



NOW

To: "Ambrosia Wellington" *a.wellington@wesleyan.edu*
From: "Wesleyan Alumni Committee" *reunion.classof2007@gmail.com*
Subject: Class of 2007 Reunion

Dear Ambrosia Wellington,

Mark Your Calendar!

The Wesleyan University Ten-Year Reunion for the Class of 2007 will take place May 25–28, 2017. Join us for a weekend of catching up with former classmates and attending exciting events, including the All-Campus Party and formal class dinners.

Online registration is available through May 1.

If you're planning to attend, a full list of area hotels can be found on Wesleyan's local [accommodations page](#). A limited amount of on-campus housing in our dorms is available. Most rooms are doubles—perfect for reaching out to your old roommate to relive some memories!

Sincerely,
Your Alumni Committee

I delete it instantly, just like I do the sale emails from Sephora and Michael Kors and the reminders from Fertility Friend that ovulation

is right around the corner. Then I empty my recycling bin, because I know better than to think anything is ever really gone.

Two weeks later, a second email arrives. *We haven't received your RSVP! We really hope you're joining us.* It's the written equivalent of a wagging finger. I delete that one, too, but not before scrolling down far enough to see her name, bolded, right under the list of Alumni Committee members. Flora Banning.

I forget about the two emails, because out of sight really is out of mind. It's easy when each day is a variation of the same—taking the N from Astoria to Midtown; stopping at Key Food for groceries, reusable cloth bags cutting into my forearms. Happy hour shouldered in with hipsters at the Ditty, a second glass of wine, despite Adrian's half-teasing *Maybe you shouldn't*. But then I come home from work on Friday, shoulders sagging from the weight of the week, and there's an envelope on the counter addressed to me.

"Hey, babe," Adrian shouts from his position on the couch, tablet in hand, where he's undoubtedly working on his fantasy football league instead of the perpetually unfinished novel he likes to talk about. "How was your day?"

"You left the door open again. Can you please start locking it like I asked?" One of the myriad things I nag Adrian about on a regular basis. *Lock the door. Close the cereal bag. Pick up your dirty laundry.* Sometimes I feel more like a parent than his wife.

"Relax. It's a safe building. Hey, something came for you. I think we got invited to a wedding. Except somebody doesn't know you got married and changed your name." My new last name, a point of male pride that Adrian pretended wasn't important to him. *I don't care, but do you really want the kids to have two last names? And yours is so long,* he said during wedding planning, the first puncture in my newly engaged bliss. *The kids,* a brightening certainty on his horizon, my concessions for them expected and inevitable.

The envelope on the counter is addressed to Ambrosia Wellington, in neat calligraphy. Not Ambrosia Turner, the woman I became three years ago when I walked down a tree-shaded aisle at the Mountain Lakes House toward Adrian, his eyes already tear filled. I let him think

Turner was for us, for *the kids*. He has no idea why I was so eager to get rid of *Wellington*.

Adrian turns around to watch me open it, expectant. He loves weddings, or rather, he loves the receptions, where he can get drunk and pose for pictures with people he's just met, instant best friends, and invite them to dinners and barbecues we all know will never happen.

"Well, who is it?" he says. "Let me guess. Bethany from work. Is she still dating that really tall guy? Mark. The lacrosse player."

Adrian and his friends, five and six years younger than me, still post engagement photos on Facebook and Instagram: girls with long hair and Chanel espadrilles, gel manicures to show off pear-shaped rocks, posing next to boys in plaid shirts. The PR girls who work under me at Brighton Dame are the same.

So basic, we used to call them, back when there was no way we would turn into them.

"Bethany's twenty-two," I murmur when I pull the card out. I ignore Adrian's response, because I'm fixated on what's inside. It's not a wedding invitation. Nobody is requesting my presence at Gramercy Park or telling me the dress code is black tie or mandating an *adults-only reception*.

It's more calligraphy, red and black against cream card stock. Wesleyan colors. The letters tilt slightly to the right, as if whoever wrote them was in a rush to get them out.

You need to come. We need to talk about what we did that night.

There's no signature, but there doesn't need to be. It can only be from one person. My face is hot and I can tell my neck is marbling red and white, the same way it always does when my anxiety flares up. I grip the countertop. She knows I deleted the emails. I shouldn't be surprised; she had a way of knowing everything.

Adrian's voice interrupts my spiraling thoughts. "The suspense is killing me. It better be an open bar."

"It's not a wedding." I stuff the card back into its envelope, then shove it in my purse. Later, I'll put it in the place I hide everything Adrian can never see.

He puts down his tablet and stands up. Of course he chooses now to grow an attention span. “You okay? You look like you’re going to puke.”

I could shred the card, but I know what would happen. Another one will come in its place. She was insistent then. She’s probably even more so now.

“It’s nothing. Why don’t we go up to the roof and have a drink?” The rooftop patio with its slices of Manhattan skyline, a feature of our building we thought we would use but rarely ever do.

He nods, curiosity temporarily assuaged, and arches across the counter to kiss my cheek.

I smile at my husband in relief, taking in his mop of curly hair, his dimples, and his pretty green eyes. *So freaking sexy*, my best friend, Billie, said when I showed her his photo. He looked exactly like his online dating profile, which is probably why I went home with him after our first date, the two of us reduced to sloppy mouths and hands in the back of a cab barreling down Broadway. I later learned that while his picture didn’t lie—not like a dozen other men before him, all of whom were at least twenty pounds heavier than advertised—his life story did. Yes, he went to Florida State, but he never graduated, instead dropping out in his third year to work on the same novel he has yet to complete a chapter of. Nowhere in his bio did it say he was a bartender, the only consistent job he has ever had.

But I overlooked that because he treats me well, because people are drawn to him, because *I* was drawn to him, to his steady warmth and self-assuredness. He didn’t know the person I was in college but loved the new version of me so simply that I figured I couldn’t be as horrible as everyone thought. I never imagined I would end up with someone five years younger, but being older has had its benefits. Our age gap is small enough that we look good together but big enough that his instincts are softer, more malleable. When I pushed the idea of a proposal because I was creeping into my late twenties, he took the hint and picked out a ring. Not the one I wanted, but it was close enough.

Adrian tries to make conversation as we head up to the roof, but

the voice in my head is louder. Hers. *We need to talk about what we did that night.*

There were two different nights, and I'm not sure which one she means. The one that started everything or the one that ended it. She never wanted to talk about either. Then again, she was the best at breaking her own rules.



THEN

I would be spending freshman year in the Butterfields, living in a double room on the first floor. Butterfield C was shaped almost like a question mark, hugging a courtyard where I pictured myself sitting with a book, wind lifting my hair. I had emailed with my future roommate a few times, but we'd never actually met. Her parents were helping her break a mini-fridge out of its cardboard jail when I first saw her, along with a younger girl who must have been her sister. I had just seen my own parents off—my mom would probably weep all the way back to Pennington, my dad placating her with promises that I'd be back. My older sister, Toni, had left for college at Rutgers two years before, but she was close enough that she still came home most weekends, bulging laundry bag in tow.

