The Final Evening Bell: A Prep School Memoir

by

Charlotte Klein
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THE FINAL EVENING BELL

A PREP SCHOOL MEMOIR
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is a work of memoir and is specific to my own experience. Interviews with former Taft students were conducted and consented to. I chose not to quote these students directly. All names and some identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.
PREFACE

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Crack-Up

I learned ... that often contradiction is the clearest way to truth.

—Patti Smith, Just Kids

On a summer evening in 1890, the night before Mr. Taft’s School opened for the first time, horse-drawn trucks carrying all of the school’s furniture rode to Pelham Manor, a village in Westchester County, New York. The trucks traveled all night, eventually arriving just as the first students and their parents did. “I put both boys and parents to work on the front porch opening boxes,” Horace Dutton Taft, the school’s founder, writes in his memoir (Taft 71). “It was a most comical beginning of a school” (71).

Comprised only of two houses and 17 boys, Mr. Taft’s School would remain in Pelham Manor for the next three years until relocating to an old, failing hotel and its mere six-acre property in Watertown, Connecticut. There, Mr. Taft’s School became The Taft School, a name change that acknowledged the institution’s quiet but promising growth (“Our History”). I arrived more than a century later.

The American tradition of prep school is fundamentally and unyieldingly private, isolated to the point of mystique. The unknowability of this part of American culture might make the prospect of boarding school fascinating to the general public — consider the ongoing popularity of the campus novel — but it also allows schools like Taft to get away with modes of operation that facilitate the anguish therein. The
administration took the privacy that should have remained as a right and held it as a privilege that could be withdrawn or renewed to their liking. I learned Taft to be a place that refused to recognize any kind of growth in their 600 students outside of the classroom: the honor code meant to help students to grow in the “right” direction did not give us the respect to navigate any kind of personal territory. Taft’s standard of conduct, which was informed by the washed, Puritanical roots that the school was founded upon, acknowledged sex only when punishing it. Otherwise, the administration pretended that sex was not something students were having on campus. As a result, sex at Taft was a kind of illicit activity that demanded you place self-respect to the side, at least for a moment. This was the irony of an institution that devoted so much of its power to preventing and punishing the very coming of age it purported to provide.

I so frequently felt a palpable contradiction between what Taft looked like and what it felt like. What was visible of the coeducational prep school was undeniably beautiful. The material presentation felt in line with what some may call the grand architectural tradition of private boarding schools, institutions literally made insular by the fortress-like structures that enclose them. Members of the Facilities and Grounds team were tasked with the school’s meticulous upkeep. Groundskeepers at work were a typical sighting for those of us who lived at Taft, but on those days when the school put itself on display for current parents or prospective students, they seemingly disappeared; it was as if Taft wanted to hide the hired hands who worked so tirelessly to preserve it. These acts of traditional presentation often made the
school feel like a copy without an original, a replica of some place or kind of place that no longer existed but that Taft, and many schools like it, continued to chase.

But I want to talk about what existed beneath the immediately presentable aspects of Taft, the cell-like structure of the school’s interior and the psychology that lived within. The tension between that which could be spoken about and that which could not was part of what was so intoxicating about Taft, part of the strange reason why some of my classmates continue to feel the school lingering so profoundly in their lives. The exhilaration of living within that contradiction required us to be one kind of person during the day and another at night. I was one of many students appreciative not only of the wood-paneled Gothic Dining Hall, but also the door directly across from it, which opened up to one of my favorite stairwells.

At the top of that stairway was a large, rubber platform. The surface felt like a grate of some sort and my then-boyfriend and I often carried blankets in our backpacks to make the space more comfortable. We could hear the conversations of those who passed up and down the levels below and occasionally the moans of those having sex at the bottom of the stairwell, unaware of the platform’s existence. If this was the case, it was common courtesy to give a sign of acknowledgment: a cough was all it took. Sex culture at boarding school embodied the rotting spaces. Going to Taft not only meant having an awareness of these two kinds of spaces but also an ability to hold both together in their opposing functions, existing in this apparently perfect environment that so many aspired to while also being able to call its bluff.

During the school day, Main Hall was a passageway, the corridor students traveled along on their way to class or to meals or when returning to their dormitory.
There was a constant buzz that echoed through Main Building during lunchtime, a palpable desire held by so many students to live in the stories that passed through the dorm rooms year after year. I often found myself eating lunch in the East dining room, where the light was best. The tall windows and their stained-glass panels reminded me of a church. The walls of this dining room were etched with thousands of names, those of former Taft students. I saw myself as one of many in Taft’s roster, yet still sought to be uniquely recognized within the collective. I found the legacy of Taft and schools like it at once bizarre and exciting. I would stand just outside the Dining Hall during the day and watch groups of younger girls chatting with each other as they exited Main Building, each with a story to tell and a hope to be noticed within the community.

But at night it felt as if the charade that students subconsciously put on during the day became something else, something that felt severe and bold and high-stakes in a way the daytime never could. In the cold metallic stairwells of Main Building and in the dim light of dormitory bedrooms, many Taft students sought to liberate themselves from what they saw as a kind of tyranny, an operating system that, in its very resistance to change, almost invited some disruption.

My parents believed themselves to be paying for an unparalleled educational experience and in many ways they did. At Taft I learned most about what people, including myself, are like when they are in pain. This is a story about disorder. For three very strange years, I experienced moments of elation and moments of equally-intense misery on a daily basis. Nostalgia for Taft is a longing I am hesitant to indulge or to treat as unique. I’m sure everyone misses a painful part of their life at
some point; the relationship between misery and love is more complicated than that. I nevertheless believe there is something peculiar to the Taft experience that facilitated a kind of mutual uncertainty in their graduates, something deeply tied to “the impersonality of living in a total institution” (Cookson and Persell 129). I write about Taft as if it does not continue to exist without me, which it of course does. But this story is a portrait of the school I knew, a site of traditional authority and self-perceived importance of which I am both proud and reluctant to be a product. Despite all of the peculiarities and pain surrounding my time at Taft, I find myself missing my life there every day — even now, some six years later. Many other Taft graduates I’ve spoken to do, too. This memoir is an attempt to figure out why.
CHAPTER I. SOPHOMORE YEAR: What Was Visible Was Beautiful

My father used to say that “Jewish people don’t go to boarding school,” which was simultaneously a gross generalization and somewhat true. I was the first person in my family ever to go to boarding school. And, once I was there, there were so few “Jews” (even though I was never especially religious, more of what some call a “cultural Jew” than anything else) that two other boys and I would take a photograph together at the school’s annual Christmas celebration, jokingly calling it “the Jew picture.”

A married couple, close friends of my parents, first told my family about Taft because they had gone there themselves (that was how they’d met). Their daughter, Jacky, also went to Taft; she was in the grade above me. I would see her on the weekends when she was home from school and hear only about the best parts of prep school, like the “Rah Rah” school spirit and sense of community; the unparalleled education; the lasting friendships and a highly-connected network of alumni; the opportunity to learn independence and to come into oneself. I was most interested in the supposed lifelong friendships that Taft cultivated. I had moved around a lot as a kid, switching public school districts in fourth grade when my family relocated to the town over and then again in sixth grade to St. Luke’s, a private day school with small class sizes and resources that my parents felt our local public school lacked. St. Luke’s (which was, despite its name, non-denominational) was located in New Canaan, a town in Fairfield County that took nearly a half-hour to get to from my house. Planning a sleepover was never a second thought or source of anxiety for my friends, who lived either in New Canaan or in the neighboring town. I felt without
any of the sense of community that this private school and my parents had promised. Boarding school appealed to me as a place where friendship was effortless: I would never be excluded from plans merely because of where my parents had chosen to live. The isolation I felt at St. Luke’s marked the beginning of my struggle with depression and anxiety, though I did not take medication for either until they became unmanageable at Taft.

I was also intrigued by the stories Jacky told me of her then-boyfriend, who was a senior during my first year at Taft, though I would never admit my hopes of finding the same companionship. I did in fact end up meeting my first love at Taft: Nick, who I will write more of later. Like me, Nick was an observer of rather than a participant in the school’s culture. Taft was not as foreign to him as it was to me — Nick’s brother and sister had both attended — but we were nevertheless aligned in our mutual repulsion and fascination by all that went on there. We provided each other with a sense of level-headedness as we navigated all of the bizarre protocols and traditions. Nick coped by trying not to take it too seriously, an interpretation I always admired. He frequently reminded me of the little bubble we lived in there, a place with its own *modus operandi* that was, in all of its absurdity, often entertaining. I think part of why we no longer worked as a couple after high school had to do with the fact that I no longer needed this kind of reminding.

When I arrived for the first time at The Taft School, the 220-acre property carried a kind of coherence so as to suggest that the entire campus was built in a day. The prep school looked especially extravagant in the surrounding bleakness of Watertown, a suburb of Waterbury. There were five central buildings, two of which
were dormitories. Most classes were held in Main Building, but science and math classes took place in a separate building colloquially called “Wu.” The Lady Ivy Kwok Wu Science and Mathematics Center was donated by Sir Gordon Wu, a Hong Kong businessman (and self-made billionaire) parent to three Taft graduates (Forbes.com; Wu 4). The building, named for his wife, was donated in the fall of 1997, which was also when the Hulbert Taft, Jr. Library, named for the founder’s great-nephew, was renovated and annexed to Wu (“Hulbert Taft, Jr. Library”).

Between class periods, the brick-lined pathway that connected Main Building to Wu filled with crowds of students, who traveled in a way reminiscent of the single-file lines of elementary school. I learned within a few days that this shuffle was called the “Wu train” and, every so often, students hummed the sound of a train engine in mockery as they walked. The school was brochure-like in its manicured state. At the sight of an overlooked weed among the flower patch, the headmaster would run over to the soil and pluck the weed from its root himself. Fall cast upon Taft in such a way that the season alone seemed designed for the school, the orange absorbing the green ivy along the brick buildings and wiping out the last licks of summer humidity in the process.

I had long thought the idea of boarding school to be romantic: I pictured myself returning to a hallway or school building some years after graduation, those nostalgic places with impressions specific to me. I looked at only one other prep school before visiting Taft and was put off by its austerity: during our tour, the campus was almost completely silent and seemingly devoid of students (the few students that we did see didn’t seem particularly happy, either). When my father
parked our car in the visitor parking lot on my initial visit to Taft, the sprawling grounds felt like a place I could see myself inhabiting. Taft’s campus was in a constant state of activity, a liveliness communicated by students walking to class together or chatting on the steps of Main Building. The Harley Roberts room, named for a prior Taft master, radiated the kind of long and rich history that I expected a prep school admissions room to have. Antique standing lamps cast the space in warm light and there was a brick fireplace, which had ostensibly not been used in years. On the walls hung framed portraits of people important to the school’s evolution and the ceiling was decorated with Victorian style stencil designs. Seated on the couch were other prospective families waiting for their tour guide to arrive or to interview with a member of the admissions team. A few parents tapped their feet and made multiple trips to the coffee station, apparently more nervous for the interview than their children. The coffee came from a machine that also offered hot chocolate (a treat I would later, once at Taft, sneak into this room to have). Mrs. Looper, the admissions receptionist stationed at an old desk in the corner of the room, typically didn’t mind when students did this. Mostly she smiled at us or knowingly nodded, provided that we asked nicely.

Jacky came to pick us up from the Harley Roberts room for our tour. Mrs. Looper exchanged a few friendly words with her before handing us off. I was struck by their good rapport, a conviviality that I continued to see as Jacky led us down Main Hall. I watched her greet several people in passing, one of which wished her a happy birthday. She laughed as she turned to my parents and me, explaining that it
was not her birthday. “That’s just a funny thing people do to their friends when they see them giving a tour,” she said. “Sometimes it’s actually really embarrassing.”

Before I went to Taft and before my brother went to college, our family of four ate dinner together every night, a ritual that I came to dread by seventh grade when I started to count calories. This would be the beginning of my eating disorder, which not only followed me to Taft but became significantly worse during the time that I was there. My mother was an exceptional cook, which made family dinner all the more tempting. I feared eating would make the day’s efforts count for nothing, ruining the hard work I had done at school to restrict myself only to a protein meal bar and orange soda. Having total control over what and how much I ate was by no means an impetus for applying to boarding school, but I soon realized that it would be a nice perk. During my first visit to Taft, my mother asked Jacky whether or not someone would notice if a student stopped going to meals. Jacky shrugged. “Not really,” she said. “I mean, maybe their friends.”

