgot. Sorry. We were moving stuff and we witnessed a car accident, it was a mess, we couldn't leave."

He forgot? I felt a sense of boiling inside and could feel my cheeks flush and get hot. The tears started to well up.

"I'm sorry," he said again and took me in his arms, hugged me and patted me on the back like "there, there," like he was sorry for me that I was so forgettable.

I pushed him away and dried my eyes. "Where's my stuff?"

He told me they had moved everything into his uncle's house after the party apartment disbanded. His uncle didn't live in the house, he lived in a different town in the country, but was going to rent it out to Rex and the guys.

“It's all there; safe and sound. But my uncle doesn't want any girls living there, just us guys. He said you could stay until you found someplace else.”

“Thanks, but Roxanne said I could stay with her. We're going to get a place together.”

I didn't need him. I didn't even like him that much. Not enough to put up with being forgotten, accident or no accident. I told him we were going back to just “seeing each other,” we could see other people if we wanted. He looked so sorry that it almost crushed me, but after a while he was okay with it.

To top it all off, just as Texas was looking better and like a sure thing, Wendy called me at the store and told me that Jason had lost his job which meant I would have no job. I decided to stay put in Oklahoma.

Roxanne and I rented a trailer out in the country. It wasn't long before I knew it was a mistake. I should have known from the beginning. I didn't have a car, so I had to depend on her for transportation. She used this to her advantage. She wanted me to go everywhere with her. If I asked her to take me to Rex's house, she would fuss and ask dumb questions like, “why do you want to go to Rex's house? You could go there anytime. He can't control you.”

That killed me. Her saying, “He can't control you.”

Finally, I decided I had to get a car. Roxanne wasn't about to help me, so after work one day, I walked two miles to the bank and talked to a nice man about a loan. He said if I found a good car for under \$1,500, I could get a loan. I had Rex and Sean take me looking. We found an ugly beige 1976 Mustang for \$1,000. I got it. My first car. Independence! It felt great. Soon after

I got my car, Russ promoted me to supervisor and Danny got promoted to Assistant Manager. Danny took a lot of time to help me out as a new supervisor and teach me the ropes.

After a couple of months, Roxanne moved back into town. She said it was too boring in the country and she wanted me to move in with her and another friend of hers. But at the same time, Rex and Sean were kicked out of his Uncle's house, too much partying, so I stayed in the trailer and let them moved in with me.

Rex and I still had an understanding that we were just 'seeing each other' and we both agreed that it would stay that way if they moved in. But it seemed Rex forgot the day they moved in and acted as though we were married or something. I tried to keep it in his head that we were just roommates but it was no use. He wanted more. He set himself up in my room and gave Sean the smaller bedroom. We started watching T.V. every night. I started cooking him dinner.

~

Rex and I were at work one night while Jay was unloading the supply truck. I noticed Rex in the freezer talking to Jay. Then I noticed Rex was upset with me. Very upset. I'd never seen him this mad before. He wouldn't tell me what was wrong, he just kept calling me a bitch and then he called me a slut. After the truck was unloaded, I went out back where Jay was sitting in his truck, and asked him what they were talking about. He said nothing, but then when he was getting ready to leave, he came through the drive-up and stopped at the window and called me over.

“Let's just forget about that night, okay?”

He looked undeniably troubled as he drove off.

After work, when Rex and I got in my car, I asked him what was wrong.

“I oughta kick the shit outta you, you bitch.”

“What did Jay say to you?”

“You know damn well what he said.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Have you forgotten already? Kissing him? He said you kissed him.” He was yelling.

“He kissed me; it was his idea.”

“Doesn’t mean you have to do it, slut.”

“That was that night you forgot me. Remember?” Now I was mad.

“So. Just because I didn’t pick you up doesn’t mean you just go start making out with everyone. That’s what sluts do.”

“I was mad and drunk at the time, and besides, we have an agreement, we can see other people. Remember?”

“I oughta beat the shit out of you, whore.”

A cop pulled up and walked over to the car. “What are you doing here this late?”

“We just got off work, officer. We’re just talking.” Rex faked a cool, calm tone.

I wanted to yell for help but I thought I might be overreacting. I figured he would calm down. We left and started heading towards the trailer. I was driving and Rex was yelling. The further out we got the worse he got. He told me over and over like a broken record that I ought to have my ass kicked good. He ought to do this and that to me to teach me a lesson. This wasn’t the Rex I knew. I got so scared I turned to go back to town.

“Where the hell you going?”

“Back to Delmont.”

“Turn this piece of shit around before I bash your head into the dash.”

I turned the car around. I decided once we got to the trailer and he was out of the car, I was going to take off. I would go to Danny's or Roxanne's, anywhere. But I wasn't going in that trailer with him. I'd get my stuff later. I wasn't going back with him for anything.

We got to the trailer about one in the morning. I sat in the car, waiting for him to get out so I could leave, but he wouldn't get out until I did. He kept yelling at me to turn the car off so I finally did.

“Come on, we're going inside.”

“I'm not going in there with you.” I was crying.

Then something changed. He got tears in his eyes.

“Come on, I'm not going to hurt you, I'd never really hurt you, I was just trying to scare you.”

He hugged me. “Come on, let's go inside.”

We got out of the car. I fumbled in my purse for my keys. My hands were shaking and I couldn't see clearly through the tears. I dropped the keys. Rex picked them up and opened the door of the trailer. We walked in and it was quiet. No one else was there. I threw my purse onto the beat up old brown, frayed couch and turned on the lamp. The sound of a fist against the wall behind me made me jump. I turned and saw Rex with his back to me sobbing, with his head buried in his arms leaned up against the wall he just hit.

I walked over to him and put my arms around him and leaned my face against his back. He turned around and cried on my shoulder, holding on like a little lost boy. We sat down on the couch and he laid his head on my lap and I stroked his hair while he cried.

“I love you,” he said between sobs.

“I don't understand what you really want,” I said.

“To be normal, like everyone else.”

“Why do you think you’re not normal?”

He shrugged. Always so up and energetic, with lots of friends, just as I was shocked by his temper that night, I was shocked that he thought of himself as not being normal. But here he was, as down as one could get, feeling hopeless and unwanted.

I stayed.

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VITA

Jennifer Jones was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut to parents Robert and Maureen Jones. She is the first of three children with a younger brother and sister. She attended several different elementary schools within the city of Bridgeport, but most of her primary education was received at Maplewood Elementary and Junior High School. She then attended Oxbow High School in Bradford, VT before finishing her high school education at Central High School in Bridgeport, graduating in 1979. Jennifer continued her education at Northeastern Christian Junior College in Villanova, Pennsylvania, and from there, transferred to Oklahoma Christian University in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Leaving OCU before completion, she enrolled in night business courses at Oklahoma City Community College while working in the fast food restaurant business as an Assistant Manager until moving to Vermont in 1989. Jennifer worked for Bradford National Bank as a data processor before moving back to Connecticut in 1992 to work as an Ophthalmic Assistant in an ophthalmology practice. She enrolled in evening courses at Norwalk Community Technical College to further her education in history, playwriting, and film studies, then transferred her college credits to Charter Oak State College where, after studying history, literature, and writing, she obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Liberal Studies in 2006. Jennifer moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee from North Georgia in 2013, and graduated with a Master of Arts degree in English, Creative Writing in May of 2017 from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.