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GROWING UP FEMALE: A FEMINIST ORIGIN STORY

by

Maggie Caitlin Bausch

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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## ABSTRACT

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Growing Up Female: A Feminist Origin Story. Major Professor: Kristen Iversen.

Growing Up Female: A Feminist Origin Story seeks to explore the connection between the depictions of women in popular culture and media, and how they have affected the speaker. This work combines the narrative of a memoir with cultural criticism. The popular culture criticized serves as a backdrop to illuminate both the sense of place that surrounded the author growing up, and what the depictions of women looked like for those in Generation Y. Television, Disney movies, Barbie, Film, Pornography, Advertisements, and the internet serve as a way for the author to answer the question of whether or not she is a feminist. Through memoir and analysis of common tropes and common ideas about women, the author comes of age and also comes to the realization that she is a feminist.

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## PREFACE

In the summer of 2011, while sitting on the balcony of the apartment that I was staying in, smoking a cigarette, and sipping on a stale PBR, I realized I was a feminist, and it surprised me. I had always believed that women were of an equal intellectual capacity to men, and that we deserved to be treated as such. I had always been sex positive, pro-choice, pro-equal pay, and pro working outside of the home. When my Mom would ask me, or my little sister, to do the dishes after a family meal, I would frequently say things like, “How come nobody with a penis ever has to do the dishes?” and then look pointedly at one of my brothers.

But I didn't view these actions or beliefs as feminist. Rather, they were the appropriate actions or beliefs that anyone in my generation was supposed to have. It didn't have anything to do with feminism, it was part of living in a more equal, hip, and sex-positive world. The idea that women could now vote, work, or choose to have an abortion wasn't necessarily something attributed to the efforts of feminists. This social change was attributed to a natural shift towards progressive thinking that happened in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Obviously, this view was wrong and exceedingly narrow. But I don't think many people in my generation were used to attributing anything to feminists. Because I thought we were already in an equal world, feminists were ridiculous. And so I had an image of them that was narrow, but culturally perpetuated nonetheless. I pictured a feminist as an angry fat girl, who blamed men for everything, and made herself a perpetual victim. A feminist smoked pot, and had hairy legs, and hairy armpits. A feminist was a lesbian, and

that was somehow bad, despite the fact that I, and everyone I knew, was pro-gay. A feminist wore no bras, she burned them, and called men “oppressors.” She pierced her face, and wore elephantine combat boots. A feminist wasn’t nice. A feminist hated men.

The pot-smoking lesbian that I imagined when I was younger now has a name, and is considered a trope, by feminist video blogger Anita Sarkeesian.

This trope is called, “The Straw Feminist.” As Sarkeesian puts it in her video series:

In television and movies, ‘The Straw Feminist’ works by deliberately creating an exaggerated character of a feminist, which writers then fill with over-simplifications, misrepresentations, and stereotypes to try to make it easy to discredit, or delegitimize, feminists. The goal is to make feminists, and our movements, look completely ridiculous, over-the-top, and unnecessary.

When I watched Sarkeesian’s video, I realized why I, personally, had not identified with feminists, despite the fact that I had feminist ideas. I believe that this exaggerated idea of feminists has affected many young women. In fact, it seems to be a social phenomenon that young women don’t believe themselves to be feminists, at all.

In her essay, entitled “Bad Feminist,” Roxane Gay says, “I sometimes cringe when someone refers to me as a feminist, as if I should be ashamed of my feminism or as if the word *feminist* is an insult. The label is rarely offered kindly.”

There are women who will, absolutely, answer “yes” to the question, “do you believe women deserve equal treatment in the workplace?” but will respond “no” if one inquires, “are you a feminist?”

“Oh, me? No, no. I believe women are just as good as men, but I’m certainly not a feminist or anything!”

Where does this avoidance come from? Why are we afraid to identify with the movement?

If you take a minute to examine the stereotypes, the ones of people involved in any movement that tries to bring about social, political, environmental change, you will see a demonized idea of that movement. The idea here is that change is bad. The stereotypes of various change-seeking figures are placed in the cultural consciousness out of fear. In the case of feminists, it's a fear that the out of control women are going to destroy our peaceful way of life. Never mind that feminists created a large amount of social change in the last century, and we turned out just fine.

“The Straw Feminist” is a leftover from the fear that women wouldn't be wives and mothers anymore. These days, with this avoidance, any woman that happens to be opinionated and smart can do so without being a feminist, which means, without disrupting the status quo. But the status quo needs to be disrupted, and women have a lot farther to go.

I took the demonized feminist for granted, but in a moment's pause, I realized that feminism is the word for what I believe, and not a group of mean-spirited harpies. I recognized what I am, and how far we have to go. Not only because there are still negative depictions of women, but because I believe that these negative depictions affected me personally. We still need feminism because a girl who was born in 1987, like me, could still grow up valuing male attention, and personal beauty, over her own smarts and achievements.

In this book, I explore American culture and the tropes that are used against women daily. I chart my childhood, and personal life, to illustrate how growing up

around, and living in, these ideas affected me. I hope that, despite my life not being representative of every woman's life, I can transcend personal distinctions enough to show that my story is similar to that of many.

What I seek to explore, and prove, through my life, and pop culture, is that we are internalizing negative ideas about women being weak, bad, or evil. And this internalization is not creating just oppression, but hate. Women, not only with body image, but at our cores, have been taught to hate ourselves. If we continue to leave these negative stereotypes unexamined, women will continue to believe that our very femininity is hateful. We will not have to be oppressed, because we will do it ourselves, tamping down our feelings, our desires, our aspirations, our knowledge.

What I'm hoping to achieve, through detailed memories, and analyzing the cultural world around my personal development is that other people, and other women, will recognize similar life experiences and realize the narrow way that women are depicted in movies, television, advertisements, and pornography.

--Maggie C. Bausch

## CHAPTER ONE: SEX DOLLS

My barbies had sex. They had orgies that followed elaborate parties. After their children were put in bed, every mermaid Barbie, and *Sleeping Beauty* Barbie stood in a circle with Ken, and Ken-Aladdin, and watched each other bump plastic uglies. They simulated complex and intricate sexual acts that were based on whisperings I overheard from other kids about “positions.” I based their conversations on dialogue between feckless twenty-somethings on television.

Childhood knowledge of sex is a game of telephone. Kids snicker, whisper, and pass on distortions of the truth. What I thought I knew was far from the facts, and so was the information that other kids swore was true. Our distortions included the idea that the best sex was supposed to be seen, performed, and orgies were common. No foreplay or condoms, were needed. Ken and Barbie danced in an orchestrated prelude to rubbing against each other.

The sex parties that Barbie had were a sophisticated practice. So sophisticated that my parents, probably, didn't do it. I like to speculate that I knew about orgies because of *Eyes Wide Shut*, though I had never seen it. I like to imagine a kid procuring a copy of the film, that his parents hadn't kept track, of and telling everyone about orgies during recess. Giving us all the idea of sex being elaborate, performative, and ritualistic.

Kids are frequently listening when adults think that they're not. The phrase, “little pitchers” was first said for a reason, and being a kid in the nineties, meant that television, movies, books, and advertisements were more openly sexual than they had been before. If this wasn't the case, then at the very least, pop culture was more openly sexual than my

baby boomer parents knew how to police. The phrase “it’s the 90’s” was effectively synonymous with, “Get over it, you prudes!”

Despite my barbies, and their mates, being sexually open, they were still in the 50’s in terms of what each gender was expected to do in preparation for an orgy. I recall with clarity the maneuver it took to put a fake plastic plate in between Barbie’s protruding thumb, and her block of conjoined digits. I don’t recall any attempts to put anything in Ken’s hands. He barely lifted a finger.

Ken, maybe, answered the door, but for the most part he plopped down on the ground while Barbie lit off-scale, electric candles. Ken fell sideways, while Barbie put tiny plates on the book, or turned over hairbrush, that functioned as a banquet table.

Before all this party-prep Barbie, spent ages getting *herself* ready.

\*

I was an anxious, and strange girl and I didn’t enjoy most of the things other kids enjoyed. Instead, I preferred to watch movies, sing, read, write, or draw. My younger sister, Amanda, was my chief playmate, and I made only the slightest initial effort to befriend the other kids at school. I watched old movies in black and white, which was unthinkable to my peers. Like many other children, I was gendered. I loved barbies, musicals, Disney Princesses, Marilyn Monroe, and all the old showbiz greats. I lived in the country in a big, white house on two acres of farmland, though it took me a long time to explore the expanse of that yard. Many of my afternoons and evenings were spent singing songs with my sisters on our splintered porch swing, our voices echoing back at us. Mowers and tractors, and the smell of fresh cut grass provided the lush scenery for my

imagination. It all faded into the background. I was never in the country. I was on a stage somewhere.

I loved attention. My three older siblings were in their teens by the time I was five, so Amanda and I were known as “the girls.” We were watched, laughed at, admired, and often called upon for entertainment. We had rehearsed responses to questions, to make people laugh. On the days when there was an audience for us, my oldest brother, Wes, asked, “Maggie, who’s the greatest guitarist who ever lived?”

And I said, “You are!”

Wes smiled and said, “That’s sweet, but who’s *really* the greatest guitarist who ever lived?”

“Jimi Hendrix!” I knew to say.

In that big house, I played dress-up, and ran around singing songs that I had written. I narrated a documentary about myself that was reminiscent of the things I heard people say about Marilyn Monroe, or Judy Garland: “She was a vision! The way she walked and stood and laughed. But that aside, she was a professional.”

In my imaginary documentary, I was other people who admired me. In their fake voices, I discussed my fake future, failed marriages, my car crashes, and my addictions. I died young, but I was a national treasure.

\*

It’s difficult not to think back on my childhood, and notice a link between what I saw and heard, and how I behaved. The culture I enjoyed produced some negative

effects, but that doesn't mean there is blame to be placed anywhere. At parties, in conversations, on the Internet, I shout, "It's the culture!" though it makes me feel annoying. I risk being perceived as annoying because I see a clear connection between media and my past behavior.

At times, my parents and siblings gendered me in a significant way. I was a beautiful little girl with knotted brown hair, long eyelashes, and big hazel eyes. I wore my favorite dresses until they stank, until my Mom forced me out of them. But, someone put me in them in the first place. It becomes a chicken and egg argument: was I girly because I enjoyed it, or because that was what I was surrounded with? Was it a conscious choice to love singing, and playing with dolls, and watching movies with tap dancing, or was it a subconscious inheritance from my mother and older sister?

I know that, on a conscious level, my family had the best intentions for me, but I also know that much of who I am now is because I was once a little girl.

It was easy to convince me to watch any movie by telling me there were beautiful dresses in it, and Mom struggled to get me to wear pants to school. When I was a baby, my dad called me, "The Empress Maggie", and told me that I was the most beautiful girl in the world. When I was three, I put my hair behind my left ear, and shrugged, and said, "Daddy, what do you think of me?"

Did I enjoy those things because of my upbringing, and the culture I was presented with? Or did my family present me with the princess idea because it was what I expressed an interest in? The answer is that it was an intricate combination of both. I was told I was pretty because that's what it feels natural to say to little girls. I tell my niece she is pretty now, and I have to put in real effort to add, "And so smart!" It's not that it's

unnatural for me to tell my niece that she is smart, it's that it feels more natural to tell her that she is pretty.

My parents, my siblings, and family friends all called me pretty. I was complimented on my beauty every single day. People kissed, me and adorned me with beads, and bows, and my older sister, Emily, begged me to sit still so she could brush, and style my hair in a long fishtail braid.

I look at gender as a cultural ritual and so I do not blame my family, or any family who is enacting these same rituals. To behave in accordance with the culture, is a subconscious choice, if it even is one. How can any family be expected to think about the culture and how it might be influencing a girl when she is the fourth of five children, and happiest in ruffles?

The unforeseen problem with my gendered childhood, was that the representation of women in media was, and is, complex. Women bear clear responsibilities to beauty and sexuality, the nuances of which are complicated, and difficult, to consider when faced with the hectic daily realities of raising children.

I was a constant thinker. I had panic attacks long before I knew what they were. I lay in my bed, comforted by the hall light, and the sound of Dad typing in his office. If I knew someone was awake, I slept easily. If I woke earlier, or took too long to get to sleep, and noticed the yawning quiet of the house, I began to think about things I couldn't fathom.

One of two things happened: either I breathed sharp breaths in order to attempt to distract myself from panic, or calm washed over me when I decided that the reason that I

existed, and was aware of it enough to wonder why, was that I was supposed to be important.

The largest example of female importance in my mind was Marilyn Monroe. Already dead, but adored by someone as young as myself. This realization, created an unhealthy intensity when it came to needing to be beautiful, and most importantly, when it came to being loved. I needed total adoration, from everyone. I needed envy, and needed to be looked, at and admired. I bought into the packaged image, that many girls do, of the women on the cover of Vogue, or the happy scene where the crowd cheers on the kissing couple. Most disastrous of all, I bought into the common notion that it was within my power to make these things happen. If I should fail, then it would become part of my identity. I would be a *failure* as a woman, and not worth a damn.

Because of this, a lot of what I remember of myself is a certain kind of palatable desperation.

\*

I was not alone in dressing my Barbie up for her orgies. Dressing Barbie up was *most* of the game, and every girl I knew dressed her up for something. That's part of the nature of the toy, she has different clothes and places to go. If she wasn't going to an orgy, she was going to a ball, or the mall, or a party. Once, I remember a lawyer's daughter dressing her Barbie up for a job interview, but mine were only interviewed on television. Every girl dressed Barbie up for a date at least once. She was subjected to a lengthy prep period before any sort of action. Sometimes, my playmates and I sat in

silence while pushing Barbie in and out of different options from the pile of tiny spandex dresses in hot pink, teal, and chartreuse.

Little fingers ripped open the Velcro fastening on the back of a more casual outfit to get to the coveted ball gowns with full skirts, or replicas of Belle's, or Cinderella's, gown. Finding the right shoe was a task because they were so easy to lose. The silver ones went so well with the teal dress that losing one was practically devastating. That meant Barbie had to wear a pair from the abundant supply of hot pink shoes that came with most outfits. It was imperative that Barbie's hair was brushed into a giant frizzy poof. When Barbie and her clothes, and hair, and shoes looked just right, which took time, we showed each other, and any parents nearby, how beautiful Barbie looked. Barbie had to be assessed by any person available.

Sometimes arguments about which Barbie was the most beautiful ensued. These arguments never sounded like: "Yours may be the most beautiful but mine has solved the deficit of an entire country!" or "Mine is pretty, but not the prettiest girl in the world because she runs an adoption facility that has saved over one million children in third world countries."

Instead, my friends and I mimicked each other: "Mine is the prettiest girl in the world." If someone disagreed, a compromise could be made along the lines of "Mine is the prettiest blonde and yours is the prettiest brunette."

Getting stuck with the prettiest brunette was awful. In this case, one might as well admit that, even after all that arduous work, your Barbie was pretty, but not *Cinderella* pretty.

\*

The toys children play with are sectioned off into different toy aisles. They are marketed to different gender stereotypes. I'm sure, that most parents were like mine, and let their children branch out from these norms. But, the difficulty is that peers, socialization, and advertising tactics create pressure. Often children don't want to diverge from the usual, lest they be marked as "different." Feminist video blogger Anita Sarkeesian, asserts that it isn't just a divide of pink and blue, but also one of ideas. The advertisements for "boy" toys emphasize action, problem-solving, agency, and aggression. On the flip side, all that pink stuff emphasizes friendship, storytelling, home-making activities, and an overall passive vibe. Flip on a children's channel, or a regular channel during children's programming, and you will see this, and I keenly remember it.

A quick search on YouTube for late 80's and early 90's commercials illustrates the division that was present during the programming of my childhood. An 80's commercial for the "girl" version of Power Wheels is for a pink, Barbie brand corvette. A female voice sings an uppity song about how the car is just like Barbie's, and has a real motor, and a "grown-up feel." Girls smile at each other with compliance as they drive side-by-side. The little girls in this commercial have no agency. They're driving but not with independence. Instead, the girls meander with no discernable direction.

The "masculine" equivalent is markedly different. Instead of the Barbie Corvette, it's the Jeep Adventure Team!, and any sleepiness you may have felt from watching a bunch of little girls with big hair drive around in loops, is immediately roused by pounding guitar, and a thrashing metal voice. Each little Jeep features walkie-talkies that come out of their own compartment, I presume so the little boys can communicate about

a mission. The voiceover talks about being the “leader of the pack” and about how the team is working together to achieve some undefined advantage over the boys in the other Jeep.

“Someone’s gotta drive! Someone’s gotta man the pack!” is sung loudly. The words in these quotes are action heavy, and visually the boys are driving with more intention. They turn knobs and yell into the walkie-talkies, and at one point, hilariously enough, drive in front of an action-packed flock of white birds, that take flight at their approach.

The problem here is not with the different colors of the cars, or the different music in the commercials. It is that children can benefit from toys that accentuate the qualities that have been pushed to either side of the gender gap. Girls could certainly benefit from learning agency. They could benefit from play that teaches them the spatial reasoning that comes with toys like Legos, which require assembly. Girls could benefit from competition.

Boys could also benefit from toys that emphasize imaginary play, and peaceful interaction, as opposed to the aggression that is emphasized in most male toys. Were we to develop a more even-handed view of what boys and girls should learn, (one outside of gender, and more in terms of qualities that each individual might be more interested in), we would be developing more well-rounded individuals, who had simultaneously learned agency, and cooperation.

One of the few facets of the culture that shows agency to young girls, is the pervasive idea that in order to achieve happiness, you must be beautiful. But working to be beautiful to achieve the man of your dreams is a passive way to gain your goals.

Barbie dresses up, little girls play dress-up, and adult women dress-up, but the decision of who the man will choose is based on his actions. One of the best examples of this beautifying idea is in movies.

\*

On a lost beta tape, footage exists of me, at two years old, singing “A Dream Is A Wish Your Heart Makes.” I am sitting on a couch with my knees tucked up under me, clinging to a tattered, gray blanket, and staring, mesmerized, at the bright image of Cinderella being adorned by bluebirds, and mice. It would appear that I am not aware of being filmed, but it is more likely that I was very aware, and was singing for the benefit of the camera.

The little girl in the video has an unsure singing voice that mumbles over a few lines, but manages to belt out “will come true!” at the end of the song.

Cinderella was my favorite movie, and I coveted the clear jelly shoes that were popular at the time. It was easy to pretend they were glass slippers, and that I was twirling at a decadent ball. Once, my older siblings pushed me along in a big, white hamper with slots in the sides. I pretended the slot pattern in the white plastic was a wrought-iron window through which I looked at my subjects and waved.

\*

It doesn't take long when examining Disney princesses, and what they have in common, to see how problematic the princess narrative is. Some may tout *Mulan* as an example of a strong female role model in a Disney movie. However, *Mulan*, similar to her modern counterpart, Merida in *Brave*, is problematic because her status as a positive female role model hinges on plot points involving "masculinity." But for every *Mulan*, ten boring, clichéd, and submissive female characters exist.

To a little girl like me, Belle, Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, and company are not boring. They command the world of animals with song, and wear the prettiest of dresses. They live in a fantasyland where the biggest decision that they will have to make is who to marry, and when to sing.

In other fictional worlds, the roles of adult women are confusing and destructive. To use the stock character examples: shrewish or dippy wife, femme fatale, dumb slut, bitter rival, etc. Anything depicted past that first big decision of love is confusing, and frightening, because the world beyond that decision involves a lot more responsibility. But since we see so few women in media enjoying these responsibilities without pressures of appearance, and sexuality, without being taken seriously, it makes some girls, and women retreat into allowing ourselves to be little more than decoration. Even a grown woman with accomplishments, and talent, may still feel like an accessory to the male world—at least on occasion.

In addition to this, all the princesses share an infantile quality. They are pure and nurturing. They're the girls you're supposed to take home to mother. Even as a little girl, I intuited that after Cinderella marries the prince she is going to become a real, human woman, and ultimately less desirable. The girl singing through the woods in her raggedy

pre-ball clothing, and letting tiny bluebirds rest on her fingers, appeals to little girls who are like I was because she is a little girl.

She is obsessed with love and marriage because that is the happy ending she has read in stories. We expect her to have the same happy ending, and then expect ourselves to. But this obsession is the only desire they have, and because marriage always ends the fairy tale story, the princess is a ripe young virgin for the taking.

When you portray a character who can, with no intentions, stumble into her happy fate as easily as she can *willfully* find it, and whose biggest obligation is to nurture, and look pretty, then you have an enormous pressure put on little girls. It's a contradictory pressure towards purity while still seeking out marriage and love. It's pressure that is, somehow, soothing because she doesn't have to make big decisions, never has to be hard-edged, and will never be like our mothers on those days when she, more frazzled than not, re-heats leftovers.

The reason I loved the princesses is because the real world is scary, and decisions are scary. The idea of decisions becomes even scarier when it is apparent that one's decisions are not going to be taken seriously. By putting the agency in men and boys, the only pressure left is to be pretty for them. But this relieves every other pressure. It made me believe, on some basic level, that I could pick flowers, and sing, while everything sorted itself out.

\*

Holding up the princess ideal, just as the hyper-masculine one, is at the expense of human reality. Though I have no problem with fantasy, if we don't think critically about it, fantasy gives us expectations that won't be fulfilled. While I grew up, reality became more painful, and the attempts to maintain the childlike, emotional purity of the Disney princess, became more desperate and cloying. The life of a Disney princess is horrible, as most fantasies are in reality.

While a life regulated to no decisions aside from appearance seems fun when you're a little girl, it creates horrible young women. The girls and women, I've known who bought into the princess thing, have at some point been utterly defeated by it. They have felt, in a moment of drunken sobbing, or distraction-fueled baking, that they aren't good enough for the object of their affection because they aren't enough like a fantasy ideal.

The princess teaches us to equate usefulness with being worthy of love. Even women who haven't grown up with the princess narrative have some idea of their responsibility as peacemakers. Their duty to malleability and smoothing things over by keeping their own opinions quiet. A good deal of women believe, in some way, that if they cook the right meal, and fold their man's boxers just the right way, that he will love them forever. But expecting *behaviors* to get the result one wants isn't going to work as well as stating, communicating, or even demanding it.

Malleability puts women in a position of servitude. Malleability silences us.

\*

I performed. I stretched my legs, and wiggled my toes, I put my hand beneath my chin and bit my lower lip, I sang, and danced, I painted my nails, I walked, talked, thought, and existed for an audience. My audience was men who may be desirous of me, and women who may be jealous of me, although I didn't fully know what any of that meant. While little girls pretend that bluebirds are landing on their fingers, they are developing an awareness of being watched.

As a result they, and I, break themselves apart into pieces. I became legs, lips, tummy, tits, eyes, ass, arms, nails, tongues, ears, freckles, teeth. I imagined these parts being evaluated by others, and evaluated them preemptively. I pointed to the pieces of myself and said, "You are ugly. If you weren't here, I would be beautiful." I shunned fragments, marking and labeling each in turn, until none could reconnect, and the pieces never fit back together to make a whole.

While I twirled in chintzy dresses, I was being barraged with images of women in various compromising positions. Women as prize. Women as decoration. Women as "old." Women as victims. Women as sexual. Women as body parts in the fridges and trunks of serial killers.

I looked at Cindy Crawford in a red bathing suit, sand sticking to her thighs, and knew that was what I was supposed to become. I wanted to become that. Not because she was beautiful, but because she was on the cover of a magazine which meant she had value. This was a value that my mom, despite being an amazing person, didn't appear to have.

While I watched Aurora sing, I knew I wasn't alone in her audience. The prince was watching her, too. Together, Prince Phillip, and I, looked on in order to assess her.

He was watching her for desire, and in his own context there is nothing wrong with that. I was watching her to see what about her made her watched by him.

I developed, without words for it, an idea of the male gaze. I knew that the assessment of men was more important than that of women, if it esteemed my personal worth. I felt an urge to be noticed that centered into my world of play, but also permeated my every waking and dreaming breath.

\*

There wasn't a time when I didn't have a concept of sex, and that it was something to be ashamed of. Sex was whispered about. It was spelled. I was afraid to ask about it. Sex was something that you simply overhear conversations about until you piece together the truth. But I also knew that it was something women had an unclear but undeniable, responsibility to.