Dormitories were divided by gender: girls lived in five houses (only one of which was located inside Main Building) while boys occupied the poorly-lit corridors of HDT and CPT, dormitories that rested atop the lower-level classrooms of Main Building. While nearly all of the female houses had been renovated within the last decade, HDT and CPT remained untouched. It would have taken weeks for Maintenance to attend to issues in the boys’ dormitories of shower temperatures so cold that they burned or suspicions of a mold infestation. (Only the most recently-renovated dormitories were put on display for prospective students and parents.) I quickly realized that the boys took pride in this negligence, though — the way that
their presence and damage to the walls or carpets or couches was preserved. Boys became what they believed to be men in those rooms and along those hallways, returning to their dorms each night with a story to tell. Mementos like couches and posters were passed down from year-to-year between the boys. Worn coffee tables were covered with pocket-knife carvings; names and dates and references to personal stories appeared to be almost forced into the wood, as if done in a state of panicked departure. The marks were no more than raises in the wood to their current owners, but I saw Nick, like every other recipient, readily inherit whatever he was given. He liked to run his fingers along the grooves of the table while we sat on his couch; he traced over the letters with his pinkie. It was unnerving to see him play with such a big history with just the edge of his nail. I watched him move over the indents, an unknowing participant in a longstanding tradition of stairways and utility closets and other dusty alcoves.

Main Building was what Taft referred to as its central hub. Inside were classrooms, teacher’s offices, dormitories, Bingham auditorium, and the Dining Hall. Several times, I tried to draw the building’s exterior. I sat outside for hours with a fountain pen, cross-hatching the steps and bricks that framed the wooden doors, which were almost as tall as the ceilings they opened up to. Inside, doors served a different function. They were less beautiful in design and less obvious in where they lead to. Most of these interior doors did not open up to corridors lit by skylights and stained-glass windows, but to fluorescently-lit shafts in the building where the stairways lived.
Main Hall was a corridor in the building home to student P.O. boxes and the offices of important administrators like the Dean of Faculty. There was a shadow box hanging outside these offices that conferred a list of High Honor and Honor Roll students in each grade, printed in black cursive. At the end of Main Hall sat the Dining Hall, a large room with tall ceilings and seemingly as many skylights as the architects could fit. There were three dining rooms, each with unofficial designations: Prentice for upperclassmen, Laube for lowerclassmen and teachers, and East, a quieter space where students often did homework during meals.

The first time I moved into Taft was in the pouring rain. My father parked in the lot outside of Mac House, my assigned dormitory, where we were greeted by a woman who introduced herself as Dr. Howell. Dr. Howell was my dorm parent and the head of Mac House. I would come to learn that she was notorious for picking favorites — I did not turn out to be among them — and treating them like her own children. She was ruthless toward all other students, especially those of us who lived in Mac House, seemingly getting pleasure out of catching us studying past the hour we were allowed to have our lights on or if we were not in our rooms by the time we were supposed to be. Her title came from the doctorate she held in biochemistry, though I always found it peculiar that she insisted on going by this outside of the classroom, especially in the dormitory she was said to be a symbolic parent of. Dr. Howell was a mousy woman with brown hair and brown eyes; she wore thick-rimmed black glasses and was seemingly always dressed in a cardigan. On that day, her glasses were fogged by humidity and dotted with rain. Alongside her in the parking lot were, oddly enough, three or four tall, built boys. They were juniors on
the football team who were there to aid in the move-in process, an obligation
necessitated by their coach. I remember my mortification as James, a blonde, blue-
eyed boy, took a storage box out of my father’s hands and carried it into the
dormitory. This particular box contained toiletries and other necessities, and I
grimaced at the sight of the bright pink box of tampons that was visible through the
clear plastic. I followed James inside and covered the box with my rain jacket as soon
as he set it down in front of my dorm room, which was luckily on the ground floor.

About an hour later, my roommate Ali and her parents arrived. We had been
randomly assigned only a week or two earlier, and I knew little about her besides that
she was from Boston; she played field hockey in the fall and planned to row crew in
the spring. Ali was a sweet girl. She was both quiet and funny, though she delivered
her jokes in a self-conscious way that prevented most of them from landing. Almost
all of our conversations took place in the room we lived in together, especially during
the mandatory period of study hall that occurred from eight to ten on every night but
Saturday. We were required to prop our door open so that both the dorm parent and
student monitor on duty would be able to walk by and make sure that we were not
abusing our internet privileges by going on Facebook or watching television.
Lowerclassmen were also not allowed to chat with each other, use their cell phones,
or shower during study hall. Ali and I would sit at our desks, which were positioned
right next to each other, and make conversation between subjects. Our room was tiny.
We had bunk beds, one window, and in the corner of the room were two small rods
and a shelf that generously constituted a closet.
Ali did everything she could to not disturb anyone. Sometimes I would find myself irrationally annoyed at her sweetness despite knowing it was genuine. I remember her bubbly laugh and how quickly she’d cover her mouth with her hand upon realizing that she was drawing attention to herself. The only thing that Ali could not control about herself was the fact that she talked in her sleep, which occasionally woke me up in the middle of the night. She would apologize every morning just in case she had slept talk, feeling ashamed of the possible inconvenience she had caused. Not until spring of that year did Ali start to crack under both the physical exhaustion that the crew team demanded and, I assumed, how much energy it took for her to avoid rubbing anyone the wrong way.

When we were no longer roommates the following year, Ali and I completely lost touch. We would catch up only on a surface level when we happened to bump into each other. Ali left school temporarily at the end of junior year after being diagnosed with schizophrenia, which turned her into something like a pariah among the students. People referred to her as “absolutely insane” and “unstable,” unfit to remain at Taft. (This would be an indicator of what was to come senior year, when Ali eventually left Taft for good.)

Ironically, sex culture at boarding school revolved largely around public displays of intimacy. On the most innocent level, this occurred through “walkbacks,” which was used both as a verb (it was tradition for a girl to be “walked back” by the boy after they spent the night together) and a modifier (a way to describe how serious someone’s relationship was). Lowerclassmen were not allowed to leave their
dormitories after study hall commenced, so most of the walkbacks occurred around 7:45. The walkback was nothing exciting in itself: the boy left you at the entrance of your dorm with a hug or a kiss, depending on how many times you had done that same routine together before. Other, younger girls looked out of their windows, watching to see who was walking back that night for the first time (or who no longer was) and in their glances alone was a kind of affirmation. Their witness gave some sense of permanence to whatever had transpired earlier between the couple saying goodbye at the door. Even if you didn’t walkback again, at least someone had seen it. There was something reproductive in the procedural nature of the walkback tradition, a ritual that the school never really acknowledged. As we got older, post-study hall encounters became more physical. Some girls refused to be walked back at all, wary of the doorstep drop-off as a marked acceptance of who had done the “conquering” that night and who had been “conquered.”

I was naïve in my first few weeks at Taft in that I never stopped to consider whether the older boy trying to see me before study hall wanted to do so because he was drunk. I underestimated how many students, mostly boys, drank or got high on a regular basis. One former student told me he could count on one hand the number of nights that he was sober during his last two years at Taft. Some boys did ecstasy before dances; others quietly took painkillers on a daily basis, attributing their withdrawal symptoms to a stomach virus. At one point a group of guys in my grade started messing around with Suboxone, a medication used to treat opioid addiction that had been prescribed to one of their fathers.
“Dress to Impress” (or “D2i”) and “Colors” were the first two dances of the year; “Wu Rave” occurred at the beginning of March; the “Hawaiian Luau” took place in May, on the night before graduation. Dances gave girls reason to dress up in tight neon outfits that teachers who were on duty would often deem too short, too tight, or too revealing. If this was the case, they sent the girls back to their dorm rooms to change before returning to the dance.

On the night of Colors, the student body was divided randomly into teams of colors and told to dress accordingly. I met Jesse for the first time at the Colors dance, where we danced together until he asked me to leave. Jesse and I then walked the deserted hallways of the History wing in search for an empty classroom in which to “hang out.” He told me that it was common courtesy to knock on an unlocked room before entering, a way to check whether someone else had already found that spot. Some students were less considerate and barged in; whoever was inside usually yelled some variation of “Nope” or, “Someone’s in here” until the dismayed pair at the door continued their search elsewhere.

We eventually found an open room. I was jumpy not so much to be breaking into a classroom but to be doing so with this boy that I had only met a few hours ago, in the near-dark of the dining room. I was nervous when he tried to take off my bra but only expressed this through anxious laughter and awkward wiggle movements.

“Shhh,” he said. “It’s fine. Trust me.” He spoke with the conviction of someone who had done this before. I believed it. Still, I asked what would happen if a teacher came in. He laughed.
“It’s not going to happen.” He tried again to take off my bra and this time I let him. He pushed the undergarment and my tank top aside with one hand, kissing me on the piling rug until he heard a noise that made him stop. He sat up and told me to put my clothes on. We waited for a few seconds in silence until the footsteps went away. He checked the time on his phone, the blue light casting his tan face into view for the first time since we had entered the room. He was handsome, with dark hair and dark eyes to match. His family was originally from Spain. He carried himself in a way that made me feel as if I was walking through the halls with someone who both knew and was known.

I did not realize the open room that Jesse and I found during the Colors dance was also my history classroom — not until the next time that class met, when I sat at my desk looking at the space of rug where I had been with him. I felt proud. Jesse and I saw each other twice during the week between Colors and D2i. Seeing him again felt less anxiety-ridden and more like what I perceived the beginning of a Taft relationship to feel like. We met up at D2i and left the dance together soon after. I looked at him under the comparably bright fluorescence of the hallway. He wore a makeshift tank top that some might call a muscle-tee and a silver cross necklace. It was not until then that I noticed his arms, which were covered with phrases evidently handwritten in marker. He was proud of what was written on his body, a clear indicator that he was among those “in on the joke.” Most of the writing appeared as mere clusters of initials to me, though I do remember one phrase that read: To the Hill!!! When I asked him what the hill meant, he smiled.
“It’s just this thing the guys do before D2i,” he explained. He held one of his arms out in front of me so that I could see in better detail. “Or, used to do,” he added. “It got shut down two years ago. Don’t tell anyone I told you about it.”

A few weeks later I made a reference to the hill tradition and he grew tense, defensive even. He remained this way for the rest of that night and for many days afterward. When I called him out for his distance, he didn’t play dumb; he just said he was busy with schoolwork, and stressed about taking the SAT.

“I just don’t get why you were so affectionate the other weekend after D2i,” I said. We seemed to be moving backward in our relationship. In his smug expression, I saw my naiveté.

“Well I was blackout drunk the other weekend,” he said.

Tori, an older girl, was my floor monitor sophomore year. Among other things, being a monitor meant that you sat in the hallways during the hours of study hall to make sure girls didn’t leave their rooms. Tori was one of those people who you knew not to trust but did anyway, mostly because she was always around and wanting to hear a story. Tori also had stories of her own, including the full meaning behind what Jesse had written all over his arms at D2i. During her freshman year, several boys went to the soccer field before the dance as a way to pump each other up for the event. (I heard this story first from Tori and later from Bill, one of the boys who attended the gathering as a freshman.) Bill had heard that going to the hill before the dance was “the thing” to do, a tradition he was invited to take part in on the first weekend of the year. Bill and his friends did not drink before the rally and, upon arrival, realized themselves to be among the few sober people in attendance. Older
boys stood chanting on the hill, yelling things like, “Everyone better get laid tonight” and, “Let’s get pussy.” Bill remembered the rally turning personal when one senior boy began to slut-shame his ex-girlfriend, who had cheated on him a few months earlier. He yelled out a cruel statement about her that the rest of the crowd echoed, words they chanted until a freshman boy interjected to say, “Hey, that’s my sister.” Shortly after, a faculty member who lived nearby got wind of what was going on and broke up the rally. The tradition was shut down after that. Tori told us it caused a huge uproar on campus, especially when the subjects of their chants — including that ex-girlfriend — found out what was said. A few boys tried to bring the tradition back the next year, but the poor turnout of those willing to participate rendered the attempt so pathetic that Tori didn’t hear of any boys who tried to do so again.