“This is your time, sweetie,” Mom had said before she closed the car door, her lips on my cheek. “Enjoy it. But stay out of trouble.” As if trouble were labeled with a Do Not Disturb sign. As if a sign would have kept me out.

I wished my best friend, Billie, were with me, but Billie hadn't gotten into Wesleyan. She was spending the next four years at Miami University in Ohio, which was known more for partying than anything else. Our friendship was comfortable—a bond forged in our awkward-

ness when we started ninth grade and our shared willingness to do something about it. Billie knew who I was and who I wanted to be, and she loved both versions. I had already texted her since arriving on campus. *I hope people like me.* Her buoyant *they will!!!* brought some comfort.

My new roommate's hair was white blond and her dress was gingham, like something I had been forced to wear as a kid to the Memorial Day parade. She didn't look like the girls I had gone to high school with, all of us in the same uniform of miniskirts and Uggs buttressing legs slathered in self-tanner. But she was exceptionally pretty—freshly scrubbed, wholesome. Billie would probably have given her a nickname. It was our meager defense against the mean girls at Hopewell Valley Central High. We studied them, then peeled them like overripe fruit in marathon gossip sessions to lessen the sting of not being invited to their parties. *My roomie is Heidi,* I'd text Billie.

Her real name was just as bad.

"I guess you already know from our emails, but I'm Flora." She gripped me in a hug. "It's nice to finally meet in person. You look just how I pictured. These are my parents, and this is my sister, Poppy." Poppy gave me a shy wave, all bangs and big blue eyes.

"Ambrosia," I said, more to them than her. "Just call me Amb." Flora didn't look how I'd pictured—she was a lot prettier. I knew from our emails that she was involved with student council at her Connecticut private school. She didn't smoke or drink and wanted to become a child psychologist. She wore her niceness so openly. She was exactly the kind of friend my parents wanted me to make. What Billie would call a *try-hard*.

"Amb," Flora's mom said, fixing me with a frosty gaze. "Where are you from?"

"Pennington," I said. "New Jersey."

"That's nice," she said, but I could tell by her pinched mouth that it wasn't, that I had already committed some kind of wrong. "You take care of Flora. She tends to trust everyone too easily."

"Mom," Flora said, her cheeks turning petal pink. "Stop."

Flora's mom looked like she wanted to say more but pressed her

mouth into a line. I rolled her words around. I didn't know if I had been folded into her confidence or warned not to be a person her daughter couldn't trust.

"We're going to have such a fun year," Flora said when her family was gone—she had squeezed her sister the hardest, whispered something in her ear I couldn't hear. "My mom is actually still best friends with her roommate from freshman year."

I felt a blip of excitement. It *was* going to be a fun year. I had worked hard to get here, to make things happen. To chisel out a Technician future, panoramic in scope, with me as its star.

"Your accent is so cute," Flora said as she tacked photos to her corkboard.

"Thanks," I managed, but I wasn't thankful. She didn't mean it as an insult—*probably*—but she had made me self-conscious about something I hadn't considered noticeable before. What I said was as important as how I said it. I couldn't be an actress—and I'd come to Wesleyan for the theater program—if I couldn't escape Jersey.

As we unpacked, our door stayed open, and people from our floor lingered there, making introductions. I smiled, returned hugs, nodded forcefully to *future* invitations to parties. But inside, I trembled. Some of the girls seemed to be friends already, with easy laughter and inside jokes from Upper East Side private schools. Two model-thin blondes were from Los Angeles, thumbing their phones, laughing about some prom after-party at a club where a classmate screwed two guys in the bathroom.

These weren't the girls I had gone to Central with, ones with Starbucks cups attached to their hands, who punctuated their vocabularies with *like* and *whatever* and one-upped each other with discussions about who'd made out with who at some shitty party in someone's basement, boys sitting around in sweatpants holding video game controllers. I had copied their hip-hugging jeans, parted my hair like them, saved a year of paychecks from my part-time job at the Stop & Shop to buy a small Louis Vuitton bag—the same multicolor monogrammed one that lived on the bony shoulders of celebrity it-girls.

At Wesleyan, I was ready to slip effortlessly into the person I imag-

ined I could be. But I realized that first day that *effortless* might not be in the cards. The girls here seemed casually beautiful in a way that felt unachievable, dewy and shiny without being overtly flashy.

There weren't just girls. Our floor was coed, something I had been happy about. The boys were a blur of darting eyes and white smiles. They probably weren't going to pick me, not when there was a better selection to choose from, a veritable buffet, girls served up all-you-can-eat, with long limbs and understated clothes. And boys were always hungry. I briefly pictured my high school boyfriend Matt, before willing the image away. I didn't want to taint my first day with the memory of what he'd done.

"You should come with us to get lunch," Flora said. "I'm heading over with some of the other girls. I hope there's something I can eat—did I tell you I'm vegan? I saw this documentary when I was twelve about how animals in slaughterhouses are treated, and I cut out all meat and dairy right away. It's really not that hard, if you're willing to learn."

She didn't sound self-righteous, just matter-of-fact. I already knew she was a vegan from our emails. But I didn't care about Flora's diet. I was fixated on her knowledge that lunch was happening, the reality that a plan had been made without me. I had been here less than a day and was already failing.

We all ended up in Summerfields, the dining hall that topped Butterfield C like a blocky hat, a big group of us pushing tables together. Pathetically, I wanted to call my mom and tell her I'd made a mistake. I texted Billie instead. *Help. The people here are so different.*

She wrote back immediately, like she always did. *Isn't that the point?*

A girl sat down beside me with a greasy grilled cheese sandwich, bringing with her a whiff of too-sweet perfume. Her hair looked like a Posh Spice imitation gone wrong. "I'm Ella Walden," she said. "I'm just down the hall from you guys. How cool is this place?"

Somehow the shape of Ella next to me brought instant relief. She was pasty and chubby and unfashionable, the proof I needed that not everybody at Wesleyan was innately cool. I watched her eat the sand-

wich, both jealous of it and judgmental that she would eat something so calorie laden in public when she obviously had a few pounds to lose. I hated eating in front of anyone.

A loud *fuck* made my attention jerk up—it came from a girl at the head of our table, with wide eyes inside a tunnel of black eyeliner, a blond ponytail, and an oversized button-down that showed her lace bra. Her eyebrows, thick and dark, moved up and down animatedly as she talked, a stark contrast to the maniacally tweezed arches that marked the girls from my senior class. I tuned out Ella and studied those eyebrows, how they guarded her whole face, a face that instantly held everybody's attention.

"Then Buddy was like, 'Please don't leave, I'll do anything for you,'" she said, her voice throaty and deep. "And I said, 'That's the problem,' and left." Everybody laughed. I wondered if they all knew who Buddy was.