Sex isn't an overt part of the Disney princess movies. But the permanent presence of sex, in all the other parts of the culture, jumbled the fantasy world of these cartoons. The fairy tale and the swimsuit ad have the male gaze in common, as well as a competitive female one. Both the cartoons and the commercials share the notion that by being noticed by a prince, or an evil queen because you are the most beautiful of all is the highest achievement.

The dichotomy this created in my mind was one of trying to, as Jean Kilbourne puts it, simultaneously embody the virgin *and* the whore. Because the Disney princesses

are pure, they may as well be children, but there is something sexual about them because the princes see them and want to marry them. And married people have sex.

\*

This strong cultural emphasis on the link between women and sexuality intrigued me. But, being a little girl, I couldn't figure out how to reconcile my intense interest in the male gaze with my immense feelings of shame for how they equated to sex. So I jammed my barbies up against each other, roughly.

Because I knew I shouldn't be thinking or talking, about sex I let my barbies do it for me. They wore their swimsuits to bed with their husbands (not boyfriends) because I thought it looked like lingerie. My barbies kissed near tufts of orange tissue paper that I pretended was a roaring romantic fire. Like teenagers in the fifties, my barbies made out in a pink plastic car, and blushed when Ken brushed his shiny hands against their hemlines. They bent backwards, and forwards, and smashed faces until the hollow plastic dented in. I would squeeze their heads to pop their faces back out.

My barbies had loads of sex. Ken and I became the male gaze, and Barbie became myself. The jealous Barbie, Ken's ex, would watch as Barbie-me was appreciated by Ken's fumbling and fully extended arms. Knowing that she/I was envied, and desired, meant that she/I had value.

Barbie talked in a child's voice that was my voice. She became the exact representation of how sex was presented to me. The watched woman was childlike, and desirous of nothing but the overlapping waves of attention.

## CHAPTER TWO: UNMENTIONABLES

“Maggie!” Mom said, for, perhaps, the one hundredth time and pulled the facial expression that I knew meant I was baring a lot of cleavage. She sat at the kitchen table, her hair framed in light from the windows. She turned her head to the side, narrowing one of her eyes. She and I both always did this as a replacement for raising one eyebrow, of which we were both incapable.

She had paperwork spread out in front of her in small piles, the organization of which, only made sense to her. I looked down and shrugged, I had mentally prepared for this conversation, but was annoyed to have it, nonetheless. At sixteen, I was old enough where she couldn’t tell me to change my top with any authority, but young enough for disapproval.

“I like this shirt,” I offered, as an apology for my protruding physicality. I pulled the fabric up at my shoulders.

“Look at your granddaughter!” Mom said to Grandma, who was sitting in her recliner with an orange and brown afghan over her lap, squinting at a handheld solitaire game.

Grandma looked over her glasses in the way that all grandmas do. “When I was your age, do you know what they called me?”

Because she had many grandkids, it was hard for Grandma to remember who she told what, so I knew the answer to her question, but pretended I didn’t. “They used to call me ‘bumpers!’” she laughed in that high-pitched way she did when something was even

slightly “naughty.” It was same way she laughed when she called her underwear “unmentionables.”

“I guess it skipped a generation,” Grandma said, eyeing me. “Your mother wore falsies under her wedding dress.”

I pulled a false smile over clenched teeth and plopped down at the kitchen table with a glass of milk. I watched the bubbles wiggle on the surface of the white liquid, and frowned, feeling annoyed, and exposed. I wasn’t the only one in the room with big boobs. I was accustomed to borrowing Mom’s bras, but unlike her, I never had any children. I slumped over, leaning my boobs on the kitchen table, and saw Mom was doing the same, her breasts a paperweight for the taxes.

I was worried I had a thyroid condition. My sister, Amanda, had no chest and I was large-chested, and overcome with feminine curves that pushed out in the same places where her body was, by comparison, sleek and narrow. On multiple occasions, Mom assured me that my great grandmother was also a very busty woman. I never met her, but I saw photographs of her. She looked like Aunt Em from *The Wizard of Oz*, a square-breasted Midwesterner with Scottish heritage and corn-fed arm flabs. “Water wings,” Mom called them.

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The idea was presented to me since the onset of puberty, that I was going to attract a good deal of male attention. I relished the notion because I loved being noticed more than any other activity. Mom and Emily, my oldest sister, made it sound like my

breasts were such a magnetic force that I imagined men falling face first into my sweating cleavage and pleading for my undying love. The expectation was not fulfilled, and this made me feel inadequate in some way. My breasts were stared at by creepy old men, honked by gay co-stars, and untouched by those who actually got close enough to date me.

The most attention they got, and still do get, is from other women. While my Mom and sisters comment in a loving way, other women are unable to let my boobs go unnoticed. There is no empathy, or sympathy, for what might embarrass me, and at twelve, when they started, and sixteen, until I became accustomed to it, they did embarrass me. Comments like, “Whoa, Maggie,” or “Letting the girls out to say ‘Hi, huh?’” were a daily occurrence, even if I thought I had been particularly modest.

This has been, perhaps, the most consistent part of my life. Seasons change, friends change, I live in a different state than I did when I was sixteen, but everywhere I go women talk about my breasts. I have never been part of a social group that hasn't, at least, mentioned them.

In a culture that constantly places the attention of men above any other achievement, I am an attention-getter in the eyes of other women. Most girls I know have had far more sex with far more partners than I have. But the assumption is that I live quite a sexy life indeed. In reality, it is mostly the opposite. Guys don't know what to do with them.

Girls mention them and then mention their own. I've never commented on a girl being small-chested. I wouldn't want to, and if I did, I wouldn't have to. They say it aloud, about themselves.

\*

I have heard my fill of the kind of jokes that women make at their own expense. The self-deprecation that comes with feminine joking is damaging. All the girls I knew joked about how their boobs weren't bigger, and how that made them inferior. At the same time, all the older women I knew, my mother and her friends, would joke about breasts knocking, and hanging down to their knees, and how much they missed being "perky."

Women apologize all the time, in general, but most of all, for their appearance. Sorry, sorry, sorry. I'm not dressed properly. My hair is a mess. My boobs are too small. I have no ass. When you take a moment to listen to it, with empathy, (instead of laughing at the "does this make me look fat?" joke), women are creating a deafening cacophony of self-hate, and assessment, based on insecurities.

I thought that when I reached sexual maturity, and had the breasts that were the envy of all, I would be pleased. But the envy of women didn't mean as much to me as the attention of a man would've. Because I'd never had a boyfriend, I thought that the jealous comments I got from other women were because they were humoring me. I thought they were telling me they were jealous because it would make me feel better for being such a massive, malformed freak.

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Mom and Grandma had several, in-depth, conversations about my breasts. Though those conversations were laced with sympathy, about how I needed a good bra because they were going to hurt my back, the general tone was that my boobs were something that needed to be dealt with, for my own good. Needless to say, this was embarrassing. It was like when Mom slipped the info to female friends that I had “become a woman,” but played on repeat, for an eternity.

I was told that my breasts were something I should be proud of, that they were beautiful. But there was an unintentional subtext that I picked up on: I was too young for them to be so noticeable.

Though it was apparent that Mom had the best of intentions, I didn't enjoy all the contemplation of my sprouting secondary sex characteristics. My breasts were apparent, obvious, and unavoidable. They were the focal point of my body, and anyone could see by looking at my chest that I had felt aroused, and curious about sex. It was obvious that I had started my period. I was constantly mortified. The one thing I wanted no one to notice, my rack, the two giant examples of my awakening sexuality, were a topic of much conversation.

One day, we went with Grandma to the bra shop, where she went to buy special bras for women with mastectomies. We walked past shelves of bras hanging on short plastic hangers. Some of them were huge. An overwhelming number of them were tan, pink, or white, which gave the whole shop the look of Neapolitan ice cream. Clear mannequins with no legs or arms looked away from us with their noses turned up. Some of them had no boobs, and silicone inserts in the cups of their bras.

Grandma was here to pick up one of those silicone inserts, but I came along because I was going to be forced into a fitting. I touched a strap on a satin-cushioned hanger with guilt. I didn't like this place, because I was so close to grief, and so close to asking someone, "What's it like to be a grown-up without them?"

I looked at the rows of bras with their droopy, pink cups, like deflated balloons. I selected sexier bras than the options Grandma was showing me, which looked like woven Ace bandages. Mom got an assistant who took me into a fitting room and measured me. She was an older woman, but I admitted to myself that she had the correct bra. Each part of her seemed to wilt in comparison to her perky cone breasts. Her hands deftly moved the tape measurer around my gelatinous blobs, fingers careful not to touch, as the measuring tape glided around me.

After she left, I stood there, unsure of how to feel. I looked at my reflection, and at my breasts spilling out of the bra I was wearing. She came back with armfuls of straps, hooks, cups. She said, "Try one on. I'll knock on the door in a minute and if you're ready, I'll come in, and tell you if it fits." Then she left again.

Mom and Grandma's voices mixed with that of a third woman behind the counter. The three of them laughed. I heard, "I know!" and worried that they were talking about me. I stared at the piles of wire and ugly nude lace.

Reaching for the black one first, I noticed a small rosebud made of ribbon in between the cups. It was an inconsequential, feeble attempt at coquettishness for a bra so big. But I pulled its straps over my shoulders anyway and hooked it at the tightest hook. The bottom pinched at my flesh and I twisted in the mirror to check if I was sexy. The attendant knocked and I said, "Come in. I think this one is too tight."

She breezed back in the fitting room, and gripped me by the shoulders, turning me around, clicking her tongue, and inspecting the hooks. “Actually,” she said. “It’s too big. You have to hook it on the loosest one first, so you can tighten it as it stretches.” Though this advice was logical, I rarely followed it.

“Let me get you a smaller one,” she smiled, and left the dressing room, disregarding the pile that was already on the floor.

I was thrilled. A *smaller* one. When I tried the next one, she pointed out why it fit, adjusted the straps, and asked me how it felt. I wanted to be sarcastic and say “Like a bra?” but it fit better than any bra before, and I wanted to get out of there. “Great! Thank you!”

She grabbed the same one in nude, at Mom’s suggestion. Mom bought them happily, even though they were sixty dollars each. She was glad to have me fitted in a good bra. They were size 34 F. I was crushed.

\*

When trying bikinis on for the beach, I emerged from the dressing room of a Khol’s, to hear Emily say: “You’re gonna give someone a heart attack!” Mom and Emily both laughed and although I didn’t appreciate the humor as much as they did, I was used to it. The two of them joked that I had “a body built for sin.” A joke that they thought was complimentary.

I spread out my arms and looked down at the flowery pattern that barely covered me. “So, no?” I asked.

“Definitely not,” Mom said.

The straps struggled under the weight of my bosom and I sighed. I wanted to exist without the comments. I wanted to go to the beach without having to worry about them, like I could when I was a little girl. I wanted to run around with sand grating my feet. I wanted to stretch in the sun, or sit in the surf building sand castles, without my brothers feeling obligated to watch the other men on the beach with a protective eye, while being careful not to look at me.

I noticed my father and brothers gave me less attention than they gave me before I grew the boobs. I was becoming a woman, and I was no longer the child they so adored. And because my breasts were so big, the male members of my family felt awkward looking at me. I could understand it. Even though I understood their point of view, it still stung. I was torn between wanting to be that little girl again, and wanting an altogether different kind of attention. Unable to verbalize this, even to myself, I slipped back into the fitting room.

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Sexuality/reproduction is the only aspect of society that women are regularly depicted as having agency over. One may think that women are also shown having agency over peacekeeping, housework, and beautification, but those are all simple extensions of our reproductive role. Our sexuality is something repressed and controlled, while on the flip side, if we are not controlled, then men won't be able to control themselves.

In a recent conversation with a male friend, he asked me why I thought that we tend to laugh at the male nude form. It took me a long time to formulate an answer. After much deliberating I decided that I believe it is because men's bodies are, rarely, depicted sexually. Their nakedness is not shown as something over which they have any control. It is something shamed, and ignored. The naked male form is something used for comedic effect, or shock value, and rarely for attracting women, aside from shirtless men at the beach. Women, on the other hand, show too much leg and they might get comments about dressing too slutty. Our bodies are frequently deployed in advertisements, and pop culture, and literature as weapons of man's total destruction. The temptress has been anyone from a siren to a modern man's crazy ex-girlfriend.

I don't know if this is true for everyone, although I suspect that it is, but I have literally *never* heard a girl ask me if something made her look fat. Generally, girls make that decision for themselves and their fellow women chase after them insisting, "No! Wear it! It looks so good! You are NOT fat!"

The question I do hear is, "Does this make me look like a whore/ho/slut/skank?"

Though our culture is making great strides in the discussion of how wrong "slut shaming" is, and how problematic our conception of "sluts" is, in general, we still ask the question. I ask the question.

"Is this too much cleavage?"

"Is this too short?"

"Does this make me look cheap?"

"Is this classy sexy? Or trashy sexy?"

Why are we asking this? What would be the consequences if we showed a little more skin than we, personally, think we should?

The question implies that we will receive judgment. Not from men, but from the other women at the bar who we imagine spreading horrible rumors about us. The reality is that some do. It is important to remember that women who discuss other women in that way, are, unconsciously, a part of misogyny, and the implications of what they say should be called out, instead of ignored.

Secondly, the question implies, “Am I asking for it?”

“Am I sending out unwanted sexual signals?”

“Is it possible that some guy will get the wrong idea?”

“Will I be raped?”

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Recently, Miley Cyrus garnered a lot of attention for her sexually provocative performance at the 2013 Video Music Awards. This performance was shortly followed by the release of a video for her hit “Wrecking Ball,” which features her gyrating, naked, on a wrecking ball into cinder block rubble, and licking a sledgehammer. She sings to the camera with a tear streaking down her face in the same way Sinead O’Connor did in her video for “Nothing Compares 2 U.” Cyrus went on the record saying that her buzzed hair, and tearful video were indeed inspired by Sinead.

Cyrus' performance at the VMAs was criticized for being too controversial, and Sinead O'Connor wrote an open letter to Miley Cyrus imploring her to stop exposing herself for the camera.

While it may seem that Sinead O'Connor's words were a feminist plea, in fact they were reductive because they made the assumption that Miley was not in control of her persona, her sexuality, or what she wore, or didn't, wear. In addition to this, the public controversy around the VMA performance was intensely reductive as it completely ignored Cyrus' fellow performer, Robin Thicke. Cyrus and Thicke both gyrated on each other. Thicke clearly made the decision to be a part of this performance. Sadly, while everyone was attacking a twenty-year-old pop star for doing, pretty much, what pop stars do, they ignored Thicke's hand in the provocative scene.

Robin Thicke is a married man, whose most famous song is called "Blurred Lines" and it is about how he "hates these blurred lines" because he knows that the girl he is singing to "wants it." He wants to "pull your hair like that" and "give you something big enough to rip your ass in two."

The juxtaposition of a relatively feminist icon like Sinead O'Connor, and the news, and people on Facebook, reprimanding Cyrus for being provocative, with the complete omission of Thicke in the cultural discussion was startling.

Did her nakedness really equate to temptation? To an invitation? One that a married man like Thicke has no choice but to comply with?

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I was “slut-shamed,” however passive aggressively, by many women for a part of my anatomy that I had no control over. Just like my sister, Amanda, received comments about how thin she is, I got comments about my massive breasts. Because women are supposed to have agency over their sexuality, it was assumed that we were sporting these culturally lauded examples of beauty on purpose. Not merely because we were built that way.

I slowly slid into “immodesty.” Not because I wanted to show off, but because I gave up trying to cover something that people were going to notice no matter what. I lost all hope that a top with no cleavage wouldn’t stretch out in the wash and become revealing eventually. Unfortunately, this “immodesty” is met with blame. Still. Even by people who love me. Even by women with feminist attitudes. I am inappropriate because you can see the line where two curves of flesh meet.

For a long time, my boobs made me feel fat. Walking into a Victoria Secret, the one store that is supposed to be all about boobs, felt like sporting a tragic deformity. The larger sizes, sequestered away in locked drawers, were pulled out by attendants who couldn’t resist commenting, or rolling their eyes.

It was like I was being punished for having something that all women, supposedly, wanted. Punished by constant commentary on what is, sadly, the focal point of my body. I was punished with re-learning to sleep on my stomach, and the college nickname “Tits Magee.” With having to learn the grace of talking about the obviously sexual without making others uncomfortable. With accidental or “accidental” boob grazes. With being drawn as a stick figure with boobs attached.

In many ways, the punishment of large breasts meant that cultural issues women faced daily were projected onto my private parts. Women were shouting about their self-hate and pointing it at me. Women proved to me an intense cultural need to put down their softness, their roundness, their big femaleness. The part of women (inside and out) that wants to spill over the edges, and be free, but culturally cannot, was turned on me. The part of women that is terrified, because breasts spilling out goes against the “feminine” ideal of control, stared at my cleavage and judged it as too much. The part of women that felt as if they would never be enough, saw that I had some to spare, and were afraid.

Women fear blame. They fear that showing too much sexuality will result in it being taken, which we feel would be our fault.

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It seemed to me that that my boobs made women feel inadequate. That by having a chest that was supposed to be the desire of all men, I would be more worthy of the love and attention that other women didn't feel they deserved. Women look at other women as competition, and are often depicted in that role, much like men are. This is reinforced by an advertising culture that nurtures ideas that make women feel inadequate about parts of themselves. But if my boobs ever did take away someone else's man, it would not have been perceived as that man being an asshole. I feel it would've been my fault for tempting him. It would've been my fault because my breasts, and by extension, me, were

out of the control that is supposed to make women good enough, but doesn't ever make us good enough.

Culturally, breasts represent sexuality far more than vaginas do. Vaginas are represented with jokes about the smell of tuna, being lined with teeth, looking like roast beef sandwiches, and all that unflattering stuff. But tits and ass get a lot of representation in films, comic books, advertisements, and TV shows.

To me, it looks like breasts are eroticized far more than other female parts, but mostly when the character with them is using them to achieve a goal. We are more accustomed to seeing a woman bend over, and show off her ass, or cleavage, than we are to a woman flashing her "beaver." Part of this is because of censorship, obviously, but that is not entirely the reason. This eroticizing of breasts over vaginas may have started with censorship, but it has become so ingrained in our culture that even an R rated film that is *allowed* to show all of the female anatomy will show boobs before bush, and most likely, only boobs.

The temptress that exposes her cleavage portrays breasts being purposefully used. In this context, breasts are a sexual invitation. If this idea of breasts as a weapon is internalized, it means any woman showing cleavage is probably doling out glimpses of the goods on purpose. This is what people have projected onto me, and found frightening. The idea that I am handing out invitations, when in reality, I merely exist. In reality, clothes stretch out, and outfits that were "appropriate" become ensembles that I shouldn't wear to work.

On some level, subconscious or not, women have felt that I am showing off, and inviting the male masses to come and fuck me. Even when I was twelve or thirteen years

old, and the sensitive knots had begun to form under my nipples, I got long judgmental looks from mothers. My cleavage was never a side-effect of me trying to push my anatomy into a more socially acceptable position, it was viewed as a tactic, an attempt, a manipulation.

The idea of the temptress goes back to the beginning of time. Good-looking women are supposed to know they're good-looking, and to create devastation in their wake. One post-coital penis, withered from exhaustion inside a used condom, can sometimes be enough for a man to relate us back to Eve. We suck the life out of men, and out of their most sensitive part. One broken heart is an example of how we slowly kill men, or drive them insane. We are sirens, and succubae, and the creators of original sin. Don't trust anything that bleeds for seven days and doesn't die.

The notion of the temptress, when used to describe a man's downfall, is misogyny at its most raw. It only takes one second of thought to picture how it feels to be in female body to know that we are thinking about comfort more than temptation most of the time. In 90-degree weather, any man can stretch, shirtless, in the sun, throwing around his height and weight and size. A man can let his whole person expand into the surrounding space. Half-nude, men can relax and push their guts into the world without worrying who is watching or if their shirtlessness is attracting the wrong kind of attention. Men go for runs without wondering if it's going to be dark when they get back. They sit with their legs stretched out while women, fully-clothed, sweating and hot, shrink away from the privilege of not having to be assessed.

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Because my breasts took up so much space, in a weird way, they made me more “out there.” Which I believe made me more “masculine.” In that, the idea of stretching oneself out into space is a, culturally, “masculine” characteristic. My personality is out-there because my breasts are. The awkward attention that I got through my teens made it so that no topic was off-limits. Embarrassment is a fleeting emotion to me. It’s a waste of time. Something that I feel when I wonder if I may have said the wrong thing before I shrug and move on with my day.

I think this contributed to my life for the good. I learned the true biting envy of watching shirtless men enjoy the freedom of sun and bare skin, and realized what was wrong with my lot in life. Unfortunately, it took me a long time to verbalize that envy, and, in the meantime, I was wondering why my breasts weren’t getting the attention, from men, that I thought they would.

The attention I got wasn’t sexual. It wasn’t love. It was negative comments from other women.

I watched myself grow, sketching their progress in the steam of the bathroom mirror. After each shower I turned to the side, and traced their outlines with my index finger, standing back and looking at greater than and less than symbols that never seemed to get bigger. But they did, the bra sizes got bigger, and all my shirts got smaller, and I was beginning to take it personally that I didn’t have a boyfriend.

### CHAPTER THREE: MARS AND VENUS

Dad often told the story about how he met Mom. He zeroed in on the image of her laughing and using her tongue to cover up the braces that she was ashamed to have at twenty-one. The way she graciously handled embarrassment was enough to make him fall for her.

The next story he always told took place a few weeks later. Dad said, “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

Mom replied, “Don’t say that,” because they hadn’t been going out for very long and my Dad, flustered, responded with, “But wouldn’t that be a good idea?”

Their wedding was a disaster. They tried to have a Catholic/Southern Baptist wedding, which neither set of my grandparents favored. The day was filled with arguments, and the verbal outbursts of a drunken priest.

The rest of the stories were about them being young and poor. About how funny my Mom was. How they had the older three children and couldn’t afford their shoes. They each worked, saving every penny they could, though it never amounted to much. They spent time, after the kids were in bed, chain smoking, and voicing their worries together.

I imagined a record swirling under a needle to folk music while smoke drifted into the sound. I imagined them staring at the wall, whispering, “What are we going to do?” But also whispering, “It will be okay. We have each other.”

It was a fact of my life that they had a beautiful storybook love. By the time I was seven years old, they had been together for twenty-five years. The comparison of the

length of their relationship to my life made their love eternal. Twenty-five years stretched out beyond my comprehension. It still does.

I was frequently told, as a child, that I looked like my Mom. Dad made a point to tell me. I knew I was loved because I was a little Mom.

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My sister, Emily, and Mom had a long conversation in the car about a woman named Julie Stemple, that I pretended not to listen to over the lowered volume of my headphones. The gist was that Julie was a student with whom Dad appeared to be getting too close. I heard Mom say that she had three, or four children, and some kind of injury or disease that made her life difficult. The bleeding heart portrayal of my father, who had used the word “admire” to describe her, included a distant husband who was no help. His description upset Mom, who with fibromyalgia and five children thought the comparison was obvious, though he didn’t make it.

So, at a Fourth of July party a few months later, I was keeping an eye out for her. In the evening, my house was flush with the red cheeks of drunk party guests, and it smelled like Mom’s crockpot barbecue. A ponytailed woman ran out of the back door towards the pool, with a gaggle of kids. She was the only person I didn’t know and I watched her intently because she fit the description I heard. She was thin and had a long, curly brown ponytail.

Dad sat at the kitchen table with his arm around a guest, gripping their shoulder. He pointed at their chest with his free hand, and told the particulars of a lengthy joke. The

woman I believed to be Julie Stemple opened the door again. Our eyes locked as she held the door open for a dripping child that shivered under a brightly colored towel. She smiled. The subject of months of hushed chatter stood there, and I half-heartedly smiled back, and looked down to cover a cracker with cheese.

Half-full glasses littered every surface and laughter erupted in this room, and the next. Mom stood with her back leaning on the kitchen counter, and ever the hostess, opened a bottle of wine, and laughed warmly with a friend.

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At a rehearsal for the community theatre production of *You're A Good Man Charlie Brown*, Amanda and I watched a girl dressed in white sweats throw her body into weird shapes that she thought made her the perfect Snoopy. But actually, her hips gyrated in a way that made it look like she was in weird Snoopy porn. The set was unfinished, and she straddled a precariously constructed doghouse, and moaned. Her dog howls were unintentionally orgasmic.