I soon learned that the Health Center offered the option of “Sanctuary” as a state that students could declare themselves in if they felt that they were too drunk or high for their own safety. The punishment for getting caught intoxicated or high was one “strike” on your record, a two-week suspension period that colleges required you to disclose when applying. Taft was a “two strike school,” which meant that receiving a second strike sent you home for good. A student who declared Sanctuary received a “silent strike,” one that did not go on their record or necessitate a suspension from school. The intention behind this option was to avoid situations where students prioritized not wanting to get caught over their wellbeing. But, while silent, taking Sanctuary still counted as a strike on your Taft record; for people with no more chances at Taft to spare, Sanctuary was not an option. The only person I had ever heard of to take Sanctuary on their own accord was a boy named Christian, who knew
himself to be too drunk to confidently make it past the faculty member on duty sometime during the last few weeks of his senior year. Having averted a strike throughout all four years at Taft, Christian walked himself to the Health Center with few qualms. He took his silent strike in stride, thinking it a waste to reach graduation having never used the one “get out of jail free” card that he still had.

This was a story I heard from Mitch, while sitting, as I did every Tuesday morning, in Morning Meeting. Seats were assigned and organized alphabetically. The last initial of my surname positioned me in the back row of Bingham auditorium, which made it easy for Mitch, a senior boy I was friends with, to slide into the seat next to me. He plopped down without drawing too much attention away from the headmaster, who was addressing the student body from the stage. I knew Mitch better than I knew most of the other boys in his class, but I was still surprised to see him: I could not figure out why, out of all people to sit with, he had decided on a lowly sophomore. His black curly hair was a mess and the mint gum he chewed was to no avail, as the stench of alcohol came not only from his mouth but from out of his skin. Even his sweat had a chemical-like odor that resembled the sterile cleaning agents used in my dormitory bathroom.

“I’m still blackout right now,” he whispered to me, the first words exchanged between us. I laughed; I strived to be casual in my way.

“What?” I asked him, figuring that he wouldn’t have told me if he didn’t want me to inquire further.

“Christian and I killed an entire bottle of Jack Daniel’s last night. I haven’t gone to bed yet.” He spoke with an air of seniority and pride. I had little idea of what
to say but managed to produce some sound of acknowledgment, something between a
laugh and a cringe. I spoke only to fill the air. “At least you made it to Morning
Meeting.”

“Do I smell?” he asked.

“Yes,” I whispered.

For the boys who lived in CPT, every night had potential. They based how
eyearly they could start drinking or getting high upon which faculty member was on the
duty calendar for that night. Certain teachers were infamous for trying to get students
in trouble. Others were known to look the other way — provided that no one was in
danger — or to even be completely oblivious. Boys were more careful around the
less-lenient teachers, sometimes waiting until one or two in the morning to start their
“night.” I am confident most faculty members were somewhat naïve about what the
boys in CPT did after signing in for the night at 10:15. Mitch told me he would often
walk through the common room sometime after midnight to find Christian at the
communal microwave, an appliance he used less for food than for his high. Putting
his OxyContin in the microwave allowed Christian to scrape away the outer coating
on the pill, which he could then file down to a powder and snort.

The half-days of class that we had every Wednesday and Saturday ensured
that some kind of substance would be mixed into half-empty Gatorade bottles by mid-
afternoon. Some boys even brought their drinks to soccer games. They held their
plastic containers in their hands like small trophies, swirling the purple-grey liquid
around the rim of the bottle in between sips.
Jesse was one of the best students in his class, someone who was naturally intelligent and high-achieving when he felt like it. When he broke things off with me after two months or so, his reason was a combination of feeling like he had too much work (“Junior year is going to make or break my GPA”) as well as the resounding reality that time spent with me was time he could have been spending with “the boys in CPT,” or doing work so that he could be around CPT later on. “I just want to bum around,” he said. I remember thinking him trite to say that he couldn’t commit to me “in the way I wanted and deserved,” but, to some extent, he had a point. Being a part of CPT was as much of a commitment as being in a relationship, one that presumed a willingness to get obliterated on any chosen weeknight. When it came down to it, showing up drunk or high to meet up with me wasn’t nearly as much fun as a night in CPT would have been. Jesse wanted to be around those who were as sedated as he was, something I could not have understood after only just a few months at Taft.

Something that continued to gnaw at me even after my time with Jesse had long passed was the realization of how often I had been wrong in presuming him to be as sober as I was. Callously and often, he put me in a position to lose my place at Taft without my knowledge. Had Jesse been caught drunk or high when we were together, I would have been in as much disciplinary trouble as him. This was Taft’s “strike-by-association” policy: according to the Student Handbook, “all students aware that the Alcohol/Drug rule is being broken in their presence and who do not make an immediate attempt to leave the vicinity are in violation of the rule” (14). So often, I was not aware when it was “being broken in [my] presence” and was lucky enough never to find out whether claiming ignorance would have meant anything to
the faculty administering our punishment. I eventually learned to tell when Jesse was high. His eyes gave him away. They hung heavy on his face, his brown pupils cocooned in his eye sockets and shaded by the weight of his lids. But most boys became masters at merging their drunk personas with their sober selves. This was initially for the purpose of evading the watchful eye of teachers, though boys grew to do so for their own personal reasons, too. By the middle of my first year at Taft, I went into all social interactions with the expectation that the boy I was interested in looked at me through a lens of drunken stupor.

In retrospect, sophomore year was mostly a year of waiting. Sitting by the phone dressed and made-up at 7:30 with no incoming texts was not as humiliating as meeting up for a quick hook up around that time, which was exactly what getting texted by a boy at 7:30 meant. Still, it was damaging knowing that you would have jumped at the opportunity, had the text come. Girls learned to equate happiness with whether the guy they had walked back with wanted to see them before study hall. I held the cool plastic of my phone case against my palms in the hopes that someone would be drawn to me for more than one arbitrary night. As lowerclassmen, we heard stories about older boys who had keys to some classrooms, possessions that were passed down to them by former students. On occasion, I saw boys walking around with contorted metal clothes hangers that were said to pick any lock in the English wing. It was not until almost a full year later that I realized meeting up at 7:30 could have never given me the kind of fulfillment that I craved, but I suppose it took all of those erratic, empty walkbacks to learn to look elsewhere.
I learned Permissions Violations were defined in the Taft Student Handbook as “unauthorized use of a physical school space” (17). A student could receive a Permissions Violation for signing out to the library when they were really heading to their friend’s dorm room, or for walking to the nearby Starbucks without signing out at the Duty Office first. Sometimes I would forget to sign-out to CVS and have to dodge a teacher who also happened to be at the drugstore, worried they might rat me out to the Duty Office upon returning to campus. If, for whatever reason, a student needed to go to the Health Center before six in the morning or after lights out, they had to be escorted there by a dormitory monitor and notify the faculty member on duty before leaving. Doing otherwise was also cause for a Permissions Violation. But, more than anything else, Permissions Violations functioned as a blanket term that allowed the administration to prevent (and punish) sexual intimacy between students. Before I came to Taft, Jacky had told me what I then thought were horror stories, those about couples being caught half-naked in a classroom by a teacher or campus safety officer. I raised my eyebrows at the letters sent home to parents describing the exact details of how their child had been caught in violation of school rules. But by my junior year, I heard about such occurrences somewhat frequently. Finding an empty classroom before or during study hall was such a rare treat that we often did not stop to think if the room was available for a reason, if a meeting was scheduled to take place in it or if campus safety had not yet begun their nightly rounds of locking up. Campus safety officers were tall, unfriendly men who policed the hallways in the evening, passing couples on wooden benches in the English or History Wing with a rigidity that communicated visceral discomfort. In an effort to keep things
impersonal, the faculty and staff dismissed all student interaction as emotionless and sex-ravaged. I imagine that a member of campus safety felt just as embarrassed as the students he caught mid-thrust, who had earlier thought themselves lucky to stumble upon an unlocked classroom or storage closet. Or maybe this kind of encounter was just another day on the job for the masculine arbiters of Taft sex life. Sometimes, we would sit down to breakfast in the corner booth of Prentice dining room to find a condom wrapper, kicking ourselves over the missed opportunity to have found such a coveted, unlocked space the night before.

I saw what sex on carpeted classroom floors looked like as early as my first week at Taft. I sat on Jacky’s bed, excited and intimidated by the older girls who surrounded me. Jacky’s friends carried their experience and knowledge in a way that I would not understand until I had done and seen the same. Jacky took her shirt off and bent down to grab a red soccer uniform from an overflowing drawer.

“Whoa,” one of the girls said. I followed her eyes to Jacky's back, which was athletic and still tanned from the summer. The upper half was covered in what looked like infected acupuncture cupping. Large, circular blisters covered her back, peeling and growing darker towards the lower half. It looked like a game of Connect Four, where there were no moves left and both players were jammed by either red or black.

I clenched my teeth together and sucked in the air, an effort to say “yikes” with breath alone. “What happened?”

“A rug burn,” Jacky said, laughing. No one else in the room seemed thrown by her answer, though they did remark on the severity of the wounds. I furrowed my
brows. “It’s because we went to the English office again,” she continued. “The carpet sucks, but it’s always unlocked.”

It seemed like a sweet gesture: affection that left its mark on the skin, tearing up the softness to leave Jacky red and purple and loved. I wanted that. I wanted to be loved all over and left with marks to prove it, those that I could see and touch and remind myself with each Band-Aid or application of Neosporin how loved I was, or at least had been that night. I had always bruised easily; over the years, my legs had accumulated a collection of jagged scars and dark shapes in the indents of my kneecaps. But these marks were meaningless. There was never a story behind them – at least not one worth telling. Jacky’s blisters were proof of companionship, a souvenir that I envied. Those blisters would turn to scab and scab would turn to scar and scar would turn to story.

Freshmen and sophomores were required to sign-in for breakfast each morning. Failure to do so resulted in conduct grades, Taft’s system of demerits. If enough grades were accumulated, a student began to lose privileges. According to the Student Handbook, the accumulation of “too many grades” was an indication that “some part of the student’s behavior at school [was] not acceptable” (25). Sometimes I would know when an email assigning grades was coming my way, like if I showed up late to class or skipped mandatory assemblies. Other times, I wouldn’t realize I had committed the offense until reading about it on my computer screen, in an email indicating both my violation and the number of conduct grades it warranted. Being out of dress code was a frequent source of grades.
Miss Craig, the notoriously eccentric art teacher, was the faculty member to avoid if your skirt was on the cusp of being “too short” or if your pants were obviously denim and not just dark trousers. Miss Craig was a short, overweight woman in her late fifties, with unkempt blonde hair cut just above the nape of her neck. She had a laugh that some called “evil,” a cackle that was almost impossible to read: sometimes she seemed to be playing up the cliché of the “crazy art teacher” but more often she seemed to be actually cracking herself up. Miss Craig would waddle up to me in the Dining Hall after I had signed into breakfast to “dress code” me. On certain occasions, she didn’t even stand up; instead, she motioned me toward her as I approached the sign-in sheet that was kept at one of the several faculty tables in Laube dining room, silently summoning me by curling and uncurling her index finger. “That skirt is inappropriate,” she’d say. “Go back and change.” I would nod ashamedly and consent, running back to my dormitory and returning in a new, “safer” outfit. Occasionally, girls decided to skip breakfast sign-in altogether in fear of being sent back to change, deciding to cut their losses and accept the grades for skipping in exchange for being able to wear what they wanted to for the rest of that day.

The Health Center also gave out conduct grades, assigning them to students who missed two or more days of their medication. Those of us who were prescribed both morning and evening medication for Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) had to tell our doctors to explicitly write us a prescription that made the evening dose optional; otherwise, the Health Center would force you to take the focus medication even on a Saturday night, when you wanted a break from the effect of the stimulant and its depressive comedown. I was sick in more ways than one at Taft.
Though my eating disorder began long before high school, as did my struggle with depression and anxiety, all three issues were exacerbated by my Taft experience. I saw a psychiatrist for the first time at the end of sophomore year. So many students were on medication. I was grateful upon receiving my dormitory assignment junior year because it was the closest residential building to the Health Center. I walked through the glass doors twice a day, chiming the generic doorbell that alerted the nurses of my presence. Often a classmate would also be waiting by the water dispenser for their own medication, the white lab coat-clad nurse searching through rows of alphabetized medication for their specific pill sheet. I swallowed extended-release capsules of Vyvanse in the morning and returned each evening to the water dispenser, where I waited for the nurse to hand me a small paper medicine cup of short-release Adderall and Prozac. The “med-train” was a common expression for the clusters of students who made their way to the Health Center in the lingering minutes before the first morning bell. Medication held its own place within the social stratosphere and was not something to feel ashamed of. We bonded over the highs and lows of Adderall and debated whether loss of libido was worse on Prozac or Zoloft.