"You're pretty," she said to the stylish Asian girl next to her—Clara, I vaguely recalled, my memory already riddled with too many names. "You should definitely be single here." Her fingers trailed down Clara's arm. I wanted it to be my turn, for her to land on me.

And then, like she could read my mind, it was. "Who are you? Where are you from?" she said, spotlighting me with an intense green gaze.

"I'm Ambrosia. From Pennington. In New Jersey."

She opened her mouth to say something, but Ella spoke first. "Pennington! No way. I'm from Morristown. We're practically neighbors. We should look at yearbooks later. I bet we have friends in common."

I bit my lip hard, wishing I hadn't said *Pennington* and wishing Ella didn't exist. The girl at the head of the table wasn't even looking at me anymore. She had moved on to a boy next to her, sweeping an arm over his shoulder.

"That's my roommate. She has zero attention span," said the girl on my other side, a freckled brunette named Lauren whose room was next to ours. "We went to Spence together. She's insane."

I wanted to know what she meant by *insane*. "What's her name?" I asked, but my question went unanswered. Lauren was already talking to someone else about where to get decent weed on campus. The

only person who wanted to talk to me was Ella. Between mouthfuls of food, she told me about her senior prom and her cat named Freddy as I feigned interest. It would have been easy to fall into a groove with her, to flesh out our similar backgrounds. But I didn't want to go back to where I came from.

When Lauren's *insane* roommate got up and left, followed by Clara and a couple of the guys, I swallowed my disappointment. I wanted to be part of that group. I stared at the can of Diet Coke in front of me as Gemma from Saint Ann's whined to Flora about her boyfriend at Yale and how much she missed him.

"I know it's hard," Flora said. "But he misses you too. Look at you. How could he not?"

It wasn't even what she said but how she said it. So genuinely *nice*. My spine prickled. Flora, in her babyish Mary Janes and high collar, was fitting in better than I did. She knew how to be herself—it seemed like everyone did. I only knew how to imitate other people.

Lauren surveyed Flora with interest. I was sure she would tear into her later with her roommate. But when the group broke apart, Flora gave her a hug. At first, Lauren stiffened, but Flora said something I couldn't hear—something that made Lauren's bored expression curve into a smile.

Later, when we were back in our room, I hung up dresses I realized were tacky and cheap as Flora unpacked photos of high school friends and her boyfriend, cheeks obscured by acne, even in grainy black and white.

"This is Kevin," she said, holding a photo close enough to kiss it. "He goes to Dartmouth. Second year."

"He's cute," I said, even though it was a horrible picture and he really wasn't.

"He's the best. I'm sure you'll meet him. He said he'd come to visit me all the time, when he can get away from school. It's not all that far. Less than three hours."

I imagined he had already cheated on her and she just didn't know it yet. Boys made us idiots. My mom seemed certain that I would find "someone special" at college, the same way Toni had met her boyfriend

at Rutgers: Scott, with his impeccable manners, *such a good guy*. But the idea of a storybook college romance just seemed unattainable.

“What about you?” Flora continued. “You have a boyfriend, right?”

I stared at the photos I had deemed good enough to occupy the space on my corkboard. There was one of me and Matt, his easy smile and the slug of his arm across my shoulders. I resented the fact that Flora assumed I had a boyfriend as some kind of certainty. I almost wanted to tell her the whole ugly story but decided against it.

“No,” I settled on. “There was a guy, but it’s complicated.”

“Complicated,” she echoed, as if she didn’t understand the word.

I had lost my virginity to Matt the summer before senior year. Billie had already given hers up and I wanted it gone, my stupid hymen, the arbitrary line drawn between girls who’d had a penis inside them and girls who hadn’t. But the decision to have sex was about more than that. At the time, I honestly thought Matt would be not only my first but my last. *It’s always going to be us*, he had said, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist at a school dance, my face hidden in his neck.

“You’re so lucky,” Billie used to whine. “He’s, like, too good to be real.”

But he was real, and he was mine. He was in my junior-year drama class and later claimed that he took the class just to ask me out—*I’ve seen all of your plays. You’re so talented*. I let myself thaw and trust him when he picked me up for our first date, brandishing flowers for me and a handshake for my dad. His fingers, when they veered under my clothes, were gentle, his voice questioning. The boys Billie and I had previously orbited around didn’t know we existed unless they were drunk and wanted something. I wasn’t used to being treated well because I didn’t even know what it felt like to be noticed.

I knew other girls wanted Matt, but he never even looked at them. He only saw me. After his basketball games, which Billie and I diligently attended in our Central colors, it was me he swept into a sweaty hug, me he kissed at parties in front of everyone. *Forever*, he liked to say when we were in his bed after school, fan whirring lazily overhead. *You’re my forever*.

I had no reason not to believe him.

“I ended things,” I told Flora, savoring the surge of power that accompanied the lie.

“Well, I’m sure there’s somebody better here for you.” She grabbed my hands. “Can I paint your nails like mine? Then we can match for the party tonight.” Hers were cardinal red and black, Wesleyan pride already.

I was embarrassed by my nails. They were never the same length, rarely ever painted, and when I did take the time to do them, I always picked the polish off. But Flora was reaching for a pink nail file, so I let her knead my fingers between hers and watched her work. When she was done, she helped me pick an outfit—a low-cut blue dress from Forever 21, wedge heels handed down from Toni.

“Are you sure I look okay?” I asked. I felt cheap and greasy, my hair too brassy, my skin fake-baked. Worst of all, I felt average.

“You’re beautiful,” Flora reassured me. “That dress makes your eyes pop.” Her words provided the smallest bit of warmth.

The party that night was in Butterfield A, in a double belonging to girls with fake IDs, which I soon learned most people already had. I spent most of the night with my back against a wall drinking vodka Sprite from a paper cup, watching girls take their turns retreating to a corner to dip their heads over a locker mirror, where I glimpsed neat lines of cocaine. I was too afraid to try it, and nobody offered anyway. The only drug I had tried in high school was weed, and all it did was calcify my paranoia that people were talking about me into a too-tight exoskeleton.

I saw Gemma from lunch flitting around the room in jeans and a white T-shirt that offset her peachy tan, simple but stunning. I suddenly felt ridiculous, sausaged into my dress, my makeup heavy-handed. Gemma’s eyes met mine just for a second before landing on my colorful little LV. Eyebrows raised, she turned away from me toward Clara and her nondescript brown bag. My purse was a misstep. The girls here didn’t flaunt their labels like status symbols. What had reigned at Central was all wrong now.

Flora left early after sipping from the same water bottle all night. “Kevin is calling me at ten. Want me to come back and get you after?”

"I'll be fine, but thanks," I said. I didn't want to be the drunk girl she cleaned up after.

Lauren and her roommate showed up when Flora left—fashionably late, except only Lauren was fashionable. Her roommate, the *insane* one, was wearing boxers and a ribbed tank top, no bra, as if she had just woken up. I downed another drink as she beelined for the cocaine, then started dancing in the middle of the room, grabbing a boy by his shirt. I saw the way she pulled back just a bit when he tried to kiss her, and noticed how she tilted her head, pushing her hair back to show her neck, grinding her hips into his crotch. His face grew more pained as hers got more playful, and the shriek of her hyena laugh was the loudest sound in the room.