My friends and I were lounging on the dusty orange chairs of the auditorium, listening politely to the scene. I exchanged a look with R.J. and we both stifled laughter. R.J. was roughly my age and was dressed in a red and black striped shirt. He held a blue blanket crumpled on his lap. He was playing Linus. I smiled at him, and looked at his bushy black hair and the speckles of a red beard on his chin. He was tall, and stocky, and I liked his arms.

I found out he liked me, and even though I liked him before I knew that, after I found out about his regard, he became a mission. I had to get a boyfriend. I obsessed over it. Several of my friends had already had boyfriends, including Sarah, who despite how much I loved her hadn't escaped my girlish scrutiny and jealousy.

The fact that she had a boyfriend perplexed me because she had short, dyed-black hair, and chipped nails. She didn't even wear make-up. As much as I didn't want to have thoughts like that about a friend, I couldn't help it. My brain harassed me with the phrase: "Why does she have a boyfriend and not me?" Before I found out R.J. liked me, I was beginning to wonder if there was something wrong with me. Sixteen and never had a boyfriend? It couldn't have been situational. It meant there was something wrong with me.

There was another orgasmic dog howl and we watched a white pant leg vibrate over the doghouse. R.J. looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. This time I looked away. Ignoring boys is how you get them to like you.

\*

The cultural practice of being aloof with one's crush has self-hating implications. The idea was that I was not good enough to approach him and that I wasn't supposed to. I had to get him to notice me without appearing too eager. I had to get him to come to me. It took him a long time to, and I didn't consider that maybe he was shy. I thought that I didn't do enough to get noticed or approached.

Girls who are bold enough to make the first move are met with envy from girls who feel like they can't, or who haven't tried yet. But they are also met with a degree of judgment. The bold girls, who weren't me, were perceived by some as playing a dangerous game. Being available isn't attractive, it could get you in a bad position, or it makes you slutty.

I have encountered this notion in my own psyche, and in the psyches of others. The girls that "stole" various objects of my affection were subjected to private, ritualistic, shredding sessions by me and my girlfriends. In college, when someone was bold enough to show interest in a boy I liked, and succeeded, a friend of mine, while sharing Chinese food with me said, "She is like the Family Dollar version of Maggie." The idea being that he was into my *type*, but was too stupid to realize that the classy girl was right in front of him, doing the aloof thing, the proper thing.

I laughed and joined in on the butchery of her character, clothing, footwear, jewelry, voice, body, and face. But inside, I knew it was my fault for not being good enough to be wanted. Girls get a lot of conflicting information about how to gain attention, and it becomes impossible to suss out how to behave. Whatever girl gets the guy, the rival girl, and her friends, will talk about the ways she was wrong. And girls will reassure the loser to no end.

The approval of our female friends is a supplement for a lack of self worth. For several hours, we can feel better about our rejections, and what we think they say about us. It's like taking an Advil for a headache caused by a deeper sickness. But after the friends leave, the suspicion sneaks back that there is actually something wrong.

Girls don't just tell each other, "You are *so* cuter than her (you are good enough)", but also "You look beautiful in that color (wear it to achieve your dreams)", and, "He is acting this way because...(he likes you, we promise)." We learn to do this from our very first crush. It is a cultural ritual of analyzing male behavior, and perpetuating this idea of the opposite gender as an "other."

The whole "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus" idea has been culturally perpetuated so much that mere children and adolescents know that you don't simply approach the opposite sex. Instead, you talk about specific members with your, often same gendered, friends. It's not all bad, part of it is just the emotionally safe bet. Analyzing male behavior is a way to field your friends for reactions, so that you get some reassurance that you aren't going to be rejected.

But for girls, this emotionally safe bet is tainted with ideas of being "too available." In addition to this, we feel that we don't measure up to the cultural examples of beauty, and so we feel we are also not worthy of male attention. To add another layer of complexity, young women are shown from a young age that they have passive agency. Girls have to scheme to get a man, not simply confront him. It is our fault if this goes wrong because we are supposed to control love and sex, but we can't be straightforward because that is too brazen.

So, I couldn't say, "Hey, what's up?" to R.J., or whoever else I had a crush on. I had to turn to Amanda, and to my female friends, and say, "I caught him staring at me again."

The response, "He is so in love with you!" could soothe me through days of uncertainty.

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Amanda also had a crush on a boy from the cast of *You're A Good Man, Charlie Brown*. His name was Blair. He was older than us, eighteen. Amanda was fourteen and made considerable effort to make sure Blair didn't think of her as a kid. She never mentioned her age, and made sure to know the names of all the bands and TV shows Blair mentioned.

When Amanda and I got home from rehearsal, we habitually went straight to our room to write in a red leather journal with a heart embossed on the front. We, uncreatively, called it "The Love Journal." In it we detailed all the things that R.J. and Blair had said, or did, that gave us the impression that they liked us back.

We also wrote down the things that gave us nagging doubt. We wrote when they were nice to each of us as a means of creating a control test to make sure they weren't just nice to girls, in general. We had to make sure that we were special to them in the way that they were special to us.

We giggled, and stretched ourselves out on the teal carpet, having a short argument about who actually got to write in the journal. Amanda deemed her all-caps handwriting better, and neater, than mine, and proceeded.

"What about when he complimented your toe ring?" Amanda asked me, lying on her stomach, and kicking her feet back and forth behind her head.

"I don't know," I replied, thinking maybe he noticed it because I was barefoot, and not many girls we knew wore them. I enjoyed the memory of him sitting next to me, so close I could feel the soft hair on his forearm. I had been barefoot for a reason. I wanted him to think I was carefree, and girly, and unique.

“He was sitting pretty close to you, looking at your feet, and he took the time to give you a compliment. He’s never complimented me.”

I bounced, excited, and suppressed a girlish squeal. We laughed while she scratched his compliment in the part of the journal I wanted to fill up the most.

\*

This idea of the opposite gender as unapproachable is played out in many subtle ways, across the culture. It is rooted, I think, in our division of masculine and feminine concepts. But it also has to do with the very fact of the oppression of the feminine. Same-gender groups are often depicted discussing their partners, or potential partners, and there are specific ideas about what those conversations look like.

In these conversations, the women are preoccupied with gendered clichés like love, shopping, children, recipes, cleaning, sex. The men are preoccupied with sex, drinking, monogamy annoying them, and sex. This is stereotypical, and too my knowledge, an over-simplification.

But sometimes stereotypes come from a truthful place. I believe that women do engage in the kind of talk that they feel they can’t share with men because there is a widespread sickness of not taking women seriously. Sexism in a social context, as opposed to a more blatant media-based one, is a multi-faceted problem that is difficult to explain.

Sexism has the insidious ability to infiltrate the subconsciousness of even the most well-meaning people. If we continue to negate anything that falls under the concept

of “feminine,” then we make that negation so much easier. Especially, when women have learned to negate themselves.

This is why my Mom talked to my sister about her relationship with my Dad, and not to my Dad himself. She had spent years doing what she thought would make her a good woman. She was a peacemaker, regularly saying to me when I was ready to argue a point with Dad, “Don’t poke the bear.”

She felt, like a lot of women feel, that it is emotionally safe to talk to a fellow woman, as opposed to what we have been shown our whole lives is an entirely different species.

\*

On a shopping trip, I followed Mom around the brightly lit store, trying to strike up a conversation, and noticing that she wasn’t in the mood to talk. I thumbed through the bras, not committing to trying any on, and lamented that the sexy ones were all in tiny sizes. Mom pulled out a yellow nightgown with a matching robe. It was silky and delicate with roses embroidered along the low collar. She mumbled a question about my opinion of it, before tossing it into the cart with a shrug.

There was uncertainty in the purchase, and in something larger. I knew that the silk, which had formed a billowy wreath around the hard plastic hanger it was hooked to, represented something that I would not soon understand.

\*

Through the meddling of others in the cast of *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, it became common knowledge that R.J. and I were in "like" with each other. We exchanged a look over everyone joking about it, and both blushed and smiled. Like true Millennials, we waited until we were at our homes to establish the truth over instant messenger. Amanda was over my shoulder every now and then, reading it over, asking questions, being excited with me.

We were officially a couple and it was so fun being a girlfriend. I loved receiving emails from him that were all about how I was pretty. I loved holding his hand when I knew that others could see that I was holding his hand. Being "couply" in front of other single girls my age was validating. Everything switched from me feeling like I was the only girl in the world who was single, to me being the only girl in the world with a boyfriend. I could feel envy from others. Not necessarily because they liked R.J., although a few did, but because of the palatable feeling that I was in a position of cultural worth.

In private, holding hands wasn't my favorite. His hands felt sweaty after awhile, and without anyone to see that I was in this envied position, I pulled away a lot sooner. It wasn't that I didn't like R.J., it was that all that awkward teenage relationship stuff, for a girl, isn't invariably based on sexual desire. I found him appealing enough, but not as appealing as the idea of being a girlfriend.

The cultural idea of male approval, and being a girlfriend, isn't one that puts emphasis on personal pleasure. So thinking a guy is cute is enough when he's your first boyfriend. And because it's an exciting milestone, that enthusiasm for the title of

“girlfriend” is enough to sustain a relationship for a quite a while. So the girlfriend was a role I was playing. I turned it on and off depending on whether or not he, or a potential audience, was in the room. This wasn’t conscious at all. I was just so excited about this new experience, and how it was a position that is envied, that I didn’t think at all about what I wanted, or what R.J. wanted beyond that I be nice to him.

One night he came over and we sat on the couch in my basement watching movies. Mom engaged him in conversation a little bit; Dad simply issued a nod and a grunt. We nestled on the couch, his arm around me, and I waited to be kissed. He didn’t even try, and I sat there, anxiously, waiting for him to want me the way he was supposed to. The last movie ended and we talked for a long while. He went home and Amanda asked me, ready to begin the analysis, if he had kissed me or groped me or anything. When I said “no” she said, “What a waste.”

\*

Dad began to have lengthy telephone conversations after Mom went to bed. In the darkness of our room, Amanda and I shared the details of his behavior that we had separately noticed. We whispered to one another, curled up in tiny balls, as we had done for as long as we could remember. This time we were whispering about uncertainties, instead of our usual goofy ramblings.

“I haven’t heard him or Mom talk about Julie Stemple in a while,” I said, my voice rasping with anxiety. I thought if I saw her at the party I would know if Mom had a reason to be worried or not. But nothing changed.

Amanda replied, “I don’t think that was anything. But why does he always wait for Mom to go to bed?”

A light washed over the ceiling in the shape of the window, a car passing. We heard Dad burp and descend the stairs, his shadow passing the hall light.

“Do you think he’s going to call someone now?” I asked.

Amanda got up and rushed towards the dresser. She picked up our purple phone and pressed the “talk” button. After listening for a second, she hung up.

She climbed back into bed, clutching the phone, and shoving it under the covers.

“Who was it?” I whispered. “Was he on the phone?”

“A woman,” she said. “It was a woman.”

There was a long pause as we grappled with unfathomable ramifications. I began to speak, but stopped myself because I heard Dad coming up the stairs. We reached across the body pillow that divided our sides of the king sized bed, and grabbed each other’s hands. Dad appeared in the doorway, his silhouette filling most of the rectangle of light between the doorframe and the hall.

“Hey,” Dad said.

“What’s up?” I said.

“Did you guys pick up the phone just now?” he asked. The tone in his voice was unfamiliar, angry and scared at the same time.

“No,” Amanda answered.

“It clicks all the time,” I said.

“Yeah. I hate it when that happens,” Amanda said, adding, “Makes me feel like the government is listening in.”

Dad laughed in a forced way, saying, “Ok.” He paused, “Goodnight.”

“Who were you talking to?” Amanda asked, and I gripped her hand tightly.

“Uncle Bobby,” my father lied.

\*

In December of that year, the community theatre did a production of *Miracle on 34th Street*. I didn't have much to do in the show. I played a concerned mother in the Macy's scene, and exchanged all of four lines with Santa. I wore a blue coat, and held a little girl by the hand, guiding her through the dark, past strips of glow tape. It made me feel like a big sister, like Emily when she would take care of Amanda and I, when Mom and Dad still went out together.

Mom saw all my shows, but she didn't come to this one. She was in immense pain because of complications with an IUD. She sat on two heating pads every day. She was going to have a procedure, but I didn't know what it entailed, and didn't ask. It wasn't until she explained why she couldn't see the show that I found out she was in pain, or what an IUD was.

I didn't know what to say, but I told her that it was okay that she wasn't coming. I explained that I didn't have a very big part, and so there wasn't much to see. I said this as

fast as I could before leaving the room. I was uncomfortable talking about her choice of contraception with her so I hugged her and went down to the basement to play video games. I wasn't worried because she was still giving us rides back and forth to rehearsal, and Dad wasn't taking any extra care of her.

\*

My Mom, like myself, and like many other women, has a habit of being silent about her wants and needs. She has worked on it over time, telling me, "I'm finding my *voice* again." That year, she frequently smoothed things over, or downplayed them. She voiced worries to other women, to Emily, to me.

On a good day, this silence is a way that my Mom makes everything wonderful. The feeling of security that comes with a Mom that makes you believe that everything is alright is beyond compare. This is part of why women keep their concerns silent. We value our natural ability to nurture and soothe, but too often our feelings are internalized, and things within the self are smoothed over that shouldn't be ignored.

The history of women, to me, is a lengthy narrative of enforced, and reinforced, silence. It is a silence that is, often, self-inflicted. When turning to other women with our needs, like I did when analyzing R.J., and his potential crush, and Mom did with voicing her anxiety about Dad, we are keeping our feelings absent from the minds of the men that we know.

There is a cultural perception of women as a "mystery", which may seem appreciative, but it simply means that there exist fundamental things that many members

of the opposite gender don't know about us. What may seem like a lack of some minor knowledge, is in fact, gross ignorance to the rich inner lives that women frequently decide not to share.

I strongly believe women should be able to form close bonds and vent to one another. Sometimes, there are things that another women really might be able to understand better than a man. But when a female friend asks me, "Should I talk to him about this?" if there is even a question the answer is, "Yes!" The subtext of my emphasis being, "Yes. Tell him what you want and what you need! Remind him of your feelings, so he remembers you have them."

Women who only talk to other women about problems they have with men, especially the serious ones, are only enforcing those problems with this widespread female silence. In this instance, we are like prisoners complaining about our captors, instead of grown people who are communicating our thoughts and feelings to an equal partner.

This is a mistake that is easy to make. It isn't wrong to vent to your female friends about what you're thinking and feeling *too*, but neither should be the substitute for the other. In my case, I didn't know how to communicate my feelings to boys. I had learned too easily to hide them, and mellow them into a smile. I knew how to behave in a "girlfriend" role, but I had no idea how to be someone's actual girlfriend.

Because I couldn't communicate about my inner most feelings, I also couldn't communicate about anything that centered on me. Unfortunately, this included my own sexual pleasure.

\*

After *Miracle on 34th Street* ended, R.J. and I were instructed to rearrange the letters on the marquee. We went into the light booth, talking rapidly, as he opened a ripping cardboard box filled with big plastic letters in various shades of red. He piled them into my outstretched arms and climbed a small ladder that lead out onto the roof. He turned around, and bent down taking the letters from me, they fit into the crook of his arm. He extended his free hand to help me up.

It was night and snowflakes had begun to float down around us, resting on our hair. Our shadows stretched over the white marquee, and R.J. pulled down the old letters, and replaced them with new ones. With the M in his hand, he asked, “Do you like Bright Eyes?”

I had never, listened to them so I said, “homeschooled,” which I often used as an excuse, and turned away. I watched the slow crawl of a car that was a long way off move closer. The theatre was in a place called Vint Hill that used to be an army base, and so there were lots of strange buildings that stretched out far from one another. Aside from the lights on the theatre, and the ones on the basketball court by the gym, it was mostly dark. Trees surrounded the base, and we could see almost the entire place from our spot. I turned back towards the light and R.J. stood with his hands on his hips, leaning back, and inspecting the marquee.

“Does that look even?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, watching the snow move into the light, and catch fire.

“It’s snowing,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said, knowing where this exchange was going. I hoped it was the moment I had waited for. I hoped it would be just like something from a movie.

He walked towards me, and grabbed my shoulder, stared into my eyes, and smiled. I looked back at him, and let the corners of my mouth lift.

He kissed me and it was gross.

\*

After obtaining an actual boyfriend, I began to get bored. I liked R.J. very much as a person, but playing a girlfriend wasn't as fulfilling as being a real girlfriend would've been, though I hadn't yet realized the distinction. And playing girlfriend meant that Amanda and I couldn't analyze his behavior the way we used to. None of my conversations with Amanda, after that first kiss, involved any anticipation, or girlish excitement. We no longer wrote in the love journal.

I also got the feeling that his female friends were analyzing me. In particular, a female friend of his who he would date immediately after me, and to whom he is now married. I felt her assessing me in a way I wasn't comfortable with. I sensed she might talk about me the way I had talked about other girls. In a weird way, I knew that she didn't like me much simply because I was competition. At a party she and I had talked and laughed, but there was an indiscernible subtext. It only became clear when he and I broke up, and the two of them began to date. But the only way I knew to process that was to say, “called it,” and move on.

Just like my Mom, I didn't know how to vocalize what I was feeling as well as I needed to vocalize it. And just like Mom, I was grappling with the issue of what love might actually mean, what it actually was. What did it mean to be a girlfriend? How could I know that, at all, if Mom still had to whisper to Emily about what it might mean to be a wife? If being a girlfriend, or a wife, wasn't the source of all happiness, then what did it mean to be a woman?

\*

On New Year's Eve, I proudly linked arms with R.J. My parents were having a big party. Which, to me, felt like an opportunity to show off my romantic success. The air outside was dry cold. The front door opened with gusts as people came in and out from smoking, arriving late, or leaving early. I was allowed to sip at a glass of red wine, and I sang loudly with my Dad's guitar, harmonizing with my sisters. When guests I'd known for years showed up, I propped R.J. towards them, and said, "This is my boyfriend!"

We played rock music in the basement. Amanda and I improvised with our cousin. My brother Wes played too, his fingers blurring over the frets of his guitar. Guests cheered for us as we made the house shudder with amplification and Amanda's slamming of the bass drum, which she did with her whole leg because of a sticky bass pedal.

Dad drunkenly coaxed us, "Play the rap! Everybody! Listen to this rap that Maggie wrote the lyrics to!" After some feigned modesty, I conceded, grinning from ear

to ear when I looked down, and let my hair cover the smile. I was pleased with myself. I was showing off and getting encouragement from everyone. R.J. ginned and looked proud of me. He didn't try to play with us, even though he played well. This was the first time we hung out where I was playing all the music.

These musical interludes, and parties, faded gradually, in the years to come. I didn't know that this was the peak. At midnight, everyone sang an Irish song and held up a glass. This was the last New Year's Eve that Dad spent in this house.

\*

After thirty-five years of marriage, my parents split up on December 25th, 2004, about eight months after Mom found out about Dad's affair. Julie Stemple wasn't his mistress, but she was the first indication of his potential for infidelity. When Mom noticed Dad was getting close to her, it was the first time it occurred to any of us that he might be capable of cheating on Mom. Of course, like a women, Mom had feared it all along.

Those eight months were some of the saddest, and most confusing, of my life. In that time I broke up with R.J., partially because I was bored, but it was done in a panicked moment. I was on shaky footing and the jumble that had become my family home was weighing on my mind. He didn't take it well at first. I think it's safe to say, at the time, he felt heartbroken. I didn't know how to tell him, because I didn't know how to

communicate my feelings. I had no idea how to communicate that my heart was breaking too, but for different reasons.

Eventually, I told him all about my parents. It was years later, and I apologized for being thoughtless, and abrupt, for not considering his feelings in the effort to preserve my own. My parents fought daily, and talked to us about it. One night they would announce everything was going to be okay, and then the next night it wouldn't be. By the time it actually was over, I was ready for it. When it actually ended, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Outsiders, friends, had idolized our family as so close. 2004, the year I turned 17, I learned things can break. I had also idolized my parents' love, and I saw that they weren't perfect. Not just their marriage but as people. I had no idea what my concept of love meant any more, and so I ended my relationship.

For a long time, I blamed many of my issues with myself on the dissolution of my parents' marriage. I blamed my lack of self-confidence on my father. I blamed everything on my father. With a more even-handed, adult perspective, I've learned how much the gender disparate culture set my parents up for failure.

Everyone's psychological past bears weight on their future selves and on how they will behave when it comes to love, or the other gender. But I have learned that's not the whole story. To my surprise, there were other girls with problems similar to mine. I met girls who had parents who loved each other still. Girls who had never known what it is like to watch parents hurt each other, or to have their parents hurt them in fundamental ways.

They were anomalies in every way I could conceive of, but they hated themselves as much as I did. They scrambled for male attention, and strived towards an unattainable female perfection. They also behaved as if they were being watched, playing roles. They downplayed their feelings, and flattened the hard edges of arguments. We all developed crushes, and exasperated, turned to each other, and asked what to do about the visitors from Mars.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE NORMAL TEENAGER

The year after the divorce, my Grandpa died of lung cancer. Mom went to Illinois to be with her dying father. Dad moved to Memphis with his new wife, and they had a new baby, a little sister I hadn't met. Amanda and I were largely unsupervised. We were in our late teens, the time when every kid wants that kind of space, and we acted entitled to it. Really, we were engulfed by it.

We were attending Lord Fairfax Community College, and spent long stretches of time there, bumming around with a few fair weather friends. We loitered on campus furniture. We doodled in our notebooks and perched with our feet on couch cushions. We lounged with ignored books over our faces. We filled our hands with the gas from lighters and lit it.

Our rebellion was tame by most standards, but to the Christian kids in the student body, we were a little intimidating. Amanda walked around with a knife tucked into her boot, and I had the obligatory black-chipped nails. I wore combat boots that were two sizes too big, and scowled from underneath heavily lined eyes. My angry style was impeded by my love of Edie Sedgwick; sometimes I wore black tights, and high heels with my fraying skirt, cuffs with safety pins, and my leather jacket. Like Edie, big chandelier earrings pulled down my head, and I cocked it to one side. I called the style sixties grunge.

I still obsessed about boys and attention, but I wanted to push people away at the same time. Maybe if someone made it over the imaginary hurdles I created, then they wouldn't hurt me the way my Dad hurt my Mom. And me.

Our friends were a smattering of outcasts. Like us, they didn't belong to the knots of kids who held hands and prayed under the flagpole every Wednesday. Those kids didn't socialize with us, except two: Audrey, our good friend from years of theatre, and David.

David was Audrey's friend from church. He was only a few months older than me, and was tall and skinny. He looked like Eric from *That 70s Show*, but with taut swimmers muscles. He didn't push any religion on us, and I had a crush on him instantly, though I didn't know why. His hair was streaked blonde, and parted down the middle, and I used to sing the Mentos theme song at him. I called him "the Freshmaker." When he cut his hair short, removing the fake blonde, I acted like I didn't notice.

David had a girlfriend, but I pretended she didn't exist most of the time. I talked to him about everything, but religion, and her. I pretended that he didn't go to church with all those kids. I told myself he felt repressed by it. I decided that he was ready to rebel. I think he was. I think he never had friends so passionate about *not* talking about God. I think we made him feel different from everybody else, but I don't actually know why he liked us.

\*

David was the first person I ever had sex with. He was the first person I ever touched sexually in any way. He was also the first person to whom I said, "I love you." But, like all our interactions, I didn't fully understand what any of that could mean for two people.

Having sex with David was either an attempt at rebellion, or a desperate attempt to be normal, depending on how I was feeling that day. Which means, it was also an attempt to fulfill my normal sexual yearnings. At nineteen, I wanted to be like every other teenager on the planet, and get laid already. I wanted to get the milestone over with. I was tired of hearing the people that were having sex hint at it, and raise their eyebrows when I would admit I hadn't. Sex was supposed to be private, and secret, but it felt like everyone did it but me.

I know this is why David and I were a couple. Why either of us said, "I love you." Even though I believed it, I said it because I knew girls have to be in love to have sex. I deluded myself into love.

\*

Being homeschooled, and going to community college at an age when most people are either starting at a university, or finishing high school made, me assess every television show, and film, for some semblance of normalcy. There are a lot of stock characters in high school and college films, but I hadn't heard the term yet, and felt that there was a trope, a group in which I could fit. I knew I wouldn't fit into any mold easily because I wasn't living my life along what felt like the normal lines. But I knew my sexuality meant something important about where I would've belonged if I had gone to high school. At least, where I would have belonged, had I gone to high school in that montage heavy, and clichéd movie world.