Nurses watched to make sure students actually took their medication (and didn’t pocket it instead). Some students bypassed this by hiding their medicine in the inner corner of their cheek or under their tongues instead of swallowing it. Once outside, they could safely spit the pill into the palm of their hand and save it for later. Most students did this to make a profit — kids in the dorms were always looking to buy prescription pills — but others, for one reason or another, just didn’t want to take
their medicine. With the exception of rare cases, all prescribed medicine was required to be kept in the Health Center. Us girls were allowed to keep our birth control in our rooms only if we brought it to the Health Center first, where nurses gave us a little yellow sticker to put on our monthly packets that confirmed it had been officially approved. While the Health Center itself did offer birth control, I, like most girls, got a prescription from the gynecologist that I saw at home. Supposedly, the process of getting birth control from the Health Center involved answering a series of invasive and judgmental questions about your sex life and desire for the medicine.

Dormitory rooms were occasionally searched without warning. If you were discovered to have prescription drugs — even those explicitly prescribed to you — in your room, you were found in violation of the Alcohol/Drug Rule. If I went home for the weekend, one of my parents had to sign my medicine out of the Health Center and sign it back in upon my return. Both my mother and I loathed the tediousness of this policy, but there was no way around it. I couldn’t keep any of my medicine at home because the Health Center conducted medicine counts twice a day, recording their inventory by hand on a small paper chart. If the number of pills missing was more than the number of days you had been home, the nurses would notice and confront you. My mother would groan upon hearing me explain this to her each time she asked why I couldn’t just keep some spare Prozac and Adderall at home. I think she felt frustrated by the fact that Taft, to some extent, dictated what I could and couldn’t do even in my own home, miles outside of the campus walls.
“Sit-Downs” were mandatory, formal dinners that occurred twice a week in the fall term, never in the winter, and once a week during the spring term. Sit-Down had been part of the Taft tradition for over a century, the idea behind these meals being to foster community among the school. Formal wear was required. We were assigned to tables with seven or eight other students from different grades, and each table was headed by a faculty member. Taft believed that coming together during the school week for a meal and for discussion at randomly-assigned tables would promote relationships between students who might not otherwise meet. The list of table assignments, which rotated every two weeks, was posted outside of the Dining Hall. Several students at a time would gather around the sheet of paper to read their assignments, groaning if they failed to recognize any of the names of their fellow table members or if the faculty member at their table was notoriously boring, or a “hard ass” who would make everyone talk. The 45-minute event was a kind of charade that cornered me into making small talk with students who wanted to be there as little as I did, or with faculty members who forced the table to answer generic questions like what our academic goals were for the semester and how we planned to achieve them. I most enjoyed eating with teachers who I had been in class with at some point, who I knew enough about to be able to discern where they wanted the dinner table conversation to go and where they did not.

We ate family style. Some students would volunteer to go get the food or to fill up the water pitchers, while others were responsible for clearing dishes at the end of the meal. Silverware, cups, and napkins were always left on the table for groups of freshmen, which rotated each semester, who were required to stay and clean after the
rest of the school had been dismissed. I suppose Taft as an institution thought this was good for building character, but sometimes those freshmen were accompanied by older students who cleaned as punishment for a rule they had broken. I remember walking by the East dining room on my way back to my dorm and seeing one of the older boys who had sat at my table earlier that evening, his blazer draped over one shoulder and his collar unbuttoned, atoning for whatever violation he had received with a spray bottle and a sponge.

As a sophomore, I relished the opportunity to get dressed up for Sit-Down. I would return to my dorm after tennis practice and spend upwards of 25 minutes trying on different dresses, running upstairs to my friend’s room to see whether she had something better for me to wear. I put on a full face of makeup; I blow-dried my hair; I yearned to catch the attention of an older boy who might ask me to find a classroom with him and maybe even walk me back later that night. This was during the first few months of sophomore year, before I knew better than to get my hopes up or betray any kind of expectation to my friends.

Sit-Down ended at 7:15, which gave us 45 minutes before study hall to socialize at the Jig, Taft’s student union, where almost all students congregated after such meals. In the nice weather, we socialized on and around Jig Patio, which overlooked Potter’s Pond. Boys played pool inside the Jig or threw frisbees outside while we girls watched. Once we were dismissed from Sit-Down, a sea of dresses and dark blazers flooded outside of all three dining rooms and into Main Hall. I weaved through the horde with panicked desperation: the initial moments after dinner let out often determined the rest of my night. I was sure that catching Jesse’s eye would
secure his attention for the short time that followed. If I failed to find him within the crowd, and if he had not texted me, I would walk in reluctant disappointment to the Jig. Sometimes Jesse would be there, hanging out with others and pretending he didn’t know me; other times he had vanished up the stairs to his dorm before I had even gotten up from my table. I soon learned that even if I had been consistently walking back with a boy (as I had with Jesse), leaving Sit-Down with them was never a given. Especially not with Jesse’s crowd, a group of boys who often drank before Sit-Down in an attempt to make the dinner bearable. At the Jig, I watched in envy as other boys asked my friends to walk back with them, which resulted in the joking applause of surrounding students as the new couple made their exit.

Enough nights like these taught me not only to keep quiet about my hopes for the evening but to try to bury them altogether, an effort to prevent imminent disappointment while getting ready by telling myself that Jesse wouldn’t even be at Sit-Down that night — that he had decided to skip it. I figured that it would be less embarrassing this way, in the event that I ended up walking myself back from the Jig to the dorm, where, humiliated, I changed out of my dress and into sweatpants.

Freshman and sophomore girls often took group photos in front of the Dining Hall before Sit-Down, a sight that my friends and I would scoff at as we grew older. We pretended that we, too, had not taken those same pictures or spent a similar amount of time picking out our outfits. I think seeing younger girls do as I had done made me feel small in a way. I realized that what Sit-Down had meant to me as a sophomore was not personal to my Taft experience but something many girls had in common.
But by junior year, we all dreaded Sit-Down. Each time an awkward silence fell upon my table I thought Sit-Down to be less meaningful and more tedious, another fixed tradition that Taft wanted so badly to believe brought us together.

I observed the differing cultures of the sexes at Taft through male and female approaches to monitorship. To be a monitor in a dormitory was considered an honor among the girls and a near-punishment among the boys. While the applicant pool for female “monitorship” grew more competitive each year, many boys became monitors simply because they were asked by teachers or coaches who knew that they would not say no. For upperclassmen boys who were monitors in the younger boys’ corridors, most of the reluctance to take on such a role came from a fear of missing out on nightly happenings among their own friends. Becoming a monitor in an upper school corridor presented an entirely different set of problems, given that monitors were expected to prioritize school rules over their friendships. No older boy wanted to be known as a rat, or as someone to whom others were careful with what they said. Other students knew the pretenses under which their friends took on monitorship; still, the wariness with which they approached getting drunk or high in that monitor’s presence was palpable. If a monitor was hanging out in a dorm room where school rules were consciously being broken, they received an association strike. Their punishment was the same as if they had been rolling the joint themselves.

Victoria, one of my friends, dated an older boy named Caleb throughout our sophomore and junior year. Caleb was striking, with messy black hair and bright green eyes. He was widely respected and beloved on campus by students and teachers alike; he was captain of the Varsity Boys Lacrosse team and, to no surprise, was a
monitor. Dorm monitors became “school monitors” in their senior year, and were expected to set an example both within the dormitories that they presided over as well as for all other students in the community. Caleb didn’t drink at school — he took his monitorship seriously in that respect — but during a period of time that he and Victoria were temporarily broken up, he was caught in another girl’s room by a faculty member. This girl also happened to be a dormitory monitor; both she and Caleb lost their leadership positions for over a month, a punishment that both faculty members and their fellow student monitors knew about.

One of my favorite nights of the year at Taft — and one of the few instances of overlap between school and student traditions — was “Lessons and Carols.” This was Taft’s annual Christmas, which always took place on the last day of final exams, the night before winter break began. The evening involved a buffet-style dinner that required formal attire and a concert in the nearby Woodward Chapel, where “Collegium,” the student choir, performed a collection of carols. Much to my Jewish father’s dismay, I looked forward to listening to Christmas music each year and felt well-versed in the genre. But on this evening, I sat uncomfortably on the pew, feeling like the one person in the chapel who didn’t know the words. The majority of faculty members and students sang along with Collegium, monotonously reciting lyrics evidently learned in church, not on the radio.

The tradition of a Secret Santa gift exchange also took place on this night, where I, along with 30 or so others, gathered in the Choral Room. This select group of students was comprised mostly of “popular” older girls and boys and those lowerclassmen lucky enough to be invited to take part in the exchange: younger boys
who drank with the upperclassmen and had developed a relationship with them as a result, or younger girls that the older boys found attractive. The event was entirely student-run — I’m unsure whether members of the faculty even knew about the tradition — and was organized each year by a different senior boy. As a sophomore, I was assigned to Richie, the upperclassman who headed “The Christmas Club” and who had organized that year’s Secret Santa exchange. I purchased him an ugly Christmas sweater-vest, which I quickly realized to be an innocent choice once the gift exchange began. One senior girl was given a dildo by an underclassman boy, a jab at her supposed “constant horniness.” Another girl was given handcuffs. Part of the “fun” of the exchange was that you had to open your gift in front of everyone else, which meant that those who received something raunchy were obligated to laugh — no matter how much the joke stung. Not all gifts were explicitly offensive. One senior boy, Mac, gave another girl in his class a figurine of a white buffalo. They had briefly dated freshman year, and the gift was meant to tell her that she was his “great white buffalo” — the one that got away. But these are the only gifts that I can remember, all somehow tied to the romantic (or even just purely sexual) identity of the receiver. Secret Santa was a spectacle in itself; people like Richie took great pleasure in assigning ex-girlfriends and boyfriends to each other, forcing an awkward interaction between them that would make everyone else in the Choral Room laugh. Older boys would ask Richie (or whoever was heading that year’s exchange) to pair them with specific younger girls who they had their eye on, using their gift as an opportunity to express interest. Still, I continued to attend the exchange each year and felt lucky to be included, despite whatever reason I was wanted there in the first place.
Taft’s Christmas concluded with an a capella concert held in Lincoln Lobby, where both the all-male and all-female a capella groups performed. Both teachers and students attended and this was one of the few occasions that I felt the sense of community that Taft prided itself on, the kind of warmth and camaraderie that I had expected to feel when I first applied. This evening was also the first time I met Ed. He approached me after asking our mutual friend if I was interested in him, which was one of the most exciting things to hear as a sophomore. That an older boy had “asked about me” made me feel special and desired, a validation that often led me to see the boy who had asked as much more precious than he often was. It was nearly impossible as an underclassman girl to see these boys as anything but infatuating, someone who was revered by other students and who had a knowledge of Taft culture that I would only be so lucky to share. That is, if they took enough interest in my physical appearance to get to know me, or to even want to see me for a second time.

Ed and I met up after the concert and I cannot remember whether we kissed that night or if we just sat on a bench. I do remember his squinty eyes, his high that made him laugh at almost everything I said. As soon as the concert ended, he ran up the stairs to CPT to take more shots of alcohol that I would later smell on him. I watched Ed leave Lincoln Lobby in confusion, worried he would not approach me as our mutual friend had promised he would. Later he told me that some of his friends had gotten too high or drunk to even make it to the concert without suspicion, that one of them had a girlfriend in the a capella group who was furious with him for missing it. This made Ed laugh.
I came to learn that Ed really only wanted to see me when he was high. He dodged me in his sobriety, avoiding me when he saw me in the Dining Hall or in passing during the class day. The way he was while high — his mellowness, the softness with which he spoke, how old he seemed compared to me — none of this was that far off from what he was like sober. But I didn’t actually know that until the sixth or seventh evening we spent together, which was the first (and only) time that he didn’t get high before meeting up with me. He used his high like an instrument; he blamed whatever faults or exhibitions of carelessness upon it and there was little I could say when he dismissed his prior actions by saying, “That wasn’t me.” After about a month, our relationship fizzled out.

