The Iris Hours

by

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My favorite part of having a beach house is the perspective. Most mornings in the summer I stand on my deck and smoke a spliff as I watch everyone spill out onto the beach from the parking lot. The only time I don’t smoke is when my dad has the day off. That’s when I sip on some Jack Daniels. I swiped ol’ Jacky from the local Pablo’s—my dad’s chain of first-class eateries. Kidding. They market themselves as a classier Applebee’s when really they’re a Hooters rip-off. I shit on it, but it’s been funding my ‘morning brews’ for years. If my dad asks what I’m drinking, I tell him it’s apple juice. He usually doesn’t, but I like it when he does. Something about starting the day off with a buzz and a touch of deception really gets my dick hard. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not a conniving, lying fucker. I just get a kick out of occasional trickery. My rule is to never deceive someone who doesn’t deserve it, unless you really have to, or unless it’s their job to not be deceived. So I guess there’s a little bit of a gray area.

Anyway, as I was saying, my deck is pretty high up. It looks over the whole Iris coast. My place is on Pirates Point, but if I pull out the binoculars, I can make out anyone splashin’ around at Perkins Cove two miles down. Not that there’s much splashing going on, that beach is for geezers and married quitters who hate their lives. No, I don’t use the binoculars for Perkins. I use them for Pirates. All the hot chicks come to Pirates, and I like to scope out the terrain before committing to the descent into the sand. To be clear: I’m not a pervert. I don’t jerk off outside in broad daylight while staring at tits and asses through greasy cum-smudged lenses. That’s not what
I’m about, though I get it if that’s your thing. I only use the binoculars to see if there’re enough smoke-shows to make my trip down the stairs worth it.

The whole beach strip is buzzing today. It’s only morning and the place is already packed, even the marsh across the street is getting some activity. Our deck is attached to our roof, where I can see Iris’ far-reaching marsh. The tide is dead low and right now it looks like a maze. A group of little shits are running around throwing mud at each other, running deeper into the maze of gunk and weeds. It makes me shudder. It’ll take weeks to wash the smell out of their skin, and they probably already have parasites laying eggs in their hair. They run deeper and deeper. Maybe they’re going to the Pit Plank. If kids want to mini-bridge jump when it’s low tide and they don’t mind kicking around in diarrhea water, they go to the Pit Plank. The Iris marsh is like a crater, so its center point, or as everyone in Iris calls it, the Pit, is the lowest. Even when it’s low tide, the Pit’s filled with seven or so feet of grimy mud water. The Pit Plank is exactly what it sounds like: A long, narrow, thick wooden plank that extends from one cattail-covered plateau to another over the Pit. The plank’s chained to anchors on each side. When it’s high tide, it rises and falls with the water but stays in the same spot. Kids jump off the plank into the Pit during low tide, and swim out to it as something to do when it’s high tide.

I got caught in the Pit like a fucking fly in a toilet bowl when it was low tide once. I was with this fag, Sam. We don’t chill anymore but we used to be friends. We were like ten or something and he chased me deep into the marsh. I had to cover my face when I was running—the marsh’s cattail’s kept hitting me in the eyes—so I couldn’t see where I was going. All of a sudden I took a step forward into
nothingness and fell into the Pit. The water below the plank is so thick with mud it’s almost impossible to swim, and I was already out of breath. If Sam hadn’t lowered the plank into the water for me, I probably would’ve fucking drowned. For days my mom did everything she could to get the grime off me, short of soaking me in bleach. Eventually she succeeded. Sam and I have our differences now, but I’ll admit it: I’ve always been grateful to him.

I haven’t been back to the marsh since then. I stick to the beach. Speaking of which, I should get down there soon. My entire school and two others have crammed themselves onto the sand—There’s not much space left. I take one last drag of the spliff and flick the butt off the ledge. I watch it fall and see Gavin next-door setting up for a darty. It’ll probably suck. Gavin sucks. He knows that too, and he knows I know that. Probably the reason I didn’t get an invite, which is actually great ‘cause now I have no reason to invite him to any of my parties. Ugh. Do I have to throw a party tonight?

Look at all these newly graduated assholes sprawled across the sand like they own every grain. Almost all the guys are flexing as hard as they can, like are you fucking kidding me? Are people really that horrified of looking the tiniest bit fat? I’ve got some chub to me but I still pull. I think it’s because of my strong jawline and maybe my dark hair since it’s a rarity round these parts. I could be wrong—It could be my winning personality that draws ‘em all in. Jesus, a dude just struck a pose in front of his little clique. Now they’re all laughing about it like he made some sort of joke. Some of these kids really piss me off. They’re acting like they won a fucking war. You graduated high school, people. Congrats. The only kids with cause for
celebration are the ones going to colleges that accept applicants with a GPA higher than 2.0, i.e. three percent of my graduating class. I’m going to UNH, a pretty decent school. You don’t see me acting all high and mighty. Well, maybe you do, but that’s because I have this deck.

I stop at the fridge before leaving, checking the freezer to see if there are any fruit popsicles I could slurp in the sun. My mom used to stock the fridge with them when I was growing up. I saw a kid eating one the other day and ever since I’ve been craving that shit. I asked my dad to get some but he’s horrible at remembering that stuff. All I can find in the freezer are these frozen nougat bars that he shoves down his throat when he gets home every night. They’re disgusting, and combined with the booze probably cause 90% of his health problems. I get that taste buds change, but there’s no fucking shot I’ll ever like those things. I shut the freezer door, leave my phone on the counter so it doesn’t get sandy, and put on my sunglasses.

I begin the walk down my steps, spying on my classmates below through my shades. There’s no one I want to speak to here, but of course they want to talk to me. Sure, that sounds arrogant, but it’s true. People always ask if I’m having a party. No one has an open house as frequently as I do, and frankly, no one has as good of a house for parties. My dad checks out different Pablo’s locations every other weekend, so every other weekend I’m king of the castle. And boy do I make the most of my short reign. Don’t get the wrong idea—It’s not anarchy. Everyone who sets foot in my house knows my rules. All cars have to be parked at the public lot down the road, sex is restricted to the sand, no touching my shit, BYOB, and if you break or boot on anything in the house, you’re banned for life. I think it’s all pretty fair, and most
people are smart enough to oblige. If you’re a teenager in Iris, that means you don’t have many party options, which means you don’t want to be banned from the only place in town that has parties twice a month. So it all works out. The neighbors don’t say shit either. They know who my dad is. All I have to do is make sure the house looks dark from the road. I take pride in the fact that I’ve never had a party busted by the cops, but my dad knows what goes down when he’s gone. I paid dearly after the first couple parties. After the fifth one, though, he stopped giving a shit. He knew I was going to keep doing it, and he had no real reason to be mad. Nothing ever breaks and I clean the whole place until it’s shining afterwards. I run a tight ship. He respects that.

I take my first step in the sand. Shit, my sandals are in the house and the sand’s hot as fuck. I always forget how fucking hot it is. I have to run on shady spots and towels of people I know like they’re rocks in a stream. I do this all the time, and probably piss a lot of people off, but nobody says shit. They don’t want to risk losing their invite to my next rager. It’s gotten to the point where I’m not sure whether people tolerate me because they like me—I mean, what’s not to like?—or because they want to be invited to my next party. Or maybe it’s because they want discounts at Pablo’s. It doesn’t matter. I run this town’s young social scene. That matters.

A few kids try to chat. ‘Yo, Gomez, what’s good?’ ‘What up, Gomez, how we doin’? There used to be another James in Iris, so we went by our last names. He moved away, but Gomez stuck, and I’m glad it did. James is such a pussy name. It reminds me of that James Taylor song, ‘Sweet Baby James.’ My mom played that shit
nonstop when I was little and every time it came on she’d say, ‘This song’s about you, you know.’ So corny. James Taylor’s fucking soft. I’m Gomez, and that’s that.

Each kid that talks to me gets to the point pretty quickly—‘You throwing down tonight?’ ‘Not sure,’ I say to each of them, in a ‘Go fuck yourself, pal,’ inflection. Most of these guys and gals are too tone deaf to get it. My mom always told me to be patient with people. It’s because of her I try to rely on inflection rather than actually saying what I’m inflecting. Patience is nice but it can rob you blind. You don’t know how long you’ll be alive. If you’re always patient with people and then die all of a sudden, your life would’ve been lived for someone else. Fuck that. Move on as fast as you can. Don’t let people get in the way. I’ve had enough of people for right now. I need beer.

I get to the parking lot with third-degree burns on the soles of my feet. I beeline it to Marty’s Convenience across the street, watching each step I take on the craggy gravel. I bump into Rose Dawkins. She’s a sweetheart. Believe me, I don’t use that term often—She’s the real deal. Her mom was close with mine. In my mom’s final few weeks they were always at the hospital with us. I thought it was cool how Rose never treated me differently, like all the other kids in school did. We’d joke around, do our multiplication tables together, and just chill. I say hi as I pass her. She says hi back, but there’s a glossy look in her eye. She’s deep in thought, possibly on edge about something. When I was growing up my mom taught me to engage friends and their feelings, complicated though they may be, and in turn share my own struggles. ‘It’ll make you feel better about yourself as a person,’ she’d said. My dad, on the other hand, taught me to keep my problems my own. He said by sharing them
with someone I was ‘condemning my listener to a share of my pain while opening myself up to vulnerability, like a dog rolling over to expose its belly.’ That stuck with me a little more than what my mom said. I’m not big on talking about feelings. Rose and I continue on in separate directions, no time wasted. I cross the street and duck into Marty’s Convenience. There’s a ding when I open the door.

It’s a small place, two rows of snack food with a refrigeration section on the opposite side. A kid’s eyeing beer in the refrigeration section. I don’t know him, but I recognize him. He played against Iris High in the basketball state championship. I remember yelling from the bleachers about how his girlfriend was a whore to try and rattle him. I didn’t know her at all, I found her through Facebook or some shit, but I was probably right. I think her name was Trixie? Trixie’s a whore name. That sounds bad, but I’m not wrong. The kid sees me and doesn’t recognize me. That’s good.

I haven’t seen the guy behind the counter before. Looks like a burned out heavy metal guy. His beard reaches down to his chest and a thinning patch of fuzzy hair clings to the top of his scalp for dear life. The cashiers who know who I am let me breeze by, so this is a bit of a curveball. It’s fine. I’ve used this ID a million times here. Something tells me this guy doesn’t give a shit. He’ll probably be too busy hating himself to even look at my ID. Should be a cakewalk. Time to pick out some beer. Hm, what do I want?

“You gotta have shoes,” A voice gurgles from the counter behind me. Homeboy next to me has sandals on, so by process of elimination that croak must’ve been directed my way. I turn to the decrepit creature working the cash register. He’s staring right at me, eyes a dark, disgusting shade of bloodshot. Now that I have a
good look at him, he’s freaking me out. He looks like a dead body that washed up on shore and decided to get up and be alive again. I politely beg his pardon. “No shoes, no service.” This guy doesn’t get how it works around here. Whatever. I grab a pair of sandals hanging from a rack nearby, snap off their price tag, and put them on. I tell him I’ll pay for them on my way out. He narrows his eyes, shrugs, and I turn back around.

Homeboy by the beer grabs a six-pack and heads to the counter. I’m not entirely sure what I want, so I keep looking. I glance over at the counter to scope out the level of card security I should expect. Homeboy gives his fake to the sea zombie dude. I feel like if he were in a heavy metal band it’d be called sea zombie. You know what, that’s just who he is: Sea Zombie. Sea Zombie takes it in his grubby fingers and holds it up to the light. Alright, bitch, take your job more seriously. The door recorder dings as Marcus Walcott, chief of police, walks in, and wouldn’t you know it, Sea Zombie asks the kid what his birthday is. I almost laugh. It’s the perfect storm. I want to go to the other side of the store to get popcorn. Walcott grimaces at me as he goes to the freezer. He knows my dad and I go to school with his son. His kid’s a real entitled asshole, and that’s saying something if it’s coming from me. Walcott grabs an ice cream, the same nougat thing my dad loves. Didn’t see that coming, they despise each other.

“M-M-March 27th,” Homeboy sputters. Dear lord, he’s pitiful. Walcott gets in line behind him. I wish I had my phone to record this shit.

“Year?” Sea Zombie grumbles. Here we go, the moment of truth.

“Um,” Homeboy says, “‘92?”
“That’s not it,” Sea Zombie growls as he pockets the ID. I can’t help the ‘Ha’ that bursts out of my mouth but disguise it as a cough when Walcott and Sea Zombie look in my direction. I’ve seen Walcott in town over the years, but my dad’s told me most of what I know about him. Walcott was the first person he met when he moved here as a kid. He said he wanted to move again after meeting the guy. He described him as a brownnose, a tattletale, and a buzz kill. Apparently, Walcott was the only kid who basically never went to the beach growing up, and if he did, he wore long sleeve shirts so he wouldn’t get burned, and never went in the water out of fear that a riptide would sweep him out to sea. When I asked my mom if all that was true, she shrugged and said my dad just hates cops, especially Walcott because she had a crush on him way back. Granted, I don’t have much personal experience to go off of, but his annoying face and hardo-vibe have led me to develop an opinion of Walcott more in line with my dad’s take. The fact that he prefers to be called the dweebiest name of all time is also a red flag. Other cops and people around town really only refer to him as Marcus. Not chief, not Mark, not Walcott, Marcus. Marcus. That’s fucking weird.

Walcott tosses the cash for his ice cream on the table and takes Homeboy by the arm. Homeboy cries a little bit as Walcott interrogates him about where he got the ID, how many times he’d used it, etc. The tears are some weak ass shit, but I actually feel a little bad for the guy. If circumstances were different, I guess that could’ve been me. But it couldn’t really. Walcott takes his notepad out and starts jotting down the kid’s information. The interrogation goes on for some time, the kid’s stumbling over all his words. Walcott’s probably getting a boner from his little power trip. What
a tool. Just because nothing happens in Iris doesn’t mean you have the right to make a federal case about every little thing. Kids wanna drink, so what?

“Hey, you buyin’ anything?” Sea Zombie asks me. Walcott realizes he’s gone DEFCON 1 in a convenience store, so he takes Homeboy outside.

“Oh, sorry, is there a time limit for service too?”

Sea Zombie grunts and sits on his stool. Little bitch. Walcott comes back in and puts a card on Sea Zombie’s counter.

“Any more of these guys, give me a ring, I’m dropping this kid off at the station then coming back.” The two asshats look at me. I shift my gaze downward at some magazines and study them as if they have the fucking cure for cancer printed across the cover. I hear a brief exchange of hushed tones and look up again. Sea Zombie gives Walcott a fervent nod, and I swear to God he’s fighting every urge to salute the pig. Walcott eyes me and leaves. With him gone this is probably the best time to buy beer, but seeing him pick out an ice cream reminded me of how bad I want a popsicle. I go to the freezer and look but they don’t have any pops. They don’t even have anything fruity. All they have are ice creams with chocolate, caramel, cookies, or nougat. My dad would have a fucking field day.

Walcott pulls out of the parking lot with his poor sap of a criminal in the back seat. I leave the ice cream and return to the beer, taking out a thirty of Boston Fresh. I lug the rack onto the counter. Sea Zombie doesn’t even ring me up. He glares at me with his slimy red eyeballs and holds out his hand. Doesn’t even ask for the ID, just beckons with his four fingers like you see in karate movies before a fight. A real piece of work, this one. I give him my ID. He holds it up to the light. It’s flawless. I
know, because my dad’s buddy made it for me. He makes real ID’s for a living, or at least ID’s that are real for all intents and purposes. It’s my picture and everything with all the regulations of a state-issued license. Sea Zombie’s puzzled. He takes it down from the light and bends it between his fingers so hard it looks like it’ll snap. It doesn’t though. It’s real as shit.

“Date of birth?”

“December 1st, 1990,” I say, wetting my lips with saliva in the hopes some of it will fly off and hit him in the face. I hold out my hand and do the little karate shit back to him. It’s over. I’ve won. He grimaces and looks down at the ID again, then back at me.

“You have any other form of ID?” He asks. Sore loser. I give him my debit card. He sees the names match and wipes his brow. This feels incredible. “But you’re not twenty five,” he utters, getting desperate. I shrug, hold my hand out further, and beckon again. Right in his fucking face. “You know, I can refuse service.”

“Because I’m Mexican?” I snap. I pass for white, so that’s what I usually go with. Believe me, I’m proud of my heritage and all that, but it’s just easier to do shit when people think I’m white. If a situation pops up where it helps to identify as Mexican, though, I’ve got not problem waving the green, white, and red flag.

“Wh-what? I didn’t say that, what’re you…” His eyes shoot open to where I can see every aggravated vein pulsing in his sockets.

“Dios mio, bigotry in this country is getting out of control,” I rant, “I’m coming back here with my dad, hijo de puta, and—“
“Alright!” Sea Zombie relents and gives my ID back. He rings up the rack without saying a word. This is for Homeboy. I hand him cash and tuck my secret weapon back into my wallet. I tell him to keep the change, AKA, ‘Fuck you,’ but instead of looking back at me with the pathetic eyes of a loser, he looks behind me and smiles. It’s a strange, unsettling smile, the kind that’s missing a few teeth and more than a few brain cells. I’m spooked so I turn to leave.

Ah, shit. That’s what he’s smiling about.

Walcott barges into the shop. Ding.

“Alright, James, let’s go,” he states. A smile twitching at the corner of his mouth makes me want to light his face on fire. I look back at Sea Zombie who’s two seconds away from pissing his pants in excitement.

“This some sort of sting operation?” I ask.

“So you admit it,” Sea Zombie blurts out, “You’ve been stung! I knew he’d fall for it.” Sea Zombie looks at Walcott for some sort of approval. Walcott closes his eyes in impatience. There’s a small satisfaction in knowing I forced this asshole to stoop to working with the likes of Sea Zombie. I look outside and see the back of Walcott’s patrol car peeking past the corner of the store. The dickhead must’ve circled around the block and come back to stage this little confrontation. Textbook police work. Walcott holds out his hand for my ID.

“I haven’t admitted anything,” I say to Walcott, “I already showed my ID, you have no reason to question me.”

“We both know you’re eighteen,” Walcott says, as he grabs my arm and takes the rack, “Now let’s go.” Fuck this. Walcott drags me out of the shop as Sea Zombie
cackles to himself behind the counter. I flip the cretin off. He wags a crooked, long-nailed index finger at me with a giddy smirk. If I get rapped my dad’ll kill me, sure, but my last act on this earth will be to make sure Sea Zombie dies first. He sees my flip-flops and stiffens up.

“Wait, he still has to pay for those sandals!” He squawks. I kick the flip-flops at Sea Zombie as Walcott hauls me out the door. One of them hits Sea Zombie square in the forehead. Bullseye, bitch. Walcott brings his walk-talkie to his mouth.

“George, I’m heading back to the station real quick.” There’s a beep.

“Roger.”

“Fuck you, George,” I yell as Walcott puts the walkie-talkie back on his belt. We’re on the curb now. “This is bullshit, you’re just doing this to get at my dad. You’re all pissy because you can’t get anything to stick.”

“You’re hardly innocent,” Walcott grunts.

“At least read me my rights,” I yell, “Do your fucking job.” Walcott sighs and continues to pull me to the car, expressionless. Fuck this guy. I punch him in the balls. I may have broken some sort of man code by doing that, but it was justified. Walcott’s a cunt, and I’m not going to fucking jail. He yelps in pain and drops the thirty. I yank my arm out from his grasp. He swipes a hand out to grab me but I’m already around the corner headed for the marsh. The tide’s still low. Valleys of sludge divide the fields of cattails. The cattails could provide some refuge, but it’d be easier to lose Walcott in the mud maze. I jump down into the mud path and my feet sink into the marsh up to my knees. Fuck. I’m stuck. There’s an overwhelming smell of diarrhea down here. I dig furiously at the sludge around my feet.
“That was stupid, James.”

I look up and see Walcott glaring down at me. I fucking hate it when people call me that. I dig out of the rut and stare back at him.

“You really think you can catch me?” I ask, backing up and nodding to his disgusting beer belly. He frowns and adjusts his belt. Like that’ll help anything. I turn and run down one of the sludge valleys. Walcott jumps down and his fat ass gets stuck deeper than I did. I come to a fork of two marsh channels in front of me, each with small streams trickling down their center. I run down the side of one to leave a set of footprints and come back by walking on the stream. I step into one of my footprints and jump up to a plateau of cattails. I lay down, cloaking myself in the vegetation. It’s fucking disgusting. I’m covered in the closest thing to shit I can imagine and there are bugs trying to crawl in my ears, nose, and mouth. But when Walcott goes back to the station with only Homeboy in his backseat, it’ll be worth it.

Walcott stumbles around the corner and comes to the fork in the marsh. His uniform’s covered in shit. I love it. He stares at my footprints for a moment.

“You didn’t go far enough,” He calls out, looking around. “I can see where your footprints end.” He walks to the stream and examines it closely, looking back in the area of my hiding spot. He stands up again. “You’re a smart kid. Don’t grow up to be a thug like your dad.” I close my fist around a clump of mud next to me. “He’s grooming you to be like him. You know that, don’t you? There’s so much more to life than what that criminal has to offer—" I sling the clump of mud at his face and it hits him in the mouth, putting an end to his retarded fucking kumbaya shit. I’m standing, fuming.
“You’re really going to come at me with that shit?” I screech, unable to control my voice, “With the king of douchebags for a son, you’re going to stand there and rant about what a bad parent my dad is?” Walcott wastes no time. He sprints over and climbs onto the cattail field. I’m already fifteen yards away. I look over my shoulder as I plow through the cattails. He’s steamrolling over my trail. The remnants of the sludge cover his reddening face in a shadow of shit, and as we run through the thickets, bits and pieces of shrubbery stick to his dirty, sweaty skin. I haven’t quite tarred and feathered him, but I’ve come pretty fucking close.

After what feels like a mile I reach the Pit and realize that not only am I out of breath, but the panting and rustling behind me has stopped. I step over one of the anchors attached to the Pit Plank and cross to the other side. It’s a struggle to clear a spot to sit, since the cattails here are taller and thicker than any other part of the marsh. My mom told me it’s because they’re in the lowest part of the marsh. The water rises the most here during high tide, so these cattails need the height to have their head above the surface to be able to breath, to be able to survive. I dip my toe in the Pit. The water here’s just as I remember it: Thicker than a milkshake. If a little more mud were added to the murky cocktail, it could be quicksand. The sounds of wheezing and cattails crinkling underfoot nearby pull my gaze from the Pit. Walcott’s caught up. Time to circle back. I stand up as he sees me through the brush. He charges. His left foot hits the plank’s anchor, his upper body’s forward momentum continues forward, and he crashes into the Pit. The splash spatters me with globs of thick, muddy seawater. It’s fucking hilarious. If I’d had a camera, it would’ve gone viral. He pokes his head and a flailing arm out of the water just long enough to spit
out filth and sputter that he can’t swim before he sinks below the surface. It’s not as funny anymore. My dad must’ve been right, he never went in the fucking water. Shit. He manages to get a hand above the surface this time, but not his head. This man will die if I don’t do anything. As Walcott’s hand goes under, I shove my end of the plank in the water, leaving the other side still on the ridge to create a makeshift ramp, just as Sam did for me all those years ago. I hug a colony of cattails to my chest and jump in where Walcott’s hand disappeared. My foot hits him in the shoulder, and I find his hand quickly. I guide the bundle of cattails into his grasp. His fingers close around it. He pulls himself up and I resurface, grabbing onto the plank and crawling up to where I’d come from.

Walcott emerges from the water, his knuckles white from clinging to the cattails. He coughs up mud and water but he’s fine. He rolls onto the plank and clambers up the makeshift ramp like I did. He sits next to me and takes several gulps of air. I don’t know why I haven’t left yet.

“You can go,” He utters.

“Yeah.”

We drip for a while in silence.

“You’re not like your father, you know,” He says.

“Yes I am,” I say, “My father’s a good man, and people like you shit on him because calling him a bad person makes your world simpler.” Walcott shakes his head.

“He wouldn’t have done that,” Walcott nods to the murky water. He’s right.

“Your mother would’ve.” I don’t say anything. “She’d be proud of you right now.”
Something hits me that I haven’t felt in a while. There’s a lump in my throat. I forgot what that felt like. I don’t say anything, hoping the lump will leave. It doesn’t.
Walcott stands up. He pats me on the shoulder and disappears into the cattails. I sit alone for a while, flicking clumps of mud into the Pit.

I walk back to Marty’s Convenience. Walcott’s patrol car is gone. I cross the street to the beach where the ice cream truck has pulled up. Its repetitive little song is playing, and I get in line with a bunch of tiny kids. I see Homeboy walking on the sand. Walcott must’ve let him go. People I know from school walk by and laugh at me—I look and smell like I crawled out of a sewer. A few of them ask what happened. I say it’s a long story, and that I’m not having a party tonight.

It’s my turn at the ice cream window. I order. I hand the lady a soggy bill and she brings me a strawberry popsicle.
I have to get out of here. Sam’s waiting for me back in Iris.

“In a hurry to be somewhere?” Laura asks me. I’d almost forgotten she was sitting next to me.

“Yeah, I have to—” My answer’s cut off by a sneeze. I couldn’t ask for better weather, but the grounds crew could’ve held off on cutting the grass. I roll my fists in my eyes and click my throat like crazy. No relief. Allergies will be the death of me. Laura waits. She’s patient with me. I wipe a tear oozing from my eye and flick it. She pretends not to notice.

“I have to pick up Sam at 12:30.”

“What?” Laura asks.

“Yeah, we always go to the beach on the first day of summer.”

“Since when?”

“Since first grade,” I say, “Except one year when I had pneumonia. He came to my house instead.”

“You really want to go to the beach on our graduation day?”

“Yes.”

“Well, ok,” She says. “Can I go?” I should have seen this coming. Normally I’d have no problem with a trip to the beach with Laura, but today is me and Sam’s day. I lean forward and scratch my butt. I’m wearing a bathing suit underneath my khakis and the mesh is sticking to my cheeks. There’s no escaping the itch, and I’m burning up in this jacket.
“Um…”

“I knew it. You never want to spend time together after school, how’ll this go next year when we’re at different—“

“I didn’t say you couldn’t go. It’s just tough to be with you guys at the same time. We talk about different stuff.”

“What do you guys talk about?”

“I don’t know, G.I. Joe’s, Legos,” I joke. Laura rolls her eyes. “Boy stuff, you know.” Laura doesn’t say anything. She gazes down at her shoes sadly and taps her toes together. Sam’s going to kill me, but I can’t help it. “How about you get a friend and meet us there? We could do a double date or something.”

“I’m not sure he’s any of my friends’ type,” Laura says. What does she mean by that? She’s avoided introducing Sam to her friends on multiple occasions. She’ll never admit it, but I think it’s because he lives in a mobile home. Laura studies my face. She quickly adds, “But you never know, maybe he’ll hit it off with Brenda.”

“So you’ll come?” I say. Wait, I thought I didn’t want her to come. How did she turn this around on me? She nods.

“This’ll be fun,” She says.

“Yeah.”

The marble step vibrates beneath me as a chime booms above us. Kids from my class rush past Laura and I into the bell tower behind us. It’s a Brenton Academy tradition to ring the Brenton Bell upon graduating. This should clear the quad enough for me to find my parents.
“Don’t you want to ring the bell?” Laura asks, interlacing her fingers in mine. I spot my parents by the lunch spread.

“I think I want to get going,” I say, standing up. I kiss Laura’s hand and tell her I’ll meet her at Pirates Point Beach. She says ok. She might be upset but doesn’t have time to show it. One of her friends whisks her away to join the tower crowd.

“There he is!” My dad booms as I approach. His lack of awareness makes me cringe. Not only is he being the loud black guy, but he has twice the amount of hors d’oeuvres on his plate than any of the old white dudes surrounding him. “You see what they have? All kinds of seafood! Mussels, scallops, even lobster.”

“Yeah, can we go home now?”

“Are you serious?” My mom asks, putting down her salad. “Is everything ok?” She puts her hand on my shoulder and examines my face. My eyeballs are burning red. The rims are caked in dried tears. I push her away and sneeze a clump of slime into my elbow. “Allergies acting up again? Here, I can run to the store and get you something.”

“No, it’s fine, I’d really just like to go,” I say, brushing the clump off my jacket. “I told Sam I’d pick him up and we’d go to Pirates Point.” My parents exchange a look. They’re not pleased. Pirates Point is the beach in Iris for teenagers. It has a reputation amongst adults for being unsavory since most kids go there to drink, flirt, and waste time in other ‘cool,’ boring ways. When Sam and I go, we’re not like that. Sure, Sam drinks there every once in a while, but when we go we do the same stuff we’ve been doing since we were kids. We bring a football and when it’s low tide we huck Hail Marys to each other. When it’s high tide we try to make diving
catches in the water. The waves were four to six feet on the Iris Coastal Cam this morning. The diving catches today will be epic.

“You can always go to the beach,” My dad says, “You can’t always graduate from the best prep school in the country.” I think he’s wrong about it being the best school. I still don’t know what the word paradox means or how the U.S. economy works or why we still use fossil fuels. But he paid the tuition. Better let him think what he wants.

“I’m already graduated,” I say, “I don’t need the rest of this stuff.” I gesture toward the wasteland of expensive suits, sundresses, and sweat surrounding us.

“Come on, Bry,” My mom says, “Have you even said bye to your friends?”

“Or bye to their parents?” My dad asks, “There are a lot of people here who could help you out down the road.” He’s always pushing me to network.

“Why do I need to say bye? We all have phones and Facebook, there’s no such thing as ‘bye’ anymore, and— “ I sneeze again. My loving father covers his food as my mom says a quick “G’bless you.” My throat’s on fire. I look at my watch again. 12:13. Time to go. “Please, can I just go to the beach?” My parents look at each other again. My dad gives my mom a slight nod.

“Oh, alright,” My mom says, “On one condition. We’re going to Perkins around 1:30 and we’d like it if you stopped by at some point.” Oh no. Perkins Cove, two miles down the coast from Pirates Point, is the beach where Iris parents go with their kids. No teenager in their right mind—including this one—would be caught dead there, especially with their parents.

“Why?”
“We’re meeting up with the Harrisons for a beach day. They’re always asking for you,” My dad says, “We thought it’d be nice if you came and said hi.” The Harrisons are an older couple with a real estate mogul for a son and a Hollywood talent agent as a daughter. My parents bend over backwards to be their friends despite the twenty-year age difference. My dad’s aggressively outgoing with them. It’s painful. I know he does it for me but he could dial it back a notch, or fifty. I’m usually able to find an excuse to not do whatever they’re doing but I’m backed into a corner on this one. I only have to show up for five minutes tops anyway. My mom gives me the keys to the car. As soon as my fingers wrap around the metal my dad says, “We’ll tell the Harrisons you’re coming. Please don’t make us look foolish.”

“I won’t.”

I hug my parents. They tell me they’re proud of me. They mean it. I leave.

***

After running to the car and speeding down Route One, I pull into the Iris Trailer Park. Sam runs out to the car right on cue. He’s sporting a tank top, bathing suit, and a drawstring bag hangs off his back. I take off my shirt and tie, stripping down to a tank top as I examine my face in the rearview mirror. The swelling around my eyes diminished during the drive from Brenton, but my hand brushes against the dust-coated dashboard, spurring up a cloud of allergens. I sneeze. My throat’s itchy again. The booger blob stuck to the inside of my elbow tells me that the regenerating glob of mucus still sits at the top of my sinus. At least I don’t look how I feel.

“Sup, broski,” Sam says, dropping into the passenger seat, “Congrats on graduating.” He holds out his hand and I dap it up.
“Thanks, dude,” I say, as I put the car in reverse, “You too.” Sam gives a nod of gratitude as he opens his drawstring bag and pulls out a plastic water bottle full of a dark red liquid. He takes a swig.


“Relax,” Sam says, his purple lips curling upward in a smile to reveal a matching set of purple tinted teeth, “It’s not like you’re drinking and driving.”

“That doesn’t matter,” I say, “You never know with cops, they’ll take any reason to pull over a black kid.”

“Oh, calm down,” Sam says, as he puts the wine in his bag. “If we got pulled over you’d be fine for two reasons. One, Chief Walcott loves you, and two, if we got taken in your parents would get their lawyer and you’d be out tomorrow.”

“That’s just not true at all.”

“That’s one hundred percent true,” Sam retorts, “Me on the other hand, I’d be getting bent over in the showers ‘til next Christmas!” He laughs, and I allow myself to chuckle. I don’t like arguing so whenever the issue comes up I try to drop it quickly, but Sam and I have debated about who’s worse off since 1st grade. As we grew up we realized it was a lot more complex than we made it out to be, so we’ve come to an unspoken compromise to agree to disagree. “So what’s cracka-lackin’?!” Sam and I keep in touch during the school year—I keep him updated on important things like girls, sports, and what videogames I’m playing—but we don’t see each other much until the summer.

“Not a lot, pretty pumped to be out of the prep school scene,” I say, “Do you know if that Gomez kid’s having a party tonight?” James Gomez is an Iris High kid
who throws a ton of parties at his beach house. Sam talked about his parties all throughout high school, but I only ever went to one as Sam’s designated driver. My dad made me promise not to drink, do drugs, or have sex until after high school. He said if I ever got in trouble with the cops this early in life, that’d be it for me. Swerving away from those three no-nos was his idea of the best ‘arrest prevention’ plan. I’ve stayed true to my word as any dutiful son-who-can’t-think-for-himself would. During the school years I devoted myself to my schoolwork instead of doing fun, dumb stuff with my team on the weekends. My teammates of color made me feel the worst about it. Not only was I the rich, light-skinned Oreo from Whitey-Ville, I was a nerd too. They figured I thought I was better than them because I cared about more than just football and partying. Half of me wishes that I’d disobeyed my dad, that I lived my youth as it was supposed to be lived: Recklessly and stupidly. The other half knows I made the right decision, and that even if I’d gotten away with anything, the guilt would’ve forced me to spill my guts to him the morning after breaking my promise. Anyhow, high school’s over. I’m ready to take full advantage of the new opportunities that await.

“He hasn’t said anything yet,” Sam says, “He usually announces his parties last minute. What’s the deal with the khakis?” Sam nods to my pants. In my rush to leave graduation I didn’t stop to take them off. They’re damp with sweat and the bathing suit mesh underneath is still stuck to my butt. I’m sitting in an itchy swamp.

“My suit’s underneath,” I say, “I’ll take it off when we get there.” A sneeze shoots out of my nose, spraying a flurry of boogers on the steering wheel.
“Egh, you’ve really gotta do something about those allergies,” Sam says. I can’t find any tissues in the car. The web of mucus on the steering wheel stares me in the face. I slide my hand across the wet leather, wiping off my mess. “Fuck, that’s disgusting. You’ve gotta make a change if you wanna get laid in college.” Sam knows about my promise to my dad. Like any good friend, he’s done all he can throughout the years to try and get me to break it. One time at my house he even spiked my drink when I went to the bathroom. His conscience kicked in and he came clean before I sipped it.

“I know,” I say as I roll down the window and shake my dirty hand in the wind.

“So you gonna finally do the deed with Laura?”

I shrug. I honestly don’t know.

“You nervous?” Sam asks.

“Of course not.”

“You are,” Sam says, leaning back, “Everyone’s first is pretty weird, don’t worry about acting like a natural because you’re not, and she knows you’re not.” Sam loves to spout his wisdom, even if he has no idea what he’s talking about. Most of the time I let him ramble. It’s refreshing for him, and I like listening—He can be pretty funny sometimes. “The biggest thing is warming her up first.”

“Warming her up?”

“Finger her,” Sam says, “A lot. You can’t expect to cram your dick in there if she’s dry, that shit hurts for both of you.”

“Oh,” I say, “Ok.” I keep driving and don’t say anything else.
“You don’t seem too pumped to have sex,” Sam says after a few moments, narrowing his eyes, “It is Laura you wanna bone, right?”

“Yeah,” I say immediately, “Yeah, no, yeah, Laura.”

“Huh,” Sam says, a smile spreading across his face, “You guys gonna stay together?”

I shrug. Sam lights up. He’s never been Team Laura.

“It’s your call, but if it were me, I’d break up with her. It’s pretty clear you don’t like being around her that much, and you can’t give me that bullshit excuse of staying with her for that weird ‘popular athletes have to date each other’ social rule or whatever. Brenton’s behind you, start doing what you want.” Sam’s right. Social standards are the basis of my relationship with Laura. If you play a sport at Brenton, there’s an unspoken expectation to date someone within the athletic community who roughly matches your attractiveness. The same is true for the musicians, theater kids, mathletes, and every other group. There’s an order to things that pushed Laura and I together. I didn’t mind it for a while. It’s not like I love or ever loved Laura, but I liked spending free periods with her, posting pictures of us that got more likes than I’d ever imagined, and of course, the occasional PG-13 hook-up session. I especially appreciated not having to worry about making a fool of myself by asking other girls out. Now that we won’t see each other everyday though, this relationship’s already become a chore. I just don’t know how or when to end it.

“Yeah,” I agree, “But she’s a nice girl and I don’t want to…”

“End it today,” Sam says, “The quicker the better. There’s nothing noble about jerking her around like this.”
“You’re right,” I say, “It should be today. But what do I say?”

“I don’t know,” Sam says, “You could tell her you love Rose.” My palms get slick. Sam looks at me and breaks out into a devilish grin. The bastard. “That’d do it.”

Rose has been a crush of mine for years. Our history isn’t much, but it’s stayed with me. This is how it went.

The summer before high school we kiss during the Fourth of July fireworks. She’s my first kiss. I’m hers. In the fall we go to separate schools and fall out of touch. Three years later, at the end of my junior spring, Laura and I start dating. A few weeks after that, during the summer before my senior year, I’m Sam’s designated driver at James Gomez’s party. I walk in. Rose is the first person I see. She’s leaning against the refrigerator five feet away, laughing at some ugly guy’s joke and drinking something clear. Sam’s hammered. He stumbles past her into the main room. I’m alone, staring. I’m nervous. I have to swallow. Three years and one girlfriend later, she still does this to me. I’m ashamed. I look down at my toes. I itch my forehead in an attempt to hide behind my hand. She still spots me. She calls me over. The ugly guy with stupid jokes leaves. We talk and talk and talk. She tells me the clear liquid she’s drinking is water. She’s her friend’s designated driver. She doesn’t drink. She’s like me. I say nothing about having a girlfriend. She doesn’t ask. I don’t know how long we talk for. Her friend cuts our time together short. She begs Rose to take her home. Rose agrees and her friend staggers out the door. Rose puts her hand on my chest. She says it was great to see me. I say likewise. Her hand lingers on my chest. I cover it with my own. I tilt my head forward a half centimeter. I hesitate. Laura. Rose leans forward. We kiss. Sam slaps me on the back and we bump foreheads. We pull
away. I blink, she blushes, and Sam throws up in the trash next to us. It’s beautiful.
Then she leaves.

The morning after that happened I was sick with guilt. I called Laura and told her everything. She yelled at me and cried. I apologized over and over. I went on about how I wasn’t used to the commitment of a relationship. I promised it would never happen again and I kept that promise. She forgave me eventually. I felt so bad I didn’t answer Rose’s text the next day, asking if I wanted to get lunch. We’ve seen each other on the beach at a distance a few times, but we haven’t talked since.

“Don’t be an asshole,” I say to Sam.

“She’ll be there today, you know,” He says, “I waited on her and her friends at the Salty Lobster earlier and they were talking about going to the beach. She’ll probably be in the hottest bikini too…”

“Man, shut up.”

“And look at you,” Sam says slapping my bicep, “Look at these fucking arms, they make mine look like toothpicks! She’ll be eye-fucking you the whole…”

“Sam, shut the fuck up,” I say. My heart’s pumping and the steering wheel is shining from my sweaty palms. “Laura’s meeting us there, forget the whole me and Rose thing until I’m single.”

“Whoa, shit,” Sam says with glee, “Does Rose know you have a girlfriend?”

“I mean, I’m sure she’s seen pictures of us on Facebook or whatever.”

“Does she know you’re breaking up with your girlfriend to be with her?” Sam ducks as I toss a jab at his temple.

***
I pull into the last spot in Pirates’ sandy lot. Sam and I get out. I unbuckle my belt and pull my pants down. Two middle-school-aged girls walk by, see my pants begin to fall down my legs, and walk faster. I want to say something to catch their attention again so they see I’m only stripping down to my bathing suit. It’s probably better to just be quiet. Two seconds in and I already feel like a creep. I kick my shoes off and slide into my flip-flops as a small group of Iris High kids approach Sam. I haven’t spoken to most of them since eighth grade. Other than a few underdeveloped beards, they don’t look much different.

“Sammy B, what’s good, bro?” One of the guys says. This guy is Dexter. Dexter and I used to be close. I’d stay over his house every other weekend. We’d play basketball in his driveway and watch movies in his den. It was a blast. Then one day he asked me if I wanted to try and steal some snacks from the gas station down the street from his house. He told me he’d been doing it for years. After that, our sleepovers became less and less frequent. Eventually our relationship dwindled to a nod to each other in the hallways between classes.

I lean back into the car and pretend to look for my phone. Sam and Dexter talk about what’s going on later, what will be fun. They’re casual. I don’t need to see him, and he surely doesn’t need to see me. My hands pat the driver’s seat with mock purpose as I try and think of a solution to this conundrum. Should I just say hi? I’m making too much of this. He’ll be happy to see me, we’re old friends. He probably doesn’t even remember asking me to steal. I’m sure he’s matured. I’ve been in this car for a remarkable amount of time. They’ll think I’m anti-social. Ok, I know what I’ll do.
I stick my head out of the car and beam at Dexter. Dexter’s looking at Sam, not me, so the beam doesn’t quite land. I keep the smile on my face as I glare at him. Look at me. Look at me. I take a few steps toward him. This is excruciating. His buddies look at me and see my face before he does. This asshole. He knows I’m here. He wants to make me feel awkward. I should’ve stayed in the car.

“Bryan, what’s up, man?” Dexter says, finally acknowledging me.

“Not too much,” I say, as we poorly execute something in between a handshake and a dap. “Good to see you guys,” I say to the others. I turn back to Dexter. “Sorry, I have to piss real quick, been holding it in for a while.” This way, I’ll be able to wait out their conversation from one of the Porta-Potties by the parking lot’s entrance.

“Nothing to be sorry for,” He chuckles, “I sorta have to too, let’s go.” Please let there be enough urine in my bladder to muster up a piss.

Dexter and I walk to the Porta-Potties together. He asks me where I’m headed to college, I ask him the same, and we congratulate each other. It’s a pretty good conversation. Much better than how I thought it’d go, anyhow.

I go into a Porta-Potty. He enters the one next to me. The two stalls are connected with a thin plastic wall, and there are air holes at the top of the divider. As I unzip my fly, I hear a distinct zip from Dexter’s Porta-Potty. The sound is as clear as if he’s standing right next to me—which I guess he is. I try to pee. Nothing comes. Dexter’s stream hits the bottom of the Porta-Potty next door. It’s deafening. He’s peeing as he said he would, and I’m standing here, a pissless liar, staring daggers at my flaccid penis as if it’s at fault for my predicament. The silence between Dexter
and I is even worse than the sound of his flow. I sneeze. He says “Gesundheit,” and I
thank him. I spit a loogie into the deodorizer below me.

“So what’s your girl situation like?” I ask. If there’s any way to mask the
awkwardness of this moment, it’s by initiating testosterone talk.

“Uh, it’s alright,” Dexter says, “I got with this chick last weekend, hopefully
going to make it happen again tonight if there’s a party. You?” Good for him.
Dexter’s fit, but he isn’t exactly a looker.

“I’m actually dating this girl from Brenton,” I say, “She’s pretty cool, I like
her.”

“I’d hope so,” Dexter says. His stream is waning. “If she’s around let me
know, I’d love to meet her.” Dexter’s door opens and closes. He’s out. I zip up.

“Sounds good.” I step out myself. “I will.” He will never meet Laura.

“Alright, I’m going this way, I’ll catch up with you on the beach.” Dexter
follows his posse across the street. I return to Sam by the car.

“Will you stop being so weird?” Sam says, handing me my towel.

“I wasn’t weird,” I say, “I made a conscious effort to not be weird!”

“You were bent over in the car for like five minutes when they came up to
us,” Sam says, “Be a little more social next time, look alive.” I’ll do my best.

Sam and I walk on the beach. It’s high tide. From the water to the back wall,
the sand is packed with teenagers. The place is inked ribs and biceps galore. I always
thought tattoos were for adults. Do these kids think they’re adults? Wait, what am I
saying? I sound like my dad. This judgmental shit’s going to catch up with me.
Sam says hi to kids left and right as we shuffle in between pale bodies and towels. I nod and smile when he does, otherwise keeping my head down. We find a small clearing where we lay our towels down. Sam takes a football out of his bag, hands it to me, and looks out at the waves. They’re spectacular.

“I’m going long,” he says, taking off his shirt, “Hit me deep.” Sam sprints into the ocean. He jumps over the first wave and continues to trudge through deeper water, extending his far arm to signal he’s ready for the throw. I heave the thing. The spiral’s all messed up and it sails over Sam’s head. He dives for it anyway. I scan the area around me out of the corner of my eye to see if anyone saw my abysmal toss. There are a few quasi-familiar faces to each side of me, but no one I care about.

“That was horrible,” Sam calls from the waves, “This is how you throw a football.” Sam winds back, waiting for me to jump in. I take my shirt off, wrap it around my phone, and drop it by Sam’s bag. I twist and look over my shoulder as I stretch out. It’s Rose. She’s ten feet behind our towels, a friend on either side of her. They’re laughing. She looks right at me. Her laughter fades. She looks away.

“Come on, dude!” Sam yells. I turn around and run into the water faster than I’ve ever run. I hope it impresses her. Saltwater splashes all around me with each step. I get deeper and try to keep running. My quads burn. It feels good. Sam chuck a bullet to my right side. I lay out for it, but it slips through my hands. A big wave crashes on top of me as I land. It shakes me under the water. My body spirals and my limbs twist every which way. I’m completely at the wave’s mercy. It feels incredible. A bit of saltwater sneaks up my nostrils. This does not feel incredible. I blow air out through my nose. Strands of mucus creep out and I pull at it with my fingers. I’m
running low on air but I can’t come up with this stuff on my face. I blow and pull as fast as I can. The goo comes out in giant chunks. When nothing else comes out, I find my footing and resurface. I take a deep breath through my nose—The first I’ve taken all day. My head feels ten pounds lighter. It’s like I’m a new person. Rose has put on her sunglasses, but I feel her watching me. I grab the football and throw it back to Sam. He dives for it and the surf swallows him. We continue on like this and lose track of time. When we finally do come out, our fingers are so pruned they hurt.

We collapse onto our towels.

“You see Rose?” Sam murmurs. We’re facing her but she’s not looking at us.

She and her friends lie facedown, tanning.

“Yeah.”

“Go talk to her.”

“I told you to forget about that,” I growl, “I’m still dating Laura.”

“No harm in talking to her,” Sam says. Rose peeks up at me from her facedown position. “She wants you, dude, go talk to her. Nothing wrong with talking.”

“Laura’s on her way, and if she sees me talking with Rose there’s going to be a problem,” I say. Sam punches me in the ribs.

“If you don’t get going, I’m gonna fart and scream that you shit yourself.”

“No way do you have a fart lined up.”

Sam squeezes out a high-pitched squeaker. The smell is wet and horrendous. Sam cups his hands around his mouth, about to yell.
“Alright, alright,” I say, pushing myself up to my feet, “I’ll go say hi, but if Laura comes and sees this, it’s your fault.”

Sam rolls his eyes. I take a deep breath and flex my abs as I walk over. No use in looking fat. I run my palms over my buzz cut. It doesn’t change my look much, but it gives my hands something to do. Rose’s blonde hair is spread across her toned back in a perfect mess. I want to reach out and collect all the strands. I’d organize them into a neat ponytail that I’d drape over her shoulder. She’d look so good in a ponytail. She looks so good without a ponytail. Her temple rests on her forearm. She’s still wearing her sunglasses but I can see over them. Her eyes are closed. I brush my finger across my upper lip in a last minute check for stray mucus. All clear.

“Hey,” I say, squatting down across from her. Neither of her friends moves an inch. Her eyes open.

“Hey,” She says, smiling as she sits up. Her eyes dart to the left then return to their focus on me. I take advantage of the break in eye contact to check the parking lot for Laura. No sign.

“Long time no see,” I say, “How’ve you been?”

“Good,” She says, “You?”

“Good,” I say, “Have you heard of anything going on tonight?”

“Not yet,” She says. I wait for her to add something. She doesn’t.

“Are you ok?” I ask. Her friend, eyes closed, inhales quickly. I can’t tell if it’s a scoff or a sniff.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Rose glances behind me. She’s nervous. I think that’s a good thing. She clears her throat. “It really has been a while, hasn’t it?”
“Yeah,” I say, “We should catch up more. You around this summer?”

Catching up is harmless. We’re still just talking. Besides, I’m going to break up with Laura. It’s only a matter of time. I’m not doing anything wrong.

“Oh, um, yeah,” She says, taking off her sunglasses. “That sounds nice. Like coffee or something?”

“Coffee’s good,” I say. I don’t drink coffee. “Or we could do a movie?”

“What kind of movies do you like?” Rose asks, “You a big chick flick guy?” Finally. Something to work with.

“Oh, 500 Days of Summer is my jam,” I say. My jam? Since when am I a jammer? Wait, that made her smile. Go with it. “And don’t get me started on The Notebook.” Rose giggles. I’m on fire. “Yeah, I’m pretty much down for anything about chicks. Or flicks for that matter.” No giggle this time. Her friends have to be awake by now. I can feel the judgment simmering off their sunburnt backs. I should’ve cooled off when I was ahead.

“Good to know,” She says, “Let’s figure something out soon, do you still have my number?” Fuck me. Laura’s here. She just stepped off the parking lot pavement onto the sand. She’s alone. She sees me. Her face drops. She’s coming over. Uh oh.

“Yeah, I’ll shoot you a text,” I say, “See you.” I stand up and head to Laura. Rose says “Bye,” behind me. Not an ideal ending to the conversation. It’ll have to do. I look back at Sam. He pushes his face into his towel, hiding.

“What are you doing talking to her?” Laura hisses. Kids nearby sneak glances at us. We have to keep our voices down.
“We were just catching up,” I say. “It’s been a while.” I’m not lying. “I thought Brenda was coming with you?”

“There’s a graduation party in Boston,” Laura says, “She’s on her way to that.” I vaguely remember hearing about that party. I don’t know if I was invited.

“Why aren’t you going?”

“Because you’re here,” Laura says, “I came here for you and I find you flirting with the girl you kissed?” Her voice trembles. We need privacy. I take her hand and bring her to the car. I sit in the driver’s seat. She sits in the passenger’s seat. It’s musty. It’s hotter in here than out on the sand. I’m already sweating. “What’s going on with you?” She asks. A tear slides down her cheek. She exhales, blowing it onto the dashboard and making it a wet blotch on a dusty surface. “We’re supposed to be off partying together with our classmates, but you come here and barely even invite me. We should savor the time we have together before next year when we’re apart.” I sneeze. My throat begins to itch. It’s the dust. My allergies are back. Shit.

“Where do you see this going?” I ask. More tears come. She doesn’t answer. My stomach ties itself up in knots. I’ve never broken up with anyone before. I thought I didn’t love her. I don’t. But I care about her. A year and a half together and I somehow thought this would be easy. Do I still really want to do this? Yes. But she’s in agony. She blew off her own graduation party to be with me and I was already planning a date with Rose. What kind of horrible person does that? Why does this hurt so much? I want to cry. I can’t. I want her to know how bad I feel. “C-Come on,” I say, stuttering out a sound to contest Laura’s weeping. “It’s not like you love me or anything.”
“You have no idea what I feel,” Laura says, looking up at me with bloodshot eyes. She sniffs.

“I’m sorry,” I say, “I thought we were on the same page, that we were, y-you know, just sort of enjoying it w-while it lasted.” I’m a babbling idiot. I hope it makes her feel better.

“You really fucked me over,” Laura says. She wipes her face. “You could have said something, anything, to hint at what you were feeling.”

“I know,” I say, “I’m sorry.” She scoffs.

“You’re sorry. Thanks. That makes me feel so much better.” We sit for a moment. I reach out to rub Laura’s back. She pulls away. It’s now that I realize it’s no longer my right to comfort her. Laura takes a deep breath. She checks her watch. “I’m going to Boston.” Laura gets out of the car and shuts the door before I can say anything. I watch her through the window as she walks out of the parking lot, down the street to her car. She’s gone. It’s just me now. I sneeze.

I head back to my towel. Sam perks up when he sees me.

“Is congratulations in order?” He asks, chipper as ever.

“Shut the fuck up,” I say. His smile evaporates. I lie down on my back.

“I’m sorry,” He says, “Look on the bright side, you’re a free man now.” He gives me a hard pat on the chest. I put my sunglasses on and close my eyes. “Oh, dude,” Sam says, “Gomez is over there.” I sit up and turn to see Gomez talking to Dexter. “Think he’s telling him he’s having a party?” I shrug. Gomez and Dexter part ways. Sam calls Dexter over.

“Is it a go or no?” Sam asks.
“Gomez’s place is a no,” Dexter says, “But Wayne’s throwing down.” A smile cracks across his face. “Looks like I’ll have another shot at the chick from last week.” He says this to me.

“Nice,” I say.

“She’s right over there, by the way,” He says, nodding his head to a group of girls. I look over to where he gestured. “Blonde hair,” He says.

“Rose.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” He says, “You know her?” I nod. “She’s a great kisser,” He lowers his sunglasses and peers over them at me, “Not too bad at giving head either.”

“Nice.”

“Alright, I’ll see you guys later.”


“Yeah.”

“Or fuck it, you’re better looking,” Sam says, “Steal his girl.” I say nothing. He stops talking. I want to sleep but it’s impossible. I see too much with my eyes closed. Laura crying as she drives to Boston. Rose on her knees. Laura drinking too much at the party. Rose tying her hair up in a ponytail. Laura stumbling into a bedroom. Dexter holding Rose’s hair.

“Hey, I just heard there’s a party if you’re interested.”

I open my eyes. Rose towers over me. Her friends walk into the water behind her. Sam stands up.
“I’m taking a dip,” He says, trotting into the froth.

“Cool,” I say, “Are you the designated driver again?”

“Definitely not,” Rose says, “First night of summer, man, it’ll be crazy.”

“Right,” I say, “When did you start drinking?”

“What?” She says, “Oh, like freshman year. Why?”

“Wait. I thought you didn’t drink in high school.”

“Why?”

“Because that night,” I say, “At that party. You said you didn’t drink.”

“I probably said I wasn’t drinking at the time,” She says, “I was in season, we had a game the next day. What, you thought I was one of those weirdos who doesn’t drink?” She laughs.

“No,” I say. I laugh too. It’s funny. “No, I didn’t think that. I’ve never heard of this Wayne guy, you know him?”

“Yeah,” Rose says, “He’s cool, he—“

“You suck his dick too?”

Rose turns a dark shade of red. She says nothing. She doesn’t move a muscle. She can’t believe what she just heard. I can’t believe what I just said. I look around. People nearby look at me, eyebrows raised, interests piqued.

“Sorry,” I sputter, not knowing what else to say. Rose turns and walks into the water in a trance. Her friends splash her and she’s smiling again. She dives under a wave. I lie back down and boil in the sun. I’m hotter than I’ve ever been and I can barely breathe. The clog in my nose has become too much. It’s starting to drip down into my throat, blocking the airflow. I snort and suck a giant wad of phlegm into my
mouth. I spit it out next to my towel. I hear a hushed ‘Ew’ and a quiet ‘Gross.’ It’s fine. It is ‘Ew’ and I am gross. At least I can breathe again. The clog is still there, but it’s smaller. Maybe someday I’ll get it all out.

“Yo, how’d that go?” Sam asks, back from his dip. Saltwater drips from his bathing suit onto my face.

“Not great,” I say, “Are we committed to going to this party? What if we hung out at my place instead, old school style. Order pizza and play some videogames.”

“Dude, nah,” Sam says, “We can do that any night, we can’t always party. Don’t throw away this chance with Rose, she’s still into you, I can tell by… Yo.”

“What?”

“Is that…” Sam says, squinting, “Is that your dad? He looks pissed.”

I spin around on my blanket. Sure enough, it’s him. And Sam’s right. The twitching mustache. The critical glances in every direction. The heavy breathing. He’s pissed. Damn. I forgot about the Harrisons. I take my phone out of my shirt. Seven missed calls from Dad. I look up. He’s here.

“Get up,” My dad growls. I obey. “Get your stuff. We’re going.” He turns around and marches back to the parking lot.

“I can get a ride,” Sam whispers to me, even though my dad’s out of earshot, “Hit me up later.”

I gather my things and follow my dad. I don’t look back. I walk to the car I drove but my dad demands I ride with him. He says he’ll get it after.
“The Harrisons wrote you a check as a graduation present,” My dad says when I get in the car. “It’s a lot of money, Bryan. They didn’t have to give you shit but they did. You couldn’t take twenty minutes out of your day to see them?”

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I mumble. I’m shaking. We pull onto the road. Pirates Point disappears around the corner behind us.

“Your apology to the Harrisons will have to be better than that,” He looks at me, then back at the road. He does a double take. “What’s wrong with you?”

“D-Dad,” I say, louder this time, “Laura and I broke up.”

My dad looks from the road to me several times.

“You alright?”

As I nod, I feel a rush. I try to say something but I can’t. I’m choking. My face tightens. I gasp for air but can’t get enough. My chest convulses. I put my hands to my face. They come away soaked. I’m crying. I’m bawling. I try to say I’m ok but I can’t. The sounds coming out of my mouth are incoherent and raspy. My dad pulls over. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives me a little shake. It’s awkward, but it’s an honest attempt to comfort me.

“It’s ok,” He says, “You’re alright. It sucks now, but you’re alright.”

“It hurts so much,” I say, “And I don’t know why.”

“The good stuff wouldn’t be worth all the fuss if there wasn’t a little pain now and then.” He pats me on the arm. A stream of liquid phlegm has trickled down onto my lip. My dad pulls a bundle of napkins from the graduation out of his pocket. He hands them to me. I clean up.

“Allergies still like that, huh?”
I nod and blow my nose.

“I used to have them bad when I was your age.” He pulls back onto the road.

“I grew out of it.” We speed down the coast to Perkins Cove. “You will too.”
Dave

2:20 PM

I’m sitting alone in my parents’ car at a Mobil station in Iris, New Hampshire. I’ve been sitting here for twenty-seven minutes. My phone is on 3% battery and it says that I’m eight minutes away from my friend Gavin’s house, the place that I’ve spent an hour of a sunny summer day driving to. It is currently 2:20. That means if I had balls, I’d have arrived at Gavin’s graduation party around 2:00. Instead, I’ve been stuck on my seat like a rat on a skewer because Gavin made me the designated booze buyer. This would not be a problem if I were 21. However, I am not. I am 19.

What I do have going for me is my thick beard, Aviator shades, fake ID, and trucker hat with a Coors logo. I ordered my ID with a group of friends seven months ago. The hologram is faded and the right end has a fragment of the lamination hanging off. I’d rip it off but I don’t want the rest of the plastic to go with it. There are five distinct creases in the middle of the card. Real ID’s don’t get creases. It also says I’m from 7 Homestead Drive, Mount Vernon, Illinois. I’ve memorized my address, since that’s what people with real identities do. The name on the ID is my own, Dave Stapleton, so that’s easy to memorize. My headshot is smaller than a real ID’s, and the guy who Photoshopped it cut my right ear off. I have not used it before. I am still sitting in my car. It’s muggy and the sun is out. More than anything, I want to be at Gavin’s beach house. My goal is to arrive by 2:50. I take a few deep breaths and bare my game-face in the rearview mirror. Let’s fucking do this.

I jump out of the car. Before I start walking I stretch my arms out to my sides and feign a yawn. That probably looks normal. I start walking. No one else is at the
gas station except for an old lady wearing an almost see-through silk shirt. She’s filling up her car. Fuck her. She wouldn’t buy me shit even if I asked. She’d probably tattle on me to the cashier. Goddamn bitch with those fatty rolls on her arms. Her name’s probably something old and outdated too, like Dolores.

I see the cashier through the window. He’s reading *People* magazine with a picture of J-Lo on the cover and looks like he should be in his mom’s basement playing Dungeons and Dragons. Acne is speckled across his forehead, his ratty long dark hair rests on his back like a cape, and he has a grimy row of black hairs above his upper lip. Today, he is the gatekeeper. I walk in. No hesitation.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I ask the cashier a little too loud.

“What?” He stammers as he looks up from his magazine. I pretend I don’t hear him and sidestep a yellow *Caution: Wet Floor* sign that’s right in front of the door. I continue walking until I find myself stopped in front of the hot dogs. They’re dark brown and shriveled like prunes. I continue to look at them and their prices because what the fuck else do I do. I’m frozen. “Did you say you want a hot dog?” The cashier asks.

“No,” I say as I turn to him. His nametag reads Bill. “No, Bill.”

“Ok.”

“Yeah, but thanks.” I check my watch as Bill looks back down at his magazine. It’s 2:22. The old lady opens the door and pokes her head through. She’s smiling.
“Excuse me?” She says. I stare a hole into the hot dog dispenser. “Young man, by the hot dogs.” I turn. She’s talking to me. “Would you mind helping me jumpstart my car?” A golden opportunity has just presented itself.

“Not at all, ma’am, happy to help.” I follow her outside.

“I’m Geraldine,” She says as we walk.

“I’m Dave.”

“You know, you remind me of my son.”

“Oh yeah? How’s he doing?”

“He was killed in combat in Iraq ten years ago. He was a Navy Seal.” I’m not comfortable anymore.

“I’m sorry.”

“His name was Dan and he looked just like you. He had a beard like yours, wore sunglasses like yours, and always wore a hat like yours.” Hm. I could use this but… Yeah, I’m going to use this.

“Did he drink beer?”

“Oh, yes, he loved his Miller Lites.”

“Well that’s funny because I’m on my way to a party and I’m supposed to bring two thirty racks of Miller Lite.”

“Oh, Dan loved his Miller Lites.”

“Oh-huh. So anyway I lost my license but I have cash to buy the beer. Just because I don’t want to deal with the hassle of convincing this guy I’m of age, would you mind buying the racks for me?”

“Yes of course, but please help me with my car first.” Let’s fucking GO.
“Sure thing, where are your cables?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any cables,” She says, opening her trunk to prove it.

“Is this the first time your car has broken down?”

“No, it happens quite often.”

“I see.”

I go to my car and park it next to hers. I grab some jumper cables from the trunk and clamp the red and blacks on the two batteries, looking at Geraldine as I do so. She’s standing behind her car staring at me, expressionless. It’s off-putting.

“I’ll start your car for you,” I say, breaking the silence between us.

“Thank you, you’re such a gentleman,” She says as she hands me her keys, “I’ll go buy your beer.”

“Thank you so much,” I say as I reach for my wallet, “Here’s the cash.”

“My treat,” She says, smiling, “Happy Summer.” I could kiss this lady, senile as she is. She turns and walks toward the gas station as I sit in the driver’s seat. It’s 2:28 and it’s a beautiful day. I turn the key in the ignition and Geraldine’s car starts without a sputter. I look at my own car and realize I forgot to leave it on. What the fuck? She didn’t need a jump. I look through the rearview mirror just in time to see Geraldine walk through the doors, slip on the wet floor, and begin the process of eating shit. Her foot flies forward and kicks the Caution: Wet Floor sign across the room. She falls backward and smashes the back of her head on the linoleum floor. I jump out of the car and run into the store.

“Holy shit, holy shit,” Bill the cashier wheezes as he brings his phone up to his ear. “Hello? Yes I’m calling from the Mobil Station by the trailer park, an old lady
just fell and hit her head. She looks unconscious, please send help right away.” He hangs up and gulps. I bend over Geraldine. She’s still breathing. A small puddle of blood begins to develop under her head. “Jesus, is that blood?” Bill asks, peeking over the counter. I nod. “I don’t do blood, can you handle this when the ambulance comes?” I nod again and he grabs a pack of Marlboros from behind the counter and runs outside. I pace back and forth next to Geraldine’s body, almost slipping a few times myself. I have no clue what to do. I crouch down and feel her pulse. Her heartbeat’s slow. At least I think it is. I say a few words to try and get a response. Nothing. I have no idea what to do so I just sit next to her, staring at the flower design of her silk shirt. An ambulance and a patrol car arrive. I stand up. The paramedics rush out with a stretcher.

“How long has she been unconscious for?” One of the paramedics asks me as they put Geraldine on the stretcher. I check my watch. It’s 2:36.

“About seven minutes.” A large policeman with blue eyes and a buzz cut approaches me. His tag reads George Norman.

“What happened?” He asks.

“She just slipped on the wet floor,” I answer. The officer surveys the room.

“Where’s the cashier?” The paramedics pop the stretcher up into the mobile position.

“He started freaking out about the blood and took off, he’ll probably be back at some point.”

“I see, and do you know this woman?” George Norman asks. The stretcher is between us now as they roll Geraldine toward the ambulance.
“It’s my son,” Geraldine says as her eyes open. The stretcher stops rolling. She reaches out and touches my face. “Dan, am I going to be ok?” She blinks. Her eyes are glossy. She’s about to cry.

“Yes, Mom, you’re going to be fine.” What the fuck am I doing?

“Oh, that’s so good to hear, you’ve always been so brave, Dan.” Her tears form puddles on her wrinkled cheeks and her hand on my face begins to shake. I glance toward the stone-faced officer.

“Ok, now go with these nice men. They’re going to take care of you.” I nod to the paramedics. She smiles at me and closes her eyes. She looks happy. She’ll be fine. They wheel her outside and George and I follow them out to the ambulance. Since I don’t want to come clean about using Geraldine to buy beer, I conform to George’s belief that I’m her son and don’t correct the lie. As they pick her up, my phone rings in my pocket. I take it out and see it’s Gavin. My phone is now on 1% battery.

“Excuse me for a moment, it’s my Dad,” I tell George Norman as I walk out of earshot.

“Dude, where the fuck are you?” Gavin shouts.

“At a gas station,” I say, “I sort of went through some shit, I’ll be right there.”

“Hurry your ass up, the girls just got here and we finished all of my parents’ alcohol.”

“Ok, I’ll be there in like twenty, what kind of beer do you guys want?” No answer. My phone’s dead. Shouldn’t have left the GPS on. I don’t really care what Gavin wants anyway. He’s a jerkoff who knows a ton of hot girls, has an incredible house, and happened to become my friend by selling me a ton of weed at boarding
school before he was kicked out. That being said, this party is going to rock. It has to.

The ambulance has left but George has waited for me to get off the phone.

“Would you like an escort to the hospital, sir?” He asks me.

“No it’s ok, I don’t want to take any more of your time.”

“I’ll only be monitoring for speeders and checking for alcohol infringements on the beach otherwise, sir, it’s no problem at all.”

“Really, it’s fine, I have to stop at home first to pick up my Dad.”

“Very well. I hope your Mother makes a speedy recovery.”

“Thanks.” I take the jumper cables off of the two cars and tell George that Geraldine’s car is the cashier’s and that my mom and I needed a jump. I get in my car and wait until George leaves, then I run into the gas station. Bill is still out ripping cigs somewhere, so I grab two racks of the first beer I find, smack the cash down on the counter, and hurry back to my car. I pull out of the parking lot and see Bill walking back to the station on the sidewalk. I don’t have GPS and don’t know how to get to Gavin’s. I pull up next to Bill.

“Hey, do you know how to get to Marston Lane from here? It’s on the beach, I think.” Gavin’s address is 267 Marston Lane.

“Did they take her away?”

“Yes, but do you—”

“Are those two thirty racks in your backseat?”

“Yeah, I left the cash on the counter.”

“Can I see your ID?” I sit behind the wheel as the engine hums. I could drive away but I don’t want to knock on someone’s door for directions.
“Seriously?”

“Yep.” I pull my shitty ID out of my wallet. I hand it to Bill. He looks at it and laughs. I’m fucked.

“How much did you pay for this?” He chuckles. Deny, deny, deny.

“What are you talking about?” I try to laugh, “It’s a real ID.” Bill looks at me as he lights another cigarette.

“Whatever, man,” He says after taking a drag, “Enjoy the barbecue or wherever it is that you’re going.”

“Thanks,” I say, “So do you have any idea where Marston Lane is?” Bill gives me this longwinded answer with a lot of head tilting and brow furrowing. Finally he finishes and I get the general gist, stay on this street for two miles, turn left on Grady, and Marston is on my right in a mile. I roll up my window and drive. It’s 2:45 and if I push it I can still make it to Gavin’s by 2:50. The speed limit is 45 but I nurse a healthy 53. I’m speeding toward a fantastic time. Hot girls, a hot tub, a beach, and a beer pong table are each key ingredients to a great party. It’s going to be awesome and I’m going to love it.

I turn onto Grady and up my speed to 58 in a 40. I make it two blocks before I hear a whoop whoop and see flashing blue lights in my rearview. Motherfucker. Before the officer exits the car I take my towel in the passenger seat and throw it over the two cases in the backseat. I haven’t gotten a ticket before so there’s a chance I get off with a warning. The officer approaches the car. I roll down my window.

“Hello, officer,” I look and see George Norman staring back at me. He’s solemn.
“Hello, Dan,” He says, as he shifts his gaze down to the road between us.

“Sorry for speeding,” I reply, “I’m just trying to get to my Dad as fast as I can.”

“I figured,” He continues, “Have you heard anything?”

“What do you mean?”

“Has anyone at the hospital contacted you or your father?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but the paramedics just reported that your mother passed away in the ambulance.”

“Oh.”

“I’m very sorry, sir, they did everything they could but the trauma to the head was too much.”

“I understand.” I sit there looking straight ahead. I cannot look George in the eye.

“Are you ok to drive?” He asks, “Would you like a ride to the hospital?”

“No,” I mumble, “I’m fine.”

“Ok,” He states, “I’ll let you be on your way.” He walks back to the cruiser and drives off.

Geraldine is dead and there is beer in my back seat. Did I kill her? No. It wasn’t my fault she fell. But I sent her into the gas station. But she didn’t even need a jump so it’s her own fucking fault. But she trusted me and I sent her into the gas station. Why the fuck did I have to look like her son. Why the fuck couldn’t I just man up and use my fake ID. Why the fuck is Geraldine dead. My head aches and my
hands shake. I just killed a grieving mother who missed her son so much that she just wanted to talk to someone who looked like him, all because I had to bring beer to a stupid underage white trash party thrown by someone I don’t even fucking like. Tears pour out of my face and I let out long, low, guttural gasps. I’m freaking out.

“I just wanted beer, man, what the FUCK.” I wheeze and cough hard. It’s almost refreshing. It feels like I’m choking up all the guilt that buried itself in my gut when I drove away from that gas station. I wipe my face with my forearm and glare at myself in the rearview. My eyes are puffed up, my nose is red, and I’m still breathing heavy. It’s 2:56. I put the car in drive and keep going.

I get to Gavin’s at 3:01. His house is big, green, and has a tall wooden gate as an entrance to the backyard. In Too Deep by Sum 41 is playing on the other side of the gate. I throw my towel around my neck, take the thirty racks, and push the gate. It swings open to reveal Gavin and his friends playing beer pong, chicken fights in the pool, and a huge hot tub with hot people in it. Behind the party scene is the beach, separated from the property by a short picket fence. It’s picturesque. Gavin sees me standing by the fence as he sinks a cup at the beer pong table.

“Dude, it’s about fucking time!” He bellows as he marches over to me, “I called you like five times in the past ten minutes.”

“Sorry, man, my phone’s dead,” I say, “You would not believe what happened.”

“What, did you have to kill someone for these?” He takes a rack from me.

“Actually, kind of,” I mumble, looking down at the wet grass.
“Weird,” He says, taking the other rack. He tears open each case and dumps the beers into a large green cooler. “Hey, guys,” He yells, “Booze just got here!” Everyone in the yard swarms Gavin and the coolers, like pigs rushing to a trough. I stay where I am.

“Do you have any cash for the beer?” I ask Gavin.

“Yeah, I’ll get you back later,” He says. A blonde girl in a blue bikini top and ripped jean shorts who is drinking one of my beers saunters over to Gavin and slips under his arm.

“Hi, there,” She says to me.

“Hi.”

“Oh, Trixie, have you met my friend, Dan?” Gavin cuts in. I look around, wondering who he’s talking about. They’re both looking at me.

“No I haven’t,” Trixie says, “Nice to meet you.” She extends her hand toward me. I look at it in a daze and glance back up at Gavin.

“What did you just call me?”

“What?” Gavin asks. Trixie withdraws her hand from the space between us.

“The name,” I say, “What was the name you just called me?”

“Dan?”

“That’s not my fucking name.”

“Oh, shit, man,” he stammers, “I was just talking to a Dan... It was a brain fart, my bad.” Trixie ducks out from under Gavin’s arm and backs up to a safe distance.

“I’m going to need that money for the beer now,” I say.
“I don’t have it right now, brother, I’m sorry.”

“What the fuck are you talking about? You have Venmo and there’s a convenience store with an outdoor ATM a block away.” I step toward Gavin. All eyes of the party are on us. I don’t care about the money. I just want to stomp this motherfucker out.

“Dude, you have to chill out,” Gavin says. He hops over to the cooler and grabs a beer. “Here,” he says as he hands me the compact, shiny cylinder, “Let’s have some fun, huh?” I glare at the beer in my hand. It’s cold and wet, but feels like it could burn through my skin. “Who wants to play some pong?” Gavin shouts as he bounds over to the stereo and turns on Bruce Springsteen’s *Born to Run*. Then he turns to me.

“Wanna be my partner?” Gavin asks with a reassuring grin. I stand there, the beer’s perspiration dripping off the bottom of my hand. “Whaddaya say, Dan? Er, sorry I mean—“ I smash the beer into Gavin’s nose. He crumples to the ground, his hands covering his face as blood seeps through his fingers. I follow him to the grass, shoving his arms out of my way as I continue to beat him. My towel falls off my shoulders. With each strike a new hissing stream of beer spurts out of the can. My face is splattered with foam and blood. Gavin’s friends grab my arms and pull me off but it’s too late, the can has split open and the remainder of the liquid spills all over Gavin’s body. The kids pull me to my feet.

“Get the fuck off me,” I growl as I shake loose. Half of the kids stare at me and the other half gather around Gavin. His face is a slick, colorful, bloated mess. One of the girls calls 911. I need to leave. I grab my towel and run to the fence.
“Hey, he’s running away, someone stop him!” I hear in the growing distance behind me. No one follows me. I sprint to the car. I collapse into the driver’s seat and lock the doors. My hands are wet and I have cuts on my fingers from the beer can splitting open. Sirens blare in the distance as I clean my hands and face with the towel. The sirens grow louder. I start driving without having finished cleaning.

It’s 3:13. My phone is still dead and I don’t know anyone in the area. I turn a corner and see the ambulance and patrol car racing toward me. I turn down a side street and look in the rearview. The ambulance passes, then the patrol car. I make out George’s profile at the wheel for a split second, then he’s gone. I drive on. I have no idea where I’m going, but that’s ok. For the first time today, I have nothing to do and nowhere to be. It finally feels like summer.
Sam
7:00 PM

“Samuel Brody, have you been stealing my wine again?”

This is the first thing I hear when I get home from the beach. Mom stomps out of her room with a half-full bottle of Merlot in one hand and a hair dryer in the other. She’s wearing a nice dress I helped her pick out last week.

“Hey, you look great,” I say, “Was that date tonight?”

“Don’t try to change the subject,” She says, “Travis wanted to split a bottle before dinner, now I have to get a new one.”

“When can I meet this Travis?” I ask. Mom scowls. “Ok, yeah,” I slurp some water from the sink faucet, “I had a little, but it’s better if I borrow it from you than try and buy some.” Mom puts the bottle on the kitchen counter, blow dries her hair, and holds out her free hand.

“You’re paying for the new bottle,” She yells over the roar of the blow drier.

“How much?”

“Twenty.”

“Fuckin’ A.”

“Language!”

I pull my tips from the weekend out of my pillowcase and give Mom a wrinkled twenty.

“Why’s he making you pay for it anyway?” I shout, “He should be buying it for you, that’s how it works.”
“The teenager telling the thirty-seven year old how it works,” Mom bellows, “That’s rich.” Her hair swirls in a flurry around her head as she glares at me. If she weren’t my mom I might be scared. “It’s always nice to bring something to a date as a little treat.” Another one of her treats. Every date she insists on paying for something. It’s how she throws the guy off to our financial situation. They all find out eventually, but at least it’s after the first impression. I don’t blame her. It must be hard to develop chemistry with a woman when you know you could be her best shot at financial stability.

“Wait, does this mean I can finish the old bottle?” I ask, as Mom goes back to her room. The blow drier’s racket subsides as she turns it off.

“No,” She says. I hear jingling in her room. She’s gotta be sifting through her two pairs of earrings and three bracelets, picking which combo to wear. You’d think it’d be easy to make a decision with the amount of options she’s got but it takes her forever to decide every time. I’ll never understand it. “You’re lucky I don’t smack you for drinking in the first place.” I roll my eyes. She’s never hit me, and she’s fine with me drinking. Mom couldn’t be more different from all the other parents in Iris, but she likes to sound like them for some crazy reason. Mom’s an awesome mom and doesn’t need to act like anyone else. She’s treated me like an adult most of my life, and that’s more than I can say for the other, richer parents out there who shelter their kids from everything until they’re out of the house. Nothing against that style of parenting—it’s cool and all. I just like how Mom’s always kept it real. When I was sixteen she poured me a glass of wine and said, “This is alcohol. It’s like fire. A little can keep your house warm. A lot can burn it to the ground.” She went on to tell me
about one of her friends who drank herself to death. At the time it felt like a lot, but her plan worked. I’ve never been blackout. I count my drinks. If I’m being honest, I’ve puked a few times, but that’s because I drank beer, and I hate beer. Mom’s also been great about demonstrating what not to do. She gives dope advice, but isn’t the best when it comes to practicing what she preaches. It’s ok. She’s been through a lot.

“What’s your plan tonight?” She asks.

“There’s a party pretty close by,” I say, lying down on the couch. “I’ll head there around 9:30.”

“What’s your plan tonight?”

“My friend Wayne’s.”

“The same Wayne that’s going to Dartmouth?”

Yep.” I don’t see her, but I know Mom’s nodding to herself in approval. She doesn’t like it when I go to parties, but if it’s at a kid’s house who seems to be on the right track, she’ll let it happen. She thinks success is gonna rub off on me or something.

“Is Bryan going too?” Mom loves Bryan. He’s that responsible, allergic-to-trouble, day one homie. Growing up, neither of us fit the description of a typical Iris kid and we’ve always sorta been close ‘cause of that I think. Mom thinks I’m untouchable when I’m with him, and she’s kinda right. Wherever he is, if something shady’s going down, he gets the fuck out. He’s also really good with adults, especially Mom. Much better than he is with kids our age, anyway. It’s like he’s an adult brain in a teenager body. It’s probably a good thing he’s not coming out tonight. He’d feel out of place, and he didn’t seem to be in the party mood after the shit at the
beach earlier today. He told me he was gonna stay in and watch the Red Sox game with his dad. I called him and offered to come over and play videogames and eat junk food and talk about girls like we usually do but he told me he was all good. He’d feel bad keeping me from the party, and wanted to spend time with his parents. It’s the first time I’ve heard of someone blowing off a party to kick it with the rents. I don’t feel good about going without him, but if that’s what he wants, I get it.

“No, he’s staying back at his place,” I say, “He wants to be alone. He had a rough breakup earlier today.”

“Who would ever break up with that boy?”

“I think he did the breaking up.”

“Probably the right move,” Mom says, “He’ll get over it.”

“Are you taking the car tonight?”

“Yes,” She says, “I hope you weren’t thinking of driving to this party.”

“I’m walking,” I say, “You’re going to drink and drive?”

“I won’t be driving drunk,” She says, “We’re having a glass of wine at Travis’ then walking to dinner down the street where I’ll only have water.”

“Why don’t you have Travis pick you up here?”

“If I don’t have a car,” She says, “I don’t have the option to leave any time I want.”

“So there is a possibility that you drink and drive.”

“No, there isn’t,” Mom says, “But Travis doesn’t know that.”

“So when can I meet this guy?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”
“He a scumbag or something?” I ask. Mom scoffs in her room.

“Of course not,” She says, “He’s quite the gentleman. You’d like him. You two have similar interests. Are the keys out there?”

“Yeah, they’re on the counter,” I say, “What do you mean similar interests?”

“We can talk about this later,” Mom says as she comes out of her room, “I’m already late.” She grabs the car keys and heads for the door. She’s wearing the same earrings as last time, but a different bracelet. The bangle glistens off her wrist, which reminds me. I pull out my little cardboard box under my bed and take out Dad’s watch. I slide it on my wrist and fasten it with a click. Mom opens the door, about to dip.

“Don’t be stupid tonight, kiddo,” She says, “And absolutely no bringing anyone back here.” She closes the door behind her.

“Bye, Mom.”

I brush my fingers across Dad’s watch. I don’t really remember him, but I saw a picture of him in Mom’s room a while ago. She threw it out after she realized I snuck in and found it. In the picture his arm was draped over her and his watch wrist dangled off her shoulder. Other than my resemblance to Mom, that watch is about the only thing that would make someone think I’m in any way connected with the man in the picture. We look nothing alike. He was tall with light blonde hair, glasses, big arms, and a thick beard. I’m short with dark hair, 20/20 vision, tiny-ass arms, and can’t even grow peach fuzz.

I asked Mom about him a lot over the years. She never gave me a straight answer, and would end the conversation with a reason why we were better off without
him, “If he were still around, those leftovers you’re eating would be gone,” or “You’d never get any sleep—he’d watch TV until dawn,” or the classic, “The toilet would be clogged 24/7.” Each reason showed the same thing: He only cared about himself.

After a few years of the same question, she told me to drop it completely. It was too painful for her to talk about. Her voice got so shrill when she said anything about him. I turned to Grandpa and Grammy for answers, but didn’t get much. Grandpa’s lips were sealed, and the only tidbit I managed to squeeze out of Grammy was that I should be happy I’m nothing like him. As I got older I began to realize if no one wanted to say anything about him, it was probably for good reason. That’s why I stopped asking about him.

I don’t remember him leaving but I remember finding his watch in the garbage at our old house. I was drawing in the kitchen and one of my crayons rolled off the counter into the trash. When I went to dig it out, a silver shimmer peeked out at me through the pile of garbage. It was a Rolex, fully intact, but the hands had stopped moving. Mom came, saw the watch, and tried to take it, but I cried until she let me have it. I tried it on but it sagged off my wrist—I could fit both hands through it. For years I kept it under my bed in a cardboard box I found at the dump, only taking it out at night to try and fix the frozen hands by either shaking it or tapping the face. It didn’t work. I had to call in the big guns. I begged Mom to help me, and she took me to the watch store in the mall for my eighth birthday. The fix was way out of our price range. She tried to buy me a new watch, one with a superhero or some other cartoon shit on it that most kids my age would want. I said no. I wanted the Rolex.
It took me a while to accept that I wouldn’t fix the watch. When I was thirteen I biked to the same store and the guy told me the price he’d told Mom years earlier. The watch was still too big for me, drooping from my wrist every time I tried to wear it, so I asked him to take a few of the links off the metal band. He agreed. When I asked him how much it’d be, he said it was free. That was their policy for any watch bought in the store. I felt connected with Dad in that moment. We’d both been standing there, in that store, probably with the same man talking about the same watch. I asked the guy if he remembered the man he sold the watch to. He didn’t.

I wear the Rolex as often as I can except at the beach—The sand could ruin it. It doesn’t tell time but no one other than Bryan’s noticed. It’s the nicest watch of anyone at school and gets a shit ton of compliments. I like to think that’s why it’s important to me, because it’s so nice, so expensive. The truth is I don’t know what draws me to it. Dad wasn’t a great guy, and I’m not sure I ever want to meet him. He can’t be the reason I like the watch. He can’t matter. If you only care about yourself, how can you matter?

With Mom gone I hit the lights and fall back onto the couch. I need a sleep for a sec. It’s gonna be a long night.

***

My phone rings.

“Yo.”

“Sammy B!” Wayne yells into the phone. He’s piss drunk. I check the clock. Fuck, it’s past 10:00. I should’ve set an alarm. “Ayyy… Yo, dude, yo,” Wayne rambles. His party’s roaring in the background. I rub my eyes and sit up. Rally time.
“What’s up?”

“Where the fuck you at? And bring some fuggin’ chasers, people are takin’ raw shots and makin’ a mess ‘f my sink.”

“Word, man,” I say. Wayne hangs up before I can say anything else. I slap myself in the face a few times and stand up. I strip off my beach clothes. No time to shower. I swipe deodorant under my pits and throw on clothes. Yeah, I’m grimy as fuck, but whatever. I go to the fridge. A half-gallon of milk, a few eggs, a bottle of hot sauce, and last night’s leftovers stare back at me. I’ll stop at a gas station for chasers. I get my wallet and phone, shut off the headlamp, and I’m outtie.

Wayne’s is on the corner of Alehson Road, about four blocks away, and there’s a Mobil station two blocks in the other direction. It’ll be a hike to get the chasers then go to his place, but I’m a man of the people so fuck it. I’ll get there when the party’s reaching its peak anyway. It’s all good.

I make it to the Mobil station in no time. The air’s warm but the breeze is cool—It’s a nice walk. I get a jug of orange juice for the people and a coconut water for myself. I don’t need everyone else’s germs, and coconut water does wonders for hangovers. That’s what Mom’s June issue of Women’s Health said, at least. The clerk rings me up and sees my watch.

“You got the time?” He asks. I check my phone and tell him the time.

“Thanks,” He says, giving me a weird look. It’s not the first time this has happened. Each time I want to say I’m wearing a broken watch, but then I’d have to answer the question: Why? “You want a bag?” The clerk asks. Someone walks in behind me.
“I’m good, thanks,” I say, as I glance at his nametag, “Have a good one, Bill.”

“You too, man.”

I take my stuff off the counter and go to leave. I definitely should’ve gotten a bag. It’s gonna be annoying having my hands full the whole walk over, and the orange juice’s already starting to sweat. Whatever, one less bag that’ll end up in the ocean somewhere, right?

“Sammy B,” I hear from behind me as I open the door. I turn and let the door close, “The fuck are you doing here?” It’s Dexter Walcott, a former classmate.

“Yo, Dex. Just grabbing some chasers for Wayne’s,” I say, “You?”

“No way,” Dex laughs, “That asshole told me to do the same shit.”

“Fucking Wayne, man,” I say, “So you’re going too. Not worried about your dad busting it and catching you?”

“Nah, he thinks I’m at Gavin’s,” Dex says, “Plus Wayne is the master of keeping things low key. You want a ride over there?”

“Please,” I say, “That’d be great.” Mom would be hyped. In her eyes, if I was invincible with Bryan at a party, I’d be untouchable with a cop’s kid.

“Hey, are Bryan and I cool?” Dexter asks, taking a step toward me. That’s a great question. I pause, not sure how to answer it. “I had no idea he had a thing for Rose when I told him I got with her, I thought he had a girlfriend?”

“Yeah,” I say, “He did. They broke up today though.”

“No,” Dex says, grimacing, “You don’t think he left her for Rose or anything like that, do you?” I shrug. Dexter curses to himself. It’s a little too dramatic. “Damn,
man, I don’t want any beef with him, he’s a good dude. I know you guys are tight, you think you could tell him I’m sorry?”

“He doesn’t blame you,” I say, “But if you wanna apologize I can toss you his digits. I’m sure it’d mean a lot to him.”

“Killer, man, killer,” Dex says, “Phone’s in the car though, I’ll grab those digits from you in a minute.” Dexter darts in between the isles in a roundabout route to the refrigeration section. He slows down, glancing at the clerk, then continues.

“What’d you get?”

“Orange juice.”

“I’ll go with cranberry then,” Dexter says, grabbing two bottles. He pays at the counter and we hop in his car.

“So the number is—“

“Check this out,” Dex blurts, unzipping his jacket pocket. Two candy bars fall out, “Want one?”

“Did you just steal that shit?” I ask. Bryan told me Dexter was into shoplifting a while ago but I’ve never seen proof before.

“Yep,” Dex says, “Which one you want, peanut butter or nougat?” I don’t want to be weird about it so I take the nougat bar. Dexter sees my watch as I reach over. “Yo, I’ve always wondered,” He says, “Where’d you get that ice?”

“I, uh, found it in the trash,” I say. Dexter narrows his eyes and grins.

“You stole it, didn’t you?” He starts up the car.
“No,” I say, “Swear to God, I got it out of the trash. It stopped ticking so someone threw it away.” I show him the watch’s frozen hands. I don’t like lying, but Dex isn’t someone I need to share my life story with. He looks at the Rolex.

“I can’t believe I’ve never noticed that,” He says, “Why do you wear it then?”

“I don’t know,” I say, “Looks cool.”

“Oh,” He says, pulling out onto the road, “I can dig that.”

“Anyway, how long you been swiping stuff?”

“Since like elementary school or something,” Dexter says as he tears into his candy bar, “I don’t do it all the time, just if the mood’s right, I guess.”

“Gotcha,” I say, pocketing mine, “You ever nervous about getting caught?”

“No really,” Dexter says as he flies down the road, “I used to, but then I thought about it. I can always say I put it in my pocket and forgot about it. Besides, it’s not like anyone’s arresting me.” He flashes a smile at me and finishes the candy bar in a massive bite.

“Word,” I say, “So Bryan’s number is—"

“Tell me later when I’m not driving,” Dexter interrupts, as Maroon 5’s Sugar comes on the radio. Dexter howls and cranks it up. It’s deafening. I feel like I should hate Dexter, but I don’t. I don’t consider him a close friend or a great guy. He’s impulsive, isn’t super self-aware, and thinks he’s immortal. In other words, he’s entertaining to watch when drunk. People don’t like him because they take him too seriously. You gotta take Dex for what he is: A mixed-up dude on the lookout for a good time all the time. He shakes me with his free hand as he rocks back and forth in his seat. I give him what he wants. I bump to the beat.
We turn onto a dark, quiet Alehson Road. There aren’t any cars parked on the street. Wayne’s house is at the top of a hill at the end of the road, separated from its closest neighbor by a hundred yards of trees—ideal for throwing an underage party. Dex rockets up the hill, through Wayne’s driveway, and into the backyard. Every time Wayne has a party he uses his backyard as a parking lot. The place is cramped. Dexter almost trades paint a couple times but we find a spot. He turns the key and silences Adam Levine mid-verse. I barely hear a muffled beat inside the house over the ringing in my ears. We get the chasers and Dex snags a handle of vodka sitting in the backseat.

“So you want that number or no?” I ask Dexter as I cram the coconut water into my back pocket. It sticks out but it’ll stay.

“Come to think of it, I’d rather apologize to Bryan in person,” Dexter says.

“Ok,” I say, “But don’t put it off. Bryan feels like shit right now and I think he’d be stoked if you reached out.”

“True,” Dexter says, looking down at the grass. He sniffs. He sniffs again and perks up. Weed’s in the air. Two guys a few cars down are smoking a J. I know them and could ask for some, but I don’t feel like getting crossed. Dexter sees them too. He smacks me in the chest and beelines it toward the smoke sesh.

“Want some of this?” He asks. I shake my head. “No? Ight, I’ll catch you inside.” Dexter’s way too selfish of a dude. In a way, I feel bad for him. He only knows what he wants, and that’s all he sees. It makes me wanna mind control him for a sec and do one selfless thing so he knows how it feels.
I walk onto Wayne’s patio and go in through the screen door. I step foot in the kitchen and find the party at its peak. Wayne’s shotgunning a beer with a buddy by the kitchen sink. Girls giggle as they sit on the counter in short shorts and skirts as guys in tank tops and tight t-shirts yell about drinking or lacrosse or something. I sneak a peek in the living room and find bodies of all shapes and sizes bouncing into each other, and some people making out. A hand clamps onto my shoulder and spins me around.

“Sammy B in the house!” Wayne yells, embracing me in an aggressive hug.

“Hey, Wayne,” I say, “Thanks for throwing down, brotha.” Wayne punches me in the shoulder. It’s supposed to be playful but it hurts.

“Of fucking COURSE, homie,” He blurts, sending a few droplets of spit my way. He doesn’t notice. I wipe it off. If that’s the price of being at his party, so be it. He sees the juice in my hand. “Yooo, you think we could use that as a chaser?”

“Yeah, man,” I laugh, “You told me to bring it.”

“For sure,” He says, letting it spray again, “Lemme make you a FAT mixie, bro.” Wayne starts to squirm through the kitchen crowd to the back counter until he notices I’m not following. He takes two giant steps backward, pushing a few tipsy kids out of the way, lunges toward me and grabs my wrist. I laugh and follow him through the crowd. It’s sweaty and hot and loud and fucking packed. A few classmates say ‘What up,’ and slap me on the back.

We finally reach the back of the kitchen. Wayne crams his arm in between two girls on the counter. They gawk at him. He pulls his hand back out from behind them with two solo cups and a bottle of rum.
“Say when,” He says as he dumps a stream of booze in the cup.

“When,” I say, but not fast enough. The cup is a quarter full when he starts to pour the orange juice. I’m holding the cup with my watch hand.

“That watch is so fire,” Wayne says, “Where’d you get it again?”

“It was my dad’s,” I say. Wayne looks back at me with blank eyes. He doesn’t hear me over the blaring party sounds around us.

“Word, bird,” He says, putting the drink down. “This stuff is yours all night if you need a refill.” Wayne puts the bottle back behind the two girls and uses his belligerent reach as an excuse to start a conversation. He doesn’t hear me but I thank him for the drink and wriggle through the crowd back toward the entrance where it’s less stuffy.

“Sammy.” I look around. Who said that? “Sam!” A foot comes up out of nowhere and barely misses my chin. I look up and see Rose sitting on the counter, staring down at me. She holds her hand out. “C’mere,” She yells over the crowd, “Please.” Before I can take her hand the girl next to her puts a shot glass in her fingers. Rose rips the shot, gives the glass back, and takes my hand. She pulls me through the kids in the way. I take a gulp of my drink and wince. It stings.

“Hey, Rose,” I say once we’re close enough, “How are you?”

“Mmm,” She grumbles, her face shriveling from the shot, “Not gate.”

“Not great, huh?” I clarify. She shakes her head. I sip my drink again and gag.

“Bathroom,” She says. It’s all I need to hear. I take her other hand and help her off the counter. We struggle through the crowd until Dexter steps in front of us.
“Ay, how you doin’?” He says, more to Rose than me as he drapes his arms around us. Rose hiccups. Dex leans into my ear. “Can you wingman me, dog?”

“We’re doing well, man,” I say, “She’s not feeling too hot though, we’re making a quick pit stop at the bathroom.” Rose nods in agreement, clamping her eyes shut. Dex takes a closer look at her and recoils.

“Fuck,” He says, stepping aside, “She’s cocked. You’re a good guy, Sammy B.”

“Thanks,” I say, “You want this?” I hold out my drink. Dex beams and takes it, bowing to me as a thank you. I continue on to the living room with Rose. We make it to the bathroom, I lock the door behind us and Rose collapses onto the toilet, spewing into the bowl. I hold her hair and find some mouthwash and cups below the sink. She might not look like Ms. America when we get outta here, but at least her breath won’t smell like shit. My phone vibrates in my pocket. I take it out with my free hand. The caller ID cracks me up.

“Yo,” I answer.

“Hey,” Bryan says, “You at Wayne’s?”

“Sure am,” I say, “You thinking of coming now?”

“The Sox won, my parents went to bed,” Bryan says, “I’m seeing all these Snapchats of that place, is it fun?” Rose yacks out a dry heave.

“Uh, sorta.”

“What was that sound?”

“Someone’s booting.”

“Gross.”
“So are you coming or what?”

“Yeah, I’ll come,” He says, “Don’t have anything better to do.”

“See you soon.” I hang up.

Rose has run out of liquid to spew, so I let her hair fall over her shoulder. She sits back against the wall, eyes closed. I take the coconut water out of my back pocket and put it, the mouthwash, and the cups in her lap as I sit down next to her.

“Drink that,” I say, pointing to the coconut water, “It’s the cure for hangovers, or so I’m told. Then rinse out a little.” Someone pounds on the door. Rose doesn’t move.

“Occupied!”

“Thanks,” Rose murmurs, her eyes beginning to open.

“No prob,” I say, tapping the mouthwash. “That shit’s the best, I have some at home.”

“No,” Rose says, “Thanks for everything, all of this. Why though?”

“It’s happened to me before,” I say, “It’s happened to everyone, really, and it sucks if you have to do it alone.” I never had to do it alone. Actually, the first time I threw up from drinking was in front of Rose. She was talking to Bryan at a party, and I booted in a trashcan right next to them. She left and Bryan took me to the bathroom to get me out of sight while I finished my business. He found mouthwash under the sink so I could rinse out after too. That’s what gave me the idea.

Two more loud bangs on the door.

“Hold on,” Rose yells. She burps and grimaces. “You’re a good person, Sam.”
“You should tell my mom that.” This makes Rose smile. Rose looks down and sees my watch.

“That doesn’t tick.”

“You’d be surprised at how many people don’t notice.”

“Why do you wear it?”

“It’s a nice watch, it shines, I don’t know.”

“That’s no reason,” Rose says, “You shouldn’t wear a broken watch because it’s shiny and nice, you should wear a watch you can actually use.”

“My dad gave it to me.”

“That’s a good reason.”

That’s the first lie I’d ever told that felt good. Now not everyone in town thinks Dad’s a total asshole. To Rose, to someone, he was a guy that was, at one point, selfless enough to give his kid a gift.

Rose and I sit in silence for a few minutes as the party rages on just a few feet away. She finishes the coconut water and throws it in the trash once she’s finished. After a short struggle, she stands up, swirls some of the mouthwash around in her mouth, and spits it out in the sink. I get up and do the same. She puts down the toilet seat cover and sits on it.

“Can you tell Bryan I’m sorry?”

“For what?”

“I hooked up with Dexter.” Rose closes her eyes in disgust.

“Oh, I know,” I say, “Don’t worry about it, he’s probably already over it.”

“No he’s not.”
“I guess we’ll find out,” I say, “He’ll be here in a few minutes.”

“What?” Rose gasps, eyes shooting wide open. “He can’t see me like this,”
She bolts to her feet and fixes her hair in the mirror.

“Do you want a ride outta here?” I ask, “My mom’s coming to pick me up in like two minutes.” I’m not sure how I feel about lying this much in one night, but it’s not like I’m doing this shit for no reason. Also, I can’t wait to leave. Everyone here started drinking way earlier than me, and I don’t feel like chugging mixies that taste like gasoline to catch up.

“Yes, please,” Rose says, “Oh my god, Sam, you’re saving my life tonight.”

“Ah,” I say, “We’ll see.”

Rose and I walk out to find the dancing section of the party has spread to the kitchen. It’s a fight to get to the back door.

“Where you guys going?” Dexter asks, appearing out of the crowd, fist-pumping.

“Getting some air,” Rose says. Dex narrows his eyes at her, then at me.

“Alright,” He says, as Rose continues toward the door. Dexter leans into my ear again. “Remind me to take the knife out of my back at some point, wingman.” I point to my ear and shake my head in mock confusion, pretending to not have heard. There’s no point in getting into a fight. When I turn around, Rose is already outside. I join her. The open air feels incredible compared to the dark, sweaty mosh pit inside. I’m glad I went, but I’m glad I’m going. Rose and I walk around front, down the hill, and wait on the street. It’s not long before headlights shine on us.

“There he is,” I say.
“Wait,” Rose says, “I thought we were waiting for your mom.”

“Oh yeah,” I say, “We’re not.”

Bryan pulls up next to us, his window rolled down.

“Hey,” He says. Rose gives a little wave back.

“This party blows,” I say to Bryan, “Want to give her a ride back then kick it at your place?”

“Um, yeah… Yeah, sure,” Bryan stammers. Rose takes a step for the backseat but I beat her there.

“You can grab shotgun, Rose.”

Rose and I get in our seats and buckle up. Bryan turns the car around and heads out of Alehson. It’s dead silent. They need time alone together.

“Yo, can you stop at my place?” I say, “I need to grab my toothbrush.”

“Sure,” Bryan says, “It’s on the way to yours anyway, right?”

“Yeah,” Rose says.

No one utters another word until we turn into the trailer park.

“I’ll be right back,” I say, as I hop out. I run inside and close the door behind me. Here we go, Bry. Make it happen.

I hear giggling. It’s pitch black. I hit the lights. Mom and a man get off the counter and scramble to look presentable. Thank God they have all their clothes on. I still cover my eyes.

“I didn’t see shit,” I say.

“No, you didn’t,” Mom says.
“Whoa,” I hear another voice say, “Is that a Rolex Dive-Master?” I uncover my eyes and see the man put on a pair of glasses and stare at my wrist.

“Yeah,” I say, “You know this watch?”

“Do I!” The man says as he approaches me, extending his hand. He has a spectacular silver-banded watch himself. “I’m Travis by the way.”

“Travis,” I say, shaking his hand, “Sam. Nice to meet you.”

“The infamous Sam, I’ve heard a lot about you.” He says this as he looks at Mom. She smiles. “Where in the world did you get this?”

“I found it in the trash,” I say, “It’s broken, it doesn’t tick.”

“In the trash!” Travis laughs, “Even if it doesn’t tick, this thing’s a relic. Good on you for keeping it around. May I?” I unclip the watch and hand it over. He cradles it in his fingers as if it could break at the touch. Mom puts her arm around him.

“I told you you two have similar interests,” Mom says, “Travis used to be a watchmaker.” She raises her eyebrows at me, “Fancy that.”

“I still have my kit at home,” Travis says, “I can’t make any promises, but I’d love to fool around with this thing to try and fix it sometime. Would that be ok?”

“Yeah, sure,” I say.

“Awesome,” He says, bringing his gaze back down to my watch. “I’ll take a crack at it whenever you want. Watches are the most intricate little puzzles!”

“Stop being so dorky,” Mom says, slapping him on the arm.

“I can’t help it,” He says, handing me back the Rolex, “Too cool, man.”

“What are you doing back so early?” Mom asks.

“I could ask the same of you.”
“We had a few glasses of wine then decided to settle on a pair of TV dinners,” Travis says, beaming, “My oven’s broken so we came here.”

“I thought you were going to a restaurant,” I say.

“We bagged that,” Mom answers.

“'Cause fuck it,” Travis blurts, sending the two into hysterics. Mom’s bottle of Merlot is empty behind them. I laugh too.

“I’m going to Bryan’s,” I say.

“You’re not driving,” Mom says, sticking a finger in my face.

“Nope,” I say, “He’s in the car outside waiting for me.”

“Then you should go,” Travis says, looking back at Mom, “I mean he shouldn’t keep his friend waiting, right?” Mom shakes her head vigorously. I haven’t seen her like this in a long time.

“Ok, alright,” I say, with a smile, heading toward the bathroom, “I can see when I’m not wanted.” They both jump at that and call me crazy as I grab my toothbrush and dash back to the living room. I stop at the door. “When do you think you’ll be back, Travis?”

“That’d be up to her,” Travis says, elbowing Mom in the side. Mom giggles. I unclip my watch and turn around.

“Then could you try and fix this thing tomorrow, or sometime soon?”

“Absolutely,” Travis says, his smile leaving his face. I go to him and hold out my watch. He’s about to take it.
“But can you just...” I trail off, looking at Dad’s watch in my palm. Travis stops reaching for it. Mom tilts her head into his temple. “Can you just make sure you’re really careful with it? It’s important to me.”

Travis slips his own watch off and holds it up to eye level so I can see.

“This here is an Omega Seamaster.” He points to its different parts, “Complete with a blue ceramic bezel, helium escape valve, sixty hour power reserve, self winding automatic chronometer co-axial movement, and thirty nine jewels.”

“Nerd alert,” Mom sings. Travis smiles and winks at me. He puts the watch in my hand.

“If your Rolex has a single scratch on it whenever your Mom decides she’s willing to put up with me again,” He says, making Mom roll her eyes, “You can have the granddaddy of them all, right here.”

“Thanks,” I say, as I give him my watch. “But you don’t have to do that, I trust you.”

“Hey, I’ll have yours so you might as well have mine.”

“Cool,” I say. It’s time I get outta here. “Nice meeting you, Travis.”

“Likewise.”

“Call me if you need a ride in the morning,” Mom says as I step outside, “Love you.”

“Love you too.” I shut the door behind me, clip on Travis’ watch, and check the time. It’s 12:05. I walk back over to the car and sit in the back seat. It’s silent.

“Everything good?” Bryan asks. I nod, trying to read his eyes in the rearview. He looks away and backs out. We drive. It’s silent again until Bryan drops Rose off.
“See you,” She says, glancing at Bryan as she gets out.

“Bye,” We say. Bryan and I watch her go into the house. Once her front door shuts, Bryan grabs a tissue and empties his face into it. It’s loud and fucking disgusting.

“Holy shit,” I say, as I jump out of the car and hop into shotgun, “It’s a miracle she didn’t just hear you.” Bryan doesn’t answer as he takes a deep breath and puts the tissue in a plastic bag. He had to’ve been waiting to unleash that gremlin the whole ride. “So what happened?” I ask. Bryan turns and punches me in the shoulder.

“Ow!” Bryan backs onto the road and heads down toward his place.

“Don’t trick me like that,” he says, upset, “I’d never do something like that to you. And you smell like shit, did you not shower after the beach?”

“Sorry,” I say. “No, I didn’t.” There’s a long silence. “It didn’t go well?” Bryan takes a breath before answering.

“I said I was sorry for saying what I did earlier.”

“What’d you say?” I ask. Bryan hesitates. He doesn’t want to tell me. “Come on, it couldn’t have been that bad.”

“I was upset from what Dexter told us about her being good at giving head or whatever and she asked if I was going to Wayne’s party, and…”

“Yeah?”

“I blurted out, ‘You suck his dick too?’”

“Damn.” There’s silence between us. Then I start giggling. It’s uncontrollable. I can’t fucking believe Bryan said that shit. Bryan starts laughing too. “That’s fucking awful, dude, how could you say that?”
“I wasn’t thinking, it just came out,” He says, as we begin to settle down.

“Jesus, and to think she was worried about you hating her at the party tonight.”

“She was?”

“Yeah, she’s nuts about you, even after that little outburst,” I say, making Bryan smile, “So what happened after you said sorry?”

“She said it was ok, she understood, and apologized for getting with such a douchebag in the first place,” He’s serious again.

“She doesn’t have to apologize for that, everyone’s gotten with a douchebag,” I say, “But it’s cool she said that.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Then what?”

“I felt weird after the whole Laura thing so I didn’t ask her out or anything.”

“Ok.”

“But she wants us to meet her and her friends at the beach tomorrow.”

“We going?”

“Oh yeah,” Bryan says, “We going.” A giant grin breaks across his face.

“Oh boy,” I say, “She’s got some cute friends, you a good wingman?”

“I guess we’ll find out,” He says, “Hey, what took you so long at your place? Or were you trying to buy me time?”

“My mom had a guy over.”

“Was he cool?”
“Really cool,” I say, “And get this, he used to work with watches. He’s gonna try and fix mine.”

“That’s sick, dude,” Bryan says, “Wait, you gave your watch to him?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you know he won’t take it?” He asks. I hold up my wrist to show him Travis’ watch.

“He gave me his,” I say, “And I’m pretty sure it’s worth a lot more than my dad’s.”

“So either way I guess you’ll finally be normal.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ll finally wear a watch that tells time, like a normal human being.”

“Oh,” I say. I laugh. I guess he’s right. I will be normal. It’ll be nice to be able to answer people when they point to my watch and ask what the time is, and it’ll be even nicer to not have to explain why I’m wearing a broken watch. Bryan zooms past the Mobil Station. “You got snacks at home?” I ask.

“Snacks on snacks,” He says, “And my parents got me the new Xbox for graduation.”

“No way!” I yell. He laughs and turns on the radio. Maroon 5’s Sugar comes on, and I turn it up to max volume. We sing our lungs out, voices cracking and all. We pass Bryan’s house twice. We have to sing every verse to wake up for our all-nighter.