In a film, if you haven't lost your virginity by senior year of high school, you are one of the main characters. Virgins have whole movies dedicated to sexual achievement. If the main character is a boy, the film will be raunchy and funny and it will feature a group of friends experiencing sex for the first time with different types of girls—some encounters more meaningful than not. For example: *American Pie*, *Sex Drive* or *Superbad*. If the main character is a girl, virginity loss is a huge romantic deal, with the guy of your dreams, who you will love forever, (or sometimes with a jerk who is a foil for the guy you'll love forever), in the case of *Clueless*, *Chasing Liberty*, *Cruel Intentions*, *The Notebook*, *A Walk To Remember*, *Dirty Dancing*, etc.

Though I never took these movies completely seriously, I did feel like they had to be something like what the “normal kids” were experiencing because the “normal kids” found these films relatable. I knew it was time to lose my virginity, but I knew I wasn't ready. I was sexually attracted to David, but part of me loved him because he had a girlfriend and was, therefore, unavailable.

\*

The second time Mom went out of town to be with Grandpa, there wasn't hope that he was going to live. We didn't know how long she was going to be gone and we took advantage of this. Amanda and I invited David, and Amanda's slightly older boyfriend, Kaze, over. The four of us sat around a bubbling pizza, and empty bottles of the Corona that Kaze bought for us. He was in the kitchen pouring screwdrivers when I started to feel the beer.

We sat at the same table that my father and his siblings grew up around, and because I wasn't speaking to Dad at this point, I enjoyed the rebellion, and disrespect, of sitting there drinking booze with boys. Someone, probably me, suggested strip poker and we all agreed. David had just broken up with his girlfriend, asking me advice over AIM on how he should end it, and we had an established flirtation. As we drank, I fantasized about him wrapping his arms around my waist the next morning, and kissing my neck. I knew we were going to be a couple by the end of the night.

We wore enough layers for strip poker to stay demure, but before long David was down to his boxer briefs, and nothing else. We dared him to make a lap around my house, which faced a road, and didn't have any concealing trees on the whole two acres of land. When he was outside, waving at us through the window on the front door, we locked him out, even though he made us promise him that we wouldn't.

I got into the pool in my bra and panties, and waved at everyone looking at me through the kitchen window. The vodka sloshed in my head enough to make me confident. I swayed on the stairs that lead to the pool, gripped the metal rail, and pretended to be an intoxicating water temptress. I kicked the water with my extended bare leg and sent out baby splashes with a pointed toe. I knew for the first time that my large breasts had an alluring fluidity to them, and without my sobriety, I was without many of my insecurities. I decided there was nothing sexier than the girl that I was, at that moment, going for a swim. I knew David was looking on as I plunged into the water and moved my hair away from my face the way all the girls did in the teen sex comedies. Eventually, he joined me in the water.

Later, David and I sat on the porch swing wrapped in beach towels, shivering and dripping. He placed his hands on my shoulders in an awkward attempt at a seductive shoulder massage.

“What are you thinking about?” I asked him.

“You,” he said.

I laughed at him. It was the answer I always wanted to hear in every fantasy I had ever had of that sort of moment, but aloud it sounded so clichéd and strange that I couldn't contain my amusement. He took his hands away, offended.

“I'm sorry,” I said, keeping the peace. “That's really sweet. Just really corny.” He didn't respond, but stayed next to me on the swing. We moved our legs so we could rock the swing back and forth. We were close, almost touching, but not quite.

\*

Inside, the four of us watched *The Boondock Saints* in our pajamas. My stomach twisted together a combination of anticipation, pizza, Corona, and lemon flavored Grey Goose. David and I cuddled on the couch, our fingers coiling together, nervous. Amanda and Kaze pretended not to notice from their already couply position on the loveseat. Being so close to him, and not knowing where the night was going worsened the lurching in my stomach.

After the movie, David followed me to my bedroom, where I performed exaggerated, feminine nightly rituals like face cream and brushing my hair. He stood, looking somewhat uncomfortable, in his Aerosmith pajamas, probably thinking of decent

rationalizations for his shirtlessness. I hated Aerosmith, but didn't mention it, instead I said, "Cool pajamas."

I got into the bed, and he got in next to me. David turned off the lamp by my bed, and we laid on our backs, not touching, in an eternal silence. Then, he rolled on top of me and kissed me for a long while. His lips moved over mine and it wasn't as gross as my last kiss. However, I barely registered it. Instead I was freaking out, wondering if I was kissing him right, if he was going to want to take things further because we were in a bed. I wondered if I wanted to take it further. He rested a hand on my face and pulled on my lips with his lips, and I wondered if this kiss meant anything to him or not.

When he moved his lips away, I said, "So, are we dating now?"

"I guess," he said.

\*

We didn't have sex that night. He fell asleep and I shivered with a hangover, and panic. I wasn't excited about being his girlfriend like I thought I would be. I felt sick and he didn't help. He slept through all of my whimpers and groans. I paralyzed myself with inaction. Would he still like me if I woke him and asked him for solace? I didn't want to be alone in that moment, but I dreaded being annoying, or not pleasing to him anymore. I molded myself to the comfort of his body, pretended that the snoring form wasn't impervious.

I didn't realize that by doing this, I perpetuated an old habit, because I didn't know I had the habit. It was a fault of mine that I would've done anything not to change a situation. Now, I know that acknowledging any type of problem is better than assuming that any change at all would be because I wasn't good enough. That night, just as I had before, I feared voicing my feelings, and I felt utterly alone because I was a girlfriend, in the stark reality of a bed, but no one watched me, and so the girlfriend was no longer a role, but a confusing state of being.

I felt more for David than I did for R.J. and he was newly single. In the shadow of his snoring form, I realized that I had just taken a leap out of a place where I had been comfortable. I was disappointed in the kiss because he hadn't made it feel romantic, it wasn't at the right moment. He hadn't said anything about how he cared for me as much as I cared for him. He just planted it on me before I was ready.

\*

David and I were a couple, it was MySpace official. Instead of going to church activities, he came over to my house to play hide and seek in our pitch-black yard. We played video games and watched movies. Amanda, and Kaze, and David, and I were a foursome of trouble. We lit things on fire and exploded firecrackers in the swimming pool.

At night, after Mom went to bed, David and I would go to one of the now empty rooms in my childhood home, and make out. One night, with our legs twisted together, I felt bold, and so I placed his hand on my breast. He left it there only for a brief second

before moving it to my belly. He rubbed there for a moment and then moved his hand down again to the top button of my pants.

“No,” I said, in between kisses.

He reached his hand in anyway and I gasped. I felt pleasure but I didn't orgasm. It was an intense sensation, but it was more than I was ready for. He stopped touching me there when he realized that it was time for him to go home. We readjusted our clothes, kissed goodbye. I walked him to the front door, and let him out, closing It, and locking it between us. I leaned against the door for a moment, and then went upstairs to my bed, pretending he hadn't heard me.

\*

Girls are told from a very young age how important it is to say “no” to the uncontrollable advances of those dirty minded boys. However, this negation isn't a sex-positive view. I have read a lot of blogs where women talk about teaching their daughters to say “yes” instead of “no.” When I saw the positive word on the computer screen, referring to the sexuality of a teenage girl, I became close to tears. I was floored by how simple the idea of teaching our daughters how to say “yes” was, and almost heartbroken that this concept hadn't been part of my sexual maturation.

As a culture, we demonize male sexuality. Sexuality is the only thing men have no agency over, according to the culture at large. But this isn't a good concept to put in the minds of anyone, let alone young girls; even if the pretense is that it keeps girls safe from harm. Virgins are told that it hurts. Women are told that we invited it somehow. The

idea is that sexuality is our responsibility, and that just the act of sex itself, with the right person, will bring you to orgasm.

I let David finger me that first time with the exact same thoughts in my head as the first time he had kissed me: I was supposed to let him do those things. I knew how to say but I didn't know how to enforce it should I need to. And I had no concept of "yes."

I had no concept of my own pleasure at all. The movies indicate that pleasure just happens, and with the naivety that a critically thinking person could only have in a sexually repressed society, I believed this. I thought that it would be good simply because I was in love, and because boys know how to do things.

\*

It wasn't long before it became apparent that David was extremely eager for the sexual contact that he had so long denied himself. He was forceful with many things that I would now merely call foreplay, but at the time hadn't done before. I was eager too, although I would have gone a lot slower were I not so desperate to please. Shortly after we started dating, David decided he didn't subscribe to the church's beliefs about premarital sex. He began to pressure me to go on the pill. I promised him I would, although I didn't really want to. I kept reminding him that it was a bad time to ask my Mom for anything, let alone *that*.

Two months after we began dating, he went out in the middle of the night and bought condoms. This didn't seem like a big decision. We had sexual chemistry and I was enjoying a lot of what we were doing. But, we had also been talking about it for

months, and I had grown accustomed to the idea that it was coming soon. It was just a matter of when. I knew it was expected of me. I was nervous about it, but it was consensual.

\*

In a bed, four months after we started dating, we became two fumbling teenagers trying to check something off of life's big to do list. I said, over and over, "I love you" and he said it too. Love wasn't the first thing on my mind, at all. I doubt it was on his. We were saying it as reminders to ourselves.

But something wasn't working right, and he couldn't stay hard enough for us to actually accomplish intercourse. I pushed him off, and said "wait," and ran to grab some thigh-high back seam stockings from a play I was in the previous year. I attached them to a hot pink garter belt and did a misguided, sexy dance. My hips circled the air and I tried not to be self-conscious. I didn't look at the form on the bed.

I climbed onto him again, kissing him, and rubbing his flaccid penis. It didn't work. We gave up and went to bed. The room enveloped me again as he snored. I knew isolation in his obliviousness, and felt terrified that my thigh highs hadn't done any good. I drifted off to sleep, ready to cry.

I woke to David pulling at my shoulders and waist, kissing me, and rolling me over onto my back. He climbed on top of me. We didn't speak to one another, and he offered no explanation for his sudden confidence and enthusiasm. I looked down at my

open legs and saw that he was hard this time. He pushed into me and I winced. It hurt but I didn't bleed like I feared I would.

I looked away from him at the nightstand, and then I looked at the ceiling fan, and wondered what I was supposed to do. I thought it was weird that I was in the middle of this thing that everyone talks about. I hoped it would get better, but it stayed mostly the same. David moved faster and moaned. I clutched his shoulders and waited for him to stop.

He gave up thrusting and said, "I don't think I can finish. I'm going to go take a shower."

As his body ignored me and moved away, I tried to pretend that this was the morning after I always wanted. I kissed his back and asked if I could join him in the shower. He looked at me like it was a weird request. He said, "Yeah."

In the shower, I chatted and lathered myself with bubbles, laughing to him under the spurting water. He barely responded, and covered himself with soap, and rinsed as quickly as possible. After we were dressed again, we sat on the couch, and watched a movie with wet hair, and linked arms. After the movie was over he kissed me and left. Alone, I was relieved to see him go.

\*

In the romantic "girly" movies, men bestow sexuality onto girls, and they wake up singing and cuddling and smiling. That isn't how it is. I knew that it wouldn't be the case completely, but I expected that I would be happy. The last time David and I had sex,

he yelled at me in frustration because he couldn't cum and I was trying to find ways to help him. I may have been distracting him too much from the cause, but after that I wouldn't let him do it to me again. I closed my body off to him. On the last night we were a couple he asked me to, practically begged, and I refused. We held each other, on the couch, and it would be the last time we were close.

If someone had been in the room with us, I think they would have been able to hear us thinking. Both of us trying to figure out what to do next, and why things weren't the way they were supposed to be. Why we resented each other and what to do to end this. But I don't know if he was there with me, or not.

## CHAPTER FIVE: WEIGHT

The year after David and I broke up, I gained fifteen pounds, and I poked at different parts of myself, obsessively. I pinched my lower back, pulling at the fat, and I stared at the scale, and waited for the needle to stop trembling under my weight. I was numb about the break-up, I pretended I was doing fine, but Mom noticed the way I sulked around the house, and the way I looked at food labels and frowned. I decided I was not fat, or sad, and most days it might as well have been true. But when I took showers, I weighed myself before and after. I noticed the subtle difference in weight when I was wet. I rejoiced when the needle went down by three, or five, and I sulked when it went back up, even if it was only by one.

I stood sideways in the mirror and forced my body into different postures. I twisted and turned my torso, or hips, and tried to find the angles at which I looked skinny. I imagined showing this body to my next sexual partner, and I knew that they would be disgusted by it.

\*

During those community college years, I took a psychology 101 class. We were shown a documentary called *The Ad and The Ego*. This was the first time I was introduced to the concept that commercials could be shaping my consciousness. I was a consumer, but I had never thought of myself that way, even though I had bought things before based on ads.

The notion seems simple now, but at the time it was a revelation. The documentary featured ads from the early to mid-nineties, ads that I remembered from my childhood. I flashed back to sighing heavily during commercial breaks that interrupted *The Simpsons*. I remembered early childhood and Saturday morning cartoons. I sat there with my pen, poised above a doodle, and my mouth hanging open.

Many people out there refuse to admit that commercials are having, or have had, an effect on them. I am not one of them. I'm a fan of the endorphins that rush through me as I buy, buy, buy. What I'm really buying is an image. As much as I can rationalize my love of shopping, I know that the reason I really do it is because of a desire to construct a future self.

Ever since I was little, I ran my fingers along rows of silken dresses in bright colored patterns. I carried armfuls of denim, polyester, and cotton into dressing rooms to try on potential parts of the new me. I try on a lot of clothes now because I have learned that style doesn't matter as much as fitting my boobs. I can accessorize to make a style, but it is more important to flatter my shape. This skill is a practical one, but even when I'm being practical, I still think "this is the dress I would wear to the theatre." I think, "These are the shoes I will wear on a summer day," "These are the earrings that will make someone kiss me."

The reason I think these thoughts is because I have seen girls wear those shoes and earrings, while springing through a sunny world where men with five o'clock shadows lean over, and kiss the part where their shoulders meet their neck. I may put more focus on theatre and summer than another girl who buys these boots for skiing, or

that big bag for her busy day, but that doesn't mean that we aren't making outfits to construct an identity outside of the self.

I have heard that the reason human beings procrastinate so terribly is because we picture our future self as a different person. That is what I do when I'm shopping. I'm dressing future me. The one who has everything together. The one who is a little thinner and a lot more in control. The one who is maybe even taller, with smaller boobs, and better skin. I dress the image that advertisements have taught me to aspire to. I have learned ways to dress my current self, but when I find that thing that is practical for me, I won't buy it if it doesn't work with fantasy me.

“Yes,” I'll say. “It fits me. But is it a summer in Paris dress?”

\*

The sweat rolled down my back as I raised my arms into the air. I breathed in and out and made my palms flat. Vertebrae by vertebrae, I lowered my torso to the ground, exhaling. I lifted my torso again and filled my lungs with air.

This was the closest I could get to sex, after David. Because I felt ugly and fat. Because I felt annoying. Because I was not worth being loved.

I took a deep breath and drew my hips back into a downward dog. I imagined how this flexibility would make me good in bed. This position would look good when I would finally get rid of the rolls. And I would get rid of the rolls, I would make them gone. I would walk around a stainless steel kitchen in nothing but a man's shirt. My hair would be in a ponytail, straight and not curly or unruly. I would be sleek. The man whose shirt I

would wear would follow me with his eyes. He would watch me when I walked past him with bare legs, and bare feet, the buttons of his shirt mismatched from their holes, and I would tilt my head back for a bottle of water. I wouldn't care what he thought because I would know I looked good.

I lay down and brought my legs up past my head. My toes curled on the carpet past where my head and the mat ended. I could see the folds and rolling hills of my belly. The weight of my thighs was against my nose, and my breasts sat heavy on my throat. I closed my eyes and breathed deep again. I imagined myself shrinking away. Shrinking down to a lovable nothing.

After meditation I sat on the leather recliner in my bedroom, my skin stuck to it, and watched a movie with no women in it. Something about war. I stared down at my thighs. They still touched.

\*

What is funny about my obsession with my weight in my late teens, and early twenties, is that I weighed nearly forty pounds less than I currently do. But right now, I don't think I'm fat. I have my moments, and sometimes days, where I notice I have fallen back into that mode. Everyone has days where they lack confidence, and I would be lying if I said I didn't spend a tad too long turning sideways in the mirror sometimes. But these lapses in self-confidence are nothing compared to the obsessions of my younger self.

I felt enormous when I was nineteen, and that was when I was the most susceptible to advertising. With my parent's divorce, my obsession with attention, and my recent break-up, I had a perfect cocktail for insecurity swirling around in my teenage brain. I had made the transition from awkward virgin to someone who had actually gotten someone to have sex with her, and I knew I would feel like a failure if I couldn't get someone to do it again. All my energy focused on making myself look as beautiful as possible. And to someone who is looking at the culture for cues on how to behave in an adult world, beauty means thin.

I had the big boobs, and I also had Mom's build. And Dad left Mom, so surely whoever I loved would leave me, too. The image of David lifting himself out and off of me to go take a shower, the sound of his voice yelling in my ear mid-thrust, the sight of his jaw clenching when I did something annoying, became visceral. I was more upset about the status of love, and loss, than I had been years earlier watching a marriage crumble. I would replay these images of David in my head, and as much as I would vocally blame him to Amanda, or Audrey, or anyone who would listen, ("He was obviously gay, he was stupid, I was so bored") in reality, I twisted into a knot of self-doubt and shame.

After David was the first time I felt truly ugly. It carried over into my behavior around family. I was the fat, ugly, loud sister, and I couldn't undo it. Sometimes I still can't. Sometimes I clutch that knot in my chest when my siblings and I get together, and I sweat through shirts, and stab the air with desperate jokes.

\*

There is a strong cultural focus on unrealistic depictions of women in the media, specifically in advertisements. My Facebook and Tumblr feeds are rife with observations about models being too thin, and women being put into too many compromising positions, that have been copy-pasted from every corner of the internet. Though we see them all as separate people, these women represent one imaginary woman: The Sex Object. She is the girl in the Gillette commercial rubbing a man's face. She is the one in the Axe commercial sniffing his chest and cooing. She is the girl that every man wants and she kneels on the beach with one arm behind her head, and a trail of sandy wet hair that nestles between the circles of her breasts.

She doesn't have any insecurities or any "flaws," and so she is separate from all of us. She is an unattainable desire for men, and an unattainable goal for women. We never see her cleaning up spilled drinks just like we never see the Gillette man clean at all, ever. She was separate from me in a way that was so palatable that I was unsettled by her, and I projected her onto any woman who appeared confident, and put together, and sexual, and attractive.

I have placed this imaginary woman over girls who succeeded where I had failed. Onto friends, onto my sisters, onto women walking down the street. I have seen the Sex Object in any girl who wasn't me, but possessed the outward confidence that I inwardly lacked.

\*

Women are rightfully mad about the Sex Object. But we should be equally as angry about the direct opposition to the Sex Object: The "Real" Woman. A foil to the

objectified woman in commercials for a male demographic, the “Real” Woman is the woman who is selling things to women.

She is a derivative of the fifties housewife caressing an avocado-colored refrigerator. Only now, she gets to have a job, too. Like most representations of women, becoming her is an impossible goal. She is almost as attractive as the Sex Object, and she has a house that is always spic and span. She has beautiful children who hug fresh towels, and a bedroom alight with sun where curtains drift and swell in a breeze. She has a yellow lab with dirty paws, easy to clean up after because she buys the right brand of paper towel, and she has perpetually clean sheets that balloon like the sails of a ship before settling onto her bed.

In other words, The Real Woman is as far from me as the Sex Object is. But, because she cleans, and cooks, and buys toilet paper, and showers, and performs other basic human functions, many of us feel that she is what we are supposed to be. She is threatening because I’m not her, but she’s close enough to make me feel like I could be her, if I worked hard enough.

American ads are rooted in the idea of the American Dream, and this creates specific cultural issues in the advertisement-enriched minds of American citizens. If we work hard enough, we should be able to achieve anything, right? But all this idea does is create blame. We should be able to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and if we don’t, we are lazy.

Apply this concept of ugliness being equal to laziness into a few beauty advertisements, and you can manipulate women with this idea, and their own insecurities, easily. These manipulations happen so regularly, that it’s perfectly normal to see an ad

where a woman is treated as a pariah because she didn't use the deodorant that *doesn't* stain the armpits of her dress. If we aren't beautiful, it isn't genes, or health. It is our own fault. We didn't do enough, or don't do enough, to achieve this impossible goal.

I am not the first to assert this. Author of "The Beauty Myth," Naomi Wolf stated that the aspirational quality of beauty directly relates to the American dream. And just like with capitalism, it ultimately serves to "protect the status quo."

It is rotten that women I know, and that I, still feel like there is something wrong with us, and how we live our lives. I feel that there must be something wrong with me because I am not the woman in any commercial. I am not the "Real" Woman or the Sex Object. Not because I haven't worked hard enough, but because I am a human being with thoughts, and feelings, and any single idea of what I am supposed to be totally negates that.

But because advertisements sell us things on our insecurities, and women already feel inferior, they work. They make people go out and try to forge an identity through clothing, and objects, and brand names.

\*

The link between shopping for the future self and advertisements is fairly obvious. Advertisements create the idea that the current self is not sufficient, and that in order to become a complete person one must possess specific products. These are sold on convenience. If you buy them, you will be bestowed with spare time for other things

that you value or enjoy, or they are sold on the image we want others to perceive in us. The self we want to project.

For women, it is especially problematic because we are used as a tool to sell things to both genders. We are taught very early on that our value is in our beauty, and so the acknowledgement of men becomes very important. Just as for a man, the acknowledgement of that beautiful Sex Object is important. But both genders also need acknowledgement from the same sex. For men, it is a pressure to be the most successful, the most “masculine,” to have the most women, and the most money, or the most beautiful woman, and the best electronics.

For women, that pressure is about approval of not just one’s success as a woman, but one’s success in domestic, professional, and sexual pursuits that never intermingle. Just as women are supposed to embody the virgin *and* the whore, they are never supposed to be the wife, *and* the sex object, *and* the professional, *and* mother, *and* the fashionista, *and* the homemaker. All these things are frequently depicted as getting in the way of each other, because they often do. But if a woman uses Bounty to swipe away more liquid more quickly, she may just have enough time to dress up, and go out, and have fun without all these pressures weighing on her. But when she dresses up, she has to use specific type of make up that only requires one sweep for a smoky eye, so that she can be fashionable, and not her usual frumpy self. *Then* she is allowed to go out and enjoy herself.

\*

I did Yoga every night before bed and every morning before school. I wanted to be thin, but I said it was about health. At 136 pounds, I was healthy already, but I wanted to be 115 again, or 110, or 98 like my beautiful sisters. They came by it naturally, but surely if I worked hard enough I could achieve that goal. My fantasy self split apart from me to stand smaller, taller, thinner on a red carpet in a Marchesa, or a Valentino. She stood in an onslaught of camera flashes with an exposed back. Bangle bracelets hung from her bony wrists.

I wanted to follow her, or for her to follow me, out of my imagination. I wanted to be less. I was too big, too noticeable. I was too normal. I loved food. I loved to cook, and I split in half when I thought of her while enjoying the sensation of dry noodles sliding through my hands into a pot of boiling water. I loved the smell of onion and garlic in my fingernails, and as I sliced fresh parmesan, I felt guilt because I *enjoyed*. Not only did I eat, but I enjoyed what I was eating. I felt, and I laughed loudly, and sang loudly, and told dirty jokes, and ate, and smoked, and drank, and savored the bellowing nights in the company of friends.

For a long time, I would think that this enjoyment of food, humor, and talking loudly was a way in which I was like a man.

## CHAPTER SIX: SALLY ROGERS DIES ALONE

The first time I saw Jake, he was walking across campus of the University of Mary Washington, where I transferred in Fall 2007. He was holding hands with his then-girlfriend, Katie. The two of them were walking on the cobblestone in the late August sun. He wore a striped sweater and puffed on a cigarette. Katie was short and had pretty facial features that hid behind black-framed glasses. They looked artsy. Like the kind of kids I wanted to be. I thought they looked cute together, but mostly I noticed him.

For the next week or so, I saw the two of them everywhere. They huddled together talking, or sharing a cigarette. Sometimes they laughed, mostly they pouted, and looked cool. I noticed him each time, tall and skinny with gawky long legs that bent under benches and stretched onto stones.

A few weeks later, he walked into my Theatre Design class, and I inwardly celebrated. He looked like James Dean, but with a wider and larger nose, and the prominent teeth of someone who likes to open bottles with them. What others might perceive as flaws, I saw through giant cartoon hearts in my eyes. His hair, which he would grow to mushroom like lengths and widths, was shaved close to his head. His eyes were the color of burnt caramel, and they sparkled out of his face.

He was a kindred spirit in good, and bad, ways and we befriended each other fast. He broke up with Katie over winter break and then started dating another girl. But through it all, I became his best and most loyal gal pal.

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When I think of being a gal pal, I think of Sally Rogers from *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. I watched hours of it when I was a kid, curled up on the couch with my favorite imaginary people. I enjoyed the then happy lives. Nothing too terrible ever happened to them. I liked that they were indirectly in showbiz, and that they had a beautiful house, and big parties where everyone sang, and danced, and told jokes to one another.

I wanted to be Laura Petrie. Her beautiful clothes and loving, handsome husband was the ultimate in female accomplishment. She was an extension of the Disney princess. Watching her dance around, and hang her arms behind Rob's head during a smooch, made it seem possible that life has the potential to be a fairy tale, even in domesticity. She could sing, and dance, and cook, and kept her house so clean although, she is rarely depicted actually cleaning. She was cute, and funny, and everyone adored her when she began to cry and shouted, "Oh, Rob!"

Somehow, I knew the trivia that Mary Tyler Moore was a mere seventeen years old when she was cast as Laura. But I had no perspective on how young that was, and used it to gauge when I could start to expect fame.

Laura Petrie, in her "scandalous" capri pants, was an ideal, not just for women, but also for men. She was sweet, and elegant, and smart, and unassuming. She had her flaws, but at the end of the day they all ended up being cute, instead of troublesome. With Laura, my projecting went a step further than usual. I didn't think this was how I was supposed to be, instead I assumed this was how I would be. Mom, who I've always been told I look like, looks a lot like Mary Tyler Moore. It didn't take a huge leap of the imagination to imagine that I too, one day, would be just like that cute, beautiful and funny housewife.

\*

As a kid, I played the card game Old Maid, and I asked what exactly an Old Maid was. Mom explained that an Old Maid is a woman who hasn't ever been married. So without any intentionality on the part of my mom, I was introduced to the notion that marriage was a woman's greatest achievement. While playing the game we laughed and cursed one another in PG language for passing on the card. Silently, I put a childlike notion of fate onto the outcome of the game, always playing for singer, or something glamorous.

If I got a glamorous outcome in the game, my magical brain relaxed in the temporary assurance of a desired fate. All of the occupations possible mattered, but the implication was that even if I was a police woman by the end, if I didn't hold the card sporting an old woman with a fat orange cat on her lap, I would still get to be married, which meant I would have cultural value.

In my mind, this game held the same truths as twisting the stem on an apple and whispering the letters of the alphabet to find out the first letter of the name of the man I was going to marry. The same as the fear of the paper cootie catcher that crackled back and forth with certainty, before I pulled back the folded edge, and found out I was going to marry the boy who sat next to me, and spent whole classes peeling glue off of his hands. It was MASH.

I played pretend games like "house" and "waitress" with intense touches of verisimilitude. Little pieces of paper that were scratched with my pre-cursive handwriting depicted grocery lists, or the order of table number five, or doctor's notes for my pretend

kids. I had fun with these games, and I see nothing much wrong with them, had the culture presented me with some realistic alternatives. However, the importance that the waitress not only be cheery and humming, like a Disney Princess, but also beautiful beyond compare, is something that I think back on with a degree of reluctant hindsight. I had, without knowing what that meant, a concept of *marriageability*. Would I be a keeper? A girl he can take home to mother? Would I be Laura? Or would I be an old maid like Sally Rogers?

\*

Spring semester of my first year at UMW, I was in the background of a play called *Far Away*. Jake wasn't in the show, but when I found out he was coming to the cast party, I dressed for attention. My outfit was modest, but tight, and my eye-makeup sat heavy, as Sedgwick-esque as I could get it. It was two stamps of black on the lids of my eyes.

This party was a hat party, and everyone around me swirled into cowboy hats, baseball hats and a few amazing oddities like a yellow and red jester hat, and a headband with bobbing disco balls springing from the top on coiled wire. I wore a knit, white hat that had a knit, red rose near the ear. It was the wintry version of a flapper hat and my short bob stuck out from underneath it.

Music thrummed and I sat in a circle playing Kings for the first time. I broke the circle of cards around a red solo cup and had to drink the concoction in the middle that was made up of beer, wine, vodka, and Smirnoff. I drank as much as I could before

excusing myself to dance. While I moved my hips and arms around, encircled by gay friends who grabbed my waist, and shimmied down my legs, I saw Jake step outside with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

“I need a cigarette!” I said, and the musical theatre kids, who need their voices, yelled, “Gross!” as I slipped out the door.

Jake and I had only talked and hung out a few times, but never alone, aside from the times we’d been walking in the same direction after class. I was nervous that he wouldn’t want to talk to me, and I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark. He leaned against a support beam to the deck above us where people talked loudly and laughed. “Hey,” I said, interrupting him texting on a flip phone. “Do you think I can bum a smoke?”

This had become a thing with us. Though I’d been smoking on and off since before David, I had never bought a pack. Jake heard me ask him for a smoke a few times, and he knew that I thought as long as I was not buying them, then I was not a true smoker. I viewed myself a just a shameless bummer. He pulled back the foil of his pack and handed the white cylinder to me.

My hands shook as I accepted the cigarette, and dipped it into the flame that trembled in his cupped hands. “Thanks,” I said. “Hey, I really liked that thing you wrote for Playwriting class.”

“Really?” He laughed. “It was so stupid!”

“I thought that was the point.”

“Yeah. That girl Hilary just texted me about it.” he said. “I think it pissed the teacher off.”

“Well, it was a stupid assignment,” I took a drag, letting smoke fill my mouth, I breathed out in a calculated movie star way.

“I didn’t mind it.” His phone made an electronic sound and he yanked it from his pocket to text again. The blue light on his face contrasted with the orange at the end of his burning Camel Wide.

“That from Hilary?” I pried.

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s cute. But she has a boyfriend. Just my luck.”

“Yeah,” I said, pulling on my cigarette harder, trying to reevaluate my tactics. “I like her style a lot. And that thing she wrote was smart.”

He laughed, “I’ve been complimenting her via text all day.”

I changed the subject, and bummed another smoke from him. We spent what felt like an hour out there, the conversation flowing easily after I switched my tactic to friendly. Just when I thought I might be able to get somewhere with him, the door flew open, and we were summoned back into the throng of the party for an exhibition of someone’s drunkenness.

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Sally Rogers was portrayed by former child star, Rose Marie. The character was funny and endearing, but because of the fact that she was unmarried, I didn’t consciously emulate her. Sally, with her signature black velvet bow, placed on the side of her head in an almost ironic nod to her femininity, was “one of the guys.” Unlike Laura, Sally almost never wore pants. She paced the office that she, Rob and Buddy shared, and thought of

jokes for *The Alan Brady Show*, the fictional show that Rob wrote for. She was portrayed as equal to the guys in talents, but she had to have a flaw. So in nearly every episode, in her voice sharded from cigarettes, Sally made jokes about being single.

I didn't want to be Sally because she was never presented as adorable in the way that Laura was. Her brassy voice, and vaudevillian "ha cha cha cha" joke delivery, made her somehow undesirable to the men around her. Every episode where she didn't find a "fella" made me think of her as some kind of failure, but the implication was always that it was her fault.

In the episode, "Sally and the Lab Technician," Rob and Laura talk in their black and white kitchen about how Rob had to give Sally a ride home because she didn't have a husband to do it for her. In this conversation, Rob refers to Sally as a "girl" even though she is clearly older than him.

Laura asks why Sally isn't attached, and Rob's response is, "Sal's had plenty of boyfriends, but she scares 'em off!"

Busy with preparing dinner, Laura asks, "How?"

"She's too quick with the answers. Guys hate girls that make jokes about everything."

Laura gets defensive and says that she also makes jokes. Rob says, "Believe me, I've worked with *that girl* for years and I've seen how she demolishes guys with her wisecracks."

\*

I believe, that there is a cultural precedent of separating different concepts into notions of “masculine” and “feminine.” Despite the fact that we don’t gender our tables and apples in the English language, we still gender just about everything else. What is frightening is the fact that “feminine” is looked down upon at nearly every turn. Even to the point that a masculine object like a tie could be called feminine (or “gay,” another concept we have feminized) if in the wrong rosy hue. Nearly anything falling under the category of emotion is “feminine” and looked down upon. A man with emotions is showing his “feminine side.” This leaves men in a difficult position where only the ever-narrowing “masculine” avenue is open for them to express themselves (and they better not express themselves in the thousand other ways besides “player” and “badass”). This is damaging to men and boys. Similar to the toys, by splitting concepts off into different genders, we are narrowing human experience.

It might seem that for women life is more wide open because we are allowed to be emotional, but our world is just as limiting. We are limited not just by social constraints, and sexual taboos, but by the way we think about ourselves within those constraints and taboos. As a culture, we place exorbitant value on the “masculine,” so we place value on the tendencies that are culturally considered such. But women are also taught that these tendencies will keep us from obtaining men. So we are taught to strive for the feminine, while being ashamed of it, and using it as a tool for some kind of entrapment.

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Even though I rushed through a downpour, I was still late for rehearsal. I opened the doors quietly and tiptoed into the auditorium. The skeleton of the set spread out on the stage and was altered by bright yellow light. The girls with speaking roles were wearing corsets and ankle boots. The boys were wearing the hats from their costumes. This was an attempt to get college students acclimated to turn of the century clothing. There were chairs of all shapes and sizes in neat rows. They were rehearsing the church choir scene.

Jake was on stage holding the back of a chair up against his body with one arm. He stood next to Helena, who played his wife and wore a petticoat over her jeans. They looked out into the audience where the assistant director instructed them on how to move the furniture seamlessly. It had to be moved in a way that was aesthetically pleasing, the audience couldn't notice the work.

I found the other people who had no lines and I sat with them in the fraying green velvet chairs of the auditorium. Eyebrows rose at me, none of them were my friends yet. Eventually, they started to rehearse another transition. Another one I was not needed for. The people sitting around me all shifted until I was virtually alone. Jake walked up the slight incline of the aisle and sat in the row in front of me. I wanted to talk to him because we were friends, and we often flirted, but at this point, without being able to put it into words, I had learned to let him determine if we would speak. I figured out that Jake was like Peter Pan. He was as likely to forget who someone was and why they were there as he was to want to start a mischievous game.

On this day, Jake was in the mood to battle pirates, so he turned to me, and in a raspy whisper said, "This is such bullshit. They were freaking out because you weren't

here and now they're not even using you." I assumed a default stance of negativity, the two of us huddling and complaining about how above this we both were. We did that a lot. Besides my crush, it was the entire basis of our friendship.

"I think we should leave," he said. "Just walk out of rehearsal. Just go to McDonalds or some shit."

"Yeah. Fuck this. *Our Town* is a stupid play anyway."

"I like it," he said. I found a way to say *Our Town* was great without contradicting my previous statement. It was a difficult task, but I had gotten used to doing it. He knew that, and he contradicted me on purpose, regularly, so he could watch the mechanism of my backpedalling in an attempt to please.

After rehearsal, we went to McDonald's and sat in front of brown plastic trays topped with two wrong orders. We looked out the window at the rain pelting on foam mats. Jake said he really wanted to get out of town. "I want to start a plantain farm in South America," he said. "Let's just go."

"What about being an actor? Why not go to California?" I said, swirling a french fry in sweet and sour sauce the color of dirty honey.

"You see, I'm not handsome enough to be a movie star."

"I think you are," I said, looking at him for a moment and then down at my tray.

A couple of weeks after this we rated people's attractiveness on a scale from one to ten. He gave me a seven. "Maggie," he said. "You should be flattered. Natalie Portman is a ten." He gave Helena a nine.

After we finished our burgers, we stood under the awning smoking some of his cigarettes. The rain poured from the fabric of the awning, creating a barrier between the

parking lot and us. We threw our cigarettes into puddles and ran to his car. I navigated around his trash, as I was accustomed to doing, in order to find the seat. As usual, I got in and waited for him to start driving. I didn't question whether he would take me on some adventure, or back to my dorm. It was his decision.

\*

*The Dick Van Dyke Show* is old. It is pre-feminism (as we know it), and pre-sexual revolution. Rob and Laura sleep in twin beds, and only very coyly allude to any sexuality. By this logic, maybe I can't make a comment about the contemporary conceptualization of humorous women, and old maids, by talking about a sixties show. To an extent, I can see this point, but the thing that always brings me back to Sally is that I watched a lot of different stuff while growing up.

I watched movies, and television, and plays from all different eras, but Sally never stuck out. In terms of gender, there was little dissonance between the older television shows, and the newer. There were things, like the twin beds, that were off and weird. But the way women were depicted seemed on the whole pretty much the same. Aside from the moms having more jobs in the movies that I watched post-seventies, there wasn't much of a distinction between fictional women based on era. Sally was like every other single woman I saw on TV. The way people talked about Sally was the way I heard everyone talk about single "girls."

Sally is the humorous gal pal, and there are ghosts of her everywhere, from her to Liz Lemon, a fellow comedy writer, women with senses of humor are often presented as

“masculine” and single. Sally gets accidentally called “Uncle Sally” when Rob is talking to his son. Because she is one of the guys, she has to be sarcastic and funny and because she is she is one of the guys.

Rose Marie was in her early forties when she played Sally Rogers, although she could have passed for ten years younger. Sally dates Herman Glimscher, who is an extreme Momma’s boy, to the point where his mother chaperones their dates, or sometimes goes instead of Sally. This is a plot device to keep Sally virginal, because in reality, a forty year old savvy comedy writer who spends all her time with men would probably have a lot of sex.

In the 1966 episode “Dear Sally Rogers,” Herman calls Sally. Rob hands the phone to her, telling her it is a man. She retorts, “It’s not a man, it’s Herman Glimscher. What is it, Herman?”

Herman, shown standing in the phone booth, shoulders stiff, says, “Well, I’m just calling to find out if our regular Tuesday night date is on for tonight?” Tuesday is probably included because it is the least sexy night of the week.

Sally says, “No, it’s not. I’m doing the Stevie Parsons Show tonight.”

Herman’s red flag response: “Is the Stevie Parsons who more important to you than I am?”

“Next question.”

Later in the conversation, Herman asks, “When should I call you?”

“Howabout turn of the century?” Sally quips.

“Watch it, Sally. Don’t push me too far.”

At the end of the episode, Sally forgives Herman for his annoying behavior and dependence on his mother, but even as a kid this struck a weird note with me. I didn't like Herman and thought Sally could do better. But the only decent guy she has a crush on, in the episode "Like A Sister" doesn't like her like that, and has to resort to strange tactics to get her to stop loving him.

Every guy in Sally's life is wrong for her, and every episode where she makes a joke about going home and crying is painful.

When it comes to other single ladies in television, like Mary Tyler Moore, or Murphy Brown, or Liz Lemon, they can't have successful romance because they are at the center of the plot, and it might be boring, although I would argue that it doesn't have to be, and the last season of *30 Rock* dealt with this particular issue wonderfully. But Sally isn't at the center of the story in *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. She isn't a central character. So why can't she be happy eventually? Is she really single because, as Rob theorizes, guys hate girls who make jokes all the time?

\*

At four in the morning one night, junior year, Jake and I sat shoulder to shoulder on a piano bench. We were working on a musical about "indie hipster douchebags" a group we both belonged to and detested. We had already finished a song about cigarettes and a song about hating everyone. At this moment we were working on a song about Windows Vista.

“Program not responding...!” I belted out, and he followed my melody as I repeated the chorus over and over until we figured out where it was going.

“Program not responding...to you!” he sang and we laughed. This joke went well with the characters. The female character was trying to show the guy something on her computer. We decided he liked apple products, and because she had vista, he was just not into it, and her.

I reached out to scribble the new added line in the notebook, that we had already covered with the shaky handwriting that came out when I had Red Bull and nicotine. Or, when I was excited, which I always was around him.

A friend of ours heard us singing a few hours before and came in to structure aspects of the musical on the chalkboard. It felt like he was there to laugh at our brilliance. We were working so well together, and we had become such good friends. Jake had to know the amazing potential of our partnership.

I was having intense, artistic fantasies of the couple we would be. When he slid his fingers along the piano keys, I imagined us as a power couple. He would be famous for his intimidating smarts, which he was now downplaying while picking out a few notes to a cartoon theme, and his immense talent as an actor. I would be famous for all that too and for being his troubled wife/lover/whatever. I would be a depressive woman who lived in his shadow, like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, or the wife of some literary great.

He stood, closing the piano, and said, “Smoke?” and I thought about how this musical would make us famous, and how we would have a rocky relationship that would be looked up to by the most tragically romantic. There would be famous black and white

photos of us in a room like this one, crowded by smoke, and a small piano, but with our mouths open wide in song, and our eyes locked in adoring smiles.

Our friend and I followed Jake out to the breezeway where we smoked, and I imagined how we would have high profile theatrical affairs with our co-stars, and we would have children. And we would have parties where people watched us and gave us attention for our talents and tortured love. I would never fully understand him, but he would understand all of me. He would be able to get me to take him back again and again. I didn't examine these thoughts. That would've taken the fun out of it. Instead, I existed in them.

I stood under his height, and took hard drags on my cigarette, and saw sad but interesting, and romanticized, possibilities. We ended up at Denny's right as the sky started to get purple. We talked about the world ending and a guy from a few tables away yelled over saltshakers and dirty carpet, "Are you talking about 2012? We're gonna be in *space!*"

I pushed eggs around with my fork, and exchanged a glance with Jake, who shot me a wry smile at their expense.

We fell asleep in the Acting Lab at six am on the black mats that were used in classes for meditation and sense memory. The mats were sticky on my cheek. I curled up on a stack of them against the wall, four or five feet from the floor. I precariously balanced, afraid to fall. On the floor, Jake sprawled out on two. He slept on his stomach and his feet hung off the edge, toes pointed together. I didn't sleep. I watch him briefly, contemplating the distance between us. I turned to face the wall and stared at the white painted brick.

My phone beeped to let me know morning had come. There would be a class in there soon, so I crept down to wake him. He looked at me, confused, not sure where he was. It looked like I was the last person he wanted to see.

\*

Despite not wanting to be Sally Rogers, I did want her job. The office that she shares with Buddy and Rob was an imaginary home. It was a place where a girl could live with her creative pursuits and funny friends. By the second year at University of Mary Washington, I realized the office was more where I belonged than the immaculate kitchen that Laura inhabited.

Every semester the student run theatre would throw a “24 Hour Play Festival” that involved writing, directing, and performing plays, all in a 24-hour period. The shows were not high quality, but were written with as much seriousness as one could muster. I was the Sally Rogers of that writing room. Though Jake was there writing too, I barely thought about him. For those 24 hours it was about making good jokes. I didn’t attempt to be appealing, or feminine.

I drank vodka concealed in a Mountain Dew bottle, and smoked on the balcony with male friends, making jizz and fart jokes. Though the content of what we wrote was never something that would be allowed on the fictional *Alan Brady Show*, it was of the same quality. It was whacky for the sake of whacky. The raunchiest plays that 24 had seen yet were written by a bunch of guys. And I was one of them. I have no memory of

what I wore, how my hair was, if I had a pimple, but I knew that being Sally Rogers felt gorgeous.

I spent a good deal of college trying to get Jake to notice me in a more romantic capacity. I lingered on particular benches a little too long, and dressed nicer on certain days of the week. I wrote in my journal, which I insisted wasn't a diary, and I asked tarot cards about what Jake was thinking.

I went through phases of feeling ugly and feeling masculine, but I didn't know why I felt that way. Why did I think I was so boyish when I liked theatre, clothes, and romantic movies? How could I be "masculine" at all when I could cry without much provocation?

I wanted to appear like a Laura, a girl next door, and when I didn't succeed at that I felt masculine. I was funny, and I made fart and poop jokes, and I had tons of guy friends. I fought Sally off with all my energy, but Sally Rogers is a part of me and she never stayed away long.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: ONE NIGHT STAND

The reason I relegated myself to being a gal pal is because that is what I thought I deserved. I thought because I was big-breasted, out there, and funny that I wasn't good enough to be loved by Jake, or any other guy that I was attracted to.

I let this crush become a strange obsession, once again with the unattainable. It wasn't that Jake should've loved me, but didn't because I was masculine. It was because I decided that I was "one of the boys," and that's why I didn't even ask.

\*

The brightly lit parking garage reeked of student vomit and piss. I got into the cab of Joe's truck, and he started to pack a bowl, not even looking over his shoulder. "Oh," I said. "You wanna smoke that here?"

"I always smoke here," he said. We were on a date, our first, but I decided to invite him back to my apartment to smoke the weed because I didn't want to get kicked out of school. He drove to my apartment with the windows down. Hot air blew in, unseasonably humid for April.

Joe parked far up on the street in, front of the house where my neighbors, middle-aged black women, usually sat on the porch and talked. During the week, they listened to great music, and smiled, and waved at me when I went to and from class. On this night, they were inside, sitting near the screens of open windows, their eyes are on the strange truck. I waved at the shadows behind the mesh, and wondered if they were judging me

for walking back to my house with a boy. I wondered if they thought I was a slut. I thought it was just as possible that they were happy for me, in all the time I had lived there I hadn't once brought home a guy. Maybe they worried that I was lonely.

Earlier that night, I thought that Joe was going to stand me up. He was late to meet me, and I waited outside of his dorm awkward and angry. I came to class that morning dressed for a date because I wouldn't have had time to go home and change. I waited for an hour in a friend's dorm across campus. We watched *Girl Interrupted* before Joe texted me saying where we should meet. My friend told me I looked like Winona Ryder and I self-consciously adjusted my pixie hair, and pulled at the tie on the front of my cotton floral dress.

Joe and I walked onto my porch and into my apartment. I was glad to see that my roommate wasn't home. We walked past the smell of the dirty rat cage that my roommate was responsible for, into the kitchen. Dirty dishes that I was responsible for, sat piled in the sink, stinking up the kitchen almost as bad as the rat cage. I opened the back door and we stepped out on a square of pavement. Joe went back inside to get a tepid glass of water, claiming that it was imperative to the getting high procedure. I hadn't smoked before so I didn't know one way or the other.

We shared the patch of concrete with my rusting and unused red bike. We huddled together. He showed me how to hold the bowl. I didn't know it but I didn't inhale. I leaned my head back on the wall, and waited to feel something.

\*

I had class with Jake's next girlfriend, Alyssa. Every Tuesday and Thursday at 9:20 in the morning, I listened to her and her roommate talk about him. We were supposed to be meditating, but there would be whispered giggles that contained his name. They giggled about how cute Jake and Alyssa were together, I winced but I tried not to do it visibly. I couldn't compete with her. She had the most perfect bow shape on her top lip and her long eyelashes rested on her cheeks when she would close her eyes to laugh. She dressed how I wanted to. I thought that there was no way that I could get Jake to notice me. Not with her around. So I tried to move on.

I met Joe through a friend, and because I was always evaluating myself in terms of the male gaze, I was used to meeting a guy and wondering if the room stopped when he saw me walk into it. I took the fact that we met on Valentine's Day as a sign that he was potentially that guy. He sent me long messages on Facebook and we went on a few dates.

I was racing to get over Jake, and more than that I was trying to get someone to sleep with me. Not because I was horny, but because the shadow of David was hanging over me.

\*

I held a glass of scotch on the rocks. Joe looked at me, shocked that I was going to drink that instead of the girly mixed drink he had prepared for us to share. He was shocked by how much I had poured, though the amount was an accident I played off.

Music drifted around us, I smiled at him. The glass was cold in my hand. Joe took a large gulp and looked up at me, peeking from under long hair and a knitted cap. “So,” he said. “Are we gonna fool around or what?”

I put my glass down on the table next to the stereo and watched the condensation cause it to slide half an inch. I crossed my arms in front of my belly and grabbed the bottom of my shirt, pulling it up over my head. I shrugged in a bra, and jeans and lead the way upstairs.

Jake hadn't spoken to me for weeks. He hadn't shown me any attention. The phrase “he's just not that into you” permeated the cultural lexicon enough that it occurred to me occasionally, but I didn't let myself linger on it.

I took comfort in the fact that Joe initiated our interactions. He asked me out, he even used the word “smitten” in his Facebook notes, which had links to songs I was supposed to listen to while reading them. I decided he must have really liked me, and even though I wasn't crazy about him, I did like him back. I liked that he liked me, at least.

We closed the door to my bedroom and I tried to find a suitable soundtrack for this part of things. I skipped through my iPod searching for something sexy but not cliché. I settled on a song with slow guitar and turned to the mattress on the floor where Joe waited under the only illumination in the room, a row of string lights over the window.

He smiled. I crawled towards him and we kissed. Our clothes came off. He laughed a short giggle in between each kiss or movement as if to say, “I can't believe my luck” or maybe, what I feared: “She's really bad at this.”

He ate me out, which David never did, but only for a minute, before he rolled over onto his back. I looked at his penis, which was much smaller than David's, but just as daunting. I explained, "I've never given a blow job before."

"Really? Are you a virgin?"

"No. My ex never did that for me, so I never did it for him." I looked down at my exposed knees and worried I might be blushing.

"Would you mind trying?" he asked, laughing again in that imperceptible way. Was he exasperated, disappointed? Was he excited?

"Ok," I said, and put my mouth around his erection. He told me that he was surprised that it was my first time. He kept laughing, while I moved my head up and down. His laughter made me nervous. Even as he touched my shoulders, and hair, and attempted to tell me I was doing a good job, I was embarrassed. I didn't finish him off. I didn't know how. He got on top of me, naked, and kissed me, begged me for sex that I wasn't sure I wanted.

He moved on my red sheets, inside me, and I looked into his eyes and then away. I wasn't sure whether eye contact was acceptable or not. I didn't move at all but I made plenty of noise. I didn't know how to do anything else. I was afraid he would yell at me again, like David did.

I looked into his eyes once more. They were glazed over. He finished. I didn't come.

\*

When I had sex with Joe, it was the last day of the semester. I finished my exams and angled to see him one last time before summer. I wanted him to go to a theatre party with me so I could cling to his arm in front of Jake. Not even to make him jealous, so much as to prove to myself that I was over it. And I wanted prove to others that I was worth something.

I only planned on fooling around because it was more within my comfort zone. But I had sex with him because I was drunk and because he pleaded with me. I had a condom in a box on my dresser that I grabbed from the health center at the beginning of the year and so I thought, why not use it at the end of the year?

We cuddled for a while after the sex, but then he went home and I waited patiently over the next few days for a text. I went to Mom's house for summer break and waited more. I waited for a phone call, or a Facebook message. I got nothing. Several weeks went by before I had the nerve to send him a message asking him exactly what we were. Boyfriend and girlfriend? Fuck buddies? Were we just going to go with the flow? He never responded to it.

I was devastated and overcome with guilt and shame. I was confused. He showed all the signs of someone who wanted things to continue, and also of someone who wanted only a one night stand. I didn't know which signs to use in order to draw a confident conclusion. There were the messages, which I read over and over, that were filled with regard and respect. There was the fact that he had insisted on cuddling with me after sex, how I had rested my head on his chest and talked about nothing important for at least an hour. But he was also callous a lot. He would keep me waiting. We would go out and then I wouldn't see him for weeks.

The worst thing, was that if he had simply asked me for casual sex, I would've done it. I wanted to be given an orgasm. I had only recently had my first one (David and I based sexual knowledge on assumptions about the clitoris made while watching the *South Park* movie), but I wanted one to be given to me. I felt that in order for an orgasm to be good, it had to be bequeathed by a penis.

Joe didn't give me love, or an orgasm, and so I spun thoughts about him around while trying to push them back. But my fantasies were self-loathing, even more so than my notions of Jake and I as tortured lovers. When I fantasized about Joe, I imagined him apologizing. I imagined exonerating misunderstandings. The worst fantasy involved me having to get an abortion and him comforting me as I sobbed saying he was wrong and that he loved me.

Even as I was thinking this I knew it was wrong. I knew it was bizarre and that I didn't want that to happen to me. I didn't ever want to be pregnant let alone have to go through a horrible procedure. But it fulfilled the part of my psyche that had to punish me and exonerate him.

\*

I became more uptight and afraid of sex than ever before. Female friends repeatedly said, "You just haven't had a good experience yet." But it was actually far worse than that. I had experiences that were so unpleasant, I wondered if I didn't like sex that much at all. I had experiences that were standard and friends related to. Experiences that were demoralizing, and heart-wrenching, and nauseating to think back on.

I worried I was a prude. Now, I know that girls do get prudish and uptight about sex. Not because we are genetically predisposed for sexual hang-ups, but because we are socially set up for them. We are told our sexuality is a secret thing, we are taught to be ashamed of it. Our sexuality is for our husbands only, or for true love (though there are many stories that show that backfiring).

This is an instance in which, I think, my case mirrors many. I am willing to admit that after David and Joe I was reluctant to open up again. I had been pressured, yelled at, and pressured again. I had been ignored and treated like a non-entity. And what might have felt good for me was ignored, too. None of the sex I had was enjoyable at all because at no point was it about my pleasure. At no point did it occur to me that it was *allowed* to be about my pleasure.

\*

When fall rolled around again, I went back to wanting Jake. I sat in my dorm trying to do French homework and failing. I was uncertain of how to do the homework and my roommate blasted Christian choral music at top volume, she hummed along. Her upper body hunched over a textbook and her pen wiggled on the adjacent pile of loose-leaf paper.

I developed a habit of checking constantly for Jake to be online. Sometimes, talking via chat lead to us hanging out. His screen name popped up under the list of contacts who were online, but I was trying not to be the one to initiate the conversation. He was single again, so there was urgency to the way I stared at the screen. I always

initiated the conversation, after ten minutes of agonizing over whether to write “hey” or “hi” or something lame like, “hello, friend”, or something bold like, “hey, sexy.” I liked to imagine that he was doing the same thing, or that he was high and not cognizant of anything but the wrong side of YouTube. I liked imagining that better than letting myself entertain the idea that he knew I was online, but hadn’t said anything to me. I hated the idea that he saw my name there, but didn’t care.

After three more harmonic exclamations of “Oh God! I love you!” from the fuzzy speakers on Jieun’s laptop, I couldn’t take it anymore. I wrote: “Jesus. Songs about Jesus. All fucking day.”

I looked at my French book, reading the same sentence over and over, before looking up and checking to see if the screen said he was typing. When his name flashed on the screen, after at least a half an hour, I put my book down, and leaned into the glow of the screen.

He wrote, “lol”

I started again, “I can’t focus on my French homework with this praisin’ going on. I already don’t know how to do it.”

He asserted that he was really good at French and that he could help me. He said he would pick me up. I changed clothes as fast as I could, smiling, and breezing around. I looked for the perfect outfit, agonizing over the line between what was a conceivable outfit for me to have been studying in for the last hour, and what was the most flattering and attractive.

An hour later, after having given up on French, we sat in the Waffle House with coffee, chain smoking, and drawing cartoons of each other, and other tiny doodles in our

notebooks. He wrote a sonnet in his manic handwriting about the graffiti on the fake wooden table of the booth. I read it and laughed. It was perfect iambic and I took this as a sign of his inner brilliance.

This was a good night that I would think back on with immense nostalgia. It was a night when Jake and I could exist around each other comfortably. When I could enjoy the sensation of avoiding stepping on eggshells, but still wanting them to break. Before I would complicate things with expectations, or debts. Before we would turn our friendship into a series of games.

Years later, I would find the sonnet pushing its way around the margins, and not have the heart to throw it away.

\*

Loving Jake was punishing myself. After Joe that was easier than taking a real risk and asking Jake out. Joe had reinforced what I knew about myself after David. I was repulsive. I was unlovable and annoying. I became content to keep love at arm's length. I obsessed about Jake because I wanted to feel like I was worth something, and imagining it gave me more hope than attempting it. I was unaware that I preferred fantasy to reality. He was the perfect choice for this type of love, although I chose unwittingly. He got validation from my obsession, and I got validation from any little moment where his eyes were directed at me.

I cherished my name on his lips, and this gave him power. I handed my power off. I made all his thoughts and opinions fit into my brain. I altered everything in order to

become his best friend, and although I tried to become his girlfriend, I was passive in my attempts. I let him dictate every detail of our friendship.

This meant never having to take a risk. Never having to have it proven that I wasn't worthy of love. Never did I consider that there were other things that I had going for me. Female friends and I spoke the same language on this. "Why doesn't he like me?" was a common saying. We put on little plays under real, or imagined, gaze, but we didn't tell each other, or ourselves, what else we might do to find worth.

\*

Jake requested a tarot reading. I had long ago shuffled and re-shuffled the cards across my bed asking question after question until I got not just an answer, but the answer I wanted. I wasted hours, that could've been spent doing homework, or making a move, on making sure that this stuff with Jake would all sort itself out. Like a Disney Princess, I was placing my faith in magic.

Jake found this hobby of mine interesting, and so we passed a bowl back and forth on the dirty white carpet of his apartment, and I unraveled my cards from a fake silk scarf. "What are they in the scarf for?" he asked, before placing his lips on the blue glass tube.

"Apparently they are supposed to be in a natural fiber? This is fake but it's the closest I have." I picked up the leopard print scarf and draped it over my neck.

Jake asked me more questions and I explained everything I knew about tarot to him. I handed him the booklet, and showed him how I had the order of the cards

memorized, and I laughed when I reach the end of the streak. He coughed and laughed, his eyes intent on me.

I wrote him a poem in return for the sonnet. He said he would put it on his wall, but I never saw it there. We watched Cartoon Network and laughed with the abandon that only high people can achieve. We gave each other massages and talked over the loud volume of the television.

Later, we watched *Planet Earth* and fell asleep on the floor. I was cold and though I was right next to him, I didn't want to initiate cuddling. Even for warmth. I suffered instead, drifting in and out of sleep every time the menu music on the DVD started over. Each time I was aware that only the side of my right arm and leg were warm from where they touched his gently snoring figure.

Every now and then, I tried to see if there was a blanket in reaching distance, but I didn't want to venture any further, afraid of waking him and making him move to his bed. Sometimes, I did sleep, and sometimes, I only pretended to be asleep, so I had a legitimate reason for lying on the floor in the cold outside of wanting to be near him. I wanted a reason outside of hoping he would roll over and flop one arm over me.

The menu music grated my ears and I was angry with myself for not moving, for being paralyzed by my own fear of changing the situation, for not putting an arm around him instead. I stopped craning my head for a blanket and berated myself until I was accustomed to the menu music. I amused myself with the strange smacking sound he made with his mouth every now and then. I meditated.

I woke up and before falling asleep for the last time, saw his pet chinchilla sitting in the stillness and warmth of my hair.

\*

Over winter break, I logged onto Facebook and saw that Jake was in a relationship with someone else. On the last day of finals they ran off to New York together and there were photos of them kissing in the middle of Times Square. They pulled faces from what looked like a hotel room. I almost burst into tears.

Instead, I went for a walk with Amanda, and smoked, and talked to her about it, for hours. I couldn't get my brain out of the loop it was making. *He chose her over me. He chose her over me.*

In general, that should be nothing personal. Someone else had a connection that we didn't have. But I was certain we did and I felt crazy, decided I had made it all up. And maybe I had. It still wouldn't have been personal if it weren't for the fact that without him I didn't have anywhere to focus this intense longing for wholeness. I wanted something from him that he could never give me, and I crumpled at that realization. I took it to mean something about myself, but not the right thing.

It wasn't that someone else was more suited to him, it was that I was deficient. And even more damaging, it was the idea that she had tempted him away from me. That he had no control over the situation, and leading me on, but that she had poisoned him against me.

I thought back to a moment when we spent a whole day together, in December, that ended with us cuddling in my twin bed. I thought about how after that we almost hugged goodbye. Or maybe, I just thought that we almost hugged goodbye. I blamed myself for that and for the countless moments when I didn't reach out and say or do something, anything.

I thought that he might've tried to tell me about her. I remembered a few moments where he faltered his speech. When he stopped and started over something that sounded important. This meant that maybe I was important enough. I put that in my pocket for months. Reminding myself, for no reason other than punishment, that he loved me more than her, and it was my fault for not making it clear how much I loved him.

This is not typical. I know that. Girls can think up a hundred thousand ways to punish themselves based on the circumstances. But because women are in competition with one another, because we are supposed to be the most beautiful girl in the room, we blame ourselves. Not all of us. But, many. We react in different ways to the knowledge that we aren't universally beautiful and adorable. We find different means to absorb the knowledge that we aren't someone's preference. But this was how I did.

I tried to move on, but each guy I liked was more unattainable than the last. Each further and further from the possibility of hurting me. The next semester we continued our friendship, and I continued to hold him in high esteem, and hope I never thought of myself as a doormat, or as a person who would cheat, but I demonized his girlfriend so much that I would've if he'd asked.

Our friendship was strained after that. Which ended up being a good thing because I moved on, slowly but by the time I graduated. In our last play together I felt a hint of nostalgia and appreciation for his talent. I listened to him act, watched him from the wings, and observed myself feeling less about him.

We fought with intensity by the end, exchanging long messages, and bitter words. He became unresolved, like a bully in kindergarten. The first time someone doesn't like

you and you have no idea what you did wrong. I still wonder what the other side of it was, but it's comforting that I no longer care if I ever know or not.

\*

During my last "24 Hour Play Festival," my friend, Taylor, and I smoked on the breezeway during our writing breaks. Jake, who I had been fighting with, joined us, a cigarette waiting in the corner of his mouth. We all chatted about how writing was going and whether or not the shows would be good.

Jake exhaled, looked at me, and said, "So what was the deal with that Facebook fight we had?"

I said, "Why don't you tell me?"

Taylor shot me an apologetic look and slipped inside, leaving me alone with Jake.

"You were being unreasonable," Jake said.

"Really? I thought you were." I shook with anger, but didn't want him to see that. He unfriended me over winter break, and a long regrettable fight had ensued. I was feverish for some of it, sick as hell, and I gave him some words I'd been holding back. But I didn't think that they were unreasonable. Just, maybe, wrong for the occasion.

I puffed heavily on my cigarette, trying to finish it fast. My soda with vodka in it was almost empty. I chugged the rest. He explained his innocence, and I explained mine. Our words got more heated and I realized we were never going to agree, or get along, ever again. He leaned against the brick, in that casual way that used to make me swoon, and I made a decision.

“Can I have some of that?” I asked, indicating his plastic bottle, which was full of vodka.

“Ok,” he said. I took a long gulp, for courage, and handed it back to him. I could picture what his face was doing at that moment, but I didn’t move my head up to look at it.

I gripped my hands into fists, “Let’s just carry on as if we hadn’t fought, for old time’s sake. Let’s be friends and then if we get in another fight, it’s the last semester so fuck it. End of friendship. We fight, that’s it. We never have to speak again.”

“Ok,” he said.

“Shake on it?” I reached my hand out.

He switched his soda bottle to his left hand so he could extend his right. We shared a handshake and I, for as long as I was able, a long second, looked him in the eye. I tossed my cigarette over the balcony and pushed on the door to the stairwell with my whole body. I walked as fast as I could, hoping to hear the door slam instead of his footsteps. It did.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: TWILIGHT, SENIOR YEAR

By spring semester of my senior year, Jake and I were no longer friends. I was living with my friend Magan, and Jake's ex-girlfriend, Alyssa. Though I was anxious about this at first, she and I bonded over the duress we had put ourselves through in regard to him. We had long nights where we could acknowledge, after some honest stories, that it wasn't entirely our faults. That he had put us through as much emotional duress as we had put ourselves through. That, maybe, he wasn't so great.

We realized, after swapping stories, that he operated more than he felt. Hearing stories of how he had hurt her, put all my obsessing into perspective, and not only was I not in love with him, but I didn't much like him anymore.

However, the realization didn't cure my need for physical distance from romance. I had a crush on a guy who said he didn't want to date, and another on a friend who was dating someone already, and another on the guy who played Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* who was a Muslim, who I barely knew, who showed only friendly interest, and who had shared enough of his religious views for me to know that, in practice, it would make love an uphill battle.

All of these post-Jake crushes were impractical because I wasn't willing to face my own sexuality, and my personal fear of sexuality. Though I could be honest about the subject, though I knew scientific information that I was willing to share with anyone confused, and though I spouted sex positive idealism, deep down I didn't want anyone to touch me ever again.

I was horny as hell, and on the surface, I thought that I wanted someone to hold, and kiss, and make love to. But all my actions contradicted that. Everyone I felt an attachment to was part of a defense mechanism keeping me from any real physical obligations to anyone. I was scared of sex because it felt like an obligation. To me it was a weird, carnal thing that, as a woman, I had a responsibility to be good at and open to, but not *too* good at, or *too* open to, and so I shied away from that dichotomy.

For a while, I was depressed. All these impossible crushes, and midnight lamentations in my journal, were a clichéd right of passage. But, eventually, I let go, stumbled into fun. Magan and Alyssa helped a lot. We threw our drunken voices to the sky, got high, laughed, made fun of television, crunched fall leaves, smoked cigarettes in the sun, pulled grass between our fingers, and yawped at passersby.

In unguarded moments with them, without realizing it, I didn't give a shit about boys. I was having too much fun to care.

\*

On the night before Halloween, 2009, Alyssa and Magan and I parked ourselves out on the stoop, and began carving pumpkins, and drinking gin and gingers. Alyssa confessed her love for a friend of ours named Michael and Magan shouted, "I knew it!"

The fall air was chilly so I wore a big coat. A green mint julep mask hardened on my face and I was wearing one of my Dad's old shirts. We weren't expecting company, so I was not dressed for it. I got up to rinse my face, and when I got back there were a few people over, smoking and laughing with us.

Our friend Elliot followed me into the kitchen with a case of beer, and I helped him shelve the cans in the fridge. “I hope you don’t mind,” he said, “I’ve invited my suite mate over. He’s a theatre major. Maybe you know him.”

“What’s his name?” I asked, cracking open a beer.

“Peter Mumford,” Elliot said.

“Don’t think I know a Peter.”

“He’s in *Romeo and Juliet*.”

“Well,” I took the first sip, and pointed towards the door so we could go out and have a cigarette, “We haven’t done any rehearsing yet. I probably haven’t met him.”

There were even more people outside. I got progressively drunker while we talked, the carved lines on my pumpkin got more jagged. Peter showed up and I recognized him from the callbacks a few weeks before, although he looked different. Tonight, his hair was much shorter than it was when I first saw him, and he was wearing a leather motorcycle jacket, his eyes were smudged with black make-up.

I asked him, “What’re you supposed to be, some kind of punk?”

Peter said, “No.”

I meant to ask him if he was a punk for Halloween, several of the stragglers on our stoop were in costume. I didn’t clarify, and we didn’t speak to one another for the rest of the night, until at around two in the morning when I shouted, “Everyone that doesn’t live here needs to get the fuck out!”

I met Peter’s eyes and detected a worried and guilty expression. I walked to where he and Elliot froze in the living room. “It was nice to meet you,” I said. I exchanged a glance with Elliot letting him know it was nothing personal, that things just got out of

hand. There was a throng of people around us grabbing their things and looking annoyed at the end of the festivities. The drunkest ones carried on with their conversations as if they hadn't heard me.

"It's nice to meet you, too," Peter said as the two of them shuffled out.

\*

The first *Twilight* movie was showing at our campus dollar movie night that semester. I had friends who went to go see it in order to poke fun at it. I couldn't even extend my interest that far. But no matter how I tried to avoid it, swooning girls who were in love with the fictional Edward or Jacob, or the actors who played them, surrounded me. They identified with Bella Swan, but I didn't know what that would mean. All I knew was that the vampires sparkled and I wasn't at all interested in that notion.

Like many others, I dismissed the saga because it was "stupid" but what I really meant, without knowing it, was that it was girly or "feminine." I could extend all the patience in the world to any vampire contrivance, but one so centered around brash femininity was unappealing to me, and to everyone I talked to who wasn't a fan. As a culture, we have dismissed *Twilight* for the wrong reasons. We have described it as stupid and silly, but these are words we often use to describe chick-lit, and often the more "romantic" aspects of *Twilight* are what is dismissed.

This isn't to say that the series isn't worthy of some dismissal, but the discussion should move beyond the damage the "feminine" story has done to vampire lore, to the abusive nature of the relationship at its core.

The female protagonist, Bella Swan, is relatable to young women, because she voices the feelings of self-hate that are all too easy to perpetuate in our own minds. She believes that she is stupid, ugly, not worthy just like I did. And because of the need of her boyfriend Edward to push her away when she gets too sexual, she fears her sexual side will lead to her being hurt.

One would think I would've eaten it up, but I was too much of a Buffy fan to go down that road. However, I take the popularity of the books as a sign that even though I didn't read them, I was not alone in feeling like Bella Swan, despite not knowing that the character represented my deepest fears about femininity, love, and sexuality.

\*

On a Wednesday, spring semester of my senior year, my philosophy class finished up and I checked my text messages in the shuffle of books put away and people stretching out of their desks. It was rainy out and I had to cross campus to get to the theatre building. I had a rehearsal for a girl named Ashley's directing scene. She asked me to play Catherine in a scene from *Proof* and she asked Peter to play Hal. During the Saturday rehearsal, she said, "I haven't cast that yet. Maggie, will you be in my directing scene?"

I said, "Sure."

Then Ashley scanned the guys in the room. "Peter, will you be in my directing scene?"

"Yeah, okay," he said, shrugging.

So, when I stepped out of Trinkle Hall and looked up from my phone, it was no surprise to see Peter walking in the direction of DuPont, with his hands in his pockets and a hood flopping at the back of his neck. He had a distinctive walk. It was brisk and lead with the head. I walked behind him, not sure if I knew him well enough to yell out to him. But I watched him walk several yards ahead of me.

\*

The relationship at the center of *Twilight* is dysfunctional, mainly because it centers around an unspoken sexuality, one that could be fatal. Many people use the Mormonism of the author as a basis for analysis, but that is only part of the puzzle. The mere fact of being a woman in a sexually repressed culture creates shame and fear of one's own sexuality.

Girls are told, and have been since the dawn of time, that their sexuality is dangerous, that wanting it could bring unwanted horrors. This is Bella Swan's life. She is already in the prime position to be in an abusive relationship, which much of the saga stands in as a good metaphor for. Her mother is immature and emotionally needy, which puts Bella in the position of parent, so she is already used to putting her own needs aside for another person. Her father is emotionally distant, and as the text points out several

times, afraid of her teenage girl emotions, and therefore, good at ignoring the signs that Bella might be in danger.

But the idea of *The Twilight Saga* as an example of an abusive relationship in female fiction is a little bit narrow. Though a ton of abusive overtones exist in the text of these novels, what should be discussed is *not* the extent to which Bella's relationship with Edward could represent abuse. Instead, we should shift the conversation to the extent to which, as a culture, we set young women up for abuse. Bella is relatable because she puts her own thoughts and feelings on the back burner like many girls and women are used to doing. Bella Swan is relatable to a lot of young women because she keeps her emotions from everyone around her.

In fact, controlling her emotions is Bella's vampire super-power. Most of the vampires in the series have an additional power that is unique to them. Bella's power stems from the fact that Edward can read everyone's mind but hers, and by the time we get to the fourth book, *Breaking Dawn*, when Bella becomes a vampire, we learn that this is because she is a "shield." All this means is that her powers extend to controlling her emotions, and protecting others. She gives birth and becomes "super mom." Her power is not giving in to hunger, anger, and disappointment, and being able to put a force field around those she loves. So even though, after thousands of pages, Bella finally gets to be a vampire with powers, and on more equal footing with her husband, she still has to tamp things down.

Her power is, essentially, female subservience, and sadly it is empowering for female readers to see that cultural ideal portrayed in a powerful way, to see a woman actually succeed at the impossible: making everything a-ok.

\*

Peter was also a smoker. He sometimes rolled his own, pushing the paper back and forth between slender fingers. He didn't have time to roll during rehearsal breaks, so he started smoking from the carton that the guy who played the Prince left in a locker for the entire cast to share. Peter and I kept similar schedules, and during the famous balcony scene Peter (who played Friar John), and Elliot (Paris), and I (random servant), stripped out of our costumes, in record time, to go for cigarettes.