Sometime in February, Ed got so drunk that he tripped and fell on the heater in his room, cracking his head open as a result. Victoria initially heard this story from Caleb, who lived on Ed’s hall. Friends in Ed’s room were so overwhelmed by the amount of blood that they went and got Caleb, who stayed up with Ed until early morning to make sure he didn’t pass out from the injury. Taking Sanctuary was not a feasible option for Ed, who had gotten a strike for smoking the year before. I remember Victoria scoffing at the position the other boys had put Caleb in, not only jeopardizing his role as a school monitor but also giving him the responsibility of making sure Ed survived the night. Ed got kicked out for good a few weeks later.

Almost everyone seemed to be “going through something” and the emotional strain of this was palpable, a heaviness that people carried around campus. Even for those who didn’t have a personal crisis to deal with, hating Taft was reason enough to be unhappy. Boys both my own age and older loved to talk about how bored they
were; how they would have rather been at home than at a lame Dining Hall dance; how Taft was “a prison.” Drinking and taking various drugs on weekends is not atypical behavior for teenagers. What always struck me as peculiar was why they were so miserable during the week. I had trouble feeling anything but envious of how the boys lived in CPT, seemingly with much less teacher supervision and with a sense of solidarity that I felt the female dormitories lacked. By senior year, my own experiences made it easier to infer what other girls were going through (and thus why they were unhappy), but the boys remained a mystery to me. I felt so lonely throughout much of my time at Taft. Maybe some of the boys did, too.

During the winter of my sophomore year, one of Jacky’s friends, Anna, became the talk of their friend group. Anna, like me, was short and olive-skinned, with long dark hair and dark eyes to match. As a sophomore, I watched Anna lose weight and become alienated from her friends as a result. I remember feeling ashamedly jealous of Anna’s self-discipline, envy I had trouble placing. I could not come to terms with what this jealousy meant for my own issues, which would spin out when I, too, was a junior at Taft.

Sometime that winter, Jacky and I had lunch together and walked back to her room together afterward. In the hallway, we ran into Lucy, Anna’s roommate, who was on her way to the gym. She said something about needing to clear her head in more ways than one; Jacky asked about Anna.

“She’s obsessed with burning every single calorie that she’s consumed,” Lucy said, annoyed. I was intrigued and asked Lucy what she meant, so she explained how
Anna logged the number of calories she consumed and would supposedly stay at the gym until she had burnt that number off.

“Just the obsessive logging is weird in itself,” Jacky said. I nodded in agreement without voicing the fact that I did the same, that I had kept a food log since seventh grade.

I think we, as girls, believed eating disorders to be normal, or at least common, but we did not feel equipped to deal with them — both our own disorders and those of our friends — so we either gathered as a group like Jacky and her friends did or deferred to the faculty. We naïvely believed that whatever approach the Health Center and administration took was better than the issue being “in our hands,” or “our problem.” Knowing someone else was aware of a friend’s issue was a source of relief in itself. Once the Health Center got involved, the conversations between Jacky and her friend group stopped being about what they “should do” and transformed into an ongoing commentary more about Anna’s withdrawn personality and emaciated body. They spoke about her as if she were a stranger. Maybe pathologizing her actions was a coping mechanism for them, a way to deal with the loss of a friend: Anna’s friends aired their frustrations and, I assume, sadness through these discussions. This was what many people at Taft did when someone — and there was almost always someone, if not more than one — developed an eating disorder that irritated or aroused the interest of the friend group. Whether this interest occurred out of jealousy or sincere concern depended on the specific situation. Most often I observed a combination of the two.
The first few weeks of junior year was the period of time that I lost Emily, my first and best friend at Taft. Emily and I had met on the first day of sophomore year in Mac House. Our rooms were directly across the hall from each other and we quickly became close. Classes ended at noon every Wednesday for the purpose of sports games, activities which Emily and I neither participated in nor attended. We instead spent these afternoons walking, usually to the Starbucks several miles down the road. I can still see her in her olive-green waxed jacket and long, dirty blonde hair, sauntering down the empty streets of Watertown in the unusually-warm October of that year or in the freezing November rain. One walk followed what I thought was irreparable heartbreak inflicted by an older boy; another was preceded by a fight between Emily and two other girls. Our afternoons together were less about the coffee and more about the excursions, but having a concrete destination provided a straightforward intention for the walks, those which we took when we wanted to feel far from the school on Woodbury Road and all of the people who lived there.

Many students made Honor Roll, but few made High Honors. Emily made High Honors her first semester as a freshman and maintained it throughout sophomore year, an accomplishment she never flaunted or even talked about. She never stopped in Main Hall to stare at her name on the list, or complained about her rigorous course load.

“Oh, yeah. Emily’s a genius,” I remember one of our other friends saying, flatly. It was the nature of our friend group to capitalize on flaws and brush off
strengths. You would be well-received walking into any given dorm room with complaints about your day, but celebration was less welcomed. No one liked a boaster. Emily was always doing work in between classes or meals but would close her notebook as soon as someone entered the room. She had time to talk no matter how late it was, giving advice on matters she really had little reason to care about. Emily laughed at the redness of her milky-brown eyes and the dark circles below them.

“I’m going to fail my Chemistry quiz today,” she’d say. And then she’d ace it, despite running on the three hours of sleep that we’d gotten in my twin-sized bed. She wore meticulous competence well. Sometime in April, people began selecting roommates for the following year. Most of our other friends either decided to stick with the roommate that they had lived with sophomore year or requested a single room. Emily and I had no interest in living with anyone but each other. At that point in time we could not yet fathom how our friendship would dissolve.

Junior year, Emily and I were assigned to live in a dormitory formally called Centennial and nicknamed “Centen.” I always saw the building as some kind of barrier, or fortress. Three floors with a midsection connected by a large brick arch. On the top floor rested The Kling: a new part of the old dormitory that stood out in its modernity. The Kling was a small glass library, the common room where dorm meetings were held and where my dorm parent’s apartment was. Centen was the furthest dormitory on campus from Main Building; it divided the academic part of Taft from the athletic, the classrooms from the fields.
During the first two weeks of school, the weather was still warm, and Emily still lived at school. I stayed up late doing homework in the library and waiting for the leaves to turn. I had returned from summer vacation with a new boyfriend, Nick. Nick was handsome, tall and athletic with brown hair only a few shades darker than my own. His eyes were hazel in the right lighting. Emily had returned to school with a crippling eating disorder and 30 pounds lighter. She complained about the bruises on her butt and thighs that she got from sitting in her desk chair. (She lacked the body fat needed to cushion her bones, and these bruises were the result.) Emily and I weren’t so different in our illnesses, which was part of what made it so hard for me to be there for her during that time.

Several meetings occurred like the one between Mrs. Ricci, the head of school counseling, and myself. I shook my foot in anxiety, eyeing her paisley scarf and greying, short, curly hair. She had previously emailed me, asking me to come and see her. She said that she had heard I had been “having some trouble.”

“I’ve worked with people who have eating disorders for a while,” she explained during our meeting, “and what you need to understand is that Emily is not Emily right now. It’s not her speaking; it’s the eating disorder. And you didn’t sign up to be friends with a sickness.”

I was appreciative of someone having an explanation. Blaming Emily’s subdued personality — the way she suddenly acted like a shy child — on her anorexia made me feel less guilty for abandoning her as a friend. I told Mrs. Ricci of Nick, how close we had become. She wasn’t surprised and said something about how
crisis bonds people. I later learned that such closeness has a weak chance of surviving after the trauma dulls and wondered why she didn’t say so then.

Along with Mrs. Ricci, other faculty members like my advisor and class dean told me to stay away from our room during the class day, to avoid being in there as much as possible until the Health Center got involved. These adults promised to be looking out for both Emily and me but I found that really, they treated Emily with cruelty. It was easier to stay out of the room where we lived together than to be there for her, so that’s what I did. I checked out, and my relationship with Nick made that easier to do. He gave me relief when I needed it most, like during the afternoon lulls when I often ran into him on his way to soccer practice. He would have a ball in one hand and his muddy cleats in the other, wearing a long-sleeved grey shirt that I can still smell as freshly washed with the Arm & Hammer detergent that his mom always used. At night, Nick and I would do homework in a small study room until we left the library for the fields and later the fields for the Centen arch, where we said goodnight. My dorm parent would sit in The Kling during the latter-half of study hall, watching for students to return from the fields, those she could later confront and report, if she so wished. I went back to my room — to Emily — only when it was the singular place I was allowed to be. I would return to our room to find Emily reading at her desk.

“How was Nick tonight?”

“Good,” I said. That was it; that was basically all that I said to her during our first two weeks at school. I smiled at texts from Nick but not at anything she said,
selfishly angry at her for ruining what I thought would be the perfect living arrangement and for drawing attention to the disease that we both had.

The window screen and its lever were broken for that entire fall. Emily constantly left the window wide open, never remembering to lock the flimsy screen into place and providing a doorway for bugs to enter through as a result. I grew more and more frustrated with each mosquito bite, with each meal she skipped, how often she spoke in a whisper. I looked forward only to the evenings, when Nick and I would sit together on the second floor of the English wing upon the cheap, cobalt-blue leather couch. Here, I keeled over, grabbing my knees like a post-temper tantrum child.

“She’s killing you,” Nick once whispered, a kind statement that allowed me to make this more about myself than about my very sick friend. “She needs help that is beyond anything you can give her.”

“I know,” I said. I also knew that she could use my friendship and that my coldness was only making this worse, but it felt then like it was too late, even if it was not. I proceeded to sink deeper into the icy self-pity that I had so quickly mastered.

By only the third week of junior year, Emily was forced by the school to become a day student — her parents lived 40 minutes away from Taft — so that she could seek treatment for anorexia. I was relieved to have total control over the windows and their screens, thankful that there would be no careless passageway left ajar for mosquito entry. As an institution, Taft took a punitive approach to mental illness. Emily was supposed to leave campus immediately after the class-day ended.
The school made a point to punish her if she was found on campus any later, even if she needed to see a teacher or work on a group project during study hall. The few times she was caught resulted in consequences, such as being prohibited from attending the upcoming dance. Other times I found the punishment more troubling in its passive-aggressiveness: our dorm parent went out of her way to reprimand Emily, faulting her for things we all got away with like leaving our shoes in the hallway or showing up a minute or two late for nightly sign-in. It was as if our dorm parent was angry at the inconvenience that Emily’s eating disorder had caused the school.

Over the course of the fall, Emily visited our room less and less, bringing more of her clothes home over time so she would not have to grab that sweater or those socks. Her grades suffered; her name was no longer printed on the Honor Roll list posted in Main Hall after the first marking period. I had always loved the fall, and that year was no exception. I drowned in my own misery and the juvenile gloat of having it worse than anyone else. The gain of Nick and the loss of Emily collided in such a way that initially made the blow of her loss less painful.

My mother drove up to visit on the third Saturday of the school year. I slumped in the passenger seat as she drove through country roads. The car was overwhelmed by smells of tomato soup and garlic bread, leftovers from a nearby restaurant where we ate mostly in silence. My mother took the food to-go even after I said that it would likely go to waste in my room.

“This isn’t about you,” she told me. “It’s about Emily. You need to be there for her right now.” I argued with her, insisting that I was not being selfish.
“You are,” she said, “and you’re abandoning her in the process.” She was pragmatic in her way and a bit disappointed, too. “Just show her you’re there if she needs you. Be kind. Don’t you think she needs that? You’re off with Nick every night when you should really be with her.”