I watched him go from wanting her to *needing* her. It was a transaction, her sucking power from him like a vampire. It was performance art. She had done this before, owned boys. When she finally let him kiss her, it was because she had already drained from him whatever she needed.

She pulled away from his urgent mouth long enough to look directly at me and wink. I smiled, then immediately hated myself for it. She had noticed me staring and would tell everyone how creepy I was.

I fixed my eyes on the ground just in time for someone to spill a drink on my purse. "Sorry," the guy said without even looking up at me. I felt myself deflate.

I unzipped the dripping purse and slipped my phone out. Then I left the purse on the floor, slumped beside the wall. I wouldn't need it anymore. Billie would be horrified, but Billie wasn't here and wouldn't understand.

When I stood back up, I realized how drunk I was. I shuffled over to Lauren and Gemma, hoping to gain entry to their conversation, but they either didn't notice me or didn't want to. I bobbed to an invisible beat and pretended not to care.

"She already fucked his friend," Lauren said. "It's some kind of game."

A shiver ran up my arms. I didn't know the rules, but I wanted to

play too. A scan of the room told me what I already knew. Lauren's roommate was gone.

Whoever was in charge of housing assignments had gotten it all wrong, because that girl should have been my roommate. Whoever had matched me with Flora instead would be to blame when Butterfield C became Dorm Doom.



NOW

To: "Ambrosia Wellington" a.wellington@wesleyan.edu
From: "Wesleyan Alumni Committee" reunion.classof2007@gmail.com
Subject: Class of 2007 Reunion

Dear Ambrosia Wellington,

Your ten-year reunion is less than a month away! There's probably somebody you've been meaning to connect with—now is the perfect time to reach out. If you haven't joined our Class of 2007 Facebook group, we encourage you to hop online and log in. You might be surprised by who you find.

Sincerely,
Your Alumni Committee

I don't tell anybody about the reunion. Not my mom when she calls to ask if Adrian and I are coming up for Pennington Day, or Toni when she texts me photos of Layla, my two-year-old niece. Not even Billie, whom I message about everything—Billie, who knows more about me than anyone else in my life. She would encourage me to go. But she doesn't understand. Her past hasn't yielded casualties.

Hadley and Heather, the only girls from Wesleyan I keep in touch

with, ask me in our group chat if I'm going, and I tell them I have something else planned for that weekend. *Boo*, Hadley says. *Justin will be sad without Adrian to talk to*. I check the mail in our building every day to snatch any potential notes before Adrian has a chance to see them. Adrian doesn't ask many questions, but when he gets curious, his need for answers rivals that of a six-year-old. *Why. Why. Why*. It's not even the insistence that I hate most. It's his simplicity, the very quality that I was once drawn to. His belief that there's a solution to every problem.

No more notes arrive, and I honestly think I got away with it. Then the past finds me in the last place I expect it. At the Skylark, where Adrian occasionally meets me after I'm done with work, making his rare pilgrimage away from the soft shell of Astoria and its craft beer. The Skylark is my favorite Midtown bar, my own glittering nest on top of New York. We're sipping our drinks—a martini for me, *just one*, Adrian likes to say, *just in case*—when Tara Rollins appears at our table. Tara from Wesleyan, who was assistant editor for the *Argus* and now works in book publishing.

“Ambrosia!” she squeals. I haven't seen her since Heather's bachelorette party—a boozy weekend on the beach in Sag Harbor where Tara tearfully admitted to cheating on her husband with a fellow editor—but here she is, and already, Adrian is standing up and pumping her hand with embarrassing vigor.

“Look at you. You look great! Please tell me you're going. It wouldn't be the same without you.” As if we were ever anything beyond party acquaintances.

“Going where?” Adrian says.

Tara laughs. “The reunion, of course. You're coming too, aren't you? My husband wouldn't miss it.”

I gulp my drink, smile intact as vodka burns my throat. *Your husband misses a lot*.

“Reunion?” Adrian makes the word an open wound. I stare at his tanned forearms, the brush of dark hair creeping up to the sleeves of his plaid shirt. “I didn't know—”

“I just haven't had a chance to talk to you yet,” I say, sparing him

the humiliation. "It doesn't matter anyway. I don't actually want to go."

Tara knows why but plays dumb. "Of course you want to go. *Everyone* will be there."

"It's our anniversary weekend," I explain. "We'll be doing something special to celebrate. Three years." Now is one of those times I wish I had a bigger ring to flash.

"No way," Adrian says. "We can't miss your reunion. We can do our anniversary anytime. It's just pizza on the patio anyway." He smiles up at Tara, all little-boy charm, as if she's going to be impressed with our low-key date night.

"Exactly," Tara says. They start talking like I'm not even there. It takes less than a minute for Adrian to mention his novel and less than two for Tara to mention Butterfield C. Anger surges through me. I want to protect Adrian, not just from the truth but from Tara's inevitable judgment of him, of us.

"I got pretty wild back then," she says with a laugh. My eyes search the room for a waiter who can bring me a second martini. "But of course, not as wild as Amb."

"You must have the wrong girl," he says, reaching for my wrist. "This one kept her head down and studied."

I can't look at Tara because I know what I'll see there. *She kept her head down, all right*. She's a time bomb, and I need to get rid of her before she detonates.

"Fine," I say, fingers closing so tightly around my glass that I picture it shattering. "We'll go."

It's only once I say those words out loud that the truth hits me.

I do need to go. Not for Tara, not for anyone else, but for *her*. Because maybe she knows something that will absolve us. I keep picturing her wherever she is, taking the time to write such careful calligraphy—so unlike her; she was always in a rush. But she summoned me for a reason, and I need to know what it is.

I said *We'll go*, but I didn't mean *we*. I rack my brain, scour the Internet for reasons to leave Adrian behind. Maybe this will help our marriage. I

can face the past, shed my dead skin, and come back with some of the gratitude I used to feel for my husband instead.

I find a weekend writing workshop offered at NYU, excitedly presenting it to him as a great opportunity to take his *craft* seriously. “Consider it my anniversary gift. Just imagine how much writing you’ll get done,” I gush. He’s almost ready to enroll when he notices the date.

“Not this time,” he says. “There’ll be another one. Hey, should I get a suit for your reunion?”

A message comes in from Hadley. *Are you guys signing up to stay in the dorms?*

I imagine it. Adrian beside me, holding hands on Foss Hill. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad. We see Hadley and Heather and their husbands every couple months for dinner and drinks, and the boys retreat so deep into their conversations about sports and action movies that they forget we’re even there. Hadley and Heather know that I haven’t told Adrian about Dorm Doom—at my engagement party, I said I didn’t want to taint what Adrian and I had with all those awful rumors, and they gave me sympathetic hugs and promises of *It’s not our business, we’d never say anything*. I could get through a weekend at Wesleyan. *We* could.

I let the idea marinate, cautiously. Adrian brings it up again when we’re out for dinner with Billie and her husband, Ryan, in Brooklyn. We’ve been making that hour-long commute from Astoria with decreasing frequency, and they never come to us because of *the kids*. He grabs my hand when we sit down, a small gesture that makes us a team, the way married people are supposed to be.

“Amb’s reunion is going to be sweet,” he says through a mouthful of steak after our main courses arrive. “Ten years. Makes me wish I had graduated.”

“Reunion?” Billie says. I take a swig of wine, the second glass Adrian didn’t want me to order. I can feel her eyes on me, the hurt there that I didn’t tell her myself. “Wait. For Wesleyan? And you’re going?”

“Yes,” I say quickly. “I thought I told you about it.”

“You didn’t,” Billie says. “You must have forgotten.”

She knows I didn’t forget. I picture the blue glow of Billie’s face

at the Hamilton Manor when we were drunk at Central's senior prom, her cold hand wiping tears from my cheeks. *Matt's here. With her. Don't look. Fuck them, it will always be us.*

I grapple for something else to talk about. "Your last post was so cute. The girls are starting to look so much like you."

Her pinched expression relaxes, but I'm not off the hook. She'll message me later tonight, wanting me to *spill*, like I'm a drink teetering on the edge. "Oh, yeah. I had to bribe Sawyer with cookie dough to get her to sit still. I'm mother of the year, didn't you know?"

Billie hasn't technically worked since Ryan got promoted into some kind of private banking job in the Financial District and she had Beckett. But she calls herself an "influencer." Her online persona—a blog called GurlMom that turned into an Instagram account with a following of nearly thirty thousand—is nothing like her real self. She's a paragon of the #2under2 contingent, moms who wear their babies like clingy purses over skintight yoga pants. They worship Billie and the state of pastel-pink staged flawlessness she embodies.

I don't have Instagram for that reason. Because I don't want to cultivate a #nofilter life, a pastiche of fake smiles. I learned at Wesleyan that people don't envy the girls who are the smartest and prettiest. They envy the ones who are smart and pretty without trying. Unlike Billie's, my attempt at effortlessness played out live. There was no delete button, no way to undo.

"I remember my five-year reunion," says Ryan. I hate him for bringing the conversation back around. "We stayed in the dorms and got shitfaced. I was planning to hook up with this girl I used to be obsessed with, except I barely recognized her under the bad plastic surgery."

"My dorm room was awesome," Adrian says. "It used to feel like a palace to me."

The palace of pussy and weed. Adrian fully copped to being a slut in college. He even told me his wake-up call was when chlamydia sent him running to the campus nurse, fearful his dick would fall off from overuse. It's one of his many anecdotes, which never failed to entertain me when we were dating, even when I suspected some weren't entirely true. Adrian is a bartender. He's used to listening to

other people's stories. It's only natural that he tries to pass some of them off as his own.

"The dorms were full when I called," I say. "I already booked us a hotel." Not one of the ones recommended in the email, but one farther away from the school, outside of Middletown, a more expensive Uber ride.

"Bummer," Adrian says at the same time Billie says, defensively, "Can you blame her for not wanting to stay there?"

"What do you mean?" Adrian asks after a silence that lasts too long.

"Amb's roommate—" Billie starts.

I cut her off. "My old roommates are going, too. Hadley and Heather. It'll be great. Is anyone getting dessert?"

Billie purses her lips. She knows I haven't told Adrian about my other roommate, so I don't know where she's trying to take the conversation. Her forehead would be furrowed if it weren't for her recent Botox injections.

I'm afraid of what Billie will bring up next, but then her cell phone chirps and her attention is diverted. "Fuck. It's my mom. She says Beckett's refusing to sleep." She drains the last of her wine. "I guess that's our cue to leave." Ryan waves the waiter over, scribbling in the air with his index finger and thumb together.

The waiter is mercifully fast. Billie's on the phone with Beckett, telling her, "Mommy and Daddy will be home soon, go to bed for Nana, sweetie." I chug the rest of my drink, and that's when I see her. It's not actually her, though. It never is. Deep down, I know this, and yet I keep seeing her, in different places.

In a summer dress with tights, a slick of lipstick when she wants to feel fancy. She watches me on my commute to work, fish-belly-white hands pressed against smudged train windows, getting off with me at Bryant Park. She's holding an iced coffee in the lobby of my office building, watching me take the elevator to the twenty-fourth floor, where the hive of Brighton Dame buzzes, where I complete my transformation to basic PR bitch. Her glare, the moment our eyes meet, splits my skull. The question she wants to ask. *Why?*

The therapist my parents made me see the summer after freshman

year told me something I never forgot. “You went through a trauma,” she said, a string of words she was paid generously to dole out. “You wish there was more you could have done. But maybe you’re scared to let things go because you aren’t sure what to hold on to otherwise.”

Secretly I was impressed that she had dug all that insight out of my silences and nods. The truth wasn’t that I held on to things. It was that I clutched them in a death grip.

I wish I had done a lot more, I told her. It was what she expected to hear. The reality is that I wish I had done so much less.

“Amb,” Billie says, smoothing the lace skirt puckering around her thighs. “Call me later. We should talk.”

When we hug goodbye, the girl is coming out of the ladies’ room, still staring at me, silently judgmental. She hates my lipstick. She doesn’t think red is my color. And she’s right. It’s forever hers.



THEN

My first week at Wesleyan was a twisted treasure hunt, different spots on campus marking the spoils. The girls were my new language to study, the campus my personal geography project. Stoli and Sprite in various rooms in the Butterfields, which I soon started calling “the Butts” like I heard others do. Olin Library, all pillars and light, where my body buzzed like a live wire when I tried to concentrate on my first assignments, too acutely aware of the people around me. MoCon, affectionately dubbed the Mothership, hulking over campus like a watchful sentinel atop Foss Hill, where we ate most of our meals, lining up for a perpetually wilting salad bar, my hands hot as I scanned the tables for Flora or even Ella, because at least I didn’t have to impress her.

And my home base—our room, Flora’s half impeccably neat. She had every color of nail polish lined up in a rainbow. “Don’t even ask,” she said. “Just take whatever you want.” I did, but not right away.

I had tacked up pictures of me and Billie and, pathetically, left up the one of me and Matt—the only one that had survived becoming origami in the aftermath of our breakup. We wouldn’t be together again—

not until a drunken mistake the next summer, although I didn't know it at the time—but I needed to look desired, because being wanted was the local currency.

I hated seeing his face on my wall, but it was the reminder I needed not to give out my trust so easily. I wouldn't be blindsided again. I wouldn't be the girl who believed her boyfriend when he canceled plans to go a party because he was sick. I wouldn't be the girl who went to the party with Billie instead. The most humiliating moment of my life, when I drunkenly staggered into the basement and found Matt's head between Jessica French's legs.

The worst part wasn't even that carnal image, burned indefinitely into my brain. It was that I stood there, shell-shocked, unable to find my voice. *That's not Matt*, I tried telling myself, except of course it was. Instead of hurling at him the wrath he deserved, I slunk away unseen, cannibalizing myself for my flaws, the ones that drove him to pastel-perfect Jessica French. *Of course he cheated*, I told myself. *I'm not special*. Every compliment he had doled out detonated in my brain. He had never meant any of them.

When Billie found me, I was a waterlogged mess on the front porch. She hugged me tightly and unleashed hell. "Fuck him, Amb. Seriously. Break up with him, and be really fucking savage about it."

We went back to Billie's house and planned the epic breakup speech I would use, all the ways I'd hurt him. I turned off my phone and barely slept all weekend. Matt acted like nothing had happened when I saw him at school on Monday, putting his hand on the small of my back and kissing my cheek. I couldn't muster the right words, so I pathetically repeated his *I love you*, hating myself more with each syllable.

"Are you feeling better?" I finally managed, blinking back tears.

"Yeah, way more like myself," he said. "I figured you were sick too, since you never called me back."

Now was the time to unfurl my prepared speech, but it was stuck in my throat.

“I wasn’t sick,” I said just as the bell rang.

I told myself I’d call him and do it that night, justifying it to Billie by saying it would be easier over the phone, but I didn’t get a chance to before his text arrived. *I think we should stop seeing each other. I’m really sorry, but I need to focus on school.* It was a fresh stab wound.

I finally retaliated. *You’re a pathetic excuse for a boyfriend if you can’t even break up with me in person. I know what you did.* But it was too late. My words had lost their impact. From that moment, I decided to use boys the same way they’d been willing to use me. If none of them mattered, I couldn’t get hurt.

At Wesleyan, I cleaved to whatever invitations came my way, not wanting to be chained down to Flora, who barely went to any parties, even though girls fluttered into our room to invite her. Every night before she went to bed, her phone would swell with Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing”—Kevin’s ringtone—and they would proceed to talk for almost an hour, hushed tones punctuated by the occasional soft laugh.

When I was in our room during the calls, I put my headphones in and pretended not to listen, but I couldn’t help but overhear. They were the most banal conversations, peppered with anecdotes about every single thing that had happened to Flora on that given day. MoCon’s lasagna, lacy noodles hard around the edges, *gasp*, not vegan friendly. The vegan hot chocolate her sister sent her in a care package. Something one of her professors said. Something I said. My name came up a lot. *Just wait till you meet Amb. She’s so nice!*

I tried to reciprocate her enthusiasm, but it felt like an inconsistent performance. To me, being nice was as naïve as being trustworthy, which had gotten me nowhere. Flora must have known the power she was giving people to hurt her. There was a danger in being too soft in a world that required a protective coating.

I wasn’t going to be soft again. Not when girls like Jessica French existed, smiling to my face and betraying me behind my back. As much as I hated Matt, I might have hated them even more. I was a joke they were all in on.

So I worked on my coating instead. I copied the styles of the girls from our dorm, girls prettier and more fashionable than me: Gemma with her ripped jeans and oversized flannels, and Clara with her miniskirts over tights, and even our RA, Dawn, whose curly auburn hair rippled down her back in a twisted current, miraculously shiny and frizz-free.

Before classes started each day, I fastidiously flat-ironed my hair and painted my face with tools from my Bobbi Brown arsenal. I resented how my clothes fit, everything so intentionally tight. My flaws were magnified in every mirror.

But I could overcome them. I was an actress, and I had come to Wesleyan to learn. I was pretty enough with the right makeup and thin enough with the right diet, but I wasn't *enough* to run off to Hollywood and live in my car, blow-drying my hair under hand dryers in fast-food restaurants between casting calls. I needed to truly learn the craft.

I had feigned shock when my acceptance to Wesleyan came in the mail. I wasn't surprised, but I felt the need to pretend I was, and I didn't understand why. It would be years before I realized that girls weren't supposed to own their ambition, just lease it from time to time when it didn't offend anyone else.

I was confident that I'd act in college, until I got to Wesleyan and met Dora from one of the other Butts, who'd already performed on Broadway, and Sienna from down the hall, who had shot a TV show pilot over the summer, and realized exactly what I was up against. I had planned to get a role in one of the Theater Department's fall plays. But fear of rejection, suddenly a white-hot certainty, made me skip the auditions. I told myself I'd try out next semester. By then, I would have studied the competition and found a way to stand out.

I didn't know how right I was.

Flora wanted to be a psychologist and to work with troubled kids. She had already become a guru for the other girls on our floor, doling out tampons and boyfriend advice, leaving colorful Post-its on

our doors with scribbled affirmations. *You can do anything! You're amazing!*

She paid special attention to me, wearing her syrup smile as she braided my hair, wanting to know my high school stories, maybe as an excuse to bring up hers. She talked a lot about Kevin, whom she'd met at the Fairfield country club where their dads golfed.

"Long-distance is hard," she told me. "But we're both patient. We make it work."

"Why didn't you apply to Dartmouth too?" I asked one day while we ate dinner at MoCon. "It's just, you must miss him a lot."

What I really meant: Long-distance relationships don't work. Or else, they only work if neither person is jealous. And Flora, as much as she claimed to trust Kevin, was jealous. There was no other way to explain the nightly calls, more frequent than bowel movements, and the ringtone itself. She didn't want to *miss a thing* he was doing.

"I didn't get in," Flora said. It was the first time I'd heard resentment in her voice. "I got rejected. I could have gone to the University of New Hampshire to be closer, but Kevin thought Wesleyan would be a better fit for me."

"He obviously wants what's best for you."

"Yeah. He didn't try to talk me into moving there."

I could tell she wished he would have.

Years later, I pictured high school Flora, sprawled on her king bed in her Fairfield mansion, private school uniform adhered to her perfect body, pamphlets for colleges spread out in front of her like a fan. The world, literally at her fingertips. She looked at the Wesleyan brochure and cast it aside. I considered how her life would look today if she had.

I formally met Lauren's *insane* roommate, the other girl living next door, during an icebreaker at the start of the semester. She was in two of my classes, Acting I and Introduction to Playwriting. She probably had the same acting dreams as I did, and she was a girl I could

absolutely never compete with—a graduate of the Spence School in New York City who had dabbled in modeling and spent part of her childhood in France.

Her name was Sloane Sullivan, but she told everyone to call her Sully. Her parents had obviously taken one look at their wailing pink bundle and known she would grow into a certain kind of girl. I had been saddled with ten syllables in total, Ambrosia Francesca Wellington. It didn't even have the decency to abbreviate well, so I was Amb, a pathetic amputation that most people assumed stood for Amber. I rarely corrected them.

Sully had her pick of friends. She could have been one of the preppy Butterfield bitches as easily as a WestCo hipster, because something about her defied categorization. She skulked down the Butts hallways in fishnets and Docs one day, wore sweatpants and a men's button-down to class the next, smoked joints with flagrant disregard, and was never not surrounded by people, girls and boys trailing her like a cape.

She had no reason to talk to me, because her charisma had already pulled in enough followers. But her boredom and my need for attention intersected at a party at Nicolson Hall, known as the Nics, a couple weeks into the semester.

"This party sucks," she said, migrating over to where I stood with Lauren and Flora, who had actually taken a night off from Kevin to join us. "I get bored easily. I think we should liven things up."

"Oh god." Lauren shook her head. "Please don't."

"I wasn't talking to you," Sully said. "I was talking to Ambrosia from Pennington. And you guys." She pulled Gemma and Clara over. "See that guy over there? The one wearing those god-awful khakis? That's Long-Distance Dave. He's the most pretentious asshole in this room, and that's saying something."

"You mean Dave Holman," Clara said. "He's in my stats class."

"He won't shut up about his girlfriend at UCLA," Sully said. "It's annoying. Let's do something about it."

Nobody took her bait. Except me, because I was hungry to set myself apart. Besides, I did know Long-Distance Dave. He lived in Butts

A and whined constantly about *Leslie*. The way he said her name, so cotton soft, made my blood curdle.

“He’s a dick,” I said. “What do you want to do?”

Sully fixed her gaze on me. It was like being anointed. The other girls were silent, waiting for Sully to give me her orders. But it was like they no longer existed, and I did.

The music got louder. Sully leaned in and her mouth buzzed against my ear. “I want you to get him to cheat. Tonight. Prove that he’s the same animal as the rest of them.”

I don’t know why she didn’t just do it herself. If anyone was capable, it was Sully. I was keenly aware that my reaction would somehow define the rest of my semester, but I didn’t realize just how much.

It didn’t feel like a decision at all.

“Fine,” I said.

Her fingers brushed my cheek. “*Showtime*,” she whispered, almost too soft to hear.

“Amb,” Flora said. “I’m heading back in a few. Do you want to come with me?”

I knew she was trying to give me an out, but I didn’t want it. “I’m going to stay,” I said.

I caught the judgmental flicker, the pinch between her eyebrows. Somehow, her disapproval emboldened me.

When she was gone, I knocked back a shot of tequila and advanced on Long-Distance Dave. Sully and the other girls watched. It was a performance, same as being onstage at Central, except with a much more critical audience. I knew that flashy displays of skin would be lost on Dave. The slaughter had to be more subtle. My tears, when they came, looked real.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern in his chocolate-brown eyes. “You look so upset.”

“It’s my boyfriend,” I said, burying my face in my hands. “He just told me he can’t do long-distance anymore. He said we never should have tried.”

Dave’s hand was reassuring on my back. He offered me a tissue. I

leaned into his salmon-pink shirt instead and felt him stiffen against my closeness. “That sucks, Amb. But you’re better off without him. He doesn’t respect you.”

“The fucked-up thing is, he was always trying to convince me I was doing things wrong. Like, every guy I talked to, he asked me about. He was paranoid.” I stretched the word into something grotesque. The same way I knew, from snatches of Dave’s conversations, that Leslie did. Leslie, who in my head became pink-lipped Jessica French.

“I’m sorry,” he said. An apology on behalf of all men that meant nothing.

I dug in. “Do you have any idea what that’s like? When somebody doesn’t want to believe you, even when you’re not doing anything wrong?”

“Yeah, sometimes I do,” was what he offered up, and it was enough.

It took another half an hour and one more cascade of fake tears for Dave to ask if I wanted to go somewhere quiet to talk. We ended up back in his room, which smelled like Axe body spray. He wrapped a blanket around my shoulders. I shrugged it off.

I don’t know how long I sat there before Dave started hinting about Leslie’s flaws. I don’t know what time it was when both of our heads hit his pillow, exhausted from our heart-to-heart, but not too tired for me to tuck myself under his chin. And not too tired for his dick to be hard in his jeans. He moaned when I touched it through the fabric, his lips finding mine in the dark. Even though I wasn’t the least bit attracted to Dave, with his bad skin and weak chin, I was strangely turned on by the time I climbed on top of him, bulletproof with power.

Dave came in his pants, which was both a disappointment and a relief. I slipped out as he snored beside me, sneaking through serpentine hallways until I was back in Butts C, splashing water on my face in the bathroom. Sully was barefoot in the hall when I emerged, wearing shorts and a hoodie, probably fresh from leaving a different boy.

“Showtime,” I said, returning the wink from that first party, the one I was suddenly sure was meant for me. I couldn’t stop smiling as I entered my room, with its neon-green Post-it gleaming on the door—
You can do anything!

Fucking right, I thought. I had never felt more alive.



NOW

To: "Ambrosia Wellington" a.wellington@wesleyan.edu
From: "Wesleyan Alumni Committee" reunion.classof2007@gmail.com
Subject: Class of 2007 Reunion

Dear Ambrosia Wellington,

The ultimate blast from your past is just around the corner! Don't forget to bring a camera, scrapbooks, photo albums, yearbooks, and Wesleyan memorabilia to reflect on the old memories—and make new ones. And remember your red-and-black best for your class dinner!

Sincerely,
Your Alumni Committee

Her name is on every reminder email, nestled underneath the Alumni Committee, bold in a way she never was. Flora Banning, forever a joiner, protestor of non-vegan cafeteria food and organizer of movie nights. I'll inevitably have to see her face when Adrian and I arrive on campus, her white smile and complete lack of wrinkles—her moisturizing rituals were a masterwork of skin-care dedication. Of all the people I'm going to see, I'm the most terrified of her.

But that's only because someone else—someone who suspects the very worst about me—won't be at the reunion.

I google Detective Tom Felty—now Captain Felty—on my work computer while I finish the leftovers of an overpriced salad I got for lunch. I look him up periodically because it makes me feel safer to know he's in Middletown, far away from me. His blue eyes spear me through the screen, as if he knows where I am. I still hear his barrage of questions in the police station. *Did you notice? Were you aware?* He wanted me to self-immolate. I never did.

I'm too wired to go right home, so I head to the gym in our building after work, sneaking in the back entrance, where old Mrs. Lowe always wedges the door open with a piece of wood to carry her groceries inside. I don't want to risk running into Adrian in the lobby. When he and I signed our lease, we thought we'd work out every night instead of sinking into the couch and turning on the TV.

I put in effort when we started dating. I'd shave my legs and hack away at any hint of pubic hair that strayed from the anemic landing strip I maintained like my personal secret garden, and we met up to jog in Astoria Park every weekend. We moved in together quickly, and that was when things deteriorated. When Adrian started leaving the door ajar when he took a shit and gained a bit of weight, a soft paunch over the front of his jeans. "Dad bod," he joked, except there were no kids, and he wanted there to be.

And I stopped trying so hard, too. Adrian didn't care if I didn't put makeup on. He didn't notice when I did. For once in my life, something was easy. But it wasn't natural. I didn't know who I was when I wasn't trying to be someone else.

I step onto the treadmill, stretching out my arms. Adrian once offered to get us a treadmill of our own. "Then you can run and I can write," he said. When I asked where it would go, he wasn't able to answer. Our apartment is seven hundred square feet, with just an arched doorway separating the kitchen from everything else, our bedroom attached like a tiny tumor. Twenty-three hundred dollars a month to have no space of my own, to brush my teeth over a pedestal sink furred with my husband's beard hair.

I start running, jerking up the incline to burn more calories. The TV mounted on the wall across from me plays a local news channel, the latest crime stories. It makes me think of the footage from Dorm Doom, all of us girls huddled outside Butterfield C, straw-pale legs quaking in the grass, a young cop telling us to *stay back* from the fluttering yellow tape. I had no idea I'd soon be facing Felty's artillery fire of questioning. It was my role of a lifetime.

My feet pound and I increase the speed to seven, heat radiating from inside my body. For the hundredth time, I fantasize about bailing on the reunion. Hadley and Heather won't stop asking me what I'm wearing to the dinner, and they're already making plans for us to have photos taken outside the wood-frame house on Fountain Avenue that we shared senior year. And then there's the note, already fused to my brain. *We need to talk.*

Why now? Why the reunion? Why hasn't she tried to contact me once, and why wasn't she around the times I tried to find her? No Facebook, no Instagram, no social media presence at all.

My sweaty finger increases my speed to eight. Her words chase me. *We need to talk about what we did that night.* They morph into other things she should be saying. *We need to talk about what we became that night.*

I have no idea what she's like now. But then again, I never really did. She was barely more than a stranger the entire time. A friendship that lasted just a few months, one that was built on the idea of us more than the reality. But my skin is still raw where she grafted herself to me, and I can so easily conjure an alternate dimension where we're those girls, the inseparable ones.

Sometimes I let myself live in that alternate dimension, just for a minute, the two of us in Hollywood, reading scripts, sun-streaked and starry-eyed. And sometimes I like it better than this one.

Despite my constant pleas for Adrian to lock up, the apartment door is open. Adrian is on the couch in his sweatpants when I return. Our faux-suede couch from the Furniture Market, the first piece of

furniture that was ours. The day we bought it, I didn't care that it was cheap, because we were happy.

I take in the detritus around me—a pizza box and beer bottles on the counter; white-handled Wüsthof knives cast carelessly into the sink; socks and papers strewn on the floor. “Didn't you have the day off? You could have cleaned up.”

I expect his typical refrain of *Chill, babe*, which I hate, because whenever I get like this—uptight and irritable—it's a reaction to his being the opposite. But he doesn't tell me to chill. Instead, he turns around and holds up a photo. “Who's this, Amb?”

I squint at the image he's waving around and tighten my ponytail with trembling hands. “Where did you get this?” I march over, plucking the photo from his fingers.

“I was looking for that screenwriting book you bought me last Christmas. The one about saving a cat. Some book was on top of it and I picked them both up, and this fell out.”

He's lying. He was snooping, but I can't exactly call him out. I chew on my bottom lip.

“John Donne.” I force myself to laugh.

“Who's John Donne? An ex?”

“He's one of the most prominent metaphysical poets,” I say. “The book is full of his poetry.”

“Oh,” Adrian says. “But you know I'm asking about the guy in the picture. Why do you have it?”

“He was just a guy. Someone from a long time ago.”

“A boyfriend, then,” Adrian says, almost jealous, which would be a welcome respite from his perpetual state of man-child chill if not for the deadly quagmire he's wandered into. “From college?”

“Not exactly,” I say quickly. He narrows his eyes. “I mean, I guess so. The book was from a class we had together.”

“Will he be at the reunion?” Adrian puts his beer on the coffee table. “This isn't a big deal. We're married. You think I care that you had boyfriends before me? I had girlfriends before you.”

Which he told me about in detail. The crazy one who tried moving her stuff into his dresser drawers after dating for a week. The one who

was obsessed with meeting celebrities. The one who still slept with a stuffed rabbit, which remained on the bed during sex. The one who only ever wanted to watch Leonardo DiCaprio movies. It was like he wanted me to know it was always their fault, never his, and see how normal he was? See how lucky I was that he got out of that thicket of girls unscathed?

“We were together,” I say. I need to hear how it sounds out loud, my sick little fiction. “He won’t be there, though. He’s actually—well, he’s dead.”

“Oh, fuck.” Adrian claps a hand over his mouth. “What happened to him?”

I shake my head. “I don’t want to talk about it right now.”

He nods. “I mean, sucks that the guy is dead, but you freaked me out with this photo. I thought there was some meaning behind it. Especially since I found this tucked in the same book.” He pulls out the envelope, my name in her calligraphy.

“Did you open it?”

“I’m sorry. I was curious. But what did you do that night? What night?”

I shouldn’t get angry. Adrian thinks he has seen me angry, but he has only seen the diluted version.

“It’s just an inside joke,” I say. “Something one of my friends gave me.”

He studies me for a beat too long, then picks up his beer. “Was it serious? You and him?”

The photo cartwheels between my fingers, corners poking into my palm. I don’t look at *him* and I can’t bring myself to look at Adrian. “Serious enough. But I moved on. I forgot I even still had that book. I haven’t looked at it in years.”

Adrian’s eyes crinkle up. “I bet you were such an adorable poetry nerd. I hope you didn’t get made fun of. Even if you did, wait till we show up. All the mean girls are gonna be jealous.”

Oh, sweetie. We were the mean girls.

I take a sip of his beer. He pictures me trudging across a leaf-starred campus, backpack turtled on my back, always studious, never late for class. He has no idea.

I can't change what we did. What *I* did. I turned into a monster, but the world knows exactly how to make monsters out of girls who want what they can't have.

The boy in the picture—he won't be at the reunion. I made sure of that. Just like I made sure that his girlfriend won't show up, and that I'll never see either of them again.



THEN

Long-Distance Dave was my gateway drug. I was certain that my boldness with him would link me to Sully, imbue me with a mystique that she would recognize as the counterpoint to her own. But for days, nothing changed. A few times in class, she would hold my gaze, but she didn't talk to me again until a party at Beta that weekend.

I wanted male attention, so I drank a lot, wore very little, and danced, letting my hands rove across my body. Lily from Butts C was with me, having been ditched by her own friends, her pale cheeks rosy from vodka consumption. I sensed people watching us and hiked up my skirt even higher. Then a voice that didn't belong to Lily entered my ear and a cold set of hands clamped down on my collarbones.

"You don't have to do it, you know," Sully said.

"Do what?" I tried to turn around, but she held me in place, her fingers pinching my skin.

"Bleed for their entertainment."

This time, she spun me into her. "You think they like you. Or want to be with you. But they're just looking for something to keep them entertained."

"The boys, you mean." They surrounded us, in packs, former sports kings with predatory eyes.