We always had more time than we thought we would before we had to be back on stage. Elliot and I slumped against the brick wall in our jeans and t-shirts. Elliot told a story. Peter paced and he checked to see how much time we had left to smoke. He noticed that we had plenty of time, but he continued to pace. He looked like a train with smoke coming out of the top.

I said, "Peter, sit down, you're making me nervous," and I pat the cement next to me. It was dusty with ash and Peter stopped his pacing and looked at me for a second. I smiled and turned to Elliot so he could finish his story. After a moment's pause, Peter sat down next to me with his knees up to his chest, looking out at the parking lot with smoke trailing out of his mouth.

\*

Bella Swan cannot express herself sexually because Edward wants to kill her, and the entire blame is placed on her for tempting him. Anytime she gets out of hand he pushes her away, and scolds her for making it difficult for him to control himself. Yes, I think we can all agree that the relationship is abusive because of the rape and kill

implications, should it go too far. But what should really be examined is *why is this relatable?*

What is it about Bella's tamping down of her feelings, her sexuality and her depression that makes female readers relate? Why do women and girls swoon over the young men in the story, who both tell Bella what to do and underestimate her intellectual capacity? Why do women and girls feel gratification at watching a girl get underestimated and then surprising everyone?

Bella is relatable because she lives in an extreme version of the world where every boy is dangerous, but not as dangerous as her sexuality, where everyone underestimates her abilities because she is just a girl, and where her emotional dampening and control is what saves the day in the end. She behaves like a girl is *supposed* to by remaining "pure" until marriage and keeping her feelings to herself, and she wins instead of living a life of servitude. She can have it all, the cool superpowers, the husband, the great family, and the kid who is so smart and growing so fast that being a mom doesn't take much time away from her life at all. She plays the game and wins. And she gets to stay young and beautiful forever.

Bella operates on much the same level as many female/male fantasies. As with any chick flick or good action film, she acts in a very gendered way in order to get socially accepted and gratifying results. It's not a surprise that to young girls who feel oppressed by this culture, even if they don't know how to admit that aloud, would feel a degree of affinity, and satisfaction with the trials of Bella Swan.

\*

During spring break, I was part of a handful of people who stayed behind to work on the lights for *Romeo and Juliet*. I spent my days with my friends, Magan, Taylor, and Delaney up in the light grid. Up there, steel mesh held us above the thirty feet of air over the auditorium. We had wrenches tied to our belt loops with string so they wouldn't drop through the holes and fall on someone below. It was empowering to be so high up and not be afraid, and to laugh like flying monkeys above the scenery below at the stagehands dropping things and cursing. I was terrified to go out there, but I forced myself to crawl onto the barrier and look down. When I spent long enough up there it was no longer scary.

I told Delaney all about this in an excited voice on my stoop. He'd been up in catwalks and light grids before. It was not new to him. We were a little drunk, empty beer bottles were all around us and the cement of the stoop was covered in ash. Delaney started to talk about himself and about his ex-girlfriend. He was so absorbed in the topic that the cigarette he bummed from me extinguished, from neglect.

Delaney thought we had a complicated history. Delaney slept with nearly every girl in the department and I once flirted with him to figure out how he got so many girls. When I was friends with Jake I did a lot of regrettable social espionage like that. I flirted with people, or was friendly in order to get them to tell me gossip. Delaney flirted relentlessly and mostly what I did was not rebuff him. He chatted with me frequently and asked me sexy questions, most of which were gross. He asked if I squirt, and I was so disgusted, and shocked, by the question that I ceased flirting.

The previous semester, when I got bored, I started flirting with him again. This culminated in him sending me eleven picture texts of his erect penis, begging me for a

picture in return. He didn't know that all this flirting was a social experiment. I wanted to see what his tactics were, why, despite the fact that he wasn't what I would call attractive, he got so many girls.

Delaney sat in one of the lawn chairs, reaching out for my lighter. I handed it to him, and he relit his cigarette and kept talking. He was tall and muscular, but I was not attracted to him. His muscles were from vanity and he wore glasses with heavy frames and ironic trucker hats. He had a tattoo on this inside of his lip which he showed everyone right after he got it. I hated the music he liked, I hated how he treated girls, I had read a draft of his play, and I hated that too.

When he finished his cigarette, he said, "Do you wanna go for a walk?"

I said, "Sure," knowing that Magan and Taylor, who were fighting, were probably otherwise occupied, and would be for a little while.

We walked through the dark streets of Fredericksburg, past the confederate graveyard and George Washington's mother's house. I folded my arms over my chest and looked through the black branches at a bright moon.

He took me to a giant rock where people had stashed mementos; the crags of it were thick with dirt, paper, and graffiti.

I lit a cigarette, "I've never been here before."

He said, "Can I kiss you?"

I leaned back on the rock and crossed my booted legs at the ankle. "I don't know how to answer that question."

"Why?" he asked.

“Because I’m really horny, but I don’t really like you like that.” He took this as a yes, and pressed his hands onto my lower back, kissing me roughly on my lower lip, my shoulders, my neck. While he was working on my neck I took a drag over his shoulder and exhaled back at the moon.

He asked if we could go back to his house. I conceded, again explaining that I wasn’t really into him. He wrapped an arm around me on the walk to his house. I waited with my arms folded, looking around, worried I would see someone I knew, while he unlocked the door. We went in and he immediately started kissing me again. We removed each other’s clothes and I had sobered up enough to wonder what I was doing. Why after all this time of not touching anyone was I touching Delaney?

He reached inside me and I shook with excitement at the feeling of physical contact. He asked, “Did you just come?”

I didn’t know the answer to the question, I hadn’t been thinking about anything other than the bizarre situation I was suddenly in, letting someone I didn’t like much at all touch me. I was pretty sure I didn’t cum, but I said, “Yes.” I wanted the attention off of me.

He asked if I was on the pill and I told him no. I told him it didn’t matter because we weren’t going to have sex because I wasn’t that into him.

I blew him, finding the answer to why he got so many girls. His dick was huge, much bigger than the pixelated text messages made it look. It was so big that I didn’t want it anywhere near my vagina. After blowing him for a minute my jaw started to spasm.

He grabbed my hand and said, “Enjoy yourself!” pushing it towards my vagina.

“Dude, I’m not good at multi-tasking. You don’t want me to do that.”

After a stretch of time, that felt longer with each passing moment, he asked,  
“Where do you want me to cum?”

I was baffled by the question, never having been asked that. I had never finished anyone off with my mouth before. My last sexual anything was Joe. Now that I knew I had an option, I said the least sexy answer, “In a towel?”

Not on my face. Not in my mouth. Not on my tits.

He went to get a towel, frustrated. When he returned I kissed his neck out of guilt, saying the only dirty things I could think of to him. He came in the folds of the towel and my phone rang. It was Magan, so I let it ring. I didn’t want her to know where I was. But I knew she had guessed. Delaney, and a girl, alone? Not a big leap.

We dressed again, and I reminded him that what happened was a one-time thing. He walked me home, our conversation less strained than before, though I didn’t know why. He sat next to me on the couch of my apartment and watched *The Colbert Report* with Magan and Taylor, who cuddled on the futon. He left, kissing me goodbye and I looked over, relieved to see that Taylor was asleep. Magan blinked at me in the dark, her face peeking over a pillow. “Where were *you*?”

I shrugged it off, “We fooled around.”

“I knew it!” she said. She always knew everything so I smiled and shook my head at her. She had an intuition about these things. “How was it?”

“It was okay,” I said, and went to go take a shower.

When I got out, I wiped the steam away from the mirror and looked at my face for a long time. Then I brushed my teeth for what felt like an hour.

\*

It took me a long time to realize why I couldn't risk anything sexual with any of the guys I really admired, and liked, and thought I loved, but I could have such a casual dalliance with Delaney. For the most part, he repulsed me. Even his giant penis made me feel like I'd given into something base in order to make out with a troll. I was still as horrified of sex as ever, but I chose to pat myself on the back for not letting it go too far. I put a shield up between Delaney and I, and it worked to my advantage. Even though the whole thing had grossed me out, I hadn't been hurt.

Instead, I was inconvenienced for weeks by Delaney's persistence to have a better experience. He clearly wanted to try again, and I was trying to walk the line between friendly and firm. About a month later I had to say, "You've slept with nearly every girl in the department. I don't want to be part of that statistic."

He said, "Ouch" and I felt good about myself for a while, but in the middle of the night it occurred to me that his dick had been in my mouth. I was part of that statistic.

\*

In the *Twilight Saga*, Bella's sexuality is presented as the most dangerous thing of all. There is a heavy emphasis on this in the first two books, *Twilight* and *New Moon*. Edward tells her that he might accidentally kill her at any moment if she doesn't control herself. Sexuality is presented as a weakness when it's not in marital terms, and that is

often how it is presented culturally, especially in terms of women. Our greatest virtue, our only agency, is control over our sexuality, and this is why Bella is relatable.

When I was in my senior year of college, I felt betrayed by my sexuality, because it didn't want to be guarded when I did. This was why I let Delaney touch me, even though, at the time, I had a crush on the guy playing Romeo. Afterwards I felt like I had betrayed that crush. How could I ever deserve someone's love if I had stooped so low? If I couldn't *control* myself?

No matter how sex positive I was about others, and characters, I still believed at some core level that I should have more control over who I shared my most private places with. I also felt ashamed because I knew I hadn't been very good. Despite not liking Delaney very much, or even wanting him, I still cared about his default male opinion, and got validation out of the fact that he still tried to pursue me.

\*

During finals week, Peter came over to sit on the stoop and have a cigarette with me at three in the morning. I had an exam the next day and I got high and tried to study, but ended up talking to him on Facebook instead. He lived across the street from me, so he said, "Hey I'm gonna have a cigarette, can I come over and have one with you?"

I told him I really had to study, but somehow he talked me into it. Before he had shown up I was putting on my robe and I said to Magan, "Apparently, Pete Mum is coming over for some reason? For a cigarette?"

She said, "Weird" and came out to greet him before going back to bed.

Peter sat next to me, and I stared at the blades of grass, and suppressed a stoned giggle. “Fuck, I have an exam tomorrow!”

“Yeah, I have one coming up, too.” Peter said. His hair glinted in the streetlight and when he lit a cigarette, it caused his face to become the same orange.

I shook my head, “I think I need to stop smoking, and drinking, and getting high so much.”

Peter grabbed my arm and said in the most serious tone he could, “Don’t talk like that!” as if I had said I was going to jump off a cliff.

I laughed so hard I had to gasp for air, and we passed another hour smoking and talking.

\*

I accidentally left my make-up bag at my uncle’s house a few weeks before the end of the semester, and so I had started to go to all my classes, and all my rehearsals, without make up. At that point I was too busy to care, but as I examined myself in the mirror before going out, I thought back to the girl who always wore her contact lenses, always had make up on her face before she left the house, and always reapplied her lipstick.

I hadn’t exactly given up on my crush on Romeo, or any of my crushes. But I cared about the last two weeks of school a lot more at this point. I wanted to hang out with my friends, and get drunk, and laugh, and not worry about if I was attractive or not. Losing the make up bag had been a little freeing.

I went to a party at Delaney's house, where twenty or thirty of us sprawled on the floor to play kings. Delaney had finally figured out that it wasn't going to happen again, and left me alone. I was sitting next to Magan, and cackling with laughter at Peter, who sat across from me telling a story for the "Never have I ever" part. His eyes light up wickedly as he sold someone out, making them drink. We locked eyes and laughed.

At this party, I was celebrating. I found out that afternoon that I got into grad school and I ran around the halls of the theatre building cheering. Jake said before a show, "Do you really want to go to Grad School?" with this incredulous tone. I smirked and said, "Yes" surprised that he had even spoken to me.

After the game dispersed, I leaned my head back on the couch, drunkenly talking to a few friends, waiting for Magan to finish talking to Peter in the kitchen. She had this thing she did when she was drunk where her "southern momma" came out. She was capable of zeroing in on the one person in the room who needed her advice. It was radar and, as far as I could tell, at least 99% accurate. But I was tired and ready to go. I could hear her counseling tone and see Peter's tall outline under the kitchen light.

Elliot could tell from my face that I was ready to get out of there. He told me, "I'll walk her home. You guys just go."

I was only halfway listening to his generous offer. Magan's counsels took a while because they were very heartfelt. It occurred to me that Magan didn't know Peter that well, at all. I only knew him because he was in the show, but Magan wasn't. He'd been over once or twice, but not that much. Not enough for her to have this much to say.

The truth overcame me. One of the keys to Magan, Alyssa's, and my special friendship was that we were all perceptive. We all knew what it feels like to just *know*

something that hadn't been even close to obvious a second ago. And I knew. Peter *liked* me. Magan was giving him advice about what to do about the fact that he *liked me*.

As a romantic partner, Peter had not occurred to me. I thought he was a freshman. I thought he was eighteen. I found out he was a transfer student who was 20, but that still seemed too young to me. He was nice, and funny, and handsome, but I wasn't into him. I thought he was interesting, and I'd noticed him around, but he was not my type. How did this happen?

"Are you sure you don't mind?" I asked Elliot. "I think this might take awhile."

Elliot said he didn't, and so I walked home with another friend and passed out on the futon in the living room of my apartment. I had to get up early to show Girl Scouts around the theatre for a volunteer thing.

I showed up with Taylor at 8 in the morning, hungover, and spent the day talking to kids about Shakespeare. When I finally got to go home, the second I was in the door Magan said, "By the way, Pete Mum totally likes you."

I plopped down in a chair and looked at her, baffled, and said, "I know, right?"

\*

At another party at Delaney's house, I decided I needed to let Peter down gently. We stood on the back patio, smoking. I tried not to think about what I had done in this house a few months before. This was about Peter. He was a nice guy and deserved an explanation. I wasn't sure how to start. I took a drag to stall, and then I said, "Listen, I heard that you have feelings for me. But the thing is, I'm going to Memphis in four

months. It's not that you're younger, you know, you're cute, if I had another year I might give it a shot, but..."

Peter shifted his weight a few times. He looked at me from underneath his large eyebrows and said, "I know. Timing has always been a problem for me."

His tone was self-deprecating, and smart. It was grown-up. I expected something different. I chuckled softly with him and said, "Yeah me too."

As I dismissed him, I noticed things about him I hadn't noticed before. I noticed that he was kind, and funny, and intelligent. I didn't admit that I felt anything romantic for him, but I felt a fondness I couldn't describe. I felt regret.

I hung out with him for the rest of the night. We walked to a friend's apartment, her on Peter's left arm, and me on his right. I noticed that I liked the way his arm felt through the thickness of his jacket. At the apartment, while our friend made some drunk macaroni for us to eat, I laid my head on his lap. I knew I was giving him mixed signals, but I was so overwhelmed with end of the semester nostalgia, and a drunken glow, that I didn't let myself think about it. After a minute or two he inhaled, resting his hand on my hip. Part of it touched my skin, where my shirt was slightly lifted.

I could feel that his hand was unsure, but I didn't move it and after a minute he relaxed. I sat up for macaroni and didn't return to the position on his lap, but I noticed I was reluctant to break it.

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I hung out with Peter a lot the last week of school, neglecting more established groups of friends, or meshing him into them. On my last night there was a big party and I whispered to Alyssa, “I think I want to make out with Peter tonight.” She encouraged me. For days she had been telling me, “he’s cute” and “he’s not too young” and “it doesn’t matter that you’re moving to Memphis!”

The night was magical, though we didn’t make out. I sat on his lap for a while and felt comfortable there, too. All the friends I’d made and I danced, and told stories, and smoked, and got drunk, just like we always did. Alyssa and I danced under the moon, embracing the magic we always felt in that place. It was a hedonistic funeral for a place in time, one where I was confident and unencumbered. Everyone was happy and we saved our tears for the last possible minute.

When the party broke up, I hugged everyone goodbye. I hugged Peter and we awkwardly laughed. He said, “Visit,” and I said, “Yes.” He stood in the courtyard waiting for the friends he came with. I hugged friends that I had for much longer than Peter and wondered why my gaze fixed on him, standing stoically in the courtyard, looking back at me.

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We talked every night on Facebook, we talked via text and on the phone. Eventually we admitted an attraction, and I was floored by the sound of his voice when I had the courage to say “I miss you,” and how wonderful it sounded to hear his voice say, “I miss you too.”

I still had some summer classes to take, and in late June he visited the apartment that I was staying in. We spent the whole day hanging out with friends, but the knowledge was there that we were going to have sex by the end of the night. In the afternoon, we broke away to go to my bedroom and have our first kiss.

“You should probably just do it,” I said, my hands on his chest. “If I try I’ll just laugh at myself and make it awkward.”

“And I won’t?” he asked.

We hugged, and looked into each other’s eyes, and finally, I had the courage to take the leap and kiss someone I cared about. I tripped, and mostly kissed his chin, but he pulled me up and we kissed for a long time. It wasn’t gross.

At about three in the morning, when we were finally, alone we stumbled into my bedroom pulling off clothes and holding each other up. We collapsed onto my mattress and whispered, and laughed, and made love.

I was not self-conscious, though I was nervous. He kissed me softly and touched me softly. He took care with each part of me and I did the same for him without knowing how, it just happened. We looked into each other’s eyes, and moved together, brushing fingers along arms, legs, holding hands. For the first time, during sex, I orgasmed. And I knew it. I wasn’t too self-conscious to doubt.

He kissed me deeply, like he loved me, and I came three times.

We finished, but stayed entwined. I wanted to say I loved him, but instead I kissed him, over and over, on his lips, his eyelids, his cheeks, his neck. He asked, “Good?”

I laughed, “What do you think?”

We showered together, and he didn't look at me strangely the way David did. We joked together, and kissed under the streaming water. We settled into bed as if we had done it a thousand times before and he drifted off to sleep, holding my hand. I stared at his hand in mine and was happy.

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Peter was the first time I felt sexuality without shame and without the feeling that I had lost some kind of control. It was also the first time that my pleasure was part of the equation. Delaney had attempted to pleasure me, but I deflected it because I didn't feel comfortable enough with him to orgasm. I felt that if I did, it would have been more for his gratification than for mine. I didn't know the words for that though.

As a culture we spend a lot of time telling girls how to say "no" to sexuality while allowing boys to accept sex as an uncontrollable part of their nature. No cultural conversation exists that gives girls the vocabulary to say "yes" and not just "yes" but "like this" and "not like that." Were it not for my extraordinary luck to fall into love and into a surprisingly functional relationship, I would've carried on for years with the same stunted views.

No matter how much sex positive thought I'd been exposed to in college, it's hard to let that override the subconscious conditioning of shame when it comes to female sexuality. But there is not just cultural shame associated with female sexuality, but with sexuality in general. Peter also had been conditioned to have a certain amount of shame about the whole thing, and were it not for the luck of learning what was wrong about our

expectations in each other's arms, I think we would have ended up in reductive relationships easily.

This is where I am lucky. I thank the universe every day for that man, knowing that even if it doesn't work out, we will still have learned a great lesson from one another. Some would argue that feminism that involves a man isn't feminism. I would say that feminism without a man is talking to a brick wall. It took the comparison of making love to Peter, a man who cared about what was going on in my head, for me to realize what was wrong with the expectations that I had previously held. And I am not ashamed of that.

Sex isn't something you're owed or that you owe. An orgasm isn't bestowed, it's something that comes about through communication, trust and time. But it wasn't just the notions we had of sex from the cultural discussion that set my generation up for unrealistic expectations. It was pornography.

## CHAPTER NINE: YOU LIKE THAT?

I was about ten years old. I was in the basement with my two friends Sarah and Anna, sitting on the Berber carpet, the woolen lumps making indentations in my hands. We were talking about our usual topics, nerdy sci-fi stuff. The conversation turned to the tantalizing world of that which we did not know.

We were at the age where our parents had given us failed monologues about sex. In my case, Mom sounded like an actor struggling to remember the lines of a long speech that had been rehearsed, but on which she drew an immense blank. Aware of her audience, she faltered, and what information I had gotten was unclear. I knew that things went into other things, but that wasn't information I had gotten from Mom. It was one of those tidbits that the other kids told me, and that I examined media to determine the validity of. A few Seinfeld jokes, an R rated film or two, and a kid can glean a lot.

I didn't know how much of the details that Sarah and Anna had explained to them, but as we sit Indian style the topic of sex (potentially, still s-e-x, which becomes its own word among confused, and curious, children,), did come up. Sarah, having a full year of seniority over me, was the most knowledgeable of all of us. I looked up to her, and thought of her as a big kid. She had shown me many television shows and books, so I assumed she knew a lot more about sex than I did, and I didn't question it when she decided to show us something truly dirty that she saw on the internet.

I was sheltered from the Internet, but Sarah and Anna had lots of access to it. They frequented chatrooms and forums, but I didn't even have an email address. Sarah really liked anime and introduced me to some of the tamer Japanese cartoons that I

wasn't allowed to see because my parents bought into the stories about these cartoons giving children seizures.

Sarah got onto the slow dial up of the dinosaur basement computer that was Mom's to use for taxes. But every now and then we could get past the generic mountain lion wallpaper and play "Storybook Weaver" and "Oregon Trail."

But as Sarah knelt in front of the computer with her long, blonde hair, that I envied, in a brightly colored ponytail holder, she bypassed the lack of knowledge that kept me off of "the net." We waited for the computer to connect. The antiquated screeching noise made me self-conscious, like we were going to be caught by one or the other of my parents. What if one of them was on the phone and this dropped their call? What if the Internet popped up even more horrifying images than what Sarah was searching for? I was worried a pedophile would appear on the screen, beaming back at us with satisfied eyes, and absent pants. An outcome that is far easier to achieve since the advent of chatroulette.

But we reached this unknown virtual reality without incident. Sarah expertly clacked her fingers on the keys until we saw the things my parents had tried to shield me from with this Internet banishment. Cartoon images of acts I had not imagined in that way were there, plain, and frank, and less tantalizing than previously expected.

As an adult I think back on this with some disappointment. It was my first experience with porn and it was *hentai*. The thing that losers jerk off too. These were the first pornographic images I saw, with the exception of a few exposed women in neon bikinis that graced the walls of the Harley-Davidson where my oldest brother worked. I wasn't aching to see any, nor was I interested in the porn so much as the Internet itself.

Because I knew the “ins and outs” of the facts of life, the still images of the girls that looked like Sailor Moon being penetrated by phallic purple blobs, that could have been tentacles, didn’t shock me. They made me laugh. They were ridiculous. I find it strange that at that age I was able to laugh this explicit imagery off, but maybe it is the fact that they were cartoons that made them so funny. They were childish, and in a way, they were an accurate depiction of how a prepubescent girl imagines sex. The penetration was aggressive and alien, but intriguing because the girls were smiling.

There were white lines that looked like they were supposed to be liquid all over everything, and though I knew about penetration, I had no idea about lubrication, or ejaculation. We giggled and quit the Internet when we heard footsteps upstairs. No one came down. Instead, there was an eruption of laughter, the likes of which tends to follow one of my Dad’s dirty jokes. We sighed. We got away with it.

We brought ourselves back to the world of play with ease, and it is only now that I wonder at the fact that I was amused, and curious, but not changed in any way. I wonder at how the submission of these animated and overly sexual women may have affected my psyche. But I find it more interesting and disturbing that my young and impressionable mind didn’t see a difference between submissive women and sexual women.

The blue haired nudes with their eyes squeezed shut, though smiling, were being penetrated by formless entities with phallic protrusions, and nothing in that seemed weird to me beyond the mechanics of white liquid. Was I too young for questions of female subjugations and objectification? Or was I simply accustomed to *that* aspect of what I was seeing.

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A few weeks later, Mom brought up “the internet,” saying the word with contempt in her voice. We were on a long car ride and there was no possible way for me to make a stealthy exit. My heart panicked at the word. I knew from the way she said it that she had seen what I had seen. It was the same situation I had been in when she gave me the faulty sex-talk. The car was her venue of choice because I couldn’t escape. The benefit of the car was that eye contact was not mandatory, and so I craned my neck at every passing sign and tree as if they were all four car pile ups.

Mom said she wasn’t accusing, but she had seen some things pop up, and wanted to talk about them with me. I pretended not to know anything about it. When that didn’t work I threw Sarah and Anna under the bus and said they wanted to look, but I didn’t because I was a pure little girl with no questions whatsoever. She still brings it up, saying Sarah and Anna were exposed to the Internet too young.

But we all were. My generation had unprecedented access to the Internet, access that has since been surpassed.