Her eyes were focused on the road but she looked at me every so often to make sure I was listening. I rested my face on the cool glass of the car window and watched the blur of Connecticut foliage, a silent movie of red and orange that played in fast-forward. We pulled into the parking lot of my dormitory, from where I could see my room. The purple paisley curtains were drawn just as I had left them and from the car I dreaded the emptiness of that room, a silence that was cut only at night by the rumblings of water pipes that lined the ceiling. My mother looked at me as I unbuckled my seat belt. I could tell she did not want to leave me, to watch me disappear as I climbed three flights to the room on the left at the end of the hall. She watched me open the car door and I could tell by her expression that she had one last thing to say. “Your friendship with Emily won’t recover from this if you keep shutting her out,” she said. “It just won’t.”

Nick and I too fell apart as October began. The beginning of the end happened in the car, on a Sunday morning. Nick drove me home from a friend’s party, the house where we shouldn’t have had sex for the first time but did. He blamed his silence on a stomach ache. I spent the hour it took to reach my town-line trying to give him cues, opportunities to show affection that he either failed to pick up on or ignored altogether. I wanted him to explain his coldness, not his silence; I more so wanted him to see the difference between the two. When we reached the stoplight that
preceded my street, his hand grabbed mine. It was not loving or embracing. His grasp
was cold and unyielding, gripping me out of necessity.

“I have an itch,” he said, after a few minutes. He laughed uncomfortably as he
pulled his hand away and he did not reach for my hand again during the remainder of
that drive.

I showed too much of myself to Nick too soon, in the misery of those first
weeks of junior year. I was only 16 then; he was 17. After just a few weeks of living
at school together, I forgot what Taft had been like without him. He showed me
kindness and warmth when I needed it most, but it became something that he never
let me forget. I was always indebted to him in some way after the immediate pain of
losing Emily subsided, after her illness was overshadowed by whatever new gossip
floated through the halls. It was only then that Nick and I realized how serious our
relationship had become. That must have scared him. Nick didn’t know what to do
with the dulled misery that I carried around with me so he fled, withdrawing from me
and giving me a glimpse of how Emily felt as he went. I don’t know if he initially
shut me out because of my own issues. Why he acted so cold to me for the few
months that he did is just as much of a mystery as to why I did the same to Emily. I
have wasted much time resenting the extent to which I miss the loneliness of that
room, the smell of that pumpkin spice coffee and that perfume with a clear bottle. The
aforementioned smells will always bring me back to that room and that weather and
the silence that made me weep.

During the middle of exam week in December, we were called to an all-school
meeting in Bingham auditorium. Fraser, a boy two years my senior, was scheduled to
give a public apology for the trouble he had caused last weekend. He had sprayed a fire extinguisher in the basement, showering the floors with white powder and the air with chemicals. Later that evening, one of Fraser’s classmates (who was also one of the two heads of the student body) wrote a Facebook post about what had happened. Under a photo of a man pushing an industrial-sized vacuum, the post read: “Preston Moore was spending his only free night with his family. Until he had to come clean up some shithead’s mess. He’ll be in the basement for three hours. Thank him if you see him.” Soon after the Facebook post circulated, we received an email that detailed the incident only vaguely. Names were excluded and the email did not include how drunk Fraser was, though I only knew that because one of my friends was dating him at the time.

Fraser stood on the stage of Bingham, his smirk projecting the complete lack of remorse he felt. His freshly-trimmed brown hair fell just below his ears and his sailboat-patterned Vineyard Vines tie brought out his eyes. Mr. Nicolson, the Dean of Students (a role essentially synonymous with the Dean of Discipline), stood next to him. He greeted us and said some other words that I cannot remember before passing the microphone to Fraser, who held the black speaker with confidence. Fraser looked out at the audience and nodded with a slight smile, amused by the turnout of the crowd. “Yeah, um, I just wanted to apologize for my actions that caused a complete inconvenience to a lot of people. It was super unnecessary and I’m really sorry for that,” he said. Then he ran his fingers through his hair and said something about how appreciative he was that we made the trek to come hear him out. “I know it’s exam week, and this is probably super annoying.” He spoke casually. The tone of his voice
in itself made me certain that he was the kind of person who could never feel bad about wasting someone else’s time. I remember looking around the auditorium, waiting for the speech to end. Rows of bright red velvet seats lined the room, and massive red velvet curtains framed both sides of the stage. After Fraser was done, Mr. Nicolson took the microphone back, thanked us for coming, and dismissed us.

In January, Emily started living at school again. The new semester brought back not only Emily but Nick, too, who stopped hiding behind his coldness when I did the same. I liked returning to our room after the first morning class for the smell. It was a stale smell, an odor like that of dried blood or the yeasty smell of day-old wine. “The smell of sleep,” Emily once called it. Not the smell of morning breath but the smell of morning hair. The scent was facilitated in part by our location on the highest floor of the dormitory; the heater that lined the inside of my bed; the broken window screen that we kept locked during the bitter winter of Emily’s return. When the wind caught hold of a slightly cracked window, it opened with such force that the screen would cave in on itself. Most January mornings Emily entered the room to find me perched on the couch corners, my arms extended outside in search for what the wind had whisked away. When Emily had visited the room after becoming a day-student, she had no choice but to ask me to lock the screen for her, or to help her close the window when it rained. It then became clear that she no longer knew the lay of the land, the technicalities of the space. But when enough time had passed that rustling sheets in the bed beside me were no longer a foreign sound — when I could both admit to and swallow the pride that had turned me cold — the room began to
feel warm. I can still find that smell of sleep in my hair now, when the fragrance of shampoo does not overpower it. But the smell is fleeting: it is gone from my hair within an hour or two of waking up, just as it was from our room that year. I smell my hair and I am right back in the warm musk of that space: the room where we lived together, if only for a moment.

Students at Taft were absorbed in their own worlds, the little lives they led between the 11x16 square footage of their dorm rooms. Like most prep schools, Taft believed in rendering students capable in all fields of study. The emphasis seemed to fall less upon the work we were doing and more on the amount of work there was to do. I was, for the most part, grateful for such academic demands. I used homework as an excuse to delay confronting my own issues, pushing my eating disorder a little further back on the shelf and pulling out my French textbook instead. Focusing on things that didn’t matter so much, like creating chapter outlines for a test, was easier than dealing with matters that would continue to follow me long after high school. Throwing myself into homework made me feel like there was a clear purpose for why I was at Taft in the first place. But I was almost always irritable, full of a sad anger that made me come off as “cold” or “bitchy.” I took comfort in Nick as the one person who knew and loved me no matter what, isolating myself from everyone else as a result. My friends didn’t seem to miss me as I withdrew and I used that as justification to see Nick as my sole ally on that campus.

That winter, I was the manager of the Boys Varsity Squash team. Among my responsibilities were refilling water bottles for the players, making sure those boys with long hair had the necessary accessories to keep it off of their faces, and keeping
score in a small notebook for recruiting purposes. The courts themselves were
claustrophobic. There were five or six of them, with glass doors that walled in the two
players during their match. The boys grunted as they chased the small black ball
across the court, occasionally yelling for a second opinion when one player called the
other’s shot out. I would sit on the sisal carpet outside the courts and breathe in the
smell of sweat, which seeped out into the viewing area where other fans and I
watched the games play out. The carpet was harsh against the back of my thighs,
scratching through my spandex leggings in such a way that I often left the squash
courts with marks from the carpet’s ridges embossed into my skin. Many Taft parents
came to watch their children play and often brought orange slices for the team, a
citrus smell that only slightly masked the stale scent that perfumed the athletic center.
Still, the snack was welcome. I was not eating much then. All I could taste were
remnants of the pumpkin spice coffee that I drank every morning and sometimes on
afternoons like these, while I watched and documented the matches. The coffee’s
aftertaste was acidic in my mouth, sour in a way that made me nauseous. The little
energy I had was devoted to watching the boys play, and this alone was enough for
me to feel like I, too, had done enough physical activity to be sore the next day.

Spring of that year was slush: a month of melting, muddy snow that left tracks
all over our carpet. Living at school again gave Emily a larger window into my own
sickness, parts of which she only picked up on because they reminded her of her own.
Out of all of my friends at Taft, Emily was the only person who cared enough to bring
my problem up to me, simply asking one night if I was alright. I remember the tone of
her voice being gentle; how carefully she chose her words; that she spoke with an empathy I could not appreciate at that time.

“You haven’t really been eating, Char,” she said. “You can talk to me about this kind of stuff.” She paused. “I get it.”

“I don’t watch what I eat,” I countered. “I had a huge plate of French toast for breakfast on Sunday.”

“Yeah, but you know that. That’s the thing. You know you ate French toast on Sunday. Today’s Thursday.”

The conversation ended there, with us lying silently in our beds in the dark. There I could see my thought process as skewed and governed by its own set of rules and protocols, those that I had made for myself. I resented that Emily could not only see that but that she had enough compassion to say so.

Junior year I grew hypersensitive to the student body I was a part of and what it thought of me. I gained further skepticism from what Nick told me of things that guys on his hockey team said about girls in the locker room and in the dorm. He said people made bets about whether or not I’d finish my breakfast; that the same boys who commented on how disgusting Emily looked when she was sick were just as quick to call her fat once she started to gain the weight back. Hearing the faintest whisper while walking through the hallway left me in hysterics, positive that someone was talking badly about me. I reasoned that the only way to keep this from happening was to leave my room as infrequently as possible, so as not to remind people that I still went to and lived at this school.
My out-of-school therapist urged me to keep a “food log” to show myself how little I was actually eating, to remind myself that what I considered to be a normal or even excessive amount of food was normal only to me. Emily had been right: part of what so obviously indicated my sickness was the fact that I could log the past weeks’ worth of food from pure memory, that I thought so much about each thing I ate that I could still recall it some five or six days later. What I ate and when I ate it was such a defining part of my everyday life that year that, even now, when I look back at those food logs, I can remember which days the almond-peach granola bar is referring to; the night where Nick and I ordered the pizza that I logged as only eating one slice of; the eight egg-whites I ate when the Dining Hall did a theme night of “breakfast for dinner” and how I almost let myself eat one of the cinnamon-raisin bagels, but the toaster caught on fire and had to be unplugged.

During the winter, Nick played hockey, a sport that often practiced late at night and that required him to eat dinner much earlier than usual. I would go with him on these afternoons to the Dining Hall, which started serving at 4:30 during the winter to accommodate athletes like Nick. We would sit separate from the rest of his teammates, isolating ourselves in one of the corner booths in Prentice dining room. During one of these meals, I remember only being able to get through half of the yogurt I was eating before feeling too full. When I said so, Nick asked me to finish it, please, if not for myself then for him.

The first time Nick gave me a rug burn was on the night we returned to campus from winter break. I wore a turquoise t-shirt and black cotton leggings and I remember thinking to myself that I looked like a little kid in that outfit. This was a
description I had heard someone say about Susanna Young, a girl one year older than me with anorexia so visible that many of her friends had trouble looking at her. But I remember liking the way I looked that night before I left my dorm to meet Nick. I wondered if someone might wage that same insult about my own child-like body, a boniness that I measured by wrapping my right thumb and middle finger around my left wrist. This gave me relief, though from what specifically I cannot now remember.

I met Nick on one of the benches outside of the Black Box, a space in Main Building used for small performances like improv shows and plays that students who took French were required to participate in as part of their final grade. We found an unlocked classroom in the basement and, after we had sex, he told me that he loved me for the first time. I did not think the night could have gone any better. The window caught the light of nearby buildings and filled the room with a dimness that reminded me of candles. Part of me now wants to turn on the overhead light in that room, wants to see what it actually looked like under the fluorescence. I know that doing so would have exposed the blue carpet in all of its grime, littered with hairballs and the dirt that our shoes had dragged in from outside. Somehow that night remains one of my sweetest memories: I continue to replay it in my head even now.

On most evenings that spring, Nick and I packed our backpacks with blankets and, after an hour or two at the library, headed up to the hill near the soccer field. From there we could see the entire school, or at least the populated parts of it. The school looked at once tiny and massive from our view. There were likely many others who surrounded us on that field, other couples with the same idea. Our privacy up there was something that we wanted to believe in more than we actually did.
From up on the hill we could see Taft without it seeing us, something we found to be precious in its rarity. I never got caught on those fields with Nick but I did hear stories of teachers shining flashlights there one Saturday night, after one of Taft’s dances. I heard of couples scurrying like mice and that not everyone got away, that the Dean’s Office was so crowded with those with Permissions Violations that people flooded out the door, forming a line into the halls. We abandoned evenings on outdoor benches and fields after October and we did not return to them before late April. The stretch of time usually spent outdoors was replaced with nights in the basement, where I had sex behind laundry machines or stairways as so many other girls had before. It was an activity that had once felt like lust and rebellion but soon became a kind of quiet, humiliating pain.

Sometimes Nick and I would order pizza for dinner and, if it was warm enough, eat on Jig Patio. The brick patio overlooked Potter’s Pond, a shallow circle of dirty water that a number of students ended up jumping into each year. The nights that we ordered pizza posed opportunities to invent obstacles like stomach aches in a pathetic attempt to avoid the basement for that evening. I counted in my head how many days I could go without having to have sex and knew when it would be a “basement night.” Every so often a fight would ensue, usually when I had exhausted my compendium of excuses. I could only blame the loss of libido on my antidepressants for so long and sometimes had to honestly say that I didn’t want to have sex, not tonight. What Nick could not understand was that my aversion to sex at Taft had nothing to do with him, an oxymoronic reality that only made sense to those who had experienced the same. But on many nights, I tried to convince myself that
nights in the basement were what I wanted, and the basement was not how we ended
the night but how we began it.

It was the rotting spaces that allowed us to get away with all that we did —
the decaying interiors where no one wanted to go. The first place I went with Nick
was the pipe room, where the ceilings were covered with yellow foam insulation that
looked like mold. The overwhelming smell of trash water lingered in our hair and on
our clothes long after we had left. The dead ends of the basement were usually safe in
their abandonment. At the end of a maintenance ramp was a small alcove formed by
cabinets that held cans of paint and other related sealants. We were careful when
leaning against those walls, even just to talk, as they covered Nick and me in a layer
of dust that left us sneezing for the rest of the night. Still, if need be, that alcove was a
reliable backup. I liked the laundry room best because we knew that in the chance that
we were caught by a campus safety officer or a teacher, we would not receive
Permissions Violations for the singular reason that the laundry room was not
technically an enclosed space. There was no door to the laundry room — only a
narrow, open doorway — and so there was no restraining barrier that we had found a
way around. I liked the sound of the machines and the stop-and-start patterns of the
washer-dryer cycle, which I eventually memorized after so many nights in that room.
It was nice to know when the soak portion was complete and how many seconds
came before the rinse phase. Occasionally, the sound of the machines masked the
nearing footsteps of someone actually using that room for its intended purpose. When
they entered, we would scramble in an effort to suggest that we were not doing what
we so obviously were. But few students were naïve enough to do laundry after seven o’clock, and those who did never made the same mistake twice.

When my interest in rug burns faded, my interest in sex went, too. The worst and last rug burn Nick gave me didn’t go away until the beginning of senior year. It scabbed and scarred and was positioned in such a place that there was little explanation needed for its origins. When the carpet began to really irritate my skin during sex, I would lift up my waist and Nick would slide his navy-blue hoodie beneath me. It was a sweet notion — him wanting to soothe the pain — but the sweatshirt never stayed put, and sometimes I would secretly push it out from under my back to make sure I walked away from the night with some kind of keepsake. I cannot now remember if I played a role in that particular rug burn, if I encouraged it by resisting the cushion of the sweatshirt as I sometimes did. All I know is that I could not lay in my bed the way I usually did for a while, until it scabbed and hardened, and even then, I had to support my battle wound with a small lumbar pillow. Eventually, the scar began to look like a splotch of dirt. Some of my friends made the mistake of trying to scratch it off with their fingernails until they realized it was part of my skin. The prized possession of the rug burn ceased to make me happy when it became unidentifiable. It wasn’t a love mark anymore: it was just something that dirtied my skin, that I could not scrub away with a loofah. I understood Nick’s frustration when I failed to reciprocate any kind of sexual attraction to him, just as I understood why I was not the first to numb myself during sex in those hallways or on those classroom floors. I never blamed him for that during our time there and I still
don’t. It was not one of us who was at fault but the culture that we were a part of. The process of scabbing took something from both of us.
Several hours of therapy over the summer before my senior year brought me to a point of partial recovery, and I returned to Taft much healthier than I had been when I left it. My restored confidence came much to the dismay of Nick, who had grown accustomed to my sick self and, subconsciously, taken a liking to it. I became more stable and less dependent on him in a way that I thought would benefit our relationship, which had for so long operated under the assumption that I needed him to keep me afloat. What became obvious was that Nick didn’t want me to get better, to change in a way that required our dynamic to change, too. I spent much of that fall in fear of his sensitivity to my new self, careful not to do or say anything that might hit a nerve. Showing up two minutes late to meet him during study hall was enough to ensure friction between us. He would respond to my error with a series of passive-aggressive comments, throwing in the occasional term of endearment like “baby” or “honey” to soften the blow. In time, Nick became less temperamental and accepted the ways I had changed, but he continued to remind me — even until the last month of school — how much he had endured with me the year before, how miserable I had been to be around but how he had nevertheless stayed and loved me through it.

I lived in a dorm officially called “Upper School Girls Dorm” (USGD) but that almost everyone called “The Rock.” The nickname was supposedly coined several years earlier after a group of girls who lived there were caught doing cocaine, though this was never confirmed. Still, teachers and students alike referred to the building this way; the official name was used only in formal documents like the
Student Handbook. The Rock was a one-story building with 17 single dorm rooms, a setup that initially appealed to me. I wanted to live alone but did not want to be isolated as a result; in The Rock, we were all in the same boat. Living there allowed for new friendships with girls who I had never shared a dormitory with before. What I sought more than anything during those first few months of school was connection, the kind of meaningful interaction that I had both craved and refused throughout junior year. Part of this yearning likely had to do with the fact that it seemed like people were always hanging out without me at Taft.

The last time Nick and I went to the hill that year was in October, on a brisk evening that we expected to be more bearable than it actually was. We bundled up and packed our backpacks as we had so many times before. Taft would have been completely invisible from up there if not for the light that flooded from the several different buildings, which I thought made the campus appear like a miniature city. Of the school below, we could not see the basement and the many dusty alcoves within it; the maintenance ramps, pipe rooms, and stairwells that couples initially saw as a last resort location for meeting up. But places like those stairwells eventually became a normal place to hang out — not a last resort but a coveted spot to find. Within a few minutes, Nick made a comment about how brutal the wind was, and we made our way back down to campus shortly after. After that night, shivering upon cold wet grass that seeped through the blankets and into our clothing no longer seemed as romantic — or even necessary — as it once had.

Freshmen, sophomores, and juniors were allowed to “interdorm,” or visit rooms of students of the opposite gender, only at specific times and on specific days
of the week. Only seniors were allowed to interdorm during study hall, an opportunity we were afforded after submitting a form to the Dean’s Office. This white slip of paper stated the rules of “legal” interdorming, explicit conditions I consented to with my signature. Interdorming was allowed from seven to ten o’clock on all nights besides Saturday, when seniors were allowed to interdorm until 11. Students could only visit a dormitory if there was a faculty member present. The “host” and their guest were required to sign in with this faculty member at the beginning of the visit and sign out with them upon departure. Senior class meetings were held once a week and teachers often used this time to remind us that interdorming was a privilege, one that could be taken away if students began to abuse it. The door to the host’s room needed to obey the “open-door policy,” which meant that the door had to be propped ajar with a trash bin. Initially, visiting Nick’s dorm with the door open seemed better than not visiting it at all. I didn’t try to push the boundaries when we legally interdormed — I figured I’d take what I could get.

Students were told to expect a faculty member to “drop by” at any time, which I soon realized to be the most demeaning aspect of this process. The relationships that I held with my closest friends and mentors at Taft did not develop with the door open. Neither the most private conversation nor funny banter was overheard by whoever stood listening in the hall. The presence of the “open-door” stifled relationships at Taft with a Big Brother-esque trash bin in the doorway, inhibiting not only physical but also emotional intimacy.

My evening routine was a fluid sequence that moved from library to basement or classroom and then back to my dorm, a procedure as predictable as the tone that
toll from the cast metal bell each night. We were often lucky enough to grab the English department’s faculty room before another couple did. The room’s two large windows overlooked the pond, and I remember how beautiful the campus was on so many of these nights. I would watch out the windows at the rest of the campus, moving and living across the property. Nick and I would always pause at the sound of approaching footsteps, silencing our already-hushed conversation. In fear of someone walking in and catching us in the room, we would hide in a dark corner next to the door, away from the light. There, we would have been safe from a campus safety officer locking up for the night or other students looking for a place to go. I think now of what we so badly wanted then — to sit, alone— and feel a kind of tender pity, that we did not fear an officer or teacher walking in on some lustful act but on us enjoying privacy behind a closed door.

Sex that winter was a planned activity that felt as routine as nightly sign-in. Nick often texted me before study hall to ask if I wanted to “find a room” later on, which was really a way of asking whether or not I was willing to have sex that night. He took my lack of interest in sex personally, picking fights when we had not “found a room” in over a week. I did not then see sex as part of a healthy relationship and thus found it to be an empty act, one I initiated only because it was what Nick wanted and expected from me. I think of these evenings and picture my pants and underwear pulled down around my ankles. I would stare at the stitching on my sneakers until the activity came to an end.

I remember one night when Nick and I wandered through a section of the basement used almost exclusively by kitchen staff. We found an open room filled
with furniture and soon realized this to be the theater department’s storage area. The flashlight on Nick’s phone illuminated dusty sofas and lounge chairs stacked on top of each other, a graveyard of retired props. On the floor was a large pile of half-sewn costumes evidently still in progress. The room was elaborate, with a loft bed and high ceilings. I remember laughing at our luck: we had walked around the basement looking for a place to sit and had stumbled upon a room packed to the brim with sofas.

We sat down upon the sofa furthest from the door, one that would keep us hidden from sight if someone walked in. The sofa was a chaise lounge with ratty upholstery, a piece of furniture that had clearly been relegated to this storage room many years ago. Nick was nervous about our finding this room in the first place: he argued there was a reason we had never stumbled upon it before, that it was likely unlocked only because someone was currently using it. Still, I convinced him to lie back with me for a moment. I pretended that we were lying in a bed together until realizing my shirt-sleeves to be covered in cobwebs. I shined my flashlight on our surroundings and saw the floor to be dotted with mice poop. Dust and dirt had not bothered me in the past, but the idea of sharing this romantic evening with rodents was less tolerable.

All students played a role in the production put on by Taft each day, a carefully-calculated performance that presented the school as prestigious, traditional, and moral. I often felt that I had to bend myself into a certain kind of person in order to become what Taft wanted me to be, which is not to say that the school sought a
completely homogeneous student body: what it did seem to desire of its students was consistency. I was Editor-in-Chief of the school newspaper and a hard-working student; I was rarely in violation of school rules or subject to disciplinary action, save for running late to a few too many morning classes; I was respected by faculty members for the work I did with the newspaper and felt, by the time I graduated, that I had made a name for myself within the community. The person I was at Taft was without much contradiction. I drank only once during my time there and never did drugs. What is not lost on me is the luck I had when I did break the rules. In retrospect, I am astonished that I never got caught sneaking up to Nick’s dorm room, a transgression we committed often. The best time to do this was on a Wednesday or Saturday. On such afternoons, the dormitories and hallways were almost always silent, a vacancy due to the various sports that students played and teachers coached. I would walk through Main Building until reaching the foot of the stairs that led up to Nick’s dormitory. His room was on the third floor and we made our way up each flight of stairs with the help of his roommate, who patrolled the floors above us to make sure they were free of teachers or students likely to snitch. He’d give Nick the thumbs-up and, by the time we reached his room, we felt that we had accomplished something. Such visits were always somewhat tainted by the fear I had of getting caught on the way down, and we had to make sure that we did not lose track of time. Once people returned from their athletic commitments around five o’clock, it would be nearly impossible to sneak back down those stairs. I imagine that if I were caught, my faculty advisor and dorm parent would have responded to my behavior admonishingly, telling me something along the lines of, “That’s not you.” Sheer luck
allowed me to preserve my reputation among members of the administration; other students were not as fortunate. Several friends of mine experienced not only the awkwardness of being walked in on during sex by a teacher or campus safety officer but also the ensuing punishment of a Permissions Violation. Most teachers were kept in the loop about student violations, somehow knowing on Monday morning who had been caught drinking in their room that past weekend or with an e-cigarette. One teacher said that the entire faculty and staff met on a regular basis to discuss students using a slideshow, which had a photo of every single student. The teachers would pause the slideshow on certain students to discuss any issues they might have and skip over those who were not on their radar.

