

Instructions:

This is not a linear book with proper chapter sequencing. To get the full *Portrait #6* experience, please do the following.

- Print this document out, only using one side of each page.
- Write down the chapter titles, or assign them a number and letter on separate pieces of paper.
 - NOTE: The first piece (“windshield wipers”) included in this otherwise randomly arranged document is untitled and separate from the other sections. Be careful not to mistakenly place it within another chapter.
- Place these scraps of paper in a hat and scramble them.
- One by one, blindly select one piece at a time and organize the chapters in the order they are randomly selected.
- Use a hole punch on this stack of paper.
- Place in a three-ring binder.
- Print out the front and back covers separately and place them in the front and back pockets.
- Read the story.
- Do the above each time you wish to read *Portrait #6* to get a more dynamic relationship with the material.

Portrait #6

Todd Daniel Crawford

The day you killed yourself, you killed me. I don't know if you meant to do that as an act of revenge. If so, maybe I deserved it. You probably didn't even consider it, though. You never could see past the length of your fingertips. So many nights spent numb in front of sitcoms, the light from the TV shining on me like I was the subject. The laugh track felt like it was mocking me. Is that what it feels like to be shot? You can't move. You hurt so bad you can't feel a thing. You just know there's a gaping hole in you and if something doesn't happen, you're going to bleed out.

Windshield wipers.

How could you be so reckless? So stupid? Even with all we'd been going through, how could you put me through this? How could you put your family through this? Were you on drugs? Were you drinking and driving? I wouldn't expect that of you but it's not like you weren't changing from the inside out. I'd been so afraid of what you were capable of doing to me that I never stopped to think about what you could have done to yourself. Maybe that was selfish, and I'm sorry for that, but at the end of the day, it was your responsibility. Sometimes, when I stop and look back on it all, I just get so—

Windshield wipers.

Upavistha Konasana

I met him at work. Isn't that how most affairs begin? I was checking customers out at the hardware store and apparently, he was checking me out, too. (*Later, he told me that another lane opened but he let the customer behind him pull in first just so he could talk to me. Say what you will, but that was kind of adorable.*) I don't even remember what he was buying, not that it's my business. It wasn't anything noteworthy, like duct tape, a machete, and rope. One time, I think I told you about this, but a couple college kids *did* buy stuff like that. They were quick to tell me it was to play a prank on their roommate. I *hope* they were telling the truth. The cops never came to question me about it, so, it seems legit in retrospect. Plus, what authority did *I* have to prevent that transaction if I was sketched out? We're just tools, same as the cash register, itself. So long as the money goes through, we're only there to enable the customer.

Anyhow, sorry, what was I talking about? Oh, yeah, right. He looked like a rock star in some television show or something. His hair, starting to recede at the temples, was greasy, black, and slipped back. Shades were protruding from a chest pocket of his black leather jacket. His five o'clock shadow was coming in nice. I knew from the second I laid eyes on him that he was the exact kind of person you'd hate. But I'm not you.

I blushed when he complimented my eyeliner. I told him I styled it after Cleopatra.

"Cleopatra?" He repeated, nodding. "I can see that, now that you mention it."

I kept my head down like a puppy that knew she had done something bad and was about to get in trouble, except, my head was down because I was worried about doing something bad. It's not like he'd be into a girl like me, anyhow. *He probably has a girlfriend, already, a tall, blonde girlfriend who likes to wear skintight red dresses and—*

"What are you doin' after work?" *Dang. He cuts right to the chase.*

“Walking home,” I said. “My car's at the mechanic's.”

“Need a ride?”

I shook my head, bashfully. “I don't live far. It's alright. Thank you, though.”

“You sure? Could be fun. We could go for a little drive. Just somethin' to do after work.”

He had a point. We *could* have fun, if only I wasn't so—if only it wasn't for you.

“C'mon. What time are you off? Do me a favor and let me treat you. We'll go get some coffee, catch that second wind.”

“That sounds nice,” I nodded. “I get off at six.”

Bhujangasana

I always forgot you were the younger brother. The way you talked about Wes, it always seemed like an older sibling irritated with his brother for making the wrong decisions. Before I even met him for the first time, I felt like I knew him from all the stories you had told me. I remember that one night we were really high and went through his Facebook, making fun of all his dorky posts. I always figured he'd be mooching off you for life. Maybe you'd be an old person, living on some farm somewhere, and he'd be squatting in some trailer parked in your yard.

I also remember how angry you were the first time you told me about your niece. You couldn't wait to see me. You called me on the drive to my house, ranting about *how could he cheat on his girlfriend?* and *if you're gonna cheat, you should at least use protection, you think Dad would've taught him that much!* You never said anything against your niece. Before you even met her, I could tell you cared about her, the way you'd worry about the life your brother would be able to give her. I remember that one time you took your brother to shop for a bunch of baby clothes just so you'd know she would have something. Even the way you talked shit on her mom felt protective. In hindsight, I can see all this parental instinct in you that just came off as a lack of tolerance for dipshits at the time.

You'd text me snapshots of her and give them funny captions. I still have them saved on my phone and go through them when I need a pic-me-up. (*Get it? Maybe it's better if you don't. That one was probably lame. I can hear your classic sigh, now.*) It never struck me as something you would want for yourself, with the lifestyle you had and your goals in life. That's on me, for making assumptions, I know. I thought, really, I was hoping that you wouldn't mind that I didn't keep our baby. Sometimes, I think about how that was probably just what I told myself so I wouldn't feel so awful about it. I know I should have told you sooner but I was afraid. I was scared about how you'd react. You hadn't been acting yourself for some time and I didn't know what to expect. A year ago, it would have been totally

different and that has nothing to do with your pronouns. All of a sudden, you had a mean streak in you, the way you'd throw things around when we'd argue and how you'd slam the door when you decided you'd have enough and would just go home. You never struck me but sometimes I could feel it anyways, like a phantom pain. I feel bad admitting it but sometimes in the sleepless nights leading up to the termination of the pregnancy, I could almost see it like a silent film playing in my head. We'd be seated on the couch and I'd be falling apart, trying to explain to you that I was pregnant and before we could even discuss the options, your hands would be around my neck. I was scared for me. I was scared for you, that you'd act out and I'd wind up calling the cops to have you taken away in handcuffs. I was also scared for our child.

So, I'm sorry about what I did. I'm also sorry that I told you over the phone. I know that was trashy and you probably died thinking about what a skank I am. I just didn't know what else to do. Our situation had become so complicated that I couldn't untangle it. I was already crying before your phone rang. I was trying to be brave but I know deep down, a part of me was pleading with the universe that you wouldn't pick up. At first you sounded so concerned and that only made the pain in my heart worse. Soon, as you pieced it together, before I could even blabber it all out between sobs, the compassion turned to rage. You were just screaming these horrible things and punching or kicking *something*, what it was, I'll never know. I'll never look back on that moment when I hung up on you without regret. That was the moment I knew it was all over. Something inside me just knew I'd never see you again. Maybe it was childish but you were gonna give me a heart attack.

I also live with the regret of never telling you the whole story, that the procedure had taken place weeks ago and between then and that final conversation, I had already been with him twice. I didn't know how to explain it to you. I never meant to hurt you but I felt like the worst person on the planet. Maybe hanging up was the coward's way out of that. If you're ever reading this, somewhere, somehow, you deserved to know those things. I'm sorry.

Tangled Cat

The first time I remember seeing your brother was while you were still at the hospital. The details get hazy around this time for me, so, this may not be my clearest piece. I know I didn't come immediately to see you. I was still in shock from the accident. I took the week off to recuperate and thankfully everyone was understanding. I didn't want to leave my house because I knew the second I would, I'd see the garage. I'd see myself stepping outside, drop my purse and then fall to my knees, sobbing in the driveway. It's tragic how so much of anxiety is the fear of fear itself. I was so lucky to not have been home when the accident happened; I can't imagine how hard that would've shaken me. I've already lost I don't even know how many nights to waking up in terror.

I'd forced myself to run small errands to break the agoraphobia, like running to the store to get milk or driving to the gas station just to fill my tank. This was the first time I left the house and actually needed to go. I remember sitting in the hospital parking lot, both hands on the steering wheel like I was waiting for the light to go green at a busy intersection, and coaching myself to build up the courage to just go in, already. I was worried that they wouldn't let me in to see you since we're not family. Or worse, that your family was in and I'd be interrupting something. These thoughts collected like raindrops on my windshield and I knew I needed to turn my wipers on before I could move forward.

That's my meditation technique. Some people suggest to view your thoughts like you're sitting on a hill in front of the road, watching traffic go by. I prefer the windshield analogy. I don't engage with the thoughts, I just notice them until it's time to nudge them out of my field of vision. It had been storming in my mind, though, and it seemed like I couldn't keep up, even with the wipers on full speed. Then, you'd come crashing through my windshield to shatter any illusion of inner peace.

I asked your location at the front office and was given a room number and directions. The nurse was happy to help and even happier to get back to her paperback. Hospitals always feel like visiting

some zoo of horrors. They've always made me uncomfortable but not like my visit to see you. There was a lot of commotion. I kept listening to every moan or scream in case I could hear your voice in them. I'd sneak a glance at the patients being rolled down the halls in case I'd find you in one of the wheelchairs. Really, I had no idea what state I expected you to be in. It was a toss-up whether you'd have the cartoon eye patch and headband or a black eye and a cast or if you hadn't any limbs left at all. I was too afraid to reach out and contact your family to ask.

As I approached the room number I was given, one outburst grew clearer and clearer. At first, it sounded like the wailing of a soul burning in Hell. It wasn't your voice but your brother's. It sounded like he was the one dying and not you. The things he was saying, they were just the most awful things. I'd like to say I can't remember but I just won't repeat the things I heard. It was like he was prodding a lion, like he expected to incite you out of your rest through harassment. I stood at the threshold of the door. I didn't dare enter or interrupt his ramblings. I didn't even want to be in that room, even if he was to exit. He was burning like incense and I felt that his outburst would be hanging in the air even after his departure. I just wanted someone to do something, to get him out of there. He clearly needed help in ways I couldn't offer.

Then, he looked up at me with the bloodshot eyes of a junkie. He didn't appear offended by my intrusion but shocked, like I'd stumbled in on him changing. I had broken the sanctity of a private moment. I felt flushed. I marched away like I had stopped at the wrong doorway and didn't look back.

Dvi Vrksasana

The first time I met you felt like brushing shoulders with a celebrity. I was out with one of my students for drinks. She recommended going to Fuzzy's and meeting up with her friends, who were regulars. She seemed like an interesting girl but when she suggested the gay bar, I was a little nervous she thought I was interested in her in other ways. Turned out, she was a hetero F-hag like me. I had never been to Fuzzy's before but I had heard of the reputation from immature high school jokes. "Hey, Dave, I heard your dad was at Fuzzy's last night." "How would you know? You see him there?" *Ohhhhhh*. The actual location looked sketch after dark, lit only by my headlights and a few neon signs in the windows. You told me once how the old building was a sort-of relic, a holy ground for all the Others in town. It occupied that building just out of town so that patrons would have some comfort of privacy. They never relocated once times changed due to the legacy of the establishment. It was a historic landmark, of sorts. Like any old building, there were rumors surrounding the place. There were orgies there every week. It was a front for drug deals. More rape happens there in a month than the rest of the city has in a year. It was all bologna, anyone who's ever set foot in the place would know.

Unfortunately, I was caught up in a much more real circumstance. I was demoted from one half of a barhopping partnership to a third wheel as my student and her friends gossiped about people they knew in the social and biblical senses. I'm not much one for kissing and telling. I also knew no one in their social circle, including all but one person present at the table. I felt like I was drowning, sunken too far down to even know which way I needed to swim to break the surface. I think I have this thing called sensory overload sometimes, when the music is blasting, the conversation is shouted, and there are three different TV sets playing above the bar with a different station on each one, not to mention all the flashing lights. I'm not blaming my social failings on that wholly but I do think it's a handicap.

Anyhow, I got up to use the restroom. At least, that's what I told them so I could check my

phone without feeling rude. I had reached for it in one swift motion as I stood up and was tapping away by the time I took two steps towards my destination. That's how I ran into you.

It was a typical movie encounter, almost embarrassing in how cliché it was. You bumped into me. (*Kidding. I admit that I wasn't paying attention and accept full liability for any damages.*) Your beer spilled all over the front of your shirt, making it look like you had a very oddly-patterned sweat stain across it. As I was apologizing profusely, you stopped me and said it's O.K. "But if you want, you can make it up to me on the dance floor."

I'm not a dancer, if you hadn't figured that out by now. I wasn't born with two left feet; I've got a right foot on the left and vice-versa. My rhythm is a flat line. I have no moves. Worst of all, I'm not only awkward but shy as well. You intimidated me, with your height and the way your makeup was applied better than my own. Yet, there was something in those eyes framed with the eyeliner that radiated kindness. Did I want to dance? Not so much. But I did want to spend more time with you than our brief encounter.

You could tell immediately that I was a klutz. If our collision didn't tip you off, my disjointed flailing surely did. So, you put your hands on my hips and subtly guided me before pulling me in closer. Most of the other people were bumping and grinding but our dance was more about the closeness than the friction. At one point, we thought to exchange names between songs. By the end of the night, we made sure to exchange numbers.

I never did wind up making it to the restroom. My student probably thought I was rude, sitting at the bar with you the rest of the night instead of hanging at the table with her and her friends but I don't think my absence made much of a difference to them. She did show up for my next class but never invited me out again. I may have sacrificed a potential friendship but what I gained in return from you was much more than someone to gossip about dick sizes with. Still, I made sure to come say hi any time we saw them out. It wasn't always comfortable and I made sure to bolt at the first sign of an awkward pause but it always felt like the polite thing to do.

You didn't take me home that night. Instead, we went our separate ways. My student's friends teased me in disbelief that I was actually driving to my own place, but I think that was the right decision. I never had any interest in hookups but I have to say, part of me was kicking myself on the ride home that night. I was shocked to get a text from you a few days later. I still have the screenshot of your message saved in my phone. "Hey. It's Matt, from the other night at the bar. I dunno if you remember me or giving me your number but I had a fun time and would love to meet up again sometime." *Remember me?* I couldn't believe you actually said that. How could I forget? I wanted to text you back soon as I saw the message but forced myself to wait until later that evening, so I wouldn't look desperate or something. It felt like putting off buying tickets to a show while fearing it might sell out. I guess that maintaining some form of my reputation, like politeness, is another virtue of mine, easy as it sometimes seems like my life would be without it.

I stayed up all night, texting you. You were like a book I didn't want to put down. I was hanging on your every letter. At the same time, I wanted to give you every part of me. When the time finally came to hang out, a whole week later, the only thing keeping all the words from spilling out of my mouth was the terrible thought of missing a single thing you had to say. We kept running our mouths until, inevitably, our lips crashed into each other. Our first kiss was desperate and sloppy, like we had been starved of the taste of one another all night. There was slobber all over our faces and a few times where our teeth collided. None of that mattered, though. I had gotten my hands on you and I felt like an addict getting her first hit after a sobriety stint.

When we went out, from then on, we rode together. Walking into Fuzzy's, or anywhere, felt like being one half of a celebrity couple. I knew all eyes were on us, even if not always for the right reasons. Though, the disapproving spectators never seemed to bother you. "While I'm living my life, they're sitting around watching me. The only embarrassment I have is for them," you told me once. Everyone seemed to know and love you. There were friends everywhere. I'd bet when you passed, there were toasts made in your memory all over town. When we went out and found ourselves in a group,

you lifted me up to your social level instead of discarding me like everyone else. I can't thank you enough for that. You had done so much for me and had so much to offer that I wished I had something else to give you in return but my love. I wish that would have been enough.

Savasana

The idea of sending your kid to a school is kind of scary, when you stop and think about it. Growing up in a public school, I never considered how nerve-wrecking it must be to have to worry about who's responsible for looking after and teaching—which, in a way, is kind of like having a hand in raising—your child. On top of that, you have to worry about everybody else's minions and how they can corrupt or harm your kid. I loved public school and have nothing against it but from the parenting angle, I see how some might have their reservations, especially considering some of the trouble I got into.

This isn't, like, the worst thing I ever did or anything. It just feels relevant in some way. It's a funny story Daddy used to tease me about when I got older and has been rolling around my head for a while, now.

I don't even remember what grade I was in; I can text Daddy and ask him sometime but off the top of my head, I have no idea; I was too young. Anyways, it doesn't matter. My teacher used to give us assigned seats alphabetically, which was a real bummer since Alex's last name begins with the letter M and mine starts with a P. So close, yet so far. What we used to do was write notes behind books when the teacher wasn't paying attention and pass them to the kids separating us from happiness and probably also academic ruin. Alex was at the desk furthest to the left and I was second to last on the right. To my left was a kid named Blake.

Looking back on it, there were red flags all over Blake I'd now recognize that I didn't in my innocent childhood. For instance, Blake was the first kid I had ever heard swear. His cursing was like an actual incantation or some physics-defying feat which had until then been unfathomable. You can't swear; we're not allowed. So, how could he just *do it*? It was one small step for Blake but a giant leap forward in terms of my growing up. One time, while he was rooting through his backpack, I saw a

cigarette lighter. I didn't quiz him on it. I felt like an accomplice, having seen something I knew that I shouldn't have. I like to think he just stole it from his parents when they weren't looking because it seemed edgy or cool and wasn't actually smoking at an age where most boys wore shirts with cartoon characters on them and tidy whities. In that moment, I felt the same fear that might come over me if I'd spotted a gun or knife in that backpack.

Oh, yeah, he also liked to sniff markers. Not the scented kind you were supposed to sniff. (*What were they thinking when they came up with that idea? What's next, edible white out?*) He'd keep Sharpies in his pocket at all times and sniff them whenever the teacher wasn't looking. He also might let you take a whiff of some of his markers, if you were cool enough.

We rode the same bus and just my luck, the seating arrangements were also decided alphabetically. So, from the moment Bus 19 stopped outside the projects and he got onboard with a herd of other kids until he was dropped off, it was me and Blake all day.

“What's so special about those markers, anyways?” I piped up, one day. “It's not like they smell good.”

“It gets me high, Reese,” he said with a sovereign tone, as though he had succumbed to a Sharpie addiction. For the record, I hated being called Reese. It was better than Terry, maybe, but only by a microscopic atom. “Helps get me through the day, especially days like today when I haven't had sex in a while. Almost a week, pathetic.” He was always bragging about this mystery girl he met at the skating rink that would drop in for conjugal visits every now and again. Nobody believed it then and I don't now.

“Nuh-uh,” I replied. “Those can't get you high. There's no way they'd sell it to kids if it could. You can't have *drugs* in school!”

Blake hushed me. “Shush before the bus driver hears you! Don't believe me? Try it for yourself.” He held a marker out like he was passing a boof.

I looked at it like he was holding a knife and expecting me to grab it by the blade. I shook my

head. "I don't think so."

"C'mon," he purred, already, his talent for peer pressure was refined. If he offered me a marker today, I don't know if I could deny his persuasion. (*I mean, not really, if anybody's reading this. That's just an exaggeration. I wouldn't get high with kids, not even off markers.*) "If you can't get high off it, there's nothing to fear."

I took another look at the purple cap and could feel myself longing to reach out for it. Before I could, a hand slapped the edge of the seat.

"Stop talking to your *girlfriend*, Blake! It's our stop!" some kid shouted before giggles erupted from the whole bus.

And so he got up and left.

I remember feeling embarrassed, like a child. I mean, I was a child, but back then I didn't like feeling like one. It wasn't until I starting growing old that I starting longing to feel young. So, it was settled. First thing, when he got on the bus the next day, I was going to (*boldly, I might add*) demand a marker from him. I wasn't afraid. It was just too stupid for me and I was going to prove to him once and for all that it wasn't me but he that should feel embarrassed. Who goes around sniffing markers, anyways?