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For a long time, this was the most remarkable experience with porn that I had. Of course, porn drifted in and out of my periphery as I grew up. A magazine here, an article there. The year *Pirates* came out, nearly everyone saw it. It came out shortly after *Pirates of the Caribbean* reached its height of popularity. I saw enough to know it was hilarious and oddly similar to the porn I had seen depicted for laughs in the most recent Judd Apatow, or Kevin Smith, film.

It seemed that pornographic material, though I had no particular interest in it, was permeated in the culture nonetheless. Famous titles like *Shaving Ryan's Privates* and *Edward Penishands* were never shocking, just as the hentai hadn't been. Without having seen pornography, I knew exactly what the "Backdoor" in the fake *South Park* title, *Backdoor Sluts 9*, referred to. Without seeking porn out, the clichés about throbbing members, and throbbing bass, slutty blonde women with shaved pussies, and the unrelenting attentions of pizza delivery men, were all well known to me. I knew what porn was supposed to look like.

I never stopped to examine these ideas and archetypes, but accepted them because they are as ingrained in our culture as the tropes of our religion, and our morals. Porn stars become stock characters in their own right, along with the dippy housewife, and the hardened businesswoman. So without having seen *Leave It to Beaver*, I'm still fairly sure June Cleaver knew how to make a pie, and without having seen *Debbie Does Dallas*, I know that Debbie had big hair and rode dick with unrivaled expertise.

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I wanted to know the entire history of Peter's sex life. I asked him prying questions that he gladly answered. I looked him in the eye and asked, "Baby, what do you jerk off to?"

At this point, it wasn't an attempt to have a discussion about feminism. I hadn't even started calling myself a feminist yet. I wanted to know because I didn't know what he liked to watch, though I had made the cultural assumption that he did watch porn

because he's a guy. For a long time, I didn't ask because we were in a long distance, relationship and often the answer would be he watched me pleasuring myself over Skype. Since I could also see him, including the brand of lotion he was using, his masturbatory habits didn't feel like a mystery. But I wanted to know the role that pornography played in the process.

I wanted to know what kind of porn Peter watched. What sort of girls? What sort of positions? Did he have an appreciation for the classics? Did he, as I feared, enjoy strange porno? Something with bungee cords and kitchen utensils?

Peter's response was vague. He seemed a little embarrassed, and he wasn't aware of the interest that was brewing within me to understand the role the pornography plays in male and female psychology, both as individuals, and as a sexual unit.

This is when he told me about *Green Sweater Butt Fuck*. Peter is not into "ass-play" but he has seen this particular porno a few times because it stars his old high school Spanish teacher. He only saw "her work" after their semester together through the whisperings of other students. It was not a porn for personal pleasure, but instead (with the purest intentions that those of us in the internet age can muster), a conversation piece. This is, completely understandable. If I had a former teacher in porn, I would be far less restrained than Peter. I would show it to everyone I know.

We sat down to watch *Green Sweater Butt Fuck* together. I wish I could say for humor's sake that we got all snuggled up with a bowl of popcorn, but it wasn't long enough for that. The film contained roughly eight minutes of, in my limited experience, sub par ass action. The camera angle didn't lend itself to any definitive penetration, and was mostly a close up of Señora's face. She was bent over a desk. Peter said it looked

like his old classroom. She was naked on the bottom and wore a green sweater on top. Blonde hair hung in her eyes and a naked man, whose face we couldn't see, stood behind her gyrating.

The camera angle made me doubt the reality of the penetration. On the wall behind her a clock ticked with ambivalence. A phone rang. I wished one of them would answer it and talk dirty, but it just kept ringing. It rang over and over again, and then stopped. The man kept thrusting and Senora twisted her face in what looked more like pain than pleasure. Nothing else happened until the "money shot," which was after a change in position, and a blowjob.

I hadn't expected anything romantic by any stretch of the word. But the pained expression on Señora's face troubled me. It became less funny. The thrusting with none of the expected bass guitar, the grunting, and the phone gave the events on the screen an air of the casual, even of the boring, and commonplace. The woman was being degraded in a cacophony of ambivalence. One of the comments on the video said, "This is my Spanish professor. WIN."

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I told friends about my interest in pornography and its implications for feminism. About a theory that it creates a disconnect between the sexes, even if they both watch. One friend said it was an excuse for me to watch tons of porn. Others gave me porn recommendations.

While discussing porn with an acquaintance, she looked at her pink nails and said, “Well, it’s a fantasy!” in a defensive tone.

But whose fantasy is pornography?

I was curious about porn in an analytical way. I wanted to examine the roles of women in porn because, thus far, all the pornography that I was exposed to was for male use. A good deal of the culture is the male side of sexuality. I saw enough porno clichés to know what it should look like, but I wasn’t prepared for the fact that this is culturally, the strongest window into mainstream male sexuality. This is not to say that all men think, and act, the way porn stars do, or even that all men expect the sex that they are seeing in porn. What I mean to say is that the standard tropes we see, playing out in explicit detail, are an exaggerated example of the way sex is processed culturally.

We live in a culture that is based on puritanical ideals, and this means that despite being a post sexual revolution America, we still are not even close to free from those puritanical roots. We are more liberal with sexuality in the media, but the ideals surrounding sex are just as outdated, and just as male centric.

Where do you look when everywhere you see “male sexuality” and no representation of the female? And worse, no representation of emotional sexuality outside of programming for women? No representation of wanton sexuality outside of male programming?

I know some may think I’m discounting some of the more feminine viewpoints that we have seen lately as part of post women’s lib life. I know some women think that because we can see women seeking out sexual pleasure on television that we are being represented. The best example of this is *Sex and The City*, which doesn’t go far enough,

in my opinion. The women on it are more vapid than not, and value standard feminine things like clothes and shoes, and despite having a supposedly awesome sex life, they still seek love from men, and Carrie in particular, gets jerked around by a bad boy.

The truth is, I don't see many examples of a true female viewpoint because, despite being a woman myself, *I don't know what that is*. I have no idea what that might look like. This isn't because women don't know what they want, or that I don't know what I want. It isn't because we are catty and dislike the too-beautiful women in shows. Or that we are angry feminists who want to pick apart all things fun, and romantic, because women don't need men.

It is that we don't know what it looks like because it has yet to be fully represented without the shackles of tropes and cultural expectations. Femininity is a source of cultural shame that makes women dismiss programming for them as guilty pleasures, without taking the time to fully understand the feminine. Because I don't know what a feminine perspective *truly* looks like, I can only tell you what it is not. And, for the most part it is *not* pornography.

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Despite the stereotype of women as sexless, women do use porn. In fact, biologically we are more stimulated by it than men. At least, according to a show I watched on the Discovery Channel. In this show, a study was done on women and men measuring their levels of arousal while watching porn. They attached electrodes to the

subjects brains, and to their genitals, and gave them a clicker so that they could measure their conscious level of stimulation. Men used the clicker to report arousal as often as their dicks did, but with women it was a lot more complicated than that.

Physically, women were fully aroused by the imagery, no matter what orientation of the porn they were watching. But mentally, they reported being far less turned on than men did overall. In some ways, this is not surprising. Women have endured generations of social pressures about purity.

What our bodies seem to be saying is that we do enjoy sex, but that we have to be selective about who we share that with. One of the conclusions that this study came to was not sociological, but in fact biological. The study concluded that the women involved were truly not aware that they had been aroused. The scientists conducting the study believed that this sort of “natural coyness” comes from our evolutionary need to be far choosier when it comes to sexual partner than our counterparts. Basically, a man can sperm up an entire village and not have to change a single diaper, but a woman has at least nine months of commitment if that sperm takes.

In my opinion, this might be why so few women admit to using porn for their own pleasure. But I believe there exists another reason. I think what women see, though physically more than enough to get us ready for the act, is not a turn on. I have tried to use porn with the knowledge that the sexual imagery will take my body there more quickly. But the mind is the true sexual organ, and so far, trying to get aroused by these videos can take far more searching than feels necessary. I never find the right video. I call Peter instead, talking in a low voice.

The sight of women, as they are portrayed in porn, doesn't turn me, or most women I know, on. Heterosexual pornography for women does exist, but from what I can find it is mostly extended foreplay, fuzzy candlelight, forced passion to the type of music you hear in a Yoga class. The most socially accepted type of porn for women is erotica, which explains the massive success of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which people called "Mommy porn."

The idea is that women have to masturbate to something that other women are masturbating to in order for it to be socially acceptable for women to masturbate. Add to this the idea of female shame, and the toxicity of the relationship at the center of that "book," and you have an easy example of women feeling shame for their sexuality. The most socially acceptable female masturbation fodder involves not only bondage, but a scene in which a girl says the safe word, and is ignored. That's called rape, by the way.

The only good porn for women that I have found is a clip entitled "BEST PORN FOR WOMEN EVER!!" and that was just a video of a handsome guy doing the dishes while "Unchained Melody" played. Even though I laughed, I found this extremely sad.

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For the women who are willing to admit that they do watch porn, there is another socially acceptable masturbation aid. It is James Deen, the supposed male porn star for women, a concept that articles about him present as novel. Deen is presented as the woman-friendly male porn star.

I can see why women favor him. I understand, to a certain extent, his appeal. He has a style to his work. He looks at the women while pleasing them, keeping his eyes open during “box jobs.” He has a confident amount of forcefulness. His signature move is a hand placed gently on the girls’ throats while he stares at their moaning faces with intense, blue eyes. In fact, his hands are always placed gently. There is a confidence in the way he works, and most of all, he radiates a semblance of adoration if the scene calls for it. By looking at his costars in the way he does, he has grasped the true nature of what is sexy to his female fans. Even if he stumbled upon this accidentally, which articles about him indicate.

He was quoted in an interview, as saying that making out is more intimate than sex. I think we are supposed to believe that this sentiment is sweet, but I think it’s a sign of emotional detachment and immaturity. Literally nothing, to me, could be more intimate than the touching of one’s most private place with that of another. I know the notion of privacy is, somewhat, enforced by religion, by the puritanical need to cover our sex. I guess, for a porn star it’s easy to dissociate from the idea that your private parts are private. Deen’s dick might as well be a stapler, or some other office supply.

But I find it disturbing that someone who does sex for a living, and is supposed to be the ladies’ favorite person to do it, doesn’t realize the intimacy of it. Or the potential for intimacy. He follows his statement with, “But what is sex? You open your legs and I’m going to put something in there? There are so many things more emotional than sex.”

I find it telling that he calls his dick “something” and in between the legs is the “there” where the “something” goes. It’s distancing language. “There” isn’t just a hole for emissions, and it is not merely a prop for a pornographic performance. Nor is a penis

a “something.” These two parts are at the root of our creation. Our grandparents enjoyed them. I’m not saying it is necessary to remember that while watching or acting in porn, but I am suggesting that in order for a person to function as a mature sexual individual one should probably take some time, on occasion, to ponder the significance of the act.

I find it sad that the touted “porn star for women” is, though attractive, on a performance level, merely the best we can get. He doesn’t act in porn for women, he still pulls hair, and says bad dialogue in pornos that men also watch. It’s sad that someone who looks at his co-star, instead of at her ass, is a hot commodity for women bold enough to admit that they watch porn.

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Peter and I decided to watch some porn together. It’s something that we’d heard mature couples do, and it was an opportunity to show each other some things we like without having to explain them. We stumbled across a series called “Backroom Casting Couch” and it featured a disclaimer at the beginning. Something along the lines of, “These girls are auditioning for a film and I would cast them all. But what they don’t know is that there is no film and I am not an agent.”

The first one is called, “Girl fucks me while her boyfriend waits.”

The camera is held by the “agent” as he walks outside of his “casting office” to greet a young girl and her boyfriend. Banter is exchanged about the girl wanting to be an adult film star and how the boyfriend feels about it. His voice hints at the sexuality and also sounds like a frat guy.

The girl is slim and has long dark hair. The boyfriend doesn't appear to be too attached to her as he lets her go off into a dark room to audition for a career in porn. He lets go of her hand and turns around without saying goodbye.

Then it cuts to a fluorescent room where the girl is facing the camera and being interviewed. She is asked how often she masturbates, and what she uses. If she tastes herself. She is asked to stand and strip. She does a short dance to no music, but the detached encouragement of the man behind the camera. When she is naked, he tells her to face the wall, and put her hands on it as if she is being strip-searched, and then to bend as low as she can. He compliments her vagina.

She sits down naked, sticking to a leather sofa, and the agent says, "I'm going to ask you to suck me off." She laughs a nervous laugh, and he says, "You knew I was going to ask you that, right?"

And she smacks her lips, and says, in an infantile voice, "Yeah."

As she has her mouth around the cock of the headless body the agent says, "Suck my dick like you suck your boyfriend's dick." When he finishes he asks, "Did you swallow?"

She says, gagging slightly and blowing cum bubbles, "I ate it all up. All up. Like a good girl."

We clicked on only a few more. We saw one with "Insemination" in the title and skipped through enough to hear Agent ask if a young redhead was on the pill.

The comments on the video were about how hot she looked with her mouth around things. In the video, the Agent tells her, as she gags with tears in her eyes, "You don't have to choke yourself on it."

Peter shut the computer, and we went out onto the balcony, and smoked. We were not turned on.

I stared at squirrels jumping from tree to tree, and at a cluster of girls walking towards the pool in small bikinis.

“I don’t know what’s worse. If that was real or if someone was simulating that scenario to get people off,” I said.

“Jesus,” Peter said.

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I’m okay with the idea of pornography. It’s never going away, but if only it would become something more positive. Because I do have a problem when I think people are being exploited. This is where my real issue with pornography lies. The women in the vast majority of porn that I’ve seen have been treated like no more than cattle to be prod. They have been draped over furniture, a pair of boobs and an ass to be stuffed and mounted on the mantle of male privilege.

The male gaze is not something that is intrinsically wrong, the female gaze exists too, and also lingers on the ass and chest. But there is something wrong with exploitative male gaze being the only source young men have for shaping their gaze, and for their viewing of explicit sexuality. Young people can get to porn earlier and earlier, and that wouldn’t be a bad thing if porn showed sex as something fun and good, instead of something seedy and exploitative, where women have to be coerced or tricked. And when I saw that porn, and *Green Sweater Butt Fuck*, a notion began to form in my head. I began to see women treated pornographically in commercials, in conversation.

I began to form the words for the expectations I had felt. I realized why Delaney had asked me where I wanted him to cum. I realized he wanted me to say “On my face” and mean it. I realized that Joe and David might have expected something more from me than I could deliver, just like I expected romantic ideals from them. We grew up watching two different things, playing two different sets of games, with toys from two different aisles, in two different colors, and we were told not to talk about sex. We were told to spell it out, like a dirty word.

And so how were we supposed to know how to treat one another? I was limp and over-accommodating. They were persistent and expectant.

Then I learned the word for how I felt. It was “feminism.” I was a feminist. It felt like it was overnight, even though it was a whole life of careful observation in the making. But it took pornography to put me on a soapbox. A high up soapbox. So high that I’m scared up here.

I envy the girls that claim to be feminists but don’t act on it, don’t question when they might be reductive. I even envy the women who think feminism robbed them of their right to be wives. I envy men and fear I am losing my sense of humor. I scream at television when it tells me I’m busy, and that there are products for me when I am on the go. I am mired in all this *noticing* and a huge part of me wants to go back to enjoying *America’s Next Top Model* in ignorant bliss.

Being a feminist in 2013 sucks and here is why: it means admitting that the sexual revolution did more damage than good, and that women’s lib wasn’t a success because we are still paid less than men. Before I could make jokes about that, but now it’s just not funny. Now that I’ve admitted that it’s true, I’m not laughing. And while I’m not

laughing, I'm terrified of being labeled a humorless femi-nazi, despite the fact that that is a sexist term.

Growing up, my generation was presented with this idea that the 60s fixed all of our social problems. African Americans are no longer dealing with racism. Women are no longer harassed and treated as sexual objects. We are all equal. Even as a kid, you can see that these things still need work. But you get the idea, that because of these movements, things are on the up and up. You may see exceptions to the rule, but that doesn't mean that the oppression isn't *over*.

That's how I felt. Now I feel disappointment and disillusionment. It's scary and sad to realize that though we have come far in many ways, in other ways we have gone backward. It's sad to know that I was born in the 80s, post-feminist movement, post women's liberation, and I still wanted to be malleable to the desires of males. It's disheartening that we still have to fight for our right to choose, that we are still raised thinking of ourselves as virgin-whore dualities because that is all we see on television.

The saddest realization of my life was the moment I ran out of fingers on which to count the women I know who have been raped. To know that the numbers are larger than what I've been told, because those are from the girls who aren't too ashamed to admit it. It's horrifying to know that they feel shame.

I watched porn, and my brain cracked, and out flew everything that was wrong with how I had thought before. Peter listened to me when I talked, and I was horrified to find that I was surprised by that. How strange that a man listening to me felt like a wrong expectation. I could ask for what I wanted in sex, and that felt surprising. I finally said, aloud, "I am a feminist," and Peter listened to that statement, and agreed. He said, "Me

too!” And then I talked to other feminists, and other women, and I saw how many women weren’t as lucky as me, though I was frustrated and exhausted, and my heart broke.

## EPILOGUE

After two and a half years of long-distance, Peter and I were finally together. He finished school and moved to Memphis to be with me in December 2012. We rang in the New Year together, negotiated bills, shared electronics, and compromised on closet-space. Peter got rid of quite a few things to move in with me, so I finally conceded, and gave a lot of clothes to the Goodwill to make room for him in my life.

We spent each night together, curled up around one another, the bed no longer engulfing me. I knew I could reach out to his snoring figure any time I wanted and it wouldn't push him into disliking me. I could even wake him up if I wanted to. In the mornings, when the sun filtered in through the blinds, and we kissed each other, and smiled, and I knew that I had one thing that was just like a movie, and that was okay, too.

I had been working on a book for the past year of our relationship, on feminism, and Peter took the subject on passionately, as well. I would write for an hour, and come out onto our deck to take a smoke break, and he would join me. "I just read/saw/heard/ this thing about the video game/comic/movie/TV show..." he let me know anything that I might need for my research. Sometimes, I would borrow his computer and find tabs open in the browser of five or ten articles about feminism that he had read, but forgotten to tell me about.

Feminism became his hobby, too, and we analyzed varied aspects of pop culture together. At night, in bed, he would say, "Did you see that article I posted on your wall about why there isn't a Wonder Woman movie?" and I drifted off to sleep knowing that I wasn't alone in the fight. That I had someone from the "other side" who agreed with me.

\*

In February of 2013, Peter and I go to a dive in Memphis with our housemates, Sarah and Mitch, to see a comedy show. Graffiti clings to each visible surface and Peter pauses, for a moment, to ponder sitting at the table with the ashtray that is close to the air conditioner, but is covered with veiny, accurate drawings of monstrous cocks. He moves the ashtray to a non-dick table. I smile at him, and take a seat next to him as he drapes an arm around the back of my chair, and squeezes my shoulder with his hand. I kiss him on the cheek and we smile at each other. “No dick table?” I ask.

“Nah,” he says.

Sarah waits at the bar for “the first pitcher,” and Mitch folds his elbows on the table in front of him. Peter and I ask him about the comedians, some of whom Sarah knows, and light our cigarettes on the same flame. I am bracing myself to be offended. Comedians haven’t really been working for me lately. They have too often relied on outdated tropes about women for humor, and it is difficult to explain what they are doing wrong without feeling like a stereotypical angry feminist. The truth is, women have a lot to be angry about. But, in my day-to-day life, I have begun to avoid comedians if they aren’t recommended to me by someone I trust.

In order to enjoy stand-up comedy, I have to ready myself for cognitive dissonance. I have to accept that each joke will involve me having to decide if something is funny, or sexist as hell. I know while deciding, I will be wondering if it’s my problem. If feminists really do have no sense of humor. At some point, my armor should harden, and I will remember that the notion of the femi-nazi is a trap to keep me from being able to express outrage.

Peter smiles at me before he takes a drag, sucking his cheeks in as he does it. He knows that I am steadying myself for the possibility that I will be offended tonight. Sarah returns, beaming, with the pitcher, and we chat a bit before the mike squeaks and the onslaught begins.

I laugh as often as a grimace. I get drunk, blinking through the haze of smoke and neon. I let beer fizz at my lips when I can't hide an angry face. Sarah is laughing more than I am, but I am making a conscious effort not to be offended. Not on my Friday. Not on my night off. But it is work.

A comedian about my age comes on and starts talking about the difference between men and women. I grip Peter's hand, and he squeezes back, and winks at me. The comedian says, "Male comedians are either crazy all over the place, or very dry, and female comedians are...not funny."

About twenty or thirty male comedians come up to give short, ten-fifteen minute routines. Each time, I hope for humor that goes beyond the played out stock characters of dumb slut, shrewish wife, stupid bitch. Each time, I hope to laugh really hard. Sometimes, I do laugh, until they follow their joke up with something that makes me feel gross for laughing. The learned behavior of smoothing things over shows up in a screwed on smile, but inside I'm boiling.

Another comedian talks about how delicious he thinks Taylor Swifts "little cunt" would be. I consider walking out, but Sarah and Mitch are laughing. Sometimes Sarah says, "That's terrible" in a way that excuses something off-color, instead of admonishing it for being offensive. Sometimes she says, "Oh, why did I laugh at that?"

I get up to pee while a guy tells a story about a girl who he fucked in a bathroom stall while someone came into the next one over to shit. “The shit sounds are terrible, and the smell is worse. She pukes in the toilet right as I cum on her back!”

I hear women laughing all over the bar, their high-pitched giggles reverberating. Something about them gives me goose bumps.

I slam the stall of the bathroom and put my hands over my head. I heave two or three sighs. I sit down to pee and look at the graffiti on the damaged wood of the stall. It’s all pretty standard: phone numbers, calling each other a slut, calling men out for cheating, dirty jokes, sad confessions.

I hear more laughter in the bar. More women laugh, and I wonder what indignation I missed. The more I stare at the graffiti, the more it takes on a desperate tone. It overlaps and crams itself into every corner, inch, speck. I think, like me, the authors had been spending the moments before writing this angry or upset. Out in the bar they sat with smiles screwed on their faces, and when they finally relieved themselves physically, they had to do it metaphorically, too. They had to call someone a slut, or write, “you’re beautiful.” They had to say what was on their minds, because out there, out in the neon glow, no one was listening. Out there, the tables were covered with dicks, as if the dominant sex had marked their turf. Out there, writing about feelings was unacceptable. Out there, they were just dumb bar sluts, but in corners of this stall, they could write down that this guy who called them stupid *did* have a small dick.

I look at the cursive loops overlapping one another in whatever writing implement was available: Sharpie, paint markers, ballpoint pen, smudging pencil, eyeliner, lipstick. These overlapping letters are expressing something that the women who wrote them

couldn't express out in the bar. On the walls is anger, sadness, hunger, sexuality, and all things that women are supposed to smooth over, and slap a smile onto. The walls were covered with all the things that women are supposed to ignore.

I wish I had a pen in my purse. I want to write over the wall in big, unforgettable letters, "WHY DO WE PUT UP WITH IT?" But I don't have a pen so I go back to our table and plop down in the hard seat, feeling eyes on me as I walk. Peter puts a protective arm around me and kisses my cheek. I scan the smoke for one other face that might feel the way I do. Peter raises an eyebrow at me and I know he feels the same. I know that when we get home I will be able to tell him what was upsetting me. I know that he will say it before I do. That the second we are alone, in our bed, he will say, "What the fuck was with that guy talking about Taylor Swift?"

A comedian says, "This girl blew me, I mean, *right after* I had sex with this other girl who was on her period. Funny thing: *she's a vegan!*"

I'm the sole woman in the bar who is not laughing, and I begin to think maybe it is just me, maybe I am looking for sexism because it's what I'm interested in. It's what I'm writing about. I look at the laughing faces of my fellow women and, after a minute, their smiles take on the same tone as the graffiti.

Maybe I'm imagining it, but in their eyes I start to see an urge to scream. Maybe not every woman has felt the way I have, but in my hazy, beer-buzzed estimations, I can see it in all their faces. I can see the never verbalized hurt, shame, and guilt. They're laughing because they think they deserve to hear this said about them. They think that women, including themselves, are just dumb sluts sometimes. They think we deserve this

barrage of hate. I clack my nails on the table, and smile wide, as I realize that I no longer think that way about myself.

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