Sometimes students had to tell teachers themselves of their transgression: if a student received a strike, it was their responsibility to inform their teachers of the two weeks that they would miss while suspended. Some teachers acknowledged such violations by asking the student to stay after class, as my English teacher once did when a boy in our class returned from his suspension. Other teachers made no reference to the student’s return, treating them as if they had never left. Students also filled teachers in, often unknowingly. It was easy to forget that Nick’s young, laid-back soccer coach wore other hats on campus: that what he overheard during practice could be of interest to him as the junior class dean and as a dorm parent. In a community of only 600 students, almost nothing stayed quiet: receiving a violation almost guaranteed that both older and younger students would know your name, even if you didn’t know theirs. Gossip was expected within the confines of any high school environment — boarding school or not — but we never expected this knowledge to
reach teachers we had never had in class or as dorm parents: those who sized us up solely based on the rules that we had broken. Faculty reactions were never black or white; the teachers could do what they wished with the carnal knowledge that they carried of our personal lives, of choices we made outside of their classrooms but within the same corridors that they, too, inhabited after the class-day. Or maybe this knowledge did not change their perception of us, but the very fact that students had to navigate these gray areas at all — had to wonder if their sex life was the subject of conversation at the faculty lunch table — was an unethical reality that the school never acknowledged, a cause for pain that was never legitimized.

Nick always loved puffy down jackets and wore that blue one with the red zipper throughout our final winter at Taft. After over a year of rushing to have sex as quickly as possible in whatever cranny we could find, we stopped. More often, we merely searched for breathing space: for any part of the school that could temporarily cater to our need for complete seclusion. During study hall, when all basement benches were occupied, Nick and I would walk quietly down the dark storage hallways until we found a barrier to hide behind: a large trash bin, maybe, or some stacked cardboard boxes. He would spread his coat down like a tarp behind wherever we had decided to settle and we would lie on the cool marble until the final evening bell rang.

Our last weekend at school was one in early May. It was the first night warm enough to bring out my fan. I had stored it underneath my bed months before, when the breeze of an open window was enough to break through the musk of my small dorm room. Nick tugged the prongs of the fan toward the outlet and the power-cord
unraveled, undoing a knot that I could not remember making at an earlier time. We sat on my beige sisal rug. We ate pizza that we had purchased earlier that day from the Watertown Meat Market while the entirety of my room moved, the thin fabric tapestries rippling against the wall with each blast of cool air from the fan. I liked watching the way Nick’s shirt creased with the breeze of the fan, as if he too was part of the tapestries and garlands and other ornaments that gave form to the room. There was no extensive conversation between us that night and whatever words we did say were said with the expectation that another person, perhaps even the rest of the dorm, could hear the same. I preferred our silence, a cold quiet that we had once thought fun. Part of why we so often took the risk of sneaking each other into our dorm rooms was the ability it gave us to linger. We would savor the lack of immediacy to zip up our pants and finger-comb our hair so as to appear that we had done nothing more than talk amicably in an open-door room or on a wooden bench for the entirety of our two-year relationship.

During what was the last regular academic week for the rest of the school, the senior class had “Senior Week,” a long- awaited week of festivities leading up to graduation. That week was meant to cement the bonds forged over the years between the senior class, beginning with the Senior Cruise. I remember coming back from tennis practice as a sophomore to find senior girls in brightly-colored sundresses, posing for group photos in front of the Dining Hall. I had felt ashamedly dirty walking past in my sweaty athletic clothing, careful not to get in the way of these older girls who seemed so eager to leave our campus walls.
I expected to feel underwhelmed before my own Senior Cruise and I did, mostly because, as we got older, people like Tori told us how the cruise itself wasn’t really that great. She commented on how long it felt, being trapped out on the water, and how most people were ready to get back to campus long before they actually did. When I think of that evening I think of the sophomore and junior girls coming down from sports practice, walking into Main Building for dinner and past me in my semi-formal attire. I watched them open the tall wooden doors and remembered how many times I had done the same, feeling split between wishing I could have had another normal night and feeling tired at the thought of doing all of it again.

The Senior Cruise was followed by other events like a fair for those seniors that participated in a year-long Independent Student Project, as well as two formal dances. One of these dances was hosted by the headmaster, held in a large tent set up in his backyard. Each year, many of the teachers best loved by the graduating class were invited. A live band performed after dinner and the headmaster and his wife were known to put on a great dancing show. The headmaster’s home was about a ten-minute walk from Main Building, which was far enough from campus to make us feel that our being there was special.

The second dance, the Senior Dinner-Dance, occurred the following evening. While the Dinner-Dance was going on, the rest of the school attended the “Luau.” For those willing to risk it, The Luau was, like other dances, a drinking opportunity. The Luau was a night almost guaranteed to end poorly for some unlucky few and that year was no exception. Only an hour or so into the Dinner-Dance, word traveled of a few juniors who had been caught drinking. I sat at a table with my family while students
accumulated in the Dean’s Office below. Suspected students waited to be breathalyzed while those already found guilty waited for their turn to call their parents.

Nick and I left an hour or so before it ended, as did our parents and siblings who had made the trip up to attend. We walked from the Athletic Center down to the brick buildings in which we had spent so much time, ready for one last night there. We both pretended it was like any other night for us sitting in the basement. We tried to ignore my dress and his suit and the reason we were dressed up to begin with. I think we were both nervous to leave the strange and impervious world that we had learned how to inhabit at Taft. Despite our recurring desire to be anywhere but on those basement benches, I already felt myself glorifying our nightly routine. Our relationship had developed between lines drawn for us by the administration, on an academic and personal time table with abnormal consistency. I liked knowing how many hours of the day I was allowed to spend with Nick or with friends and I cherished the equality of these restrictions, that every student was subject to the same parameters. So much was decided for me in a way that I knew did not exist outside of Taft. However emotionally detached I felt from the school, I was soothed by the way that the community moved together on a physical level, into assemblies and along the path to Wu and onto Jig Patio after Sit-Down. I took comfort in this kind of choreography. All of us, for the most part, did the same thing at the same time. Senior week was an exception to this, which is perhaps why that week felt so strangely disconnected from the rest of my time there.
What was particularly absurd to me was the unique entitlement shared among students: how much we felt that we deserved to know about one another. I think that after the school took away our right to privacy, we, as students, saw to enforcing that among ourselves. Before I started dating Nick, I felt uncomfortable when, in the evening, someone saw me walking with a boy through the hallways. Older girls especially seemed to have an opinion on my personal affairs and would likely make a comment if they didn’t approve. I, too, felt discomfort when, as a senior, I walked in on Nick’s roommate with a freshman girl who wrote for the newspaper of which I was the editor. I felt that I was seeing something I should not, accidentally gaining an intimate knowledge of this girl I barely knew. At Taft, there were no boundaries between what teachers knew about students, but there were also no boundaries to what students knew of each other.

Learning the ins and outs of Taft was not, as I had expected, something I would do by the end of that first year. There were parts of Taft that I would not come to know until the last semester of my senior year, when the drug culture in CPT led a boy in my grade to have a seizure in the middle of Economics class, his body convulsing from the mix of painkillers and alcohol that most of the boys consumed on most of the nights. They would raid both their parents’ liquor and medicine cabinets each time they went home and bring their findings back to school, pooling whatever they could get their hands on with that of the other boys, trading their mom’s Xanax for someone’s dad’s OxyContin.

What I did learn almost immediately at Taft was that there were two kinds of traditions: those held by the school and those held amongst its students. More often
than not, these two sets of traditions were in direct conversation with each other. The most prominent student rituals were those formed out of a kind of rebellion, a refusal to preserve the values that the school so desperately wanted its student body to reflect. Perhaps what I consider now to be student traditions are only such because of my distance from Taft. On a day-to-day basis, they were merely part of my routine. I did not realize how many others had passed through Taft before me, how many had done and thought the same as I then did. I still feel a connection to others who attended boarding schools like mine. It is a bond that has almost nothing to do with academics and everything to do with experience. I meet people who went to prep school and wonder what lengths they went to for privacy; whether they got away with what, most of the time, the boys at Taft did; if they would pick their school again or if, looking back, they’d choose differently. The level of education I was privileged to at Taft will always be something I am grateful for and, academics aside, I would do it all again. What I wonder is whether I could have done without some of the pain and still have learned what I did.

When someone asks me if I liked boarding school, I always say yes. But I always want to add that I liked it in the same way I feel about certain movies, those I describe as heavy or hard to watch but worth seeing. There are films I recommend to people but that I do not want to watch again. I liked certain parts about coming of age at Taft: I only wish I didn’t have to do them so publicly.

Our campus was a world in itself. Inside Main Building, the school appeared to be infinitely compartmentalized into different groupings. There was a zooming, filmic quality to this architectural structure. I often pictured a camera traveling deeper
and deeper into Main Building until reaching the dorm rooms themselves, the final destination for every student at the end of every night. A boy living in CPT would enter Main Building and walk through many doorways, travel up various staircases, and make a certain number of left and right turns that he had memorized before reaching his room. My dorm room was the only space on campus that was markedly mine, a space I had temporary claim over until year’s end. Leaving Main Building felt much like reassembling a set of Russian nesting dolls, with each small section fitting neatly into the next. I was often overwhelmed each time I left Main Building and felt the campus open back up, an expanse of property that I could never see all at once.

I remember how often I would be surprised by the campus from afar when my mother dropped me off after only a weekend away. How small the red brick buildings looked from outside Taft’s gates always baffled me. When I looked at them from this vantage point, they seemed so impersonal, as if they were buildings that I had never been inside or walked past every day on my way to class. But however miniature the school felt from afar paled in comparison to the feeling of intimidation I had when mother’s car pulled into Headmaster’s Circle. We would sit for a few moments before I entered Main Building to sign-in, which all students were required to do upon returning to campus. Both my mother and I registered the school’s dominating presence, though we did so to very different ends. She often appeared to be filled with reverence and gratitude for this place that I was a part of. I chose to use this time to prepare, staring at the wooden doors of Main Building and bracing myself for the strange energy inside. Even now I have trouble articulating such energy without nostalgia, a confusing feeling for a time in my life that wasn’t actually that great. I
continue to ask myself why it feels so necessary to parse these things about Taft out — the contradictions, the complexity of a place so exciting yet so severe. I have spent much time arm-wrestling with my Taft years. I still cannot reconcile the part of me that wishes I could return to the slow tedium of nights on basement benches or to the fall of my junior year, a period of misery during which disordered eating both surrounded and infected me. Sexual mores at Taft carried literal filth with them, which remained on your clothes and under your fingernails. I see now that I was lucky to have navigated sex at Taft with Nick, not with a random boy who was interested only in what I could provide behind the laundry machine. I am more concerned by how many other girls also learned stairways to be an appropriate place to have sex. How long after Taft does a teenager carry this kind of knowledge with them? At what point did I realize that sex in public places is not a universal part of “coming of age?”

There is a concept taught in fundamental psychology courses called cognitive mapping. Cognitive maps are mental representations of physical locations, which often differ from the actual places they describe. Each person’s mind map is a telling of what they consider important. Girls at Taft did this exercise in AP Psychology — it was one of their favorite parts of the course. They would compare their maps with each other afterward, often finding commonalities in what places on campus they had drawn too big. Some girls found that they gave spatial priority to the soccer fields and the basement, places where many girls lost their virginity, drawing them much bigger and more central to the campus than they actually were.
This essay is my cognitive map, a blend of what I recall of Taft in the day and what I remember of its nights. I think of Main Hall and see it only in the daytime; memories from the basement are only those that occurred in the evening. It is almost as if neither place could have existed while the other was in use. Students shared an understanding of Taft both as a neatly packaged establishment and a jarring site of disorder, and I felt that I came to take on this very contradiction during my time there. George Orwell wrote in his overwhelmingly scathing essay about prep school, “No one can look back on his schooldays and say with truth that they were altogether unhappy.” As I look back on the massive contradictions of The Taft School, I realize that I was, and remain to be, the school’s biggest fan and its most reluctant participant.