I spent the whole night and the bus ride the following morning rehearsing my cool introduction. Like, yeah, I am a tough girl, and I *will* be enjoying one of those markers on my bus ride to school, if you would be so kind. When he plopped down, I wasn't feeling so confident, but I did bring myself to mutter out, "C-can I try a marker?"

"Sorry, Reese." He shrugged. "Forgot them on the table." He looked down, dramatically. "Also forgot my homework." He lifted his gaze to meet mine. "I'll bring 'em tomorrow, sure. Didn't know you had it in you, kid."

The next day, I began my brief stint as a marker user. He presented a pretty bouquet of different colors to draw from. I chose the classic red, immediately pulling the cap off and pushing it under my

nose and inhaling.

“Careful. Don't mark your nose all up.”

“Is it on me?” I said, mortified. What if the teacher saw? Would she know what I had done? What would happen to me? Would I be expelled? Would Daddy take me to rehab?

“Just a little bit.” He retrieved a package of tissues from his pocket. He took one and shoved the rest back into his pocket. He spat a wad into the tissue and rolled it around to be absorbed into the thin paper before placing it under my nose. Normally, I would never let him come anywhere near my nose, let alone with his saliva, but these were desperate times. I forced the gorge to stay in my throat while he wiped the rim of my nose a few times.

“Is—is it better?” I was about ready to cry.

“Oh, yeah.” He nodded. “You've got nothin' to worry about.” (*Except, that, like most things Blake said, was a lie. But we'll get to that later.*) “How ya feelin'? Notice anything different yet?”

“I do,” I nodded. “Everything seems woozy, now.” I don't know if I was lying to him or myself.

“That's the stuff,” Blake said as if he was proud of this corruption. He celebrated by uncorking a golden marker and placing it under his nose. He took a sharp inhalation.

Remember when I said that bit about the mark on my nose being gone was a lie? Well, I soon found that out for myself when I investigated the crime scene in the bathroom. I scrubbed it frantically with soap and water but it was no use. I hung my head low while stepping off the bus that day, like I was headed to the gallows.

“What's wrong?” Daddy said, crouching down to look at me. “Rough day at school?” He put his hand under my chin and gently lifted my face to level with his own. “Were—were you sniffing markers?”

I shook my head.

“Teresa, look at me. *Were you sniffing markers?* You can tell me the truth.”

I couldn't restrain the grin when I looked him in the eyes. I probably looked like a little Joker or

Norman Bates, caught red-nosed and giddy about what I had done. The truth was, my natural reaction to discomfort is to laugh. He could have asked me what my name was or said nothing at all and I'd probably have had the same reaction. He gave me a lecture and told me he'd better not catch me doing it again. Unfortunately, all it took was one hit and I was hooked. From what Daddy tells me, I used to come home every day with my nose stained different colors. Every time, he'd ask me the same question and every time he did I thought I could get away with lying.

Ultimately, I don't remember what broke my marker huffing habit. I guess, like most things, I just grew out of it.

Padmasana

Not long after I came down pregnant, I was sort-of abducted by aliens. Just my luck, right?

I was in bed, probably exhausted from another night spent crying about my predicament, when a light shined in through my windows. When something truly supernatural happens, it's interesting how there's always this bipolar reaction of crapping your pants terror and acceptance all at once. I guess your adrenaline kicks in and that helps, like when it hits the fan in life and you go into save the day mode.

Rather than floating around in little orbs or stepping in through the door, the aliens decided to take me up to them. I began to float out of myself towards the ceiling. I'd heard about tractor beams but I didn't know they stripped you of your clothes. Then I realized that I had been taken not just out of my bed but out of my skin as well. I passed through the ceiling like it was nothing, or like I was nothing, and up through the sky. The details are muddy. It was like in the space movies when they transcend our world and it's a bunch of random colors and shapes, kind of, but everything was mixed in together and everything was nothing but also it made sense somehow to me, like the secret of the universe that was too big for my mortal brain to possess but something hidden from myself deep within my soul.

I was greeted upon my birthing to this other dimension not by an alien but a man. Something told me this was an angel. He didn't stick around to catch me up to speed. He got right down to business, telling me that I needed to live my life but I had strayed too far from my own path. He said that he can course correct my life but that he would need something from me in order to do this. I wanted nothing more than to give this man anything he wanted, not just out of sheer need for my life to be mine again but because I immediately trusted him more than I had trusted anyone or anything else in my life. I'd give him my soul but currently, that's all I had. Still, if he asked me to float away with him and never look back, I wouldn't give the world I once knew another thought.

He attached something inside of me, some alien—or angel—technology I had never before seen the likes of and can't begin to describe. It began sucking with a noise almost like a vacuum. I knew he was taking my baby. He sucked my child out of me and I saw him with its soul.

“I'll be keeping onto this for you,” he said. “But you'll meet again, in time.”

All of a sudden, I felt myself the subject of some great force sucking me back, out of this world and into the world of flesh and blood I had just been so eager to abandon. Before I knew it, I was back in my bed, in my own body, in my pajamas and tank top. Don't get me wrong, a part of me wanted to cry, to mourn the loss I had just endured. Another part of me knew that everything was just what it should be, that what had just happened was alright.

Utthita Tadasana

When we first started out, sex was good. You spent a lot of time down there but I'm not complaining. You never did anything wrong or anything to be insecure about. When you first started transitioning, I sometimes wondered if your attention to my details was more out of curiosity than pleasure, but even if that was the case, that's alright, too. The last few times, after your thing stopped working, I know you were insecure because you had to rely on alternative measures of satisfying me. I wasn't upset about that. I still got mine; I just felt bad you couldn't get yours. And that you were so hard on yourself about it. Sometimes it felt like I was the private audience of your internal struggles choreographed. It wasn't always fun to watch but mostly I just felt bad for you, like you were hurting in some way and I couldn't help you.

When you began transitioning, it was an adjustment for both of us. I'm not trying to make it about me or anything. That's just the truth. When we were first going out, you seemed in touch with your masculine and feminine side. I liked that about you. You knew how to put on makeup and you could carry in all the heavy groceries. *(Alright, that's not the best example but you know what I mean!)* I felt protected around you and never threatened. I knew you'd never let anyone disrespect me and if my tire went flat while we were out, you'd have the spare on sooner than I could get a AAA technician to arrive, if left to my own devices. Until our last conversation, I really never once felt like you even had any urge to hurt me, but we don't have to talk about that right now. If I'm being honest, though, there were times where I was uncomfortable and struggled to communicate that. If I'm being *really* honest, I'm having a hard time getting it across even in this one-sided kind of communication. I already wrote and scrapped one draft of this whatever-this-is.

This might sound confused but I was attracted to you; I've just never been attracted to girls. That's not me saying you weren't a girl, even before I recognized it. There were just times I struggled

with that. I still loved and cared about you but it wasn't always easy for me. Like, that one time you referred to us as "lesbians." You said you were just kidding when I mentioned it but I could tell it hurt when I didn't just accept that. That was the problem. It wasn't with you and I hope it wasn't with me but that I felt like as a straight woman, I couldn't be there for you in the way you needed someone. Trust me, I wanted to be, but I felt like a square peg. By the time you wanted to start going by your new name, I felt like the person I fell in love with had slipped away from me. It wasn't just the drugs, whatever you were getting into, and I can die happy without ever finding out. It was just everything between us had changed and the only thing I could see holding us together were memories. You don't deserve to be with someone who can't love you, who can't totally accept you and whoever you were growing to be without reservations.

When you'd look at me or kiss me in that way I knew you wanted me, I felt guilty. I enjoyed myself. You knew your way around me. I just felt like I was taking advantage of you in some way. I thought I was hurting you. I felt like a traitor and couldn't live with myself feeling so bad all the time. Sexually speaking, you were good up until the very end. Sometimes, a woman just needs a dick.

Marjaryasana to Bitilasana

After that first time, I learned the definition of anxiety. I was counting down the days until my period like it was Christmas morning. When Aunt Flo passed me by without stopping to visit, I was sure my family would all do the same once they found out what I had done. I could picture myself living on Main Street in a box, holding in one hand a tin can, poorly-rinsed by the rain and still stained with clots of tomato sauce, and a shoe box containing my child in another. Every time the image came to mind, I could feel my daddy's hand around my throat.

I stopped eating. It wasn't a hunger strike to starve the baby out but I considered that as a potential perk to my lost appetite. Eventually, I would regain my hunger just long enough to take a few bites out of a sandwich or eat a few pieces of candy. It was almost like I was eating just enough to sustain a little baby rather than my fourteen year old self. The thought of that run the food right back up out of me. For weeks, I had nightmares of that puke swirling down the toilet as it flushed, retracing the image over and over again to remember if maybe, just maybe I had seen a little hand reaching up from the tides for its mother to save it. My period came late but never more welcome soon after.

I'd never been so happy to bleed.

Supta Matsyendrasana

When I was a kid, I loved to play doctor. I'd scoop worms up out of their puddles and place them on the ground to save them from drowning, gently pressing my fingertips across their bodies as though I was pushing the water out of their systems. At home, I had my trusty plastic stethoscope and would place it to our dog, Bo's abdomen to listen for a heartbeat. Of course, I never heard one but if I imagined hard enough, I could almost convince myself. If Daddy saw me, he'd make "Badump badump badump" to encourage me. There are still pictures of Dr. Pele in some album at his house.

One day, I asked him if he always wanted to be a construction worker. He told me no with the certainty and immediacy as if I asked his gender. I asked if he ever wanted to be something else. He said that he wanted to be a race car driver as a boy but that was it. With my future as a veterinarian in the front of my mind, I asked him if he ever considered being a doctor. He said nope. Why? Because they had to go to school for, like, a decade. *Oh*. Like that, my life path, once paved so clearly for me, came to an end and I was to tread unmarked territory moving forward. In the moment, it was like being told that I'd never walk again. The possibility that maybe what wasn't right for him might be good for me never crossed my mind but I never looked back to see.

High school is like playing in the sand of a beach. Your first part-time jobs, if you had them are treading water where your feet still touch the ground, if you had them. *(I lived in the middle of what Daddy called "BFE" without a license until the summer after graduation, so, I missed out on that.)* From your high school or college graduation onward, it's like you're just swimming towards the horizon. That's my experience, anyways. Maybe other people were rich enough to get jet skis to make things easier and faster for them. Other people might have gotten bitten up by fish and sharks during their travels. I'm a reader, not a writer. I don't know how to make long metaphors that go on for pages and pages. You get the picture.

My career has been kinda all over the place. My first job was at a seasonal location, hanging up costumes and decorations for Halloween. That was nice while it lasted but nobody's buying fake blood or vampire teeth in December, well, not until the goth scene rises again. After that, I worked as a waitress for about two weeks before walking in on one of my coworkers straddling our boss. I wasn't fired but the image scarred me and after another shift or two, I was a no show. Lesson learned: Never open a closed door unannounced. Another lesson learned: Always lock the door while doing something you don't want people walking in on. I'd say we both share some blame in that one. Next up was a hardware store while I became certified to teach yoga. It was lame but me and my coworkers used to joke around back then about getting hammered after our shifts and, yeah, there was also a lot of that. One of those outings is how I met you but this part's about me, still, sorry. Our story is too important to just throw in the middle of some other tangent.

So, yeah, now I'm CPR trained and yoga certified. I teach a few classes and work as a cashier for extra change. Why yoga, you may ask? I think everybody needs *something*, whether it's religion, a hobby, or, let's face it, some substance to abuse. We're all looking for an out, an escape from ourselves. You can be driven crazy by your own thoughts, ya know?

Meditation was my gateway drug. A customer recommended it to me when I accidentally had a panic attack in front of her because I was having one of those days and couldn't stop messing things up. It was almost like she was meant to be there to sell me on the idea. She gave me the rundown on how she grew up with anxiety and how it 180'd her mentality. So, what the heck? It doesn't cost anything to try, unless you pay for one of those apps to help. (*I may have a monthly mindfulness subscription or two, what of it?*) The thing about meditation is that, like, you're not handcuffed to yourself anymore. It's like your mind and spirit are two different things and you can free your spirit for a bit to get a breather. I don't float around in the lotus position or anything but it can feel something like that sometimes.

If meditation is emptying oneself, yoga is filling. The meaning of the work yoga is “to yoke.” In laywoman's terms, that means to find unity. With what? If you ask me, the universe. I'm all into the law

of attraction and all that but I won't bore you with those details. *(If they have phones in Heaven, you should look it up for yourself. It's not like we don't have the internet on our phones. Really, in a way, there's no excuse not to know things when we're curious about them, these days. We have the power and with great power comes great you know what.)*

The secret to yoga is that these aren't just stressful poses. If you want that, you can sign up for Pilates. (If you want a referral, I know a guy.) There are stories behind these poses. The Hanumanasana isn't named like that because it's fun to say. Yoga is kind of like prayer. Really, it's kind of like possession. Hear me out. There are ancient deities associated with these poses. When I'm doing my stretches, I can almost feel their presence in me. Are they entering me or are they something inside of me radiating out? I don't know but it's enriching. This isn't crazy, like, the meaning of yoga is to yoke oneself. Maybe it's more spiritual than psychological. I know people who read Jung in college and can bore you with the universal meaning of these stories and recurring themes in our cultures. I, for one, did not read Jung or anyone else who might have an opinion on the matter, and could care less what they think. Metaphysical or metafiction, their presence in my life splashes color onto the gray scale of day-to-day life. Truly, they are my mentors and even though I'm the one cashing checks, they're the ones in the studio, spotting all my students. I like to think they follow them home, too, like friendly ghosts. The benefits of yoga aren't just of the moment. Proper exercise leads to good posture, mentally, physically, and in my case, spiritually, too.

I explained this to Daddy once when he was making fun of my studies and he said it sounded like a deal with the devil. Well, if the devil's giving me all this for the price of my sweat, then what's God offering to compete? He laughs now but yoga is being implemented in schools as I type. One day, I might even try to continue my studies and I could teach it at a college or something. Laugh it up while you still can, Christians, but we're coming for your kids and the state's gonna pay us to do it!

Thread the Needle

I opened my door one day as I was about to go get some fast food (*It had been a while since any cooking had gotten done around my kitchen. Funny how diet's always the first thing out the window in times of stress.*) and there was your brother. He was standing across the street like a statue made in your honor at the ground zero in our story. I could see the shame on his face when he noticed me, like he was a voyeur caught with binoculars in one hand and the other down his pants. This would be the second time I cut a private moment short for him. I tried to act casual about it and invited him in.

He was looking around the place like he was on board a UFO. I didn't feel judged by his curiosity but it did put me on edge. He was almost like an amateur sleuth looking for any clue about what had happened to his brother. It wasn't a big deal or anything, just a little odd. Hey, I have an odd sense of style, so, I'm kinda used to people reacting weirdly to my weird stuff.

It wasn't the ideal way to meet your significant other's brother, after you'd already broken up and then your other died. At least he didn't go off on me about sneaking into your funeral or anything. (*I don't really need to get into that. It was just an awful time and we can leave it at that.*) He was just curious about me, about what my connection was to you. He almost seemed under the impression that it was pure chance that my garage happened to be the one where you spent your final waking moment. I told him everything, well, almost everything. I left out all the gory details. Was that cowardly? Was it *wrong*? Maybe it saves my face but was it necessary for him to know how awful his recently deceased brother acted towards me? About how scared he made me feel? Forgive and forget is what I say. I forgave you and I chose to forget those details as I told him our story.

He came to visit a few times after that. We both opened up a little more. I was dealing with the whole situation with *him*, which I spared your brother from having to hear about, but it felt nice to have some relief from all that drama. Maybe relief isn't the right word. Catharsis is more like it. To get more

real, I don't think I ever got to know your brother in any real way. I think our connection was just two grieving people taking advantage of each other. It was like we were talking to each other physically but trying to conjure some of you out of the other person in doing so. When he would talk about his classes or other personal things, I wouldn't say I was enthralled. I felt guilty. It's like I was skimming the pages of a book, looking for the pages containing you. I'd feel a lot guiltier if he wasn't clearly coming at me from the same angle.

One time, when I was very emotional, and I'm really embarrassed to talk about this, I might have tried kissing him. I wasn't trying to kiss him, though. He's not really my—he's not what I'm into, personally, no offense. I just wanted to feel *you*. For one stupid second, I thought that maybe with my eyes closed, it would feel like the old you, before everything started changing. I was wrong. I disgusted myself and if there was only one thing I can take back in this entire *whatever-this-is*, I think it would be it. That was enough to scare him off.

Until one night, he showed up on my doorstep, looking like an athlete staring down his competition. It's like I opened my door to a tornado on the doorstep. He came, tearing through my living room and yelling about text messages he'd read, going through your phone. He was interrogating me about what had happened and doing such a monstrous job at it, he was making bad cop look like a nice guy. He seemed like he was on drugs. More than that, he came across like a man possessed. I remember thinking, *You wanted Matt to come back, well, here he is*. You were in the room with me, in his flesh, a violent entity ready to tear me apart in ways that should be physically impossible. My time spent with Wes was a vain effort to conjure you and it turned out to be a success, the only problem is that the person you died as was not the person I remembered so fondly. I felt like I was being put on trial for the both of you. I really felt like a hostage. If I gave one wrong answer, this animal could tear into me and I wouldn't have a chance at defending myself.

I knew I could rush for a knife if my life depended on it. What I wasn't so sure of, was if I had the guts to use one in that moment of truth. Already, I could feel his hands around his throat, fading me

out with the force of your rage. I didn't think I'd have to live through the experience of choking to death, at least, you seemed so angry that he would probably break my neck in the process.

He wanted answers. I didn't know what he was willing to do to get them or how he'd react once he had them. The one thing he said that stood out to me, was "I don't know what's worse, being unread or misinterpreted." Then, I could feel him imposing the pressure of that question onto me. As the situation was escalating and my certainty of seeing another morning dwindled, something in him changed. The fever, or more accurately, the spell was broken. I could almost see the force leaving his body and he crumpled back up into his own pathetic, powerless form. I don't know what it was but something in him totally changed. Then, he left, to haunt some other building. I never saw him again.

Down Dog Pyramid

You'll be happy to know things didn't work out between us, me and him. Maybe. You were never a petty or vengeful person. If you were rooting against us, though, I think that's totally understandable. If so, then you win.

He was just the wrong guy at the wrong time. Who'd have thunk it, right? He liked going out, drinking with friends, seeing shows. At the time, I was really into staying home and bawling my eyes out. I guess that wasn't really his scene.

We had fun for a bit, though. I won't lie about that. In some ways, I needed someone to get me out of the house and force me to be apart of society, outside of my duties as a yogi. His friends were all nice; they were a wild crowd. They'd always be trying to outdo each other like a couple of high school jocks, racing each other to see who could down a beer the fastest, trying to beat each other to wherever we were meeting at and whoever was last to park paid for the first round, just charming, good fun. One of his friends brought his girlfriend sometimes and the other was always on the prowl for a new conquest. Between us, I got along much better with most of the prospects than I did the girlfriend. I think she liked being the only girl in the crew and saw me as some form of competition for attention. I was pretty quiet (*and boy, did I hear about that when things went south between us*), so, he was always giving me extra attention and trying to include me in the conversation, even the times when I didn't have anything to say, which, in his defense, was most of the time. I can't remember a time we were out and he didn't have an arm around me. By the time my cheek dried, he'd be leaning in to plant another kiss on it. He liked to own me in the bedroom and to make sure his ownership was known in public. That made me feel secure. I really needed that.

He used to flash owl horns to encourage the live bands and holler. At karaoke, the gang would end the night with their arms around each other singing out of key at the top of their lungs. They were

fun. I liked their vibes. I just liked watching them more than I liked participating in their shenanigans. I could tell he wanted a girl who could chug beers with them and sometimes even be the first to crush her can. He wanted a girl who'd be dancing at the shows, who'd be excited to sign up to take the mic at karaoke and would perform like a headliner, not just hover over the mic like a candle whose flame she was protecting from the wind, mumbling into it. I hope he finds that girl. He could make her very happy. She just isn't me.

I don't blame him for not wanting to hear about my dead ex. Just like I don't blame you if you choose to skip these sections, should you somehow ever read this. I didn't expect him to listen to me describing what you liked in bed or anything. I just wanted him to appreciate how much I had been through and maybe even comfort me a little. I never felt like I could talk to him about things and that only made me feel more alone.

There were some fights, as things turned sour. I could hear the disappointment in his voice when he'd say, "You don't have to" any time something outrageous was offered by one of his friends. It's easy to say no pressure but I could feel his expectations wearing me down. I felt like we were in the kind of relationship that, when away from us, his friends would place bets on how long we'd last. My guess is they were betting in terms of weeks, not months.

One time, on a ride home from putt-putt, he told me about their plans to drive up to see a college buddy the next weekend. "Or, you could just sit home alone in your apartment," he said. "That seems like something you might prefer to do." I could tell he was a little tipsier than he was letting on but it hurt all the same.

"Just go," I said. "You'll probably have more fun without me." I meant it.

"What? I'm just sayin', maybe if you wait around there long enough, something fun could happen. Who knows, maybe there was a parade in there tonight but you missed it 'cause you were out, wasting your time with us. I dunno."

I didn't say anything the rest of the ride. When we got to my place, I let myself out without a

kiss or a word. He was planning to stay the night but he got the hint. I didn't look back to watch him drive away into the night but I felt something like relief as I turned my door handle.

Adho Mukha Svanasana

Coming home with him for the first time took me back to slipping into Daddy's house when I lived with him past my curfew. It felt like breaking into my own home. I tried not to let him see but it took me a few tries to work the key into the lock. Eventually, to your misfortune, the door opened and I let him inside.

“Spooky,” he said, walking around the room in circles to take it all in, almost like he was slow dancing with himself. At first I was embarrassed I accidentally left my lights on and then because of all the witchy decorations. “This looks—did you paint this yourself?” he said, standing above the Ouija board coffee table. Right. He did have that rocker look with the slicked-back hair and the shades sticking out from his jean jacket. They tend to like alt-type girls, and let's be frank, I wanted him to like me.

“Yeah,” I said bashfully, nodding.

“What's up?” he said, approaching. “You're blushing.”

“I just—feel silly. I don't usually—”

I saw his hands in my peripheral vision and then felt them on the sides of my neck. His touch was warm. Before I knew it, he was on me, pressing a wet kiss against my lips. I found myself kissing him back, wanting to resist, but knowing that urge was only a formality. In the bottom of my heart, I knew I didn't want to fight him off. I knew that if he walked out of here, dejected, I'd regret it for a while. His hands moved quickly, pulling me in by the hips. I wrapped my arms around him. He massaged my stomach, working his way up to and underneath my bra, pinching and caressing my boobs. I bit his lip.

I don't know what got into me. In a flash like a cut in a movie from scene to scene, I was in position, face downward for doggy style. He took a moment to savor my butt and the rest. I told myself

I shaved today just because it needed trimming. The truth was, I shaved for this moment. He plunged in me, sliding effortlessly between my legs, steering me by my hips with one hand as he pushed my face into the mattress with his other. I don't know how many times he came; I won't tell you how many times I did. I almost said your name at one point. Almost. But I didn't.

Lying next to him the morning after, I told him about you, kind of. I was nervous he'd take one look at me and think he woke up to a monster. If he didn't take the visual queue, surely this would send him rushing out the door, screaming.

“So, I sorta have a boyfriend.” He was kissing my shoulder as I said it.

“Have or had?” he said, coolly, looking up at me with the bluest eyes.

I had to laugh at the irony of his question. He might not have gotten the humor of it but I couldn't let it go unappreciated. “Both.”

“Well, let's see if I can change your mind on that.” He got back on top of me.

Balasana

Going over to Alex's house used to be my favorite thing. I would mark each passing day on my calendar until the weekend like an advent calendar. *Tuesday the 13: Three more days until Alex.*

Wednesday the 14: Two more days until Alex. Alex's was a home away from home for me, a safe place. Similar to mine, her parents were divorced, except she lived with her mother. Daddy would stay for the first half an hour or so I came to visit and catch up with Alex's mom. We used to gossip in hushed tones, shielding our conversation behind our hands, that my dad and her mom would someday get married. Soon after he would leave, she'd start pouring what I only knew to be adult grape juice in fancy glasses. *(One New Year's Eve, we were allowed to drink sparkling wine from one of the glasses and we thought we were so cool.)* Since I was an only child, it was comforting to have another kid, let alone a girl my age to talk to, which was mostly just being silly, but that was therapeutic in its own right. As the years passed, the conversation evolved from talking about puppies and cartoons to boys and clothing.

Something else was developing at the same time. One day in class, back when we were maybe eleven, she told me that she had new neighbors, a family with a son and a daughter in a wheelchair. I began to notice the growing collection of rust old car bodies littering the property across from Alex's as the neighbor father added to his own private junkyard. It looked sad to me, like these old abandoned cars were the carcasses of dead animals, or the vehicles maintained some consciousness and wanted to run but were too old and beaten-up to do anything but sit and rust.

Sometimes, around the time we were fourteen, we would see the neighbor boy zip by on a fourwheeler. His name was Nate and I was beginning to hear it a lot. Alex didn't need to tell me she

had a crush on him, but one stormy sleepover, she confessed it to me behind the closed door of her bedroom as though she was admitting to murder. I couldn't see what she saw in his greasy, long hair and the angry music he had gotten her into. I kind of thought he was *gross*, though I'd never dare say any such thing to her. I'd still be nice to him when we all hung out, which seemed to be every time I came over to Alex's, but I was always relieved when he would go back across the street to his house at night. Even then, I feared Alex's mom would smell his cigarettes on our clothes, but she never questioned us about it. *(Later, Alex told me that her mom had given her a lecture about Nate's smoking and said as long as she didn't catch her daughter doing it, that it was between Nate and his parents.)*

This one time, I had come over on a Saturday when Nate had driven out of town to pick up a friend of his from another school. We might have recognized him if we paid attention to the football games we attended, as his school played ours every year, but we were too busy hovering over hot chocolates in a circle while we socialized. Homecoming was soon and I was nervous about whether or not Chad was going to ask me to it, especially since he and Cassandra Brown seemed so close. Still, every now and then when he was getting things from his locker next to mine and we made small talk, he flashed a smile that was enough to keep the tiny flame of hope in my heart alight. *(He wound up asking Cassandra. They dated throughout high school, broke up in the eleventh grade and awkwardly courted others for the remainder of their grade school careers before getting back together about a year after graduation. They are now married with two little ones. Who was I to stand in the way of fate? Alex wound up talking me into attending stag with her, either starting or enabling rumors of our closeted lesbian affair, which was news to my ears.)* Anyhow, where was I?

Oh, Shane, or as I grew to call him, Shane the Shrimp. Alex thought I was a bitch for that but she probably wouldn't have judged if she understood. Shane was a senior in high school, two grades

higher than Nate and four above us. Like Nate, he wore Fox Racing apparel and smoked cigarettes. He also mentioned smoking pot, in an offhanded way that came off like he was trying to either impress us girls or his friend. He could grow a patchy beard with stringy, black hairs on his face that made him look mangy. He wouldn't have been handsome without it but the pubes on his face weren't doing him any favors. Underneath the paper-thin layer of confidence, he came across to me as deeply insecure. Despite his age and experiences of driving and working a steady career at a fast food chain, he came across as the youngest of us all, or at least on par with me and Alex. For a man, he felt vulnerable, but that didn't make him any less intimidating. After all, he was, like, half a foot taller than me and his bony arms would be a fair match for my flabby forearms if push came to shove.

That's why I was nervous right off the bat when Alex and Nate informed us they wanted some alone time. We had carried on, walking and talking through the woods before coming to an abandoned car. It was at this landmark they informed us they wanted to break into pairs. I knew even from my days of watching Scooby Doo while eating canned raviolis my dad had prepared for me in the microwave that splitting up was never a good idea. I felt the same sudden dread that I now feel when I see red and blue lights flash with a siren wailing behind me on the highway.

"Why? What are you gonna do out here?" I protested.

Nate simply laughed, propping himself up against the hood of the car.

"Nate's got his driver's test coming up and we're gonna practice for when he's driving me around," Alex said.

Nate nodded his head with a smug grin.

I looked at Shane for support. He touched my elbow with a trembling hand and told me we should give them their privacy. I didn't like that he touched me. I didn't like that Alex would just abandon me like this, like she was choosing time with Shane, who lived right next door, to me, who

could only visit on the weekends. I didn't like the idea of them sitting in some old, rusty, abandoned car that was probably some makeshift nest for wildlife. Actually, the thought of Nate stepping inside, full of swagger, only to get bitten by some snake lurking underneath the driver side seat, did give me some pleasure.

I knew I was outvoted and didn't want to come off like a bitch to Shane or a killjoy to Alex (*I didn't care what Nate thought of me. After all, he didn't care how I'd feel if he took my best friend from me.*) So, I quietly let Shane lead me away. I knew the area pretty well, but even so, the deeper into the woods we got, the more helpless I felt. Eventually, we came to a stop at an edge overlooking a stream. The running water was peaceful, probably in some animal instinct way of knowing there is a source of hydration nearby. (*Anymore, the sound of running water just makes me anxious but that's my problem.*) I slid my phone out from my jean pocket and flipped it open. The stock camera flash sound let me know the picture was taken and I folded my phone back up.

"Maybe I'll draw this later," I said, desperate to break the silence with small talk. Some silences are awkward but what we shared was suffocating. The crunch of twigs underneath our feet only made matters seem more dire. I felt like we were marching towards my own execution. Something in the back of my head kept screaming, *Get out of there! Run back to Alex's house and call your dad to come pick you up!* I didn't want to be a baby, though. I was afraid Alex would make fun of me once she found out, or worst of all, not want to be my friend any longer.

"You like to draw?" Shane said, standing behind me. I remember worrying that he might push me off the ledge or something. Sometimes, looking back on it, I wish he had.

"Yeah." I took my phone back out and began scrolling through some pictures of sketches on my phone. As I passed some selfies taken in my bathroom or with Alex in her bedroom, Shane would make comments like, "Oh, I like that one." or, "Hey, I wasn't done lookin' at that one! Go back!" as I

tapped to the next photo with desperation.

I felt two hands slide across my belly and breath on my neck. "You're talented." he said before planting a wet kiss on my neck. My shoulders tightened and I'm sure I was trembling. He had to of seen I wasn't comfortable. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Childish as it was, I remember worrying Alex would see my face smeared with mascara upon our return. *If* I returned, that is.

"W-What are you doing?" I quivered.

"It's O.K." was all I got back. He said it softly, almost like he was reassuring himself and not me. I felt him fumbling with the button on my jeans and then loosening. Soon after, I could hear my zipper being pulled down. His cold hands began massaging my thighs and encouraging my pants down to my ankles. I was hyperventilating, probably sobbing. He turned me around and wiped my cheeks. "It's O.K." he repeated, kissing my cheek and then my lips. I didn't purse my lips or do anything. I was no longer in control of my body. I was just as comfortable in my own body as I'd be behind the wheel of a car I couldn't legally drive for years to come. He kissed back down my neck and began reaching under my shirt, above and beneath my bra. He knelt down and kissed around the triangle of my underwear, the thin cloth protecting me from him, but not for long, as he soon slid that down to rest inside the crumpled-up pants at my ankles. He rubbed all along my parts before sliding a finger in and then two. Each time he pressed his digits back up into me, it was like being stabbed with another knife.

He patted the ground for me to lay down and I obliged. He got up from his kneeling position with a strain and climbed on top of me, kissing all over me and lifting my shirt and bra up to hang around my neck. He unbuttoned and unzipped his own jeans with much more ease than he had mine and stood up to pull them off, along with his boxers that were emblazoned with some stupid car he could probably never afford to this day. I felt him pressing up against me, at the top of my parts, and then pushing all up and down it until finally, he was in. I looked to the side and tried to focus on my

breathing as he had his way; I was worried if I didn't, I would suffocate. My throat didn't want to let air through. My body had betrayed me. It wasn't moving and it wasn't letting me breathe, like it didn't want me to live through this, to have to live with this for the rest of my life. I could still hear the indifferent stream beneath us. I don't know why I took offense to that; it's not like nature was going to stop for my sake. All while he repeated his mantra, "It's O.K. It's O.K." to one of us, to which, I wasn't yet certain. Before long, he pulled out and jumped to his feet. I heard him groan before the rushing of his hand on his shaft. When I finally built up the confidence to face him, I saw his seed shooting over the edge down towards the stream below. He knelt down and wiped his hands on the grass.

I didn't want to get up. I wanted to lay there and let the grass collect me, to sink into the ground and never feel or be seen again. Finally, I forced myself to. I looked down and saw blood. I looked to Shane and could see blood on his thing, blood on his hands. I also now saw that he, too, had tears streaming from his eyes. He buttoned his pants and then sat down beside me.

"That was my first time," he said.

"M-me, too."