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Dead Stars and Empty Calories

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“A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal.”

– Oscar Wilde

PREFACE

I wanted to hug Keira and tell her it would be ok, but I wasn't sure it was. Nothing would really be okay anymore and I cried for all the things that had gone wrong, would get worse, and change everything. Her unconscious body, laying in this cold, dreary hospital room isn't how it should be. The IV coming out of her right arm and the morphine drip in her left arm seemed to be her only lifelines connecting her to this world. She looked peaceful and beautiful, her face no longer marred with worry and tears. Her brown hair spread across the white pillow like gravy on mashed potatoes, and her sky blue eyes dreaming under her eyelids, quiet and resting.

“Keira,” I whispered though no one was there, “take me with you to your dreams, so I can see what you see, feel what you feel.”

The mechanical parts of her body were alive and awake as her chest rose in a quit rhythm, up and down, up and down. I wished my mind could be as still as her body. The door opened and my mother walked in.

"I don't want you to be a tree Keira. You can't be one of those trees."

“Let's go,” my mom said flatly, “it's not good for you to be here Petal.”

“Just a little longer Mom, please,” I begged. “She needs someone Mom.”

“She has family for that. Let's go please.”

I relented, not wanting to have an argument and disturb Keira's rest. I was sure to see her soon, this side or the other.

Chapter 1

To die and part is a less evil; but to part and live, there, there is the torment.

~George Lansdowne

If Only It Had Been Me

Jen was my first cousin on my father's side. She lived about three blocks away from us and was exactly a month older than me. We were born a month apart and lived three blocks away from each other, so she was like my sister and best friend wrapped up into a cousin. We didn't go the same school, but every other minute was either spent at her house or mine.

Whatever she did, I did, including being shipped off to Grandma's every summer since we were five was summer and we had been stuck at Grandma's for the past month. Every year our parents sent me and Jen for two months to stay at my grandmother's retirement apartment complex in Miami, Florida, huge complex, which consisted of over 30 buildings spread over at least an avenue and three blocks in NYC terms. We had family and cousins down there also, but we mostly stayed at my grandma's apartment, where we swam in the community pool most mornings, lunch, and then sat through two hours of her soap operas on T.V.

Most times we would play UNO or video games we had brought with us, makeup games, play hide and seek, and stalk old people to see what they were doing. This was our favorite

game. We would take notes of certain residents and their habits, documenting everything in little notebooks we would carry with us.

Sometimes we would sit outside the windows of some apartments and watch the tenants for hours and make notes like we were spies. Most of the surrounding tenants had strict schedules, and we would follow them on their walks, their pool time, card times, and times they spent at the clubhouse. At dinner we would tell the neighbor's gossip to my grandmother.

"Mrs. Chavez was telling Mrs. Diaz that Mr. Conklin's granddaughter is a whore because she's sleeping with a married man," I told my grandma at dinner.

"Petal, you guys need to learn to mind your own business, it's not nice to spy on people," she had scolded me.

"But its fun Grandma."

"You're own life should be fun, not someone else's."

This was our third summer here and we were eight years old. But I did get a kick out of making of fun of her since she was a lefty.

It was getting late and we needed to head back for dinner. There was a passageway through two buildings that made the way shorter, but Jen wanted to take the long way around to kill time.

"You're always hungry, you look like a turkey. Skinny legs and a big round belly," she teased.

"Well, did you know that in the Bible, the right hand is mentioned in a good way over 100 times and the left hand is only mentioned twenty five times. Only twenty five times, and all of them bad," I teased back.

She hated being teased about being a lefty, because we lived in a right-handed world.

"Come on Jen, I'm starving," I begged.

She hesitated, and because she was a month older than me she always wanted to be the one to tell us what to do. I had worshipped her and always did as she said, but that day I was starving and wanted to take the shortcut, which was something we rarely did because there was no lighted path and it crossed between two buildings.

"All right," she relented.

She had turned to say something to me as we walked through the alcove that separated two buildings when we heard this loud metal jangling noise coming from above and both looked up. I thought she was going to punch me for what making fun of her, but instead she pushed me forward and I fell into the cement hallway, smacking my head hard on the ground and the last thing I heard was something hard and metal hit the ground behind me.

I awoke lying on a cold hard floor, people running all around me, and looking into the tear-strained panic stricken face of my grandmother.

"Is Jen ok?" I asked, though everything was fading in and out.

"Jen," I said, trying to sit up, but a squinty paramedic girl with a round face and eyelashes that almost reached her eyebrows pushed me back down and shined that felt like the sun exploded in my eye.

"Please stay down little one, you're in shock and could be hurt," said the paramedic, as I felt a little sting as the long lashed paramedic girl stuck a needle in my arm.

The next time I woke up my mother was there staring down on me, like I was a black hole. I was in the hospital, with needles sticking out of my arm and machines beeping all around me. My head ached, but that would just be the beginning. Jen was dead. Some kids had thrown a shopping cart off the five-story building and it had crushed her head on, and it was instant.

"It wasn't your fault," said the therapist.

"I wanted to eat and take a shortcut," I told her.

"Things happen, and it was those kids on the roof who did this. You can't blame yourself? Not eating is not going to change the fact of what happened. She died and you're alive."

But Jen was dead, because I had been hungry, and shortcuts had consequences.

When we got back to New York City after a week stay in the hospital, my mom sent me to a therapist, Annabel, to help deal with the trauma and the fact that I wouldn't eat. Every time I had tried to eat I would start to cry.

I couldn't eat. Every time I got hungry it reminded me of Jen, with her curious green eyes and gapped front teeth. When we were six, her older brother tried to teach us to skateboard, and put her on the front of the board with him on back. They hit a small crack in the sidewalk and fell forward, with Jen breaking her two front teeth. When her teeth finally grew back she had a big gap between her two front teeth to which she hated and her brother teased her about even though it was his fault.

My refusal to eat landed me in the hospital where they stuck me with feeding tubes and almost daily visits from Annabel. Eventually, after another week in the hospital, I had slowly

graduated from Jello to real food and was able to go home. It took some time of nibbling here and there, but eventually I started to slowly eat again.

Jen's parents and brother refused to let us visit or call after the funeral, which I wasn't allowed to attend because my parents thought it would be too traumatic, because they said it was too painful. My aunt and uncle needed time, but time turned into years of minimal communication with my parents, and they eventually moved out of state to get a fresh start. My aunt was my father's sister and though they hadn't been all that close as kids, they were even further apart than ever because of me.

On the year anniversary of Jen's death, September 21st, I put a picture on my dresser of Jen and me at two years old having a bubble bath in our grandmother's bathtub. Both of us naked in a bubble bath, laughing.

Chapter 2

“Do not watch the petals fall from the rose with sadness, know that, like life, things sometimes must fade, before they can bloom again.”

My mom named me Petal because on the day she found out that she was pregnant with me, my dad placed rose petals all throughout the house, everywhere and anywhere, and had cooked her dinner. It was a romantic thought but that wasn't the exact reason. The next day she had to pick up all rose petals, and throughout her pregnancy she would occasionally find a rose petal here and there, under the couch, or behind a door. She had stuffed some in my baby memory box.

"Another damn petal," she would joke with my dad every time she found one.

My mom had wanted to name me Rachel after a friend of hers that had passed away at a young age, but at the hospital my dad suggested damn petal as a joke. They decided to drop the damn part. People always think my parents were hippies to have named their kid Petal, but as I got older, it seemed to me that the word damn might have been more appropriate.

We lived in a three-story brownstone on the Upper East Side in the 90's, on a tree lined street facing a small park. The building across the street to our right was about forty stories high and the blocked most of the sunlight from the street. In order to build it, the owners had to

promise two small parks on either side of the building for the block residents to sit peacefully and get a bit of sunlight, or so the rumor goes. The building was built in the 70's, long before my parents moved into our house. It was brown on the outside and felt like warm bread on the inside. Our house was comfortable, warm, and always smelled of lavender and vanilla, my mother's favorite candles. My mother was a relentless cleaner, and the house was always neat, orderly, and an oasis from the dusty, chaos of the outside world.

My bedroom was my small world within our home world. My bed was big and my desk was small, with my painted yellow walls and crimson curtains. I had a thing for velvet crimson, even down to my duvet that my mother thought was much too dark and rich for a kid, but I insisted. The small wind chime outside my second story bedroom gave the sweetest tinkle and I would imagine each time it chimed, a dream was coming true somewhere.

My mom gave me that wind chime when I was eight.

"It was ancient tradition to use chimes to ward off evil, the musical instrument of the wind, and it's supposed to maximize your life's energy," she explained.

It was a small chime and it hung closely outside my window and its light tinkling gave a small sense at times that made me feel that Jen was talking to me.

I spent most of my time at home. The therapist used terms like possible "agoraphobic" and "social anxiety disorder," but really I just wanted to stay home, read, and cuddle up with our cat Renoir. My dad was at one point an art major, which he never completed, going on into the

business world, but every once and while he would renew his love of art. Hence the name Renoir for a furry, fat, black and gray ball of love. He loved sitting on my chest as night, drooling and purring. He was my constant consolation when I had nightmares about Jen, seeing her fast that last time, eyes wide as she pushed me out of the way. Sleep wasn't peaceful, so most nights I stay awake reading and writing in my journal with Renoir purring and sleeping on my chest. The Ambien the shrink had given me had given me even worse nightmares, and also gave short term amnesia, so I usually exhausted myself and got about four hours of sleep a night.

The brownstone to our left were our neighbors the Milian's whose son Marcus was one of my best friends, while the brownstone to our right was the Stanz family, whose kids were all grown up and out of the house, so they converted their basement into a small apartment which they rented out. My mother's uncle, who had no children, left our three-story brownstone to my mother, his only niece upon her getting married. Though her aunt was still alive, she chose not to stay in this big house alone, and moved upstate to their retreat from the city.

One of the best things about our house I liked best, besides my room, was what we call the Den. The basement floor used to be some kind of den area that my mother's uncle had set up to entertain friends, but my parents never really used it and over the years it had become a mini-storage space. The best part of the room is that it was big, quiet, and had a big corner window above an old leather couch that looked directly into the Stanz' downstairs apartment of the house next door. Our windows were about a foot apart, so to give privacy to the neighbors, my parents had painted a huge wooden plank black and placed it over the window, so if you looked at it from the neighbor's point of view, you couldn't see anything but a covered black window. Their

window was pretty big and allowed view to most of the apartment living area, and usually had no covering because it allowed a little sunlight to stream into their basement apartment. Our buildings were connected in some weird way that the vent above the window, when opened, let you hear the downstairs tenant if they were in the main living area. It was a full invasion of privacy, but since my parents made sure we didn't use the Den, they didn't see it as a problem.

"You ask if you need to go down there, it's dusty and full of junk," she would tell my sister and me.

When I was about eleven on a lazy, boring summer Saturday afternoon alone in the house, I went down to the Den out of boredom to explore. There wasn't much of interest in the old furniture and storage boxes, which I had searched for tidbits of juicy information about my parents, possibly making them interesting, but nothing. The plank covering had caught my eye. It was a little heavy to move, but once it slid about an inch or two, I could see directly into the neighbor's basement apartment where their tenant Frank, an old man with a cat lived. It was like opening a treasure chest. I could see him but he couldn't really see me, unless he looked up at the window. I watched him that day for about an hour as he made lunch, watched a TV show, and read a book. It was like watching my own reality TV show, except this was real. His house was clean and sparsely furnished, he had a small brown dining room table with four chairs, and an old cloth patterned couch, a TV stand and a bookshelf filled to the rim with books. He had book stacks everywhere in the main living area. His cat was a skinny gray cat that spent the whole time sleeping on a carpet near the back door that had a window that allowed sunlight in. I had met Frank before on several different occasions on the sidewalk or on my stoop, plus he

would talk to my dad when they happened to meet outside. But that day, I began my love affair with Frank.

So the days that I was alone in the house or my parents were well occupied, I would sneak into the Den to check on Frank. I had a little journal where I made notes about the things he did, ate, or read. He was a strange creature of habit and didn't do much all day, much like his cat Rodya. Frank would read, eat, and watch TV. Most of the time. Sometimes he would leave the house and sometimes he would have friends over for card night, but he pretty much spent most of his time reading or watching TV, mostly old movies. Sometimes I would read along the same books he was reading, just for fun. Card nights were fun, as it was a bunch of cranky old men who would play cards and complain about being old and discuss politics. Politics were boring, but the complaining part was always fun.

“I may need to have knee surgery again for this bum knee and that means I many need a goddamn cane. Fucking sixty-seven and I'm gonna have to use a goddamn cane, can you believe it?” one of his friends had said one evening while I was spying on them.

“I once read a quote from Dostoyevsky that said ‘I am now forty years old, and, after all, forty years- is a whole lifetime; after all, it's the most extreme old age. To live beyond forty is indecent, banal, and immoral.’ I used to think that was ridiculous, but now I'm thinking he had a point. I mean what was really beyond forty that wasn't better before forty?” Frank replied.

“After marriage and kids, nothing man, nothing,” said one friend.

“Here, here,” said one of his other friends, raising some glass of liquor, which made them all a little tipsy and loud as their night went on.

They did this about once a week, sometimes complaining about their wives and kids, but Frank never said much but quote books and news. I wasn't sure if he had ever married or had kids, but for the most part it seems he was a lonely old man. I did notice one day he put a hide-a-key rock in a pot in the back yard, which seemed odd because you couldn't get into the back yard based on the surrounding buildings placement. I had taken a few pictures of him eating, watching TV, and cooking, and sometimes would look at them and wonder what he was thinking.

Most times I couldn't stay down in the Den long enough because my mother would look for me or wonder what I was doing, so everything had to be done quietly and secretly. But once, when my parents had gone to bed, I stayed up late watching on one of his card nights. After his friends had left, he put on some kind of classical jazz music and danced to himself for a while. He looked to be so free at that moment, moving to the music with his eyes closed, and I wondered what he was thinking about just then. I wanted to be there, dancing with him, wishing the world away with music. He looked like he knew a secret, and he wasn't going to tell. I would always wonder what he felt that moment because two weeks after that, while we were upstate visiting my aunt over a long weekend, Frank died, alone in his apartment and the Stanz' gave his cat Rodya to one of his friends.

The only person who knew about my watching Frank was my therapist, Annabel. She didn't approve and kept reiterating that I was intruding on his personal space.

"Petal, we need to seriously discuss your curiosity about Frank. He doesn't know you're there. He deserves his own privacy. Would you like it if it were the other way around?"

"Well then he would be a kind of pedophile and that would be gross."

"You know what I mean Petal."

"If I didn't know someone was watching me, why would I care?"

"It's not about you knowing or not, he's was allowed his privacy and it's just not right to be have been spying on him Petal."

"But he was so alone, and always with this thoughts. How does one get away from their thoughts and live? I loved him, and now he's gone."

"Not everyone went though a traumatic experience like you did Petal. He may have had a great life and preferred being alone. And there's no way to love someone you didn't know."

"I knew him."

"Watching someone doesn't mean you know them. Besides no one ever really knows someone."

"We need to work on you. You spend a lot of time alone, Petal."

"I have Renoir and parents and an annoying sister and friends. I'm never really alone except in my head."

"You need a hobby, get outdoors, go see your friends. Your parents are worried."

"My parents are always worried."

"Let's talk about the nightmares."

"I don't want to."

"You need to get proper sleep and your mom says your not eating enough."

"If I can make them go away, I could sleep, but I'd rather not dream of seeing Jen's wide eyes as she pushed me out of the way before she died."

"It's not your fault."

"I don't want to talk about Jen anymore."

My parents had increased the therapy sessions after the most recent "incident" with my neighbor Marilyn, just days after Frank died. This is why they were worried.

"He died alone," I told Annabel. "Alone."

"We all die alone Petal."

"But he really was alone, and sat in that chair, dead, for two days before someone found him. Horrible. Two days and no one noticed."

"Is that what you're worried about, that no one notices you?"

"This isn't about me. And I don't care if no one notices me."

"You can't hide from the world Petal."

"Can't I?"

"I ate three sandwiches the day Frank died."

When I would get upset or anxious, I would binge eat on bologna sandwiches.

“I thought we were making progress Petal, you can’t do that every time something you don’t like happens. Bing eating is not a solution, and then it makes you feel worse afterwards.”

“He died alone.”

“We will all die.”

“After he died, the Stanz’ just cleared out the basement apartment and shut it up because they felt it was bad luck to have a possible dead spirit in the house. Now it’s just an empty and lonely space.”

“That makes you sad, knowing the space is empty.”

“I don’t want to talk about emptiness today.”

Annabel always said that emptiness was my theme. Her theory was that everyone had a theme that they lived by and being empty was mine, whether an empty stomach, empty mind, or empty thoughts, that I was consumed by emptiness and felt a constant need to fill it, and then empty it.

"We need to talk about Marilyn," she said, shifting slightly in her chair.

After years of seeing Annabel, it was easy to read when she wanted to talk about topics that made her uneasy. Jen was one of them. Sometimes I would just yell and scream about it, and sometimes I would just sit there and cry.

"We were just practicing," I told her.

"You're a little young to be practicing those kinds of things, as it is something that happens when your a bit older, as eleven is a bit too young for the practicing you were doing. Did you feel that was normal behavior? Did it feel wrong or weird?"

"No, it was actually fun and I liked it."

"Do you feel as if this is something you will do again or want to do again?"

"With Marilyn? I'm not allowed to see her anymore."

"I meant with anyone, boy or girl."

"Not sure."

"Not the right answer Petal."

The Marilyn Incident

Right before Frank died at the end of that summer, I had this friend Marilyn who was about two years older than me and lived down the block. Occasionally she would invite me over when no one was home, and since it was right down the street it was close enough to home. We would watch TV, play video games, and search on the Internet for funny videos at her house most of the time. Sometimes she would wander the neighborhood with me so I could take pictures. Photography was a way to capture silence in its beauty. There were no words to mar the moment, and the pictures spoke for themselves. Marilyn loved getting her picture taken, and her eyes were so blue that they looked like a piece of sky stuck in her eyes. She was pretty and smart.

Since she was older she would talk about all the boys that had crushes on her in school. I knew some of them, and others were just meaningless names rolling off her lips.

One day while sitting on her couch watching a DVD, she turned and kissed me on the lips. It made me giggle.

“What was that for?” I asked.

“Haven’t you ever been kissed before?” she said.

"Once, and really fast."

"But you've seen it done?"

“Yeah, but by older people. Married people. People on TV.”

“I kissed this boy after school the other day.”

I wasn't sure what to say to that since I had only barely kissed one boy when I was six years old on a dare from my friend Jess, and it had been our friend Marcus. We had been at her house and her and Jen had been teasing Marcus about having a crush on me and dared me to kiss him, so I did. We giggled after and when Jess left the room to get something downstairs, Jen dared me to show him my pee pee. I lifted my skirt, pulled down my pants and let him have a long good look. We dared him to see his, but Jess came back into the room and we never talked about that day ever again.

“You want to try it again? I want to practice for the next time he kisses me,” she asked.

“On me?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah. We're friends, and no one has to know. You're ok with it right?” she asked.

“Um, sure. I could try?” I told her.

Her lips were soft and delicate, and we kissed lightly, adjusting our heads to get a better fit. We moved closer till we were hugging, and when she stuck her tongue in my mouth, I backed away, a little horrified and excited.

"Don't worry, that's normal," she said.

We started kissing almost every time I went over, sometimes we would play games where she would be the guy and I was the girl and vice versa. The first time she stuck her hand under my shirt and touched my breast, it was shocking. It felt weird but tingly at the same time.

"Its just practice she would say," and I had willingly went along with everything she tried.

Sometimes we would take off our clothes and touch each other. She was thinner than me and had bigger breasts since she was thirteen. She even had a little bit of hair down there and it fascinated me since I was eleven and had yet to develop anything, even my period. She had asked me to suck on her breasts, and though it seemed weird to me, she liked it. When she first stuck her finger in my vagina, I screamed and jumped off the couch.

"It's normal Pet. I watched my sister's boyfriend do this to her once and she loved it."

"You watch your sister and her boyfriend?"

"Yeah, sometimes before my parents get home from work she brings him over and I pretend to be up in my room while they sit on the couch, but most times I sneak down the stairs and watch them."

Marilyn's sister was seventeen and though I had seen her once or twice, I really didn't know that much about her, even that she had a boyfriend.

"Trust me, I think you'll like it."

It was like doing research for homework, and it filled me with anticipation. She was right, and it did feel good. Someday we would do this for real with boys, but for now, this was just for practice we would tell each other. Our secret. It felt good being touched and watching her naked. We would kiss for hours, using our tongues and hands and mimicking scenes we had seen in movies or on TV.

We did this for a couple of times a month for about a year, and my parents were just thrilled that I was out of the house and socializing a bit more. Usually Jess and Marcus came over to our house, because I preferred being at home. It wasn't until I was about to turn twelve and Marilyn was about to turn fourteen that she wanted what we were doing on boys for real, but she was a bit scared. Boys seemed more real than anything we were doing. This was between her and me, our secret, and it was safe.

One day she found a porno DVD that her brother had hidden in his room we watched it, fascinated and amazed at all the action, moaning, and rough play. It excited us enough that we started kissing, and we hadn't heard her mother come home and she had walked in on us and was mortified, screamed at us and had sent me home immediately. Of course, she called my mom. My mother was furious and humiliated.

“What do you think you’re doing? You are eleven years old, what’s wrong with you? What’s wrong with her? Is she trying to make you a lesbian?” she yelled.

“She’s not a lesbian mom, we were just practicing.”

“Practicing for what?”

“Practicing for when we get older. For boys.”

My father said nothing, just standing there with his arms crossed.

“For sex? You are almost twelve years old and you're practicing kissing boys with girl? You are not allowed to ever go to her house again. I can’t believe this happened. Why are you acting out this way?”

I knew my mother was going to bring up Jen, because I saw the way she looked at my dad, as she was about to speak. Jen was a taboo topic in our house and she rarely if ever spoke about it as if it never happened. My dad always told her she excused everything I did because of my guilt over Jen.

“It’s not always about Jen, Mom, and leave her out of it,” I screamed at her over and over again.

“Then there’s something wrong with you, you need help,” my father finally spoke.

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” I yelled.

“Well this isn’t normal, and if you’re going to be a lesbian, we all might as well start dealing with it now,” he said.

“I’m not a lesbian,” I yelled, and ran upstairs to my room.

The next day we were at the therapist’s office. Annabel tried to explain to my mom that sexual experimentation at a young age, especially among young girls is quite normal, but my mother would hear none of it and insisted I stay in therapy and go at least twice a week more. I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone about what happened, not even Jess or Marcus. I was grounded for two months and was not allowed to go to anyone's house and if Jess and Marcus came over, one of my parents had to be there.

"Have you been journaling?" Annabel asked.

"You always ask me that, and the answer is always the same. Yes."

Every night I wrote in my journal to empty my thoughts. I talked about my day, my thoughts and how I missed Jen, wondering what she was doing or would be doing. It was a suggestion by my therapist since I refused to talk about Jen, to anyone, anymore. If it weren’t

for my hunger, she would be alive. Her parents wouldn't have suffered and our family ripped apart. Though my aunt and uncle didn't blame me, they moved out of state and rarely kept contact with my parents or came to visit relatives. Every time I was hungry, it mad me think of Jen. I was hungry and she was dead. She'll never laugh, eat, sleep, grow up or be hungry again.

Eleven turned into twelve and then thirteen, and so did my pant size. I rarely saw Marilyn in school and when I did, she wouldn't make eye contact with me, and suddenly I felt that we had done something wrong.

Dad's Advice to his Daughter

I reached for a second helping of Mom's delicious, breaded chicken with rice and Kirby black beans. This was my all time favorite meal, and sometimes I even had thirds. I only liked Kirby black beans, which my father hated, so when Mom made it, I knew it was just for my benefit. The soupy liquid from the beans spread on my plate like molten lava, and my stomach seemed to expand with anticipation while my mouth was gearing up for a second round. I glanced at my mother's smile, which stemmed from the fact that there would be no leftovers tonight.

"You know, Petal, boys don't like chubby girls," my father stated, interrupting my juicy thoughts.

My mother's smile turned to a frown, and the serving spoon, in my hand, filled with black beans stood suspended in mid air. I turned to look at my father.

"You're dripping on the tablecloth," my mother said suddenly, prompting me to lose my grip that sent black beans and liquid splashing onto the white and blue flowered tablecloth.

I stared horrified at the mess, and heard my mother sigh as she scrambled for some napkins.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered, stunned and embarrassed as I turned from the mess to look at my father again. “What did you just say?”

“Boys don’t like chubby girls,” he replied, while stuffing a fork full of rice into his mouth.

“Glenn,” my mother’s voice warned.

“I’m just saying, you need to lay off the seconds or you’re not going to be very popular with the boys in school. Nor the girls,” he said in all seriousness as my six year- old sister giggled at the word boys.

I was speechless, and just stared at him, feeling my jeans suddenly tighten around my waist, as my stomach contracted in humiliation. I could feel the flush on my face, warm and angry. Tears welled up in my eyes as I tried desperately to think of a sharp retort, but was momentarily distracted by my mother’s horrified face. I sat there, dejected, for what seemed like hours, but was actually about a minute.

“I’m not fat,” I suddenly blurted out, trying my best to glare at my father, as everyone stopped to look at me.

“I didn’t say you were, but you’re getting there,” he responded, without even looking up from buttering his bread.

“Glenn! She’s only thirteen,” my mother warned again, and this time he looked up.

“Thanks,” I said as I pushed myself away from the table.

My father laughed.

“Same old Petal, can’t take criticism without running away crying.”

“Shut up,” I screamed at him as I stood up.

“Both of you stop if right now,” my mother hissed, as my sister stopped eating and stared at us in comprehension of the festering volcano threatened to erupt.

I stormed away from the dinner table, stomped down the hall, and slammed the bathroom door as hard as my punched ego could muster. Slamming the toilet seat cover down and I cried my ego all over the floor. I could hear my parents arguing down the hallway, while the tinkling

of dishes being cleared muted some of the conversation. Who was he to call me fat? Did he happen to take a look in the mirror lately?

My sister quietly knocked on the bathroom door, claiming she had to wash her hands, but I knew better. I yelled at her to wash her hands in the kitchen sink and to leave me alone. Several moments passed, and I could hear her defeated footsteps shuffle down the hall towards the kitchen.

“I hate him,” I muttered to myself, but wishing to scream it out loud.

I pulled the scale from under the sink, took off all my clothes, and hesitated for a second before stepping on the scale. The scale jumped to 150. Was that bad? At 5’1” was it bad to weigh that much? I turned and faced the mirror on the back of the door. I stepped back to take in the full view of my naked body. I looked like an upside down egg. Small, white, and round with a middle of fat. I thought of what Jen had said on that last day, that I looked like turkey, big and round up top with skinny little legs. I giggled, but I could see the tears well up in my eyes. Who didn’t like eggs?

“Petal?” my mother said from the other side of the door.

Unconsciously, I grabbed a towel and covered myself though I wasn’t going to open the door.

“I’m an egg,” I replied.

“What?” she replied a little too loudly.

“I’m an egg,” I whispered.

Resolutions

After the argument with my dad, my mom decided on the small approach of normal dieting for a while, but that meant everyone had to be on a diet.

"Why do we have to suffer because she eats too much? You let her get away with eating too much, you need to watch her more," my dad had said to my mom at the dinner table. The more she tried to make healthy dinners, the more aware I was of my weight. Slowly I tried cutting back and eating less and less. The less I ate the faster the weight came off, the more compliments I got. That's when my mom noticed that I wasn't eating enough and would harp about not being healthy and hurting myself.

“You’re body needs food,” she would say.

“I eat mom.”

“But not enough, you’re getting to skinny. You look like a carrot.”

“Thanks. Better than being an egg.”

“It’s not healthy, and you’re sleeping too much and you’re always angry.”

“I’m fine mom. Leave me alone.”

Dizziness was becoming a daily occurrence and the surprising thing is it's very easy to get used to, like not eating. I had it down to a science. My mom was so aggravated at my food avoidance that she started bringing me smoothies to my room for breakfast while I got ready for school, which was like bringing me a bowl of sugar to drink every morning since fruits have a lot of sugar. I would take a small sip, thank her, and then dump it into an empty milk container I had taken out from the recycle bin and hid behind my bed. It was genius and worked like a charm. She always packed me a lunch that I promptly threw away as soon as I got to school.

The day I fainted in gym class was not a good day. We were running laps and by lap two I fainted on the field. The nurse quizzed me about how I was feeling and what I ate. When she tried to force me to eat a banana, I refused and started crying, terrified of having to eat all that sugar. My mother was called and she promptly checked me into the hospital. I had a serious case of anemia, which could be fatal, and the doctor’s suggested a specific diet and medication. I was not happy.

Over the next couple of weeks I had no choice but to follow the menu the doctor gave my mother as she watched me every moment and made sure I took all my medications. Even the teachers at school were warned to watch me eat lunch. It was frustrating, humiliating and I started gaining some of the weight back I had lost. Healthy weight the doctor had said. There was nothing healthy about weight, and I hated it. My parents watched me and my teachers

watched me, and it made me paranoid. It was weird having people watch you eat and it was causing major anxiety.

"Why don't you try some exercise," the therapist recommended. "I run and it clears my head. Just put some music on and run."

I asked my mom if I could start running around the neighborhood and she was so excited at my taking a healthy instance that she bought be all the running gear I could possibly need, but made sure I run in the neighborhood and during daylight hours only.

Jess and Mia

Jessica was my best friend since the third grade because she was the only one who didn't make fun of my getting glasses that year. She said it made being a nerd cool. She was pretty, smart, popular, and a total bitch, but I liked her. She liked to call me her "Pet." Her long brownish blonde hair, her hazel eyes and tan skin, gave her a slightly exotic look and she had developed big breasts at an early age. She was about as tall as me, but her glow was seven feet tall. Everyone liked her, especially the boys, and the fact that she had perfect C cup breasts and a nice athletic body didn't hurt either. Even if you hated her, you had to love her. But I knew she was far from perfect. We all have our problems and she was no different. No one was perfect, but we could try. Even though we were only fourteen, she had an older boyfriend, Junior, who was the obsession of her life and also pretty much a total jerk.

Every day after lunch, Jess and our friend Kat would go to the bathroom by themselves, as we had fifteen minute bathroom breaks after lunch, to which most of the time I spend reading

or catching up on homework. It was a weird routine because they never wanted to include me and I finally harassed Kat enough to the point where she confessed to what they did in the bathroom when no one was around.

“Why do you do it?” I asked the next day after school.

“Do what?” she asked, confused.

“Throw up your food, it's gross?” I said.

She looked mortified and denied it.

“I know its true Jess because Kat tells me that every day after lunch you go with her to the bathroom, turn on the sinks and use that last stall to throw up when no one is in the bathroom.”

“Bitch. Why would she tell you that?”

“Why not? Why wouldn't you tell me that? We are all friends, and I asked her why you guys always go together to the bathroom after lunch?”

“She used to do it too till her mom caught her one day. She taught me. Her sister used to do it and she learned tricks from her.”

“Well?”

“I hate doing it, and it hurts,” she said.

"So why do it?"

"Because it's easier than dieting and exercising, but not as easy as it's gross. It keeps me thin and let me eat."

"Really?"

"No ideas Pet, you have enough problems as it is."

"I want to know how you do it?"

"No Pet, you have enough issues with that, especially after you fainted."

“Either you tell me or I try it myself.”

"Why do you want to do this? You're fine."

"Because I need to empty out too."

“Alright, I'll come over tonight and show you, but you can't tell anyone else. Make sure you have diet soda in the house and soft foods.”

“Promise.”

The Vomit Sessions

"Rule number one is you can't do this all the time. I try to keep it to several times or weeks or on days I know I'm going to eat big. This is not an all the time thing Pet, got it?"

"Got it."

"First, you make sure you have plenty of liquid, especially a diet drink because it helps the food come up faster. Try to have a trigger food, a food you eat first, so you know when it comes up, that you're getting everything out. Drink water and soda the whole time you are eating and make sure you eat within a half hour, no more because your body starts to digest after about fifteen minutes or so."

"Soda, water, and half hour, got it."

"Remember, this is not an every time thing Pet."

"I get it."

"After you're done, you make it to the bathroom, running water. Either sink water or shower water and try not to be too suspicious. If you run the sink too long you may cause attention, so if you pretend you're taking a shower it might be better."

"We have two bathrooms and then the one in the Den, I can use that one, no one will notice."

"Let's begin."

She watched me drink and eat and then after half hour she told me to go to the bathroom and shove two fingers down my throat that would make me gag. Since my parents weren't home, there was no need for the running water. It was painful and unproductive, as though I had a gag reflex, nothing came out. Shoving my fingers further didn't help and pushing on my stomach like she had recommended did not help either. Most of time was spent gagging spit and it was gross. After about twenty minutes and a sore throat, I came out of the bathroom red faced and angry.

"It didn't work, Jess."

"Sometimes it does, sometimes it doesn't, like every thing else, the first time isn't always the best and you have to practice which is why I'm warning you not to do it. You run, so that's good. This isn't for everyone."

It definitely wasn't for me.

The Neighbor

I never really much paid attention to the fact that we shared a back yard with the building next door, separated by a small shoulder high wooden fence. I hated going in the back yard because I was always afraid that people in the neighboring building would look at me, judge me, or creepy old men would jack off watching me sunbathe or read on the lawn chairs. My mother spent a lot of time out there when there was good weather either reading or knitting. Dad would barbeque in the summer months and salt in the winters.

"There's someone moving in to the basement apartment downstairs next door," my sister said as she plopped herself onto the couch and reached for the remote.

"Hey," I snapped, grabbing the remote, "I'm watching something. And what about next door?"

"Some girl moving in with some little floo floo dog," she said.

A new neighbor. This I had to see. After the old man who lived there passed away last year, the neighbors had left the apartment empty for a while. My mom thinks they were traumatized that the old man, Frank, had died there and closed it off. Apparently last month they had a priest over to bless it and they renovated it a bit.

My parents were out grocery shopping and would be back any minute, so I had to get my fill before I was forced to help unload our grub for the week.

The first thing I noticed was there was a big moving van taking up the whole street, this would be a problem, but it was Saturday so maybe not so much traffic would be affected. There were a few people unloading things, guys and girls, so I couldn't tell who the neighbor was just yet. A few glanced and smiled at me as they unloaded stuff and took it downstairs, and even one said hello. I suddenly felt weird just sitting there staring at them, when my parents' car pulled up. At least unloading groceries gave me an excuse to be there.

"New neighbor I see," said my Dad. "Hope she's nicer than that old geysir they had there before. Hopefully this one won't die in the house," he said, laughing at his own joke.

"Glenn," my mom scolded.

"Keira, where do you want this couch?" someone yelled from downstairs.

Her name was Keira. Pretty. I wondered if she was just as pretty as her name. They unloaded lots of boxes labeled books. She was a reader, making us kindred spirits already. I wonder what she read/ classics, contemporaries, or romance novels like my aunt. There were plenty of boxes and garment of bags of clothes and an overdose of shoeboxes. An obvious clothes and shoe whore wasn't appealing, but not my place to judge.

The day was bright and lightly warm, and the truck in the middle of the street didn't to seem a big impediment to the light trickle of traffic going by. I waited for a while, but she didn't

seem to come out of the basement apartment and so finally relented to my mother's yelling to come help with the groceries.

"Wonder who she is?" I casually told my mom, as she was busy unloading the vegetable drawer, putting the newest groceries on the bottom and the older back on top. She hated wasting food, and would make it a point to use everything possible and what point to utilize food leftovers. Sometimes we would have a smorgasbord of leftovers from different days for dinner.

"Who? The neighbor?" she replied from behind the door. "Marissa told me a bit about her the other day. She's newly divorced, around thirty-five, has a small dog and works for some firm mid-town."

"Did you see her?"

"No, but I'm sure we will see here around. She eventually has to take the dog out for walks, so we will run into her."

"She had lots of book boxes, so she likes to read," I said.

"Of course you noticed that part. Did you finish reading your book for your report yet?"

"Not yet, it's kind of boring."

"Just don't wait last minute as always."

I stared at the groceries lying along the countertop. My mom claimed she liked to eat healthy and make balanced meals, but somehow the potato chips, ice cream, and Kix cereal she liked to buy didn't seem so healthy. She always bought more cheese than meats and every type of bread and cracker you could think of. I noticed this time she bought honey-flavored cashews instead of almonds. She once read that nuts were good for you, but she never bothered to check which ones, as I'm sure honey-covered didn't qualify as good for you nuts.

I went upstairs to check my cell phone for any texts or calls, and heard a voice coming from outside my window. I walked over and tried to stay a bit hidden from view as my window directly overlooks the neighbor's back yard to an extent. I could see half of the yard that extended out to the building behind it, but not so much the doorway or if people were standing a few feet from the door.

I noticed a small dog running around the tiny patio and running to the flower planter and then peeing on the tree. Definitely a floo floo dog. It was blondish color, with a big fluffy tail like a squirrel.

"He likes it," I heard a male voice come from below.

"I hope so," replied a female voice that had a little girl tingle to it. "Come on Dorian, you don't have to spray every inch of the yard just yet."

She walked out a bit into the yard, and only her back was visible. She was about my height, think, with shoulder length brown hair. With that, they went back inside. I could hear talking and laughing, but couldn't make out exact phrases. The wind blew, and the wind chime outside my window made a low giggling tingle that always gave the sense of being somewhere else

Hunger Strike

The constant watching of my eating had made me paranoid and I was afraid to eat in public or at home. It felt like people were judging what I ate. Whenever we went out to dinner I always ordered salad. I home I would get big plastic cups and while we were eating, I would chew my food and then pretend to drink and dump the food in the cup. It was gross and nerve wracking, as I was always afraid parents would find out. After dinner I would take the cup with me to the bathroom and dump it out. It was winter and too cold to run outside and it got dark early, so running was out of the question for a while. At school I would nibble on pickles and cheese or lunch, just enough to look like I was eating.

I had tried the purging several more painful times, and sometimes it would work a bit but most times it didn't. It hurt my stomach, my throat, and it would take so long that it didn't seem so helpful. My weight would shift up and down. Purging was hard to maintain and keep secretive, so when I would try to eat normal, I would gain back the weight again. One night when I was out at a movie with Jess and Marcus my jeans were feeling a little tight again and it was all I could think about. I barely watched the movie so annoyed at my jeans, feeling them squeeze tighter and tighter till I felt like they would cut me in half.

“Every time you hang out with that girl you’re late. Her mom can’t even respect your curfew. It’s 10 o’clock at night and you have school tomorrow,” my mom yelled at me when I had finally got home that night.

“What’s the big deal,” I yelled back.

“She’s disrespectful of my wishes and I don’t like you hanging around with her.”

“She’s my best friend Mom. There’s nothing bad about her.”

“I just don’t like her for you.”

My dad came in to investigate the yelling, like a cat honing in on a noise.

“What’s the problem?” he asked amused.

“She’s late because she was with that girl again.”

“What girl?” he asked. My dad had a gift for forgetting names and could never keep any of my friend’s straight, which was most likely from his disinterest in my life.

“Jessica, Dad. The one I go to school with.”

“The pretty one?”

“Glenn! She’s fifteen,” my mother glared at him.

“Let me tell you something Petal. Pretty girls always surround themselves with mediocre and or fat girls because it makes them seem prettier.”

“What the hell Dad? Are you saying I’m mediocre and fat and she’s only friends with me because of that?”

“Not necessarily,” he said.

“I hate you!” I yelled.

“Petal,” my mom yelled back as I ran past them into my room and slammed the door.

My mother came after me, slamming the door open. I was crying and ready to hit someone.

“Don’t you ever tell your father that again and if you slam this door again I will take it off the hinges.”

“How could he say that to me, Mom?”

“He’s not trying to be mean; he just doesn’t have the right way with words.”

“Are you joking?” I asked. “He called me mediocre and fat.”

“No he didn’t. He just has the wrong way of saying things and thinks that my being cruel, you’ll get angry enough to believe him. I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s nothing to say. I just want to be alone.”

She left the door half open and I fell asleep wondering if he was really right. Did Jessica only want to be friends because I wasn’t competition for her?

Grounded again for yelling at my father, I was home reading in my bed with Renoir, the window slightly open for a cool breeze and the chime jingling ever so lightly. I was trying to read the "Divine Comedia" by Dante Alighieri as a book report assignment for my English class. I was enthralled with the Forest of Suicides in Canto XII. On his journey through hell Dante comes across a forest of trees than caged people who had committed suicide. Because they had given up their earthly bodies, they were stuck as trees in hell and suffered pain when their leaves or branches were broken off but harpies who tormented relentlessly. They could only speak when a branch was ripped off, causing them lots of pain.

I was debating my thoughts on how I felt about suicide when I heard someone talking just below my window.

I hadn't really seen the neighbor yet, and each time I went to the Den to see, she was never home, and I was anxious to see her. Her apartment set up was nice and she had lots of pictures on the wall, mostly pictures of scenery and her dog. On her desk she had a picture of her and a guy kissing but from my distance I couldn't really make out a good view of either. The dog spend most of the day sleeping on the couch or on the rug near the back door absorbing sun, almost in the same spot Rodya the cat had slept in. Animals seemed to adore the sun, like food to warm their souls. She had a chalkboard above her desk where she had small Polaroid pictures lining the bottom and personal notes to herself written on the board. In big letters she had written "Something good is going to happen soon." I liked that.

I moved closer to the window, but stayed hidden so she couldn't see me.

"I hate him and I'm angry at myself for letting him do this to me," she was telling someone on the phone. "Why does he do this when he knows it hurts me?"

She stayed quiet for bit listening to the other end talk. I couldn't see her from where I stood, but could see through the window of the brownstone behind ours. It was a mother fixing lunch for her two kids, a teenage girl, probably about my age was sitting at a white kitchenette table texting, wearing a plain white t-shirt and pink sweatpants since she had her leg bent up on the chair. Her younger brother was helping the mom cut something on the counter and the mom was laughing at something he said. It all seemed so normal. I wondered what they were eating, and why?

"There's no place for the world for a woman in her thirties, slightly unemployed, unmarried and childless. She's dead weight in the world. I'm so far down the rabbit hole I can't tell which end was up," Keira said.

The rabbit hole. It always bothers me when people use popular phrases or themes from movies and don't really know what they mean or use it in the right context. She sounded serious and sad. Dead weight? Was she talking about herself? I didn't know she was in her thirties, but what does thirty look like anyway. Slightly unemployed didn't seem good.

"They basically cut my hours in half and I'm only working four days week. I don't know how I'm going to do it. This bastard begged me to move in with him and then cancels at the last minute, and I'm stuck paying rent on our love nest, while he comes over once and while for a fuck. I'm an idiot," she angrily told her friend.

My mother was unemployed last year for a few months and it was like living in a library with a loud clock ticking away. We could all hear her anxiousness and anger at being unemployed, but stayed clear and quiet till the storm rolled past. At least dad worked and my parents had savings to hold us over, but what about her? She lived alone and I prayed she had some kind of savings to help her out.

She went back inside and I was tempted to run down to the Den to hear her conversation, and possibly see her, but I knew my mom was in the kitchen getting ready to go downtown to buy new jeans for me as mine had developed a hole in the knees from being too tight and me bending down or crawling on the floor so my mom insisted on getting new jeans because she said that the holes made me look like I was a homeless person.

I struggled a bit with the button, but the zipper was another story.

“How’s it fit?” Mom asked from the other side of the dressing room curtain.

I tried one more time to zip the jeans, but it wouldn’t go up.

“There too tight, I think they run small” I whispered through the curtain, hoping no one, even I, could hear it.

“But they are an six,” she said so the whole store could hear. I could swear that the mirror snickered at me.

“Thanks for the update mom. I know what size they are.”

“Do you want a bigger size,” she asked, and I could feel the concern in her voice.

“No. I don’t like the way they look anyway, ” I said to her, trying to sound normal rather than hysterical.

As I put the jeans back on the rack, I took a good look at the size. Six. I was 5’2” with no butt and no boobs, so the six was all belly fat. All that running had done nothing for my belly. My legs looked great, but my belly wouldn't budge. I needed to start being serious about the purging, because if it worked for Jess, it should work for me. My belly was the only place I ever

gained weight, just like Jen had said, a big turkey. I pulled out the next size, an eight, and they fit my belly, but was big everywhere else. I felt like a Macy's Day Parade Float.

“Next up, the Petal Size Eight Float. They had a lot of trouble getting this one down Central Park West last year, any bigger and they may need to move that float to Long Island,” I could hear the announcer say in my head.

“Boys don't like chubby girls,” my dad's words reiterated in my head. I sighed and put the jeans back.

My mom asked if I wanted to go to another store. I said no, that I would rather try and drop some weight again to get back into a normal size.

"You just need to eat more vegetables and exercise a bit more. Since you can't run in the cold maybe we can join a gym?"

"You join a gym mom? Please."

"Maybe we can get a treadmill and set it up in the den?"

"Whatever you want mom."

"It's never really been what I want Petal, but I'll ask Dad about the treadmill. We could all use it."

Much to my mother's disappointment, I didn't want to be a cheerleader or get involved in school activities, preferring to read or walk around taking pictures with my camera. She would claim I was a loner like my father and my choice in friends was questionable at times. She wasn't a big fan of Jessica because her parents weren't as strict and she could be a little wild at times. Her parents even let her drink a glass of wine at dinner with them, and I knew she was having sex with her boyfriend. She was two months older than me, but way ahead of me in life.

"Thin doesn't run in this family, so we all need to work at it," she said, like it was some kind of excuse.

No Lunch Break

"Why aren't you eating lunch?" Jessica asked the next day as she scarfed down our prison school style lunch, which I knew she would purge as soon as lunch was over. I didn't like trying to purge at school because I needed time and was worried I'd get caught. Jess had it down to a science.

Each week the lunch hall posted the menu for the next week, which usually were the same ten things alternated around each week. Today was hot dogs, fries, corn, and fruit salad. You weren't allowed to pick and choose, so if you bought lunch, you had to get everything, but were graciously allowed to choose a little or a lot. Monitors walked around making sure you ate everything and a monitor stood at the garbage and tray return to make sure nothing was left on the plate. If there was, they made you sit down and finish it before you were allowed to go back

to class. It was ridiculous and prehistoric treating us like prisoners or small children, but rules were rules and there were bigger causes to take up than lunch. If you chose not to buy lunch, weirdly enough you were allowed to bring your own and eat whatever you wanted or not. I always failed to see the logic behind that. Today I had brought lunch which was a tuna sandwich, a pear, and a Capri Sun that my mother so sweetly would freeze and then when she packed it would wrap it in Reynolds wrap and paper towels so it would be nicely melted by the time lunch came around. I had started eating normally again, and the weight would come on faster than I could try to run it off. Since last year's anorexia scare, my mom was on top of my eating like a dictator and there was no way around it.

“My dad said I’m fat,” I was ripping a piece of the sandwich into smaller pieces.

“Your dad certainly isn’t one to talk,” she laughed.

I watched her take another bite of her hot dog, as the conversation around our banquet style seating got louder. Jessica was across the table, while Mercy sat on her right and Brian on her left. To my right was Javier and my left was Giselle. They were talking about going to the movies this weekend. Much to my chagrin, Javier had a crush on Jessica.

We had been friends since we both started this school at four-year-old pre-kindergarten and had as close to best friends as we could be. I had once told him I had a crush on him and he told me that he just wanted to stay friends while we were high school as to not ruin our friendship if anything happened. After high school we would see how we felt about each other. That sounded so stupid to me, but rather than make a fool of myself and beg for a chance, I

accepted his circular reasoning and hoped he would change his mind. It hurt that he had a crush on her, but I knew she had a thing for him, even though she had a boyfriend. The dreaded Junior. He went to an all boys private school that my cousin went to and was seventeen. They had met at the beach a year ago and had been together ever since. He was kind of an asshole, but it wasn't my problem. Jessica reached over and grabbed half my sandwich.

“If you're not going to eat it, I will,” she said, stuffing my crust less tuna sandwich through her black hole of a mouth.

I didn't mind the crust, but my mom thought it looked cuter cut diagonal with no crusts. Who cares really? Food is to eat, not to look pretty. I looked down at my half sandwich and pear. They seemed to be mocking me with their ignorance and lack of sympathy. The fries around me smelled so good, and I knew they tasted good, and I had tuna, which stank like fish. I hadn't gotten the school lunch because I didn't want the fruit cocktail that was drowned in heavy syrup. It always made my stomach upset and wasn't worth the effort to eat soggy canned fruit.

“Where do you put all that?” Javier asked. “You eat more than I do.”

“I'm on volleyball, basketball and softball teams, I need my energy,” she told him, like it was an actual fact. She always brought something extra to drink, usually or diet soda that helped her with her after lunch routine or she would buy one from the snack machine, saying she needed to hydrate properly. Last I heard diet soda wasn't the recommended form of hydration. I finished my half of the sandwich she didn't manage to attempt to eat, savored my pear and drank

the Capri Sun, managing to steal some fries from Javier. Each bite I took made me feel bad and guilty.

When lunch was over we went straight to the bathroom to supposedly wash our hands and check our hair. We had a fifteen-minute break.

Jessica, Kat and me were usually the last ones to leave the bathroom. There were two sides of the bathroom with six stalls on each side, almost like airport bathrooms. Jessica always went to the last stall. Most times I left her there by herself, not wanting to be late for class. Detention was the penalty for lateness, and eight hours a day in this school was enough without having to serve extra time.

Sometimes I would hear her gagging and then the toilet would flush automatically after. It grossed me and out, and when she was done, she would come to the sink, red faced with her hair pulled back. She seemed changed, like she had morphed into an alternate version of herself. Her red face looked scrubbed clean and with her long, wavy hair pulled back she looked younger and innocent. She would then gargle with mouthwash, scrub her hands, fix her hair, letting it fall down her shoulders, and apply lip-gloss. She would look new again.

‘It’s great to eat everything I want and not get fat,’ she said.

“Do your parents know?” I asked.

“I think my mom knows.”

“What? Why would she let you do that?”

“Because she always wants me to look good, especially since one day I plan on becoming Homecoming Queen.”

"That's voted on, not a guarantee Jess."

"But looking good doesn't hurt, especially when the boys like you."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I was a little jealous that she and her mother had such a bond that they would share in this secret.

Chapter 3

First View

"It is always by way of pain, that someone arrives at pleasure."

Marquis de Sade

I was in the front of the house putting out the garbage near the side of the street when I saw the neighbor walk down the block and down into her basement apartment. Finally, I ran into the house, grabbing my camera that was in the foyer, and slowly entered the Den so my parents couldn't hear, and ran to the window panel and slowly slide it open so I could see her. She had her window open, letting in the light breeze, so I didn't need to open the vent. I got to get a good look at her. She was thin, with shoulder length hair and what looked like green eyes. She was pale and medium height. She was pretty, and when she smiled at her dog it was stunning. She had an amazing smile, a smile you wanted to stay forever because it made you smile. I turned the flash off and took a picture of her. Her ignorance and vulnerability of the photo of her was probably the best picture I had ever taken.

She put her purse on her desk, kicked off her shoes and picked up and kisses her little dog. He was excited and licked her face while she giggled. I wanted to take a picture of that moment and save it for its innocence. After a while she sat down at her desk typing on her computer. I heard her cell phone ring, this bell like chime, and a gorgeous smile came over her face. She hesitated a second and picked up the phone. I could feel her excitement through the walls.

"Hey sweet," she said in a little baby voice that seemed so ridiculous I wanted to laugh.

They exchanged what seemed like normal chitchat for while and then she asked if he wanted to come over this week.

"Why not?" she said angrily. "You too busy?"

Whatever he said wasn't to her liking and her voice got even louder.

"We can't be friends when you want to be friends and then fuck when you want to fuck. It doesn't work that way Alex. You can't resort from one to other. Feelings will always be there, especially when one has one more than the other. You promised me this was real and then changed your fucking mind when I left my husband for you, and now you play this back and forth bullshit. This doesn't end for me because you say so," she yelled and cried at the same time.

She then hung up the phone and threw it on the floor. She left a husband for him? Wow. I didn't like that. The phone kept ringing and ringing over and over again but she didn't pick it up, just sat at the computer for a while longer, just staring. After a while she picked up the phone and went to the bedroom and closed the door. I could hear muffled yelling, but not much else. Her little dog whined and scratched from the outside for a while until she finally opened the door, let him in, and closed it again. I sat there for a bit, wondering about her life before moving here and what I didn't know. Did I want to know more? I wasn't sure. I felt sadness for her pain that made me want to wish her an emptiness of what she was feeling.

It's about time

I stared at the toilet bowl water swirl around and around, wondering the travels of the sewage water. It wasn't the best day, got a C on my math test, and I mean, in the future do we really need to know the circumference of a circle or use exponential equations? Jessica was mad because I didn't want to hang out after school because it would throw off my running schedule. Mom was mad because after school snacks were no longer on my menu. My belly was full from dinner, making me feel gross and bloated.

The toilet water rippled, distracting my pity party. A bubble floated from the hole. Weird. Something shiny appeared at the bottom. I checked my earrings and my necklace to make sure they didn't fall into the toilet. The water rippled again and I couldn't quite make out what the shiny thing was at the bottom. I hesitated to stick my hand in the toilet. It was clean water right? I slowly dipped my hand in the toilet water to get the shiny thing, but as I reached down there seemed to be no bottom. I tried again and the same thing. Am I going crazy? After pulling my hand out the third time, I leaned head in closer to the water to try to see what the shiny thing was and why I couldn't grab it, but the water started bubbling again.

I reached in one last time and when I was elbow deep, something grabbed hold of my hand. I yelped and tried to pull back and it pulled my hand harder to the point where I was almost shoulder deep and my head was hitting the toilet rim. I tried to scream for mom but the next thing when I the hole got bigger and half my body was being pulled into the toilet bowl. Gross, I was swallowing toilet water. I heard the toilet flush and then I was going down, pushed by the water through pipes and caverns. I couldn't grab onto anything as the water was pushing

me so fast, down what seemed like a black water slide. I couldn't breathe, my chest heavy, and kept swallowing water. I came out of the end of the slide into a big pool of water, struggling not to drown.

When I made it to the surface, it looked like a large cereal bowl. I swam to the rim and threw up what seemed like a gallon of water. It took a while to get my breath back, and then I grabbed hold of the rim and pulled myself over the edge to see where I was.

It looked the inside of a small basement, dark, dusty, pipes everywhere, and a creepy vibe.

"Hello," I yelled, hearing my voice echoing several times. "Is anyone down here?"

Silence answered my question and ignored my panic.

"Helllllooooo. Can someone help me?" I yelled again.

The rim of the bowl was slimy with what looked like algae and I couldn't get a good grip to pull myself out and kept slipping back into the water.

I kept trying and trying and on the fifth time I was finally able to get half my body over the rim. It didn't seem too far of a fall so I heaved my over, almost like a somersault and landed on my back with a loud thud and a yelp. Everything was pitch black and the smell was atrocious. It looked like the bottom of a toilet bowl and I vomited.

I vomited several more times and then sat back, light headed. A feeling of satisfaction and euphoria came over me and I sat leaning against the wall, eyes closed feeling exhilarated and anxious at the same time. It was almost close to what it felt like when Marilyn and me would

kiss and touch in her room so long ago. My body tingled and felt relaxed. It felt like I was smiling on the inside as well as on the outside. I flushed the toilet, stood up on shaky legs, washed my hands and stared at my red face in the mirror. I looked satisfied and tired. This felt good. It was a high I'd never experienced before, an accomplishment that seemed wicked and productive at the same time. It made me want to masturbate, this feeling. My therapist had encouraged me after the Marilyn incident to masturbate to possible relieve anxiety, and it had become almost a daily habit, but today I did it twice.

I had done some reading on some websites about tricks of the trade. Take an antacid first to help with the stomach acids, make sure to drink a carbonated drink and a lot of water while eating, and make it to the bathroom before thirty minutes after eating. The trick was in the mind. The faster you eat, the more you ate, the easier it was to come up. Don't brush after as it runs your teeth enamel, just use mouthwash and take another antacid to settle your stomach acids.

The First Timers

I went out to get the mail one afternoon and could hear the Keira giggling in her front doorway, and a male voice talking to her lightly, and then her front door slammed. She had company. Male company. I wondered if it was he, the guy on the phone, and ran quietly downstairs to the Den. I moved the wood plank aside and was excited that her window was open and I could see into the house. Her window was closed, so I opened the vent. They were kissing and he started undressing.

"I'm going to pee and you better be undressed with your legs open when I come back," he said to her.

"I'd rather be in the bedroom," she responded in a resigned voice.

"No. I want it here on the carpet, so you can have rug burns tomorrow and think about every time you look at it."

"Who do you think you are? Marquis de Sade? Am I the submissive today?"

"You're always the submissive."

Marquis de what? I didn't quite hear it but it sounded interesting. I would have to Google that later. She undressed and I was a little embarrassed to be watching her get naked. She had thigh high stocking and stripped down to a black bra and colored panties. Her breasts were pretty small, and she was pretty thin, but she looked beautiful and her face was as pink as a carnation, as she got down on the floor and spread her legs while lying on her back.

I heard his footsteps and her low laugh and took a good look at him as he undressed. He didn't look like her type, since she seemed too delicate and classy, and he looked like a Dominican hood rat. He had a long goatee, tattoos all over his arms, his black hair in a ponytail, was a bit on the thin side, lacked body hair, and big thick glasses wearing his pants about three sizes too big. He had a black hoodie, a NY Yankees cap, and a smirk on his face.

He unbuttoned his pants, slid them off and I could see his penis sticking out from his boxer shorts.

"Touch yourself for me," he said to her.

"No, I want you now, please baby, it's been so long."

"Is this what you want?" he said, stroking his penis.

"Yes, please baby."

"Not yet, I want to see you touch yourself," he said.

"I want you to touch me, please," she said quietly.

The couch was blocking my view as they were on the floor and its back was obstructing my view. It made me a little angry that he was making her beg, and I wanted to see more so badly, but that would require moving the grate more and they would see me. The noise alone would alert everyone in my house and hers.

Seconds passed, she begged again, and then there was her sharp intake of breath and such a sigh of relief from her.

"This is what you wanted so bad?" he said to her

"Yes. Always," she replied, panting and breathy.

There was a slapping noises and she started moaning so loudly I thought my parents would hear, so I closed the vent. They finally moved down to the floor and I could see them over the back of the couch. He was rough and aggressive I could see her mouth open as I imagined her moaning. It was like watching a silent movie. You don't really need to hear what's happening and not hearing made it all the more exciting. He turned her over so her face was on the carpet and her body halfway up and while he was pushing in and out her, he took his belt and slapped in hard on her butt. She arched her back every time he hit her, and kept her head to the floor so I couldn't see her face. She started getting welts all over her butt and at some welts she had started to bleed.

It was 8:25pm and my parents would be in the middle of one of their shows at least until 9:00 pm unless she got up to go to the bathroom. I prayed silently she would hope I was in my room and wouldn't come looking for my sister or me.

What was he doing to her? She was saying something to him and I wanted to hear, so I opened the vent slightly again, hoping they wouldn't be too loud. It must feel good because she was yelling and begging like nothing I'd ever seen on cable or on the porno Marilyn and me had watched.

"Cum for me baby," she kept saying.

"Shut up," he kept telling her and he pushed into her harder and faster.

When she switched positions and turned to face him, she kept asking him to kiss her and asking for his hands, though I never heard a reply from him, I assumed he gave into her requests.

"Please" she asked.

He roughly put his hands on the sides of her face and kissed her so hard that she moaned in pleasure and scratched at his back.

"Not the back," he said roughly. He got up and went to the bedroom and came back with what looked like a long scarf.

"No baby, you know I don't like being tied up, it makes me anxious," she whimpered.

"I don't care," he said as he got on top of her, pinned her down and tied up her hands.

She struggled a bit, but he just laughed. It made me a little anxious that she was uncomfortable. Her face seemed troubled and he seemed pleased.

Around 8:45 she asked him to stop for a second because she was dry and it was hurting. The thought of her hurting made me tingle, and I could feel myself get wet and antsy.

"No," he replied a bit angrily, "you like it when it hurts; I want you bleeding tomorrow at how bad I rip you."

"Please baby, it really hurts, just slow down for a second or let's switch condoms."

"Then no more condoms," he said.

He turned her around so that she faced away from him and the force he used made her scream more in pain than what seemed pleasure. At one point he stood up and she was bent over like a V and he pushed into her so hard she begged him to stop.

"Please, it really hurts," she pleaded.

"I don't care," he said, laughing and pushing even harder.

Even though she complained of pain, she never moved or tried to physically stop him, which was strange to me because if it really hurts then you try to stop it. He finally untied her hands, which were red and marked.

It was around 8:55 pm when I got worried that my parents would get up and at least check on me upstairs. At around 9:05 pm, he moaned while she screamed and the pounding stopped as he collapsed on top of her. They were kissing softly, and she was whispering words into his ears as she gently stroked his back with her nails.

"That was amazing baby," Keira said, low and shaky.

Her voice had a sound of excitement and joy in it. It was so beautiful and I wanted to imagine the look she had on her face. I imagined as he leaned on his elbows, still inside her, looking into her eyes and thinking how beautiful she was at that moment.

They whispered something I couldn't hear and then I heard her intake of breathe and she started moaning again. I imagined this is how it was supposed to be when someone "rocked your world.

"Petal?" My mother's voice sounded like a bullhorn coming from upstairs.

I jumped off the couch and up the stairs, coming out of the Den as quietly as I could. I could tell from her footsteps that she was upstairs so I opened the front door and slammed it shut.

"Yeah?" I replied as casually as possible.

She made her way downstairs and I walked to meet her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I was outside sitting on the steps."

She raised her eyebrows, and I was sure I blushed. Claiming exhaustion, I went upstairs to take a shower. I got into bed and masturbated to her words and her sounds, cumming hard. I dreamt of bleeding and she ripped so bad she couldn't walk, just like he wanted.

Second Hand Me Downs

The next day I told Jess about what I had sort of seen and heard. Her excitement sucked all the air out of the room. She wanted every detail, every moan, every slap, and every word. Just telling her about it made me wet with anticipation and the satisfaction of telling Jess, knowing she didn't see it. Second hand stories aren't always good as first hand experiences. She was jealous and I relished. It had been weird at first, knowing I had witnessed such an intimate act between them, but since they didn't know, it seemed harmless. It was exciting to watch and I couldn't wait till the next time.

"He was so rough and mean with her, but she liked it," I told her.

"Why would she like that?" She asked.

"Not sure, but it went on for like three hours and he tied her up, beat her with a belt to the point where she was bleeding."

"And you watched the whole time? It didn't scare you?"

"Why would it, she seemed to like it. They both did."

"I can't think that anything painful would be pleasurable, but hey, to each is own. Next time call me, I definitely want to see this."

A few weeks had passed since the sexual incident and I hadn't heard or seen the neighbor or her lover in all that time. The weather had a fall crisp to it, and it smelled of wishes and fake dreams. The air was full of friskiness and the growing leaves and flowers and light breeze make people think of possibilities and love. Spring was the season of falling in love and the being symbolizing the end of winter sadness, or as my shrink calls it Seasonal Affective Disorder. Sad. I had become so adept at my purging, that my parents were a little perplexed at my healthy appetite at dinner, and rapid weight loss. My mother attributed it to running, which I dutifully did every afternoon on the treadmill my father agreed to get. Though no one used it but me. It was an escape from my mind, as I could just listen to the music and stretch my body to its limits.

Chapter 4

"The thought of suicide is a great consolation: by means of it one gets through many a dark night."— Friedrich Nietzsche

"Life isn't a hotel, you can't check out whenever you want," said my dad one afternoon after we were watching a news report about a young, gay kid who killed himself for being bullied for being gay.

At the time I agreed with him. This kid was only sixteen and had his whole life ahead of him, a whole wide world to explore and fall, get back up, make mistakes, have fun, fall in love and just be a basic human being. He would be like Jen. He didn't give himself enough time to think about what he was doing and what impact he could have had on the world. Plus I have several gay friends and though they do tend to be overly dramatic, I'm not sure they would take the route of taking their own lives, though I couldn't be entirely sure.

"You know in Dante's Inferno, he will be confined to the "The Forest of Suicides," and forever be locked inside a tree tormented by harpies, never going to heaven," I told my dad, proud to have remembered something from my reading of Dante.

"Good to see you're learning something in that fancy private school I sent you."

"Well, it looks like you're getting your money's worth then."

"Except it's The Divine Comedy, not Dante's Inferno."

"Touché, Dad, for someone who never graduated high school."

It was odd having this conversation with my dad, as I had heard Keira was having a different conversation on the phone with a friend a few days ago.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with it. When you're done, you're done. How others feel about it shouldn't matter, because nobody is living your life but you. You live in your head, in your heart, and in your soul, and when you lose the desire to go on, it should be your choice to check out," she was telling someone on the phone.

"It aggravates me when people say things like 'it will get better' or 'it could be worse' will it really get better? Can it get worse? It's just an automatic response to people when they are in pain. What if it never gets better? Do we just suffer with the hope of it? I think hope is what kills, hope is what's deadly, and hope that gives a false sense of reality."

It seemed like such a morbid conversation at the time but it did seem to make sense after a while. Nobody lives your life but you, and if you don't want to do it, then why do it? It wasn't for me but it saddened me that Keira thought that way, that she felt empty and hopeless.

I went back and reread Dante's Canto XII. His journey was pretty scary, but the thought of these poor souls stuck in Hell with their bodies as trees, branches being ripped off causing them pain seemed so sad. Imagine not being able to bear life on earth that you take your own life and then spend eternity in even more pain. There was no escape, either you deal with it in life or have a worse punishment than death.

"I don't want you to be a tree Keira," I said to the window, hoping she could somehow hear me.

Introductions

"So I have a new neighbor," I told Annabel. "Someone new moved into Frank's old apartment."

"You seem excited, I thought we talked about privacy Petal," she said sharply.

"There's something about her, she's sad, like she's going through something bad."

"And you feel a connection with her that way?"

"No, I want to feel her pain?"

"Why?"

I told her about her phone conversations and then I told her about the sex she had with the man, Alex that day.

"You watched them have sex Petal? That is not appropriate behavior and something you should be doing."

"They didn't see me. It was just weird how he hurt her and she liked it."

"It's called sado-masochism, and it's not something I want you to be interested in. It's people who derive pleasure from pain."

"But that sounds like a good thing, turning pain into some kind of pleasure, how can that be bad?"

"It's not that simple Petal. From what you're telling me, it's not just the sex part. He obviously is not good to her in normal everyday life, giving her emotional pain, and then sexual pain. She seems to enjoy both or she would not continue with this relationship. She's using both to escape reality rather than deal with it."

"Maybe that's the only one some people can deal with pain, by not dealing with it."

"That doesn't apply to you Petal, we have worked hard over the years to find a good balance for you, and watching this neighbor is not going to be a good thing for you. She has her own problems to resolve and it's really none of your business. If you continue this behavior I will have no choice to speak to your mother about it."

"Doctor patient privilege Annabel."

"If I feel your are doing damage to yourself, I'm allowed for parental interference."

On Wednesday evenings, Keira would spend most of the evening past eight on Skype with her friend Regina from China, who was over there on some kind of teaching visa from what I gathered. Most of the talk was about Regina and her tales of men, friends and adapting to Chinese life. Regina was black, and her skin color was some kind of sensation to the Chinese, and an attraction to the seemingly many European businessmen who worked there.

"You should definitely move here darling, so many European men at your disposal and the Chinese guys love American women," Regina would insist each time.

"I'm too old to start over my friend, you are only twenty-six while I'm about to be thirty-six which is a big difference."

"Age is just a number darling."

"It's only a number when you're young, when you past thirty-five it's like a death sentence."

"It's only a number because you fucking a man way too young for you and his immaturity makes you feel old, when it should be him that feels mature."

"Not funny Regina."

"You're an easy target."

"Because you know he's my weakness."

"No, it's because he knows your weakness, and uses it every chance he can because you let him."

"It still just changes the circumstance of my life. I'm divorced, broke, and old. Trying to find my way in life and hung up on some kid who treats me like toilet paper and then flushes me away."

"Only because you let him darling. It's all you, and you need to change that."

I thought about what she said for a while. Everyone I knew who was older was married with children, and that was also my expectation. After college, I expected to get married and

have children and "start life" as they call it. My mom married my dad at twenty-one and they were still, what seemed, happily married almost twenty years later. Isn't that every girl's dreams? I didn't want to be married as young as my mom, but at least before I was thirty. Was that what was expected out of women, was it such a bad thing to be single and trying to find your way at that age?

I remembered that time Frank said something about Dostoyevsky saying that living past forty was indecent. Was that true?

Purge the Pain

My therapist had noticed my weight loss and was concerned because of my past history of not eating. I didn't want to confess my purging secret, but she was much too smart, or at least educated to figure it out and got a confession out of me. After a brief lecture of the dangers of purging, she asked me why I did it, and recommends joining an Ana-Mia support group or we would need to include this in our sessions.

“At first it helped with the weight loss, I can eat anything and then get rid of it. But the feeling afterward is amazing. I feel relaxed and less anxious,” I told her.

“Maybe we should try more Xanax for the anxiety so you don't feel like you need to purge,” she advised.

“I don’t always purge, just when I feel like I need to, it’s actually very calming. It gives me that empty feeling, like I can start everything over fresh.”

“We will need to work on this Petal, this is not good for you and it doesn’t resolve any issues. Purging is a control issue, not a weight issue. Does it help with Jen?”

“Don’t talk about Jen.”

She didn’t usually reference Jen too often, but in seven years she has tried at least every few months to get me to talk about Jen and I refused. She never pushed the topic. I wanted to talk about Keira

“Why are you still watching her Petal? She is entitled to her privacy,” she told me.
"Would you like someone watching you? Knowing your purging secret?"

"There’s just something about her, I can’t help it. Just watching her do small things like eat or watch TV. Makes everything seem so normal.”

“Everything is normal, but you can’t live your life by watching someone else’s.”

“She’s sad too and I just want to know that I’m there for her. She feels old, neglected and heartbroken. Is thirty-five old?"

"Everyone reacts different to age. Especially women. Women have a stigmatism that they should be married with kids at a certain age, and when it doesn't happen, they feel like they failed somehow. Sometimes it's in their heads and sometimes its society. I don't know her Petal so I can't answer that."

"I want to know that she shouldn't be sad, and it makes me sad."

"How does she know that Petal? She doesn't even know you, nor would she appreciate you spying on her."

"I think she can feel me through the wall and know she's not alone."

"I think we need to add an extra session to your normal sessions Petal, and maybe bring in your mother for a few session. I feel we are regressing a bit, not moving forward."

"I think we are perfectly fine," I said.

"You would think so Petal," she replied.

Chapter 5

Homework

My English teacher had assigned a book and paper based on a book by Jean Paul Sartre called *Nausea*. It was a book about a man questioning his existence, or his existence in life and what it all means. Pretty much everyone's thought at some point in life, but he actually wrote his down and expanded on it with characters. It depressed me yet excited me at the same time. Human pain, whether mental or physical was a fact of life and everyone deals with it differently, or just doesn't deal with it at all. Makes me think of a quote from one of my mom's favorite movies, and she does have pretty good taste in movies for a mom, "Reality Bites."

"There's no point to any of this. It's all just a... a random lottery of meaningless tragedy and a series of near escapes," says the character Troy Dyer.

Maybe this book was a bit much for a bunch of fifteen year olds, but maybe it was best we learn early on that life just sucks. Like my dad would reiterate that stupid old adage to me every time I complained about something, "Life isn't fair, so just deal with it."

I sat on the stoop of our brownstone waiting for Jess to come by and pick up some shoes she wanted to borrow and maybe work on our paper. I pulled out one of the cigarettes I had stolen from my mom's secret stash, which wasn't so secret since she kept in the hall closet under the towels and put it in my mouth. It felt good to be a little bad at times. It lingered there for a

bit because I wasn't so sure I had a lighter and didn't know if I had enough time before Jess got here because I knew she would bitch and moan about smoking and how it wasn't sexy.

"Fifteen year old girls aren't supposed to be sexy," my mom had told me last week when I wanted to borrow her red lipstick because I wanted to try to look sexy for a poetry reading.

"I don't mean porn star sexy mom, its just lipstick."

"Red lipstick is for whores for anyone under twenty-five. There needs to be an age restriction because it just screams attention to your mouth. Plus. You're going to a poetry reading, you're going to look like paid entertainment."

"You wear it."

"I'm married and way over twenty-five, and trust me at my age, any woman would love to be confused as the entertainment portion of any event."

As I debated about being unsexy by smoking, I saw the neighbor, Keira, coming up the block. I checked my phone; it was 3:45 pm. As she started getting closer, it was obvious by her red nose and puffy eyes that she was or had been crying. She was walking pin straight, reminding me of how my mother always yells at me about my improper posture, and had a grocery bag in one hand and her purse in the other.

She looked like she had lost some weight since the last time I'd seen her, which about three weeks ago, yet she looked so beautiful in her state of despair. She reached her landing, and didn't even glance up at me. She opened her purse to take out her keys.

"Hello," I blurted out so quickly before she disappeared down the stairs.

She stopped so abruptly I thought I had scared her. She stood still for a second and without looking back gave a low hello.

I wanted so bad to get her attention and talk to her, comfort her, but she put her key in the door and disappeared inside her den. I looked down the block to see if Jessica was coming, damn bitch was always late and with no sign, ran into the house and flew down the stairs to our basement den, pushing the plank aside. Her window was closed, so I rushed to the couch and put my ear to the vent.

I heard the rustling of a plastic bag and the TV. Went on.

"Hello my little mouse," I heard her say to her dog. "How was your day? Mommy missed you."

I heard her give him what seemed like a million kisses and then nothing. I could hear her sniffing and knew she was crying. It made me want to cry. Her cell phone started to ring, that

bell ring that meant "he" was calling. She let it ring, not picking it up. It rang again and again, till I assume she put on vibrate.

The doorbell rang and the noise scared me so much that I slipped off the couch onto the floor, landing on my side. It had to be Jess. I limped to the front door, annoyed and bruised.

"Thought you were gonna wait for me outside?" Jess said.

"The neighbor came home early," I said, regretting telling her the instant I said it.

"Cool," she replied, pushing past me and walking towards the Den. "Is the guy there with her?"

"Stop Jess, she came alone. Forget it."

"Damn, she never brings him when I'm here. Next time you have to call me ASAP."

"Why are you so interested in hearing her having sex?"

"Cause it's hot! It's like ear porn. Just imagine what he's doing to her, listing to what he says to her. We could get some tips."

"Let's get out of here and get some coffee," I told her, though I wanted to just sit on the den couch, comforting her through the walls.

All though coffee Jess kept talking about what she was going to wear to match the shoes, the only heels I was allowed to have, she was borrowing from me. I tried to sound interested but my mind started drifting to my English assignment that was due tomorrow.

"Did you finish your paper for English tomorrow?" I asked Jess, trying desperately to change the topic.

"Seriously? That book is so boring, and seems totally inappropriate for teenage reading. "No pun intended but that book gives me nausea, and I don't get it, all that complaining, just end it."

"It's a metaphor, Jess."

"Yeah, a metaphor for crap."

"For someone who's all about journal entries, I would think you would love a novel that's all about journaling."

"It's boring. Hey, let's go downtown to H&M so I can get some accessories and then get some Chipotle."

The thought of going shopping and talking about her boyfriend, brought up to mind a line from the book "I had as much desire to eat with him as I had to hang myself."

"Eh, I'm tired and I need to work on my paper."

"We both know you're not going to crack into that paper till after dinner and into the wee hours of the night as always. You just wanna see if that guy's gonna come over and you'll get to hear them have sex again."

"Jess, he rarely comes over, and I really need to work on my paper."

She agreed she probably needed to work on hers too and I was much too excited that she didn't suggest we work on it together. I ran home as fast as I could, as the coffee shop was only two blocks from the house, and hurried to the Den before my parents got home.

I could hear her TV on and some rustling of bags and clanging of a utensil against a plate, so she was probably eating. Good, she couldn't be that sad if she was hungry. I lay on the couch and listened to the sounds for a bit and then went upstairs because I had to pee. I heard her TV go off and she put on this song she played all the time, it was called "Like a Friend" by a band called Pulp. My mom was a big Pulp fan and I recognized the song immediately. It was a sad song about a friend using a friend, and I imagined she thought of him each time she played it. I

hoped she was sleeping peacefully in her bed, dreaming of her love, and cuddling with her annoying dog.

I went downstairs, ate and then went upstairs to purge, so we could both be empty inside. It always felt so good to purge, the euphoria, light headedness and satisfaction was beautiful, and for some reason made me want to masturbate each time after, like a grand finale. After I sat on my bed and tried to finish reading my book assignment.

"Don't you have a paper due tomorrow?"

My mother's annoyed voice awoke me from my sleepy haze.

"Oops, must have fallen asleep. Sorry."

Working on the paper seemed much more difficult than I had tried to convince Jess. Sartre was a complicated writer, big on existentialism, and less centered on character rather than circumstances beyond his control. The more I read about Antoine, the more I thought of the neighbor. Antoine was depressed, and as a result of his depressed he was constantly nauseous. Maybe that was it. She was depressed and it caused her nausea. Maybe I should tell her that and it would help her, but maybe not. Sartre had a cynical view of life and his philosophy sends you spinning in circles and wondering of your own existence.

Later in the night and halfway through my paper as Jess had predicted, I crept downstairs to the Den. The clock in the hallway said 1:30am. I couldn't hear anything, so I climbed on the couch and put my ear to the grate. I could hear a TV low in the background, so she must be watching it in her bedroom, or had fallen asleep with the TV on. I hoped she would get some rest and feel better.

"Good night and sweet dreams," I whispered through the grate.

I didn't finish the paper till around 4am, which meant a lousy two hours of sleep was all I would get, but it was Friday and I could sleep till tomorrow when I got home from school.

"I knew you wouldn't finish till probably this morning," Jess greeted me out on the sidewalk on our way to school.

"Four a.m. to be exact," I corrected her.

No Rhyme or Reason

"I don't know why she takes that from him. It's so confusing and it bothers me," I told the therapist.

"Why should it bother you? You don't really know her and have no personal attachment to this young woman other than a building wall. She's an adult and makes her own decisions and

from what you're telling me, she seems to be fine with her decision to keep letting him treat her that way," she told me, writing some notes on my folder.

"What does that mean that she's an adult and makes her own decisions, so people under eighteen can't make their own decisions? That sounds like a stupid thing to say Doctor."

"What I would like to discuss is why you are spying on this stranger's life and taking it personal when you should be concentrating on yourself and your own real personal relationships and problems. Don't start inventing new ones and both I and you are going to lose track of which direction we are going every week," she said, placing the folder down and reaching for her glass of water.

"I don't know. Everything and everyone else seems so mundane, and she seems so real."

"She is real, but her life exists on the other side of that wall, and is not part of yours. Plus, I don't think she would appreciate an audience to her sex life. Are you still journaling?"

"Nice switch doctor. Yes, like a good little girl."

"Remember Petal, we leave sarcasm at the door here."

"So now I assume we will talk about the usual now?"

"Yes, how are we doing with that?" she asked, putting the water down and picking up my folder again.

The next night I hadn't realized that the guy had come over until I went to check the plank just to see how Keira was doing. They were apparently in the bedroom because I couldn't see, so I opened the vent and could hear them off and on. After a while he came out and abruptly left, she came slowly out of the room crying. I wondered what he said and why he always made her sad when he left. Why would she want that? Why would she want him to treat her so bad when it made her feel awful afterward? I thought of the day she sat on the outside porch talking to her friend on the phone crying about how much he hurt and that he didn't love her that way she loved him, but she couldn't stop. Couldn't stop what? Loving him or him hurting her?

Dining Room is Not for Eating

Engrossed in a riveting episode of Law and Order, I barely heard the neighbor's sliding door open, but did hear her voice, low and sad from my open window. I rushed to my window, overlooking our tiny backyard, and could see her knees peeking out from her door. Running down to the dining room, I quietly unlocked the sliding doors and pulled them open a bit so she wouldn't hear. If I went outside she would probably be able to see me through the wooden gate slats, and I didn't want her to go inside. Putting my head out as far as possible, I was on my hands and knees with my head slightly out the door. I could lightly hear my mother talking on the phone in her bedroom, and knew my sister was watching TV in her room, so it was safe for a while.

"I know you're upset with me, but I can't help it. You know nothing ever changes. When he gets what he wants, same routine, nothing changes, not even me," she said.

I definitely could not hear what the other person on the line was saying but I could hear her softly sniffing and assumed she was crying. She was quiet for a long time.

"I can't stop it, can't help it, and can't try. This won't end until one of us is dead," she said with such finality.

She was quiet again for a while, and kept giving brief answers once and then thanked her friend for calling and hung up. She sat there for a while, crying a bit and I wanted so bad to reach over the fence and hug her. Something about her voice gave me the chills. It made me sad to think of that beautiful smile crying.

She went back inside and went down to the Den when I saw her come out of her bedroom with some kind of device, which up close looked like a vibrator shaped as a penis. She picked up her phone and dialed someone.

"Hi baby. Want to play?" she asked.

She lied down on the couch and played with her toy while moaning and saying love words to him. When she finally came, she was quiet for a while.

"Thanks baby, I needed that," she said.

Chapter 6

"An objection is not a rejection; it is simply a request for more information."

Bo Bennet

Marcus had been my friend since we were kids, and I knew he had a slight crush on me and we even had a passionate kiss in the park once, other than the kid incident years ago. Me, him and Jess always went out together for Halloween every year.

Halloween is my favorite holiday of the year. It was a time to be someone else for a day and marvel at the ingenuity of other people's costume. This year Jess insisted on dragging me to senior party that she wasn't even invited to. One of her friends, who is dating a senior, told her about it and that meant we were going. Jess was going as a sexy bunny, and her boyfriend Junior was going as some kind of vampire zombie thing. So unoriginal. I was going as a black cat, and Marcus as some kind of Japanese Anime character. My mom wasn't too thrilled about me going to a senior party but I assured her parents would be there.

I wore a full-length black leotard, though it annoyed me that my potbelly showed too much, but my mom thought it looked great. Cat ears, eye make-up, and a tail, and I was actually a little excited, but anxious. I didn't really know any seniors and was sure to be the third wheel with Jess and her kissy kissy boyfriend. I was relieved that Marcus was going but he was taking some girl friend of his and there was sure to be an awkward moment.

It was going to be downtown in the West Village, which was going to be a pain in general to get to because of the parade. We took the train down to Christopher Street and walked down towards Hudson. Everyone was out, and the streets and looked like a piñata exploded.

The brownstone was big, and the parents weren't home. Good and bad. I was surprised but not really that there was liquor available, that didn't look like it, was pilfered from the parent's liquor stash. It was everywhere and everyone was already drinking and acting like it.

"Whose party is this anyway?" I asked.

"Ricky Sarter, Marilyn's ex. You know him."

I did. He was one of the cutest seniors, and rumored to be very nice and cool with the sophomores and juniors. Most seniors treated the lower grades like disease. They either ignored us or made fun of us. I'd actually talked to Ricky in the library once about a book we were both checking out at the same time and he seemed cool. This party just might be fun.

"Awesome," said Junior. "Let's get fucked up."

I pulled Jess aside and begged her not to leave me alone and definitely not let Junior get drunk. A room full of strangers made me clingy, and Jess made sure to let me know that she was not going to be my babysitter.

"You need a drink," she said, "and you'll do just fine."

I was drunk, and it was fun. There were two cute seniors sitting next to me, including Ricky who had gotten me a screwdriver once or twice, I couldn't remember. One from my high

school and one was his friend was from another. The friend was dressed as Hugh Hefner and the others had the usual vampires and zombie costumes. Hugh was paying great attention to me, which caused Jess great alarm as she rushed over and roughly grabbed my arm when he leaned over to say something to me.

"Let's get away from this group," she insisted. "This guy is bad news, and he's eighteen."

"So?" was my passive answer. What did she care if I was talking to strangers?

"You are drunk and I'm not babysitting," she said pointedly, crossing her arms and giving me that angry mother stare.

"She'll be ok. I'm here, and I'll watch her, no worries," said Ricky.

She seemed appeased by his response and walked off to a group of guys that Junior was talking too. He was already drunk, and I knew she would be annoyed.

Ricky got up to get another drink and I moved a bit closer to Hugh, almost sitting on his lap. He seemed to like that at spread his legs a bit so that his robe opened a bit more, exposing his chest a little more, letting his robe expose the boxer shorts he had under. They were silky and maroon, like his robe, and he put the fake cigar in his mouth, took a fake puff, to which I giggled. I wanted him to want me.

"You're a little drunk," he laughed. "How old are you by the way?"

"Fifteen."

I noticed in my slightly drunken state that he looked at his friend and then back at me with a slightly uncomfortable look. I knew he was eighteen, but what did it matter, he was cute and I'd probably never see him again.

"Maybe you should drink a little water. I like your cat costume by the way. I suddenly seem to like cats more so than usual."

"Be careful," his friend said lightly, "this one you just might be allergic to."

I was confused at his friend's statement, but his slight attraction to me made me a bit bolder. I thought of Keira, and the teasing remarks she would tell sometimes tell her man on the phone. Hugh grabbed his beer and kept making eye contact back and forth with his friend. I saw Junior walking to the bar while Jess engaged in an excited conversation with a group of guys I'd never seen before. The bar was almost directly behind the couch I was sitting on.

I felt Hugh put his hand on my knee as I watched Junior and Ricky talk at the bar. Hugh said something I didn't quite hear and when I turned back to him I noticed his friend's eyes were glued to me. Being the center attention was fun and I turned to Hugh and smiled.

"Would you like to pet the pussy?" I said.

"What?" he said, as his eyes widened and he inhaled so fast.

"Would you like to pet the pussy?" I asked again, glancing at his open robe, and noticed I had really gotten his attention, all of it.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I heard Ricky say behind me.

"What the fuck, Pet?" Marcus said.

"What?" I said to the both of them. "I was just asking him if he wanted"

"I heard what you said the first time. Get up," he said.

I turned to look at him and Ricky, both with shocked looked on their faces and felt a small sense of satisfaction. I then turned to look back at Hugh who had leaned back against the couch arms spread along the back of the couch and had a huge smile on his face, as well as slight amusement.

"Well?" I asked him, leaning closer, feeling his body stiffen.

"Don't even think about it," Ricky said to him as I felt Marcus grab my arm and almost drag me over the couch.

"Hold on," Hugh said.

"She's fifteen bro," Ricky responded to him.

"Nothing's going on, she's just a little drunk," Hugh responded. "It's cool."

By this time Marcus had dragged me over the back of the couch and was pulling me away from the group. Ricky followed with a glass of water.

"Here, drink this," he said, but he was slightly laughing. "You're funny when you're drunk."

"What about you?" I asked him.

"Petal, shut the fuck up," Marcus said. "Let's go outside and get some fresh air."

I tried to look around for Jess but didn't see her, as Junior roughly grabbed my arm and shoved me towards the front door. I thought of Keira again, the time her guy had dragged her back to her apartment when she tried walking away from him down the street, and the look she had on her face.

The cool October air felt good, and I stumbled a bit trying to walk down a few stairs to sit down. Marcus made his way slowly down and sat next to me.

"What were you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing, just joking around," I told him. What was the big deal anyway?"

"You go to school with these people, and you can't say shit like that. You're fifteen."

"Fifteen. It's like a warning label. I get so tired of everyone saying I'm only fifteen. So what? What does fifteen really mean? There's a lot of can't do than can do at fifteen."

But he was right. I felt a little humiliated since it seemed so brazen and not everyone was amused at my joke. Marcus dragging me out the door and Ricky laughing at me didn't make me feel so brazen about now.

"I'm going to get Jess and then we'll go, it's getting late anyway," he said as he got up.

"Marcus" I said. "Will you kiss me?"

"You're drunk Pet," he said.

I felt dejected and put my head down when I felt him grab the sides of my face and kiss me deeply, like that day in the park. It felt good and warm. We heard the front door open and pulled apart quickly.

"I wish I would have heard that," Jess said coming out the front door. "That's fucking hysterical. You actually said that Pet? What I wouldn't have given to have heard that."

"That wasn't funny Jess," Marcus said to her.

"I'm glad you're amused Jess," I told her, annoyed that she always got a kick out of my humiliation.

"Oh my god, wait till Monday and everyone in school hears about this. It's going to be hysterical. You'll be very popular amongst the seniors," she said, handing me my coat.

On the cab ride home I was mortified and felt like crying, though I wasn't sure why. Hugh's reaction felt good, but now it didn't feel so great if he was amused rather than what I had wanted him to feel.

Luckily Monday at school, Ricky was nice enough to keep my debacle quiet and no one talked about it. Much to Jess' disappointment, though she did managed to mention it to me more than once to see me squirm

Keira's guy had been over several more times over the past weeks, but they spent most of the time in the bedroom so I imagined the things they did, and dreamt about it almost every

night. I wanted to see, feel, and know what they were doing. I wanted some of the pain to turn into pleasure.

I went over to Marcus house one afternoon when I knew no one was there. I started to kiss him and though he was little startled, he didn't stop. We even got to the point where he was fingering me and I was reaching down into his pants to grab his penis. After getting a brief glimpse of their last sexual episode, I wanted to get Marcus to have sex with me. He immediately jumped back.

"Are you crazy Petal?" was his response. He stopped fingering me, got up and walked out of the room. I felt humiliated. Why wouldn't he want to have sex with me? Was I not that sexually attractive. He came back after a bit, finding me sitting on the bed, fully clothed with my hands in my lap.

"Why are you doing this? We've never done anything before and now all of sudden you want to have sex?"

"Why not?" I yelled.

"Why now?" he asked.

I knew it was because of the neighbor but I couldn't tell him, and not knowing what to say, just sat there cried.

When I got home, I ate so much my stomach hurt, purged, and then masturbated myself to sleep.

Rough and Tumble

It was about 11:00 am on Saturday and I was sitting the top doorstep prepping for a run in the park, and Keira was leaning against her gate railing looking down the street, holding her cell phone in her hand. The excitement on her face was almost gross. The guy must be coming over for sex and then when he would leave she would be crying for days. Her giddiness spread all over the stairs and down the street like a waterfall. It was a calm breezy day and her hair was blowing slightly as her green eyes radiated a wildness that almost seemed inhuman. She was so beautiful in her anticipation.

She couldn't see me from where I was sitting on my stoop, though she rarely looked around. I stayed completely still so she couldn't hear me or notice me. Her cell phone rang and all she was said was "Ok. See you in a minute."

Her anxiousness was visible in the way she stood. I wanted to say hello, maybe to ease her anxiety a bit, and finally talk to her, but before I could say anything, her body shifted and she was facing down the street. A strange heat filled the air, like a strong smell. I looked down the street and saw him through the plant that was hiding me from their view. It was weird seeing him with clothes, as I could never really get a good look at him through the peephole. She was so dainty, smart and fashionable and he looked liked a garbage man. Seeing him up close, he looked like a Dominican hood rat. He had a black hoodie on with his iPod earplugs in, a long

goatee, black glasses, and was one of those idiot guys that wore his pants eight times bigger than his size.

When he got to her took one of his earplugs, and the way he looked at her made me feel jealous for every girl out there that has never felt that look. Especially me. It was look like he wanted to absorb her into his every pore.

"Hey," he said.

"You're late," she said, her voice sounding pouty.

Her voice always had a different sound every time I heard it. She was upset, crying, whining, giddy, or just plain defeated.

I could feel the heat between them even from my distance, and was enveloped in this passion that was flowing between them. You hear, read or see these kinds of things in movies but it was weird to experience it. It was like a separate breeze that filled a particular space, like standing directly in front of the fridge. My skin tingled and I wanted to desperately to touch one of them to feel what they were feeling. He leaned close and kissed her, reaching for her hand.

"I can't stay too long, I have to be somewhere," he said.

I felt rather than heard the anger in her voice. "What do you mean be somewhere? You said you were free this afternoon."

I was embarrassed for the tears I could hear welling up in her voice like boiling water.

"I have to meet a friend," he said.

"Fuck you, then leave now," she said started walking away, past my stoop and down the street.

"Fine," he said and started walking back the way he came.

I sat there stunned and embarrassed, not knowing what to do. What an asshole he was. He walked down for a bit and then turned around heading in the direction she went in and grabbed her arm. They were having an argument in the middle of the sidewalk, and I prayed no one but me would hear it. She didn't deserve anyone to see her humiliation, least of all me. I couldn't hear most of the argument, but he grabbed her arm and started walking back towards our stoop.

"What the fuck is your problem?" he said to her.

"You come here after almost a month and then tell me I have limited time. What the hell Marco?" she yelled and I could see the tears streaming down her face.

As they came closer, I reached down to pretend I was tying my shoes, trying not to look up. I wanted to jump from the stoop and scratch his eyes out, and in my anger looked up and saw them. He made slight eye contact with me and then went forward.

"Let's go inside," he said, dragging her roughly by the arm.

I expected her to be angry and hurting at his rough treatment of her, but that's not what I saw. She looked placid but her eyes were excited and her mouth had a look of satisfaction. She liked it and wanted it. He seemed angry, but she seemed pleased. What was wrong with her?

He was still holding her arm as they went down her stairs and disappeared into her doorway. Jumping up, I ran down to the Den and moved the plank aside.

They were still arguing, and I had to reach up and open the vent so I could hear, but as soon as I did, the arguing stopped and he push her roughly to the floor. She stayed there staring up at him angrily as he took off his hoodie and unbuttoned his pants.

"No," she yelled at him. "You don't get to fuck me."

He didn't even reply, as he knelt down and grabbed her legs as she tried to kick him away. He lifted her skirt, moving her panties to the side and shoving hard into her. She screamed and then gasped.

"This is what you wanted, so shut up," he said to her, as he pushed into her harder and harder. She gave in completely.

They had sex for hours, in so many different positions I wanted to take notes. Whenever she asked him to stop because she was in pain he wouldn't even slow down.

"You like it," he would say, "So take it."

She would say words in Spanish I didn't understand and though he was rough with her, you could feel their connection through the wall. When they were in a position facing each other, I would watch his face. He had a look of anger about him I couldn't describe, like he was angry with her, but he would grab face roughly and kiss her for long amounts of time. When she would tell him she loved him, he would roughly grab her hair and switch her to face the other way or to a side position, like the word love was repulsive to him. No matter what position they were in, at some point he always reached for her hand and locked fingers with her. My breathing was becoming heavy and I was so wet that I knew I would have to change underwear as soon as they were done. Sometimes he would whisper things in her ear that I couldn't hear, and it would make her sad and sometime cry. I wanted to be there with her, feeling what she was feeling.

They never left the room, having sex on the rug on the floor, and though she complained that she was getting rug burn.

"Shut up. I want you to feel that burn tomorrow and think of me," he told her.

When they would flip positions, I could see scratches from the rug on her back, some of them bleeding. They had sex for over three hours, stopping only once because he had to pee. When he got up, his knees were bloody. While he was in the bathroom, she cried silently till she heard the toilet flush, then wiped her face and sat up on her knees. He walked up to her and she started giving him a blowjob. He grabbed her hair hard and threw his head back and started moaning. She seemed to really like it, and her moans made me excited. I started fingering myself watching them. In the middle, he pulled her head all the way back. She looked up at him for a minute and then he shoved her down back to the floor.

She scratched him and bit him and he was so rough with her, I couldn't imagine how she got so much pleasure from it. She would beg him to kiss her, and though he seemed hesitant most times, he would relent. It made me think of the movie "Pretty Woman," when the hooker told the guy she doesn't kiss on the mouth because it was too personal. His hesitation when she asked made me angry and sad for her.

At around 2:00pm, they finished. They lay next to each other for a short while, she was on her side facing him, and one set of hands intertwined while her other hand traced his tattoos. He lay facing the ceiling, still with a hard on. The whole time they had sex, he never went down. She reached down and grabbed his penis, and he immediately sat up.

"I have to go," he said, staring to get up.

"No you don't," she said, sounding pathetic and pleading.

"I told you I have to meet someone."

"Who? Who do you have to meet? You're supposed to spend the afternoon with me and we were going to have dinner," she yelled so loud I thought I would have to close the vent as I had heard my mother come in about an hour earlier.

"I just fucked you for three hours and I'm tired. I told my friend I would meet them," he said so calmly while he put his pants on and grabbed his shirt and hoodie.

"You asshole. You just use me like fucking toilet paper. Use me, wipe yourself, and then flush me down the toilet. I'm not your fucking goddamn whore," she was yelling and crying at the same time.

She was sitting naked on the carpet, her back facing me.

"You're not a whore and I have to meet my friend. I'm not arguing with you," he said angrily, as if she didn't have a right to ask him any questions. "Every time we do this you get like this. This is going to be the last time, as I can't deal with your shit every time. We are friends, nothing any more Keira, that part is over."

"It's so easy for you. You said you loved me once. It's always the last time till you get horny," she said, so angrily I thought the walls would fall down.

"I did love you, still care about you, but you know we cannot do this. It can't be real. You know how it is between us, and we need to stop it anyway and just stay friends like we are supposed to, so this will be the last time," he said, and walked over to her, kissed her lightly and then walked out the door before she could say anything else.

The fragility of her resolve had been demolished by his last words as I watched her sitting there, naked, crying, with her back red and bloody. I hated him and hated her a bit too. I closed the vent, slid the panel back into its place and sat on the den floor and cried with her.

Brazen Whore

It was winter break and although I should be enjoying the Christmas break, I was stuck under house arrest with a busted knee. The humiliation of why it happened was worse than the surgery, though only Marcus and me really knew.

Marcus and me had been messing around on and off for a bit since my last embarrassing incident with him, but never went all the way. Marcus was sexy, tall, and muscular and had that cute adorableness of a puppy. We'd been engaging in rough fingering for a while, but I wanted more. He tried to stop it, but my hand stroking his dick was too much of an incentive and the next thing that happened is he had me pinned under him and we were about to have sex. I'd had wanted to have sex for a while, but Marcus kept insisting we were too young and immature to know what to do. Then we heard the front door open.

"Shit, my mom is home," he whispered.

We hurriedly got dressed and were trying to sneak down his stairs while his mom was in the kitchen, when I tripped over my untied shoelaces on my stupid Converse sneakers. The pain in my knee was excruciating, but not as painful and listening to Marcus come up with some excuse to his mother about why we were both upstairs alone. As they tried helping me up, I screamed from the pain, but insisted I would be fine going home, limping and gritting my teeth. The next morning my knee was the size of a small watermelon and as purple as an eggplant, and my parents rushed to the hospital. Apparently in the fall, I had shattered my kneecap and major surgery would be required.

What was worse is Marcus wouldn't talk to me. After a short visit when I got home from the hospital, where he barely looked at me or said anything, he hadn't been seen or heard from by Jess or me. I texted him a few times, but he never responded. I assumed he was embarrassed and upset about the whole situation and wanted to either sulk or hope it all went away with time. This left me with lots of time on my hands since Jess was on a month long vacation in Italy visiting a distant aunt and uncle. My parents weren't too happy about my staying home alone all day, but really, how much trouble could I get into with my leg in a full leg boot and crutches. In the morning my mom would help me down the stairs to the couch so I wouldn't have to attempt it and possibly hurt or kill myself by falling down the stairs again. She would kill me if she knew that I painfully climbed down the Den stairs every afternoon when I knew Keira would be getting home. Lately she'd been like clockwork and been coming home around 3:00 pm about four days a week from her new part-time job, which I wasn't quite sure what it was but she was always dressed up, so I assumed it was something corporate or office related.

Most days she came home and watched TV, napped or took her dog out. She had moved the laptop to the couch and I mostly saw the back of her head most days. He hadn't been by in a couple of weeks as far as I could tell.

The problem with having my knee in a brace for the next month was that I couldn't exercise or run. Short of not eating anything, I found myself eating way too much and sleeping way to long. The weight gain was fast and furious. The days were long and the hours were endless, as each day just rolled into another. If I wasn't spying on Keira downstairs, I was reading or watching enormous amounts of brain cell killing daytime TV. I was obsessed with the ID Network with stories of real life murders, mysteries and disappearances. It was crazy how crazy people really were. You could be happily married for twenty years, with two kids, a dog and nice house, and the next you know, your spouse blows your brains out for a half million dollar life insurance policy. With no rhyme or barely a reason people killed each other for revenge, lust, money, or petty things like jealousy or family feuds. People scared me.

With not much to do all day and no where to go, I found myself baking and cooking for as long as I could stand up without pain. The Vicoden made me sleepy and the Tylenol made me cranky. My father wasn't too happy with all the baking and sore attempt at cooking I tried, but mom was more sympathetic. I used an old recipe book from Good Housekeeping found in the Den, and started from page one of the dessert section. The first few tries tasted better in my head than in our mouths, but you never get anywhere by not trying.

On my third attempt, brownies were on the menu. Since we had run out of baking powder and I forgot to tell my mom to buy more, it was just left out process. It didn't seem like

such a bad idea since it was only a half a teaspoon anyway. The best part was licking the bowl, to which I left a small amount of batter as an excuse to taste test.

"What the hell is this," my dad asked when I presented dessert that evening.

"What does it look like?" I asked him, because it seemed pretty obvious.

"It's brown and hard as a rock, I can't even cut it," he complained.

I had neglected to cut it into pieces, nor even try it before its presentation, which was not a good sign. He turned the brownie pan over and it fell in one big piece to the floor and shattered like a ceramic plate.

"Glenn!" my mother yelled, as we all stared in horror.

"I was only trying to get it out. What the hell was that supposed to be? Are you trying to kill us?"

"It was supposed to be brownies," I said, trying not to cry.

"There was nothing moist about that," my sister said with a snicker in her voice.

"Did you follow the recipe?" my mom asked.

"Yeah, just didn't use baking powder because there wasn't anymore."

My mom gave me sad smile, patted my hand and explained that baking is almost a scientific art and there is not much room to play with ingredients, especially baking powder.

"Guess you'll never be a scientist, or a baker, since you can't seem to follow directions," my father laughed.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad."

"That's not my job."

My small baking venture ended there, and I stuck to what I did best, read, sulk, purge and watch Keira.

Months pasted and the guy never visited Keira as far as I could tell. She spent most of her time in her bedroom or out of the house. I missed seeing her, and wanted to know if she was in pain and was ok. Not seeing her made me sad. Finally on a Thursday afternoon, I went down to the Den to see if she was home. She was talking on the phone and she was crying.

"He has a girlfriend now," she said. "He won't see me or talk to me and told me he was in love with her and sorry. Just like that."

She seemed to calm, as I expected her to be a little more hysterical.

"I'm ok," she said. "Just going to go sulk and sleep for a while. Love you too."

She hung up the phone and went to her bedroom. This time, there seemed to be no pleasure in this pain.

The next day when I was walking home from school, there was an ambulance in front of the neighbor's house. My first thought was Keira. I ran down the block but was stopped by a police officer.

"I live at 206 sir," I told him.

He escorted me to my door where my mother stood outside with my sister at her side.

"Mom, what happened?" I almost yelled.

"So sad sweetie, the girl next door tried to commit suicide."

"What?" I said, shocked and horrified at the same time. My body went numb and I vomited right there on the doorstep.

"Oh my God Petal," I heard my mom say.

“What happened Mom?” I asked, my throat raw. Everything was spinning and the world was going gray.

“She’s dead?” I yelled, “She can’t be.”

“Petal, calm down. She’s not dead, I meant to say apparent suicide, but they are not sure she will survive as she was unconscious for a long time.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Weirdest thing. I went the Den to put away a box and I heard her dog barking, apparently our vent was open, so I went to close it and noticed the plank was moved so I could see her on the floor in her apartment with her dog running around and barking and nipping at her, so I went next store and alerted the Emily who went down to the apartment and realized what happened. Overdose of something. Not sure why the plank and vent were open, were you down there Petal?”

“The other day mom. Sorry, I was just being nosy.”

“Well I guess it’s a good thing then.”

“What hospital is she in?”

"I would assume they took her to Mt. Sinai."

"I want to see her Mom."

"You don't even know her, why do you want to see her?"

"I'll explain later Mom, I just need to see her."

"You don't even know her, and plus I'm sure her family is there."

I closed my eyes and tried to connect myself to Keira and reaching to hold her hand. I ran inside and went out our back door. I knew that Frank had once hidden a key under a potted plant to get in the back door, and I jumped the fence and entered her house. I knew the police were outside, but I just needed to know why. I walked over to her desk and found an open journal and the picture of him and her, and grabbed them both and took it with me. It was strange being in her space, feeling her, and missing her. Running back outside, climbing back over the fence, I ran upstairs and read the last entry in her journal.

My sweet,

My heart is your home, and you need to come home, nestled safely and secure where no one can hurt you and I can keep you. If you won't come home, this heart needs to be sold and taken away as it's empty real estate.

My body is always hot inside, while my heart is always so cold waiting for you. Waiting and wanting and needing.

We can't be friends, as we were lovers and you can't resort from one to other. Feelings will always be there, especially when one has one more than the other. You promised me this was real and could happen.

Been taken so far over the edge that there's no way back, directions are lost and I'm left here wandering, waiting for you to get me.

It was sad to read her letter. I needed to see her, to know that she would be ok. It wasn't fair that he would be happy with someone else, especially after giving her so much pain. There was no pleasure in her pain, just the pleasure of him. I looked at the picture of him and her, and it must have been a long time ago. They were sitting at the water fountain at Washington Square Park, it was evening, and he had his hand on the side of her face and was kissing her cheek with the other. She had a smile that conveyed an overwhelming sense of what I imagined happiness to be. She was happy once, and there was no pain. I flipped the photo frame over and taped to it was a letter. It was a poem.

Remembering Once Upon a Time

It was a windy, crisp, gorgeous October day, or so I imagined it. Your day off, and it made my workday long and unbearable without you. I counted the seconds till it was time to clock out, almost breaking the front door of the shop down in my hurry to leave. Tick tock and around the block the day went, dragging my anticipation and anxiety to see you. This thing we had was beyond reason, beyond doubt, and beyond any control I tried to have.

The cold wind was a short respite to the heat of my anxiousness and desire. I mostly ran, slowing for decorum, turning north on Hudson. Three blocks. Only had to go three blocks and you would be waiting at our spot. The beautiful gardens of St. Luke's church, where we would sit on the old, wooden bench under the gazebo with the withering vines, during lunch hour, whispering, kissing and me eating all of your empty promises. The old, wooden bench, facing the full garden, but hidden in the shady corner, where when no one was looking, you would finger me to the sound of the fountain water and better judgment.

Slowing to a normal pace, catching my breath, adjusting my hair, and straightening my eagerness under my red coat, wearing your favorite black cotton dress, and the pink and white girly undies you thought were so sexy were starting to stick to my skin under the dripping wet excitement my body gave into at just the mere thought of you. The tingling sensation all over almost making me lose my balance on the street corner across the street from the church, as I imagined how your pupils would dilate when I would slip off my black thigh high tights. It was wrong, this affair of heart and soul, but I was defenseless and too hungry to stop it. Nothing

could or would matter anymore but what we felt. The rabbit hole would be endless and one of us would be the one to pay the price for this affair.

I stopped again, at the corner of the block, staring at the brick wall surrounding the church garden where I knew you were waiting for me. The busy street and overwhelming New York noise was silent in that moment, absorbing the love and happiness that I was sure radiated from every pore of my skin. I looked at the old man standing next to me, waiting for the walk sign to come on. The stop hand was a warning I ignored and dared not look at. The old man smiled at me as if he could smell my loss of sanity and reason.

I slowly walked towards the garden entrance, immediately glancing towards our favorite bench. You were not there, and the world stopped spinning and started falling. You weren't at the place I expected you to be and the death grip on my heart sent the world black for a moment. Hearing your laugh from where you had hidden, crouched behind the rose bushes was the reason for my every breathe. The look of laughter and love on your face when you stood up is the picture I will imagine as the bullet goes through my head.

I refused to eat for the next two days and on the third day, Keira died. I cried for two days, and my parents were baffled at my heartbreak over what they thought was a stranger. They thought it was because it reminded of Jen, and I let them believe it. I put her photograph of her and her love next to the one of me and Jen and when the wind blew and the chimes tingled, I imagined her letting her pain go. I was empty again, and this time, it didn't feel so good.