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Mine

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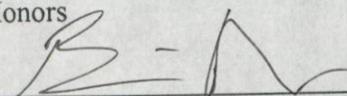
Mine: On Reclamation

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Department of English from
The College of William and Mary

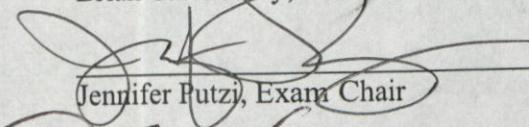
by

Brooke Garcia Stephenson

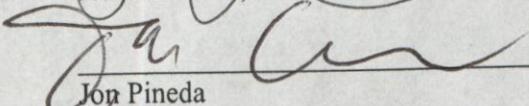
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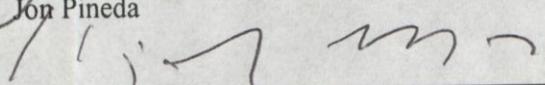
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April 12, 2019

1

It's October, six years after we first met, when Eva finally calls me for the first time.

Eva only texts. It's a fact we always took for granted. Something about the way her laugh changes in a crowd, the way she always answered calls as if by mistake, made it obvious she'd never be the one to pick up the phone.

I hate when patterns are broken, even little ones. Especially little ones. So when she calls I immediately get the nagging feeling that she's just discovered some way I've wronged her. I make a tally as the phone rings.

I told my mom, one damp night last August, that Eva had stopped eating again, even though I'd been sworn to secrecy. I hesitated when the boys asked how she was doing, how she was running, implying the secret of her vulnerability in exchange for their attention, my continual admission to the club. I'd canceled coffee that one time. I make such a long mental list of the unspoken promises we've made and all the times I've broken them that the call almost goes to voicemail before I realize that it might not be about me, that she might just be capital N not ok, and that's when I finally pick up the phone.

The summer Eva and I met and became close, it rained nearly every afternoon.

We were fourteen. Eva had just moved into the house three blocks down the road, a ten-minute run on the road and a six-minute run on the trail system that ran through the woods behind the neighborhood. We were friends from the track team in a way that still had some stiffness to it; we knew each other from big groups of girls where everyone knew your place, but few people knew your story. Eva was fast enough to be allowed into the center of things, usually

a quiet listener. It was only when we could gather alone, just the freshman girls, that she would finally speak:

Nathan ate his frog today in Biology class and Mr. Brewer made him puke it back up.

Everyone would talk at once, *Really?*

No way!

That's a lie, and in the midst of it all would be one girl who had also been in Mr. Brewer's class, yelling, *He only licked it! Guys, he just licked it!* But, too late, to us Nathan was the kid who barfed up nearly a whole frog, stinking of formaldehyde—but not quite the whole frog, Eva told us later, because he pooped out the heart entirely undigested, visibly nestled in one of his turds.

High school was boring, we were a tediously routine, undramatic bunch, and half of the stories we told and retold were true only to us, most of them spun by Eva, so lovable in her half-truths you hardly realized she was hiding behind them.

In the summer, running consumed us. We woke up and ran, on the steaming track or in the cow pasture turned public park, slogging uphill through the heat and the smell of hay. We did running drills and abs and lifted, and then dragged ourselves home to eat and lay in the air conditioning and wait to run again.

Miles in the bank, Coach said.

Eva doesn't remember how we started doing summer afternoon runs together, but I remember because I was the one who texted the invitation with a hopeful question mark and then buried my phone under my pillow.

At first Eva always took the trails to my house and I would find her waiting outside my sliding glass door, sheepishly waving. After a month, she would walk in, collapse on my floor

and declare that she had finally accumulated so many layers of dried sweat she crackled when she walked. By the end of the summer she never went home at all, and we would go straight from morning practice to my back porch, where we would lay outside watching the dark clouds roll in, eating sandwiches and snap peas and guacamole and whatever else we could get our hands on. Mom hid the pickles from us because we could eat a whole jar in one sitting, fulfilling some beautifully simple animal need for salt.

By the time we were stretching and groaning and lacing up our shoes for our second run, the sky would be navy, the wind picking up and teasing the hairs on our backs. As we ran, pushing our tired legs forward, rain would come down and the white lines of sweat would wash off our faces and collar bones and we would laugh and go faster. We leapt into mud puddles when the rain came hard and it didn't matter which direction the wet came from anymore.

The way we perceive our movement relative to our surroundings is called optic flow. At night, optic flow makes runners feel like they're flying because they can only see the things closest to them, the next tree rapidly disappearing behind them, the four feet of trail beneath their feet being quickly left behind again and again. Eva and I had a theory that in a thick, joyful summer rain, there was some piece of our brains registering individual raindrops as we blew by them, so we were left with only the sensation of being propelled forward at an indefinable speed, no sense of space or reality to limit our power.

In the mornings we would run with the track team, occasionally beating the heat when clouds rolled in but rarely outrunning the humidity, the fullness of the air that caused our skin to bead with sweat within minutes. On workout days when we gathered on the track and felt the heat rise around our ankles, all the girls wore an unspoken uniform, black spandex and Nike

sports bras. When I wore unserious floppy shorts or an off-brand cotton sports bra, Rachel would laugh and ask, lisping through her braces, if I'd forgotten what day it was, and I'd shrug and settle in for a bad workout.

Only Fatima wore anything different, half-tights and a long sleeve shirt and a hijab safety pinned around her neck. In the fall it was easy to accept this, but in the summer, when we all were damp with sweat and stripping off our t-shirts, her own uniform seemed needlessly, oppressively hot.

Because she sweat and gasped and beat her feet against the track, the team cheered hard for her, defended her against other kids at school that would ask, *but what does she run in?* But privately, winding the trails in groups of three or five, we wondered at her choice. Because we did not want to critique the differentness of Fatima, we defended her against her own clothes.

But her brother doesn't have to wear long sleeves, And,

She should be able to make her own decisions, as if it were not Fatima that dressed herself, as if the decisions she made were not her own.

The long-distance team used to take bets on how long team meetings would go.

57 minutes.

An hour and a half at least.

Before Coach walked in, the girls and guys teams self-sorted almost perfectly on opposite side of the room and the biggest flirts acted as ambassadors, calling across bets. Others would murmur within their group, and when an especially bold bet was made by an especially quiet kid, it would be echoed around the room, trigger a wave of discussion and sporadic applause.

Hey'd you here that? Tommy's saying 39.

Tommy, an eighth grader with wispy blond curls, shrugged in a vain attempt to play it cool.

Alright Tommy, alright.

Bold.

Wayyy too optimistic.

When Coach walked in, there was a discordant series of beeping, the sound of running watches starting time. He talked about drinking and drugs and cookies, all the things that could be your undoing now and in the future, if you weren't careful.

He flashed a BMI chart on the board, pointed to the fine line between the blue underweight squares and the green healthy weight squares.

Every pound you lose is 2 seconds off your mile time, he reminded us. High stakes.

He cautioned about venturing into the blue, took a finger, jabbed it upward to demonstrate initial success and then tanked it. The trajectory of a starving runner. Dance with the line, but don't cross it. Don't get to the blue zone. Get to teal.

And then it was done. 39 minutes. Coach had begun to set our world to new colors, added food to the list of things one could achieve or fail at. And in record time, no less. Tommy was congratulated for weeks afterwards.

My mom always told me I was smart and kind and strong before she told me I was beautiful.

As a kid, she had sported a crisp brown bowl cut and scabbed knees, and old women told her mother what a cute boy she had. Her child, Mom decided, could have as much hair as she wanted, and as a kid I kept mine long, a loud proclamation of my girl-ness. By third grade my

red hair touched my butt in thin, un-brushed tendrils. I would lean way back in the shower to see if I could get it to touch the backs of my knees. Neither of us knew how to put it in a ponytail, so when I played football and foursquare at recess it spun out around me like flame.

I didn't watch football at home with my dad like the boys did with theirs. So I knew a second down meant you got a few more chances with the ball, but I didn't understand how real teams settled when first down started all over again without bickering and pointing at different patches of grass.

When a new boy joined our class, he would pick me last for his team until the other guys taught him that I wasn't like other girls, that I was cool.

She's a tomboy, they'd say. A word my mom had given me, and I had given them.

My mom took me to buy jeans from the boys' department at Old Navy that hung loose around my thighs, and I slid for the soccer ball so often that all the knees were holey and stained green. I got to be a boy in boys versus girls capture the flag. Who wouldn't want to be a guy? They always won.

My dad would look at me across the dinner table and say, *Chase can really hang with them boys, can't she?*

As a child in a bowl cut, my mom also played football with boys and wore holes in her jeans. Who can blame a mother trying to undo a pink and blue world for telling her daughter that strong looked scruffy and grass-stained?

When, in fifth grade, I walked in on a group of girls lifting up their shirts to show each other their new soft white bras, we all giggled.

Chase definitely doesn't have one.

I grinned. Under my t-shirts, my body still looked like the boys', and I liked it that way. Nothing was weird or soft or floppy. I had a ridiculous little swagger to the way I walked that my dad loved.

Later that year, Georgia Ricardo asked me if I was a lesbian. And even though I had a crush on Sean Johnson, who had scruffy black hair and looked exactly like Harry Potter, I wasn't sure. I didn't know anything about lesbians except that they weren't quite the same, weren't quite girl.

I asked Fatima about her hijab one day when we had both drifted to the back of a big group of eight on a long run. I didn't usually get to run with her—even on days like this, when we ran in a huge group, jostling around each other on the trail, laughing and letting our stories mingle and overlap one another, we didn't brush elbows. Fatima was always at the front, chattering away with the fastest girls while Rachel and I struggled for breath in the back.

Why not take it off just for practice? You could put it back on before your parents picked you up, like Sim.

Simrah didn't run on the team, but it was common knowledge that she slipped her hijab off in first period and put it back on before she went home. Her faith was more recognizable to me, it seemed less constrained.

I don't wear it for my parents, Fatima said. I could tell from her tone that she'd had this conversation before.

I told her I kind of admired this external sign of devotion, but it's more like I was fascinated by it. Fixated. I kept probing, forced her to continue.

It's a sign of devotion, and like, self-respect. A way of setting your body aside for God. You're just not used to it.

I started to protest but she cut me off, told me that no one is used to it here. She said that in Jordan, everyone wears a hijab, even though it's twice as hot there. She feels lighter walking those streets, the weight of so many eyes finally gone. Every time she visits, some of her family asks her about the oppressed American women, pressured to walk around basically nude, told to give themselves to every man they see, told they are worth nothing.

I keep trying to explain to them hookup culture isn't the same as prostitution, Fatima chuckled, seeing my discomfort. I'm just saying, no one dresses just for function. Isn't it cold wearing short shorts to school when they keep the thermostat at, like, 20 degrees?

I snorted. *Yea.* Our high school was an icebox. The school made girls wear jackets over our tank tops, and sometimes I slipped mine off just to lay it over my thighs, where goosebumps were always rising.

So. She rolled her eyes, and the silence that followed held the stories she would not tell me. We ran on, listening to the conversations going on in front of us.

It's just kind of hypocritical, you know? She finally said. I don't know if she was still just talking about me, or if the comment was directed at my country, my culture, the drunk father at a track meet that yelled at his daughter to beat the terrorist girl as Fatima stood on the line.

Eva was the friend I always wanted, and Rachel was the friend I was going to have whether I liked it or not. She had brown curls, square glasses, square braces jutting out of her face, and a clipped way of talking, like a human telegraph.

She and I joined the cross-country team at the same time at the beginning of our freshman year and bonded over the fact we were a year late to the game. We strained, socially and physically, to catch up to the girls who had been running since eighth grade, girls who won state meets every year, who other teams preached about in their pump-up speeches—*catch those black singlets*. Girls like Eva.

By sophomore year Rachel and I were writing each other letters before races—I love you, you can do this, you are strong and you work hard and you deserve everything you're fighting for, so fight like hell. Rachel's hand writing was blocky and wide. We wrote our letters on folded pieces of computer or notebook paper, sometimes recounting the history of the other's season back to her, her triumphs and defeats.

I know it is hard, we wrote. We went to every practice, did every warm up and drill and morning practices too.

In hour-long team speeches we got a shout out for depth—as in, even our bench warmers are better than the other team's seventh, sixth, even fifth best varsity runners.

I'd rather be on this team and be one of the worst, than be on a slow team and be one of the best, we wrote.

I still wonder if Rachel believed that, or if, like me, she was just saying what she wished she felt.

We wrote, *sometimes you give everything and you still don't move forward, and that's not your fault.*

The letters proved that somebody else cared. They held back that whiny anarchist thought: *What if I'm just too lazy or too weak or too something, what if it's just me*, that, if given space to roam our heads would rob us of our purpose and our community and our hope.

Rachel was the first of us to get her license, and that spring Eva and I rode home from practice in her car every day, all the windows down. Alt-rock played on the radio—an overly enthusiastic drum beat, a mournful guitar in minor key. The air smelled of soil and fresh rain, and it beat so hard through the windows it seemed to enlarge the present briefly, demand that attention be directed only here, this moment, the breath of Appalachia being pumped through the small car.

Everyone's hair swam in the wind, tendrils reaching towards each other and then flying apart again. We couldn't hear the words of the songs but still they seemed to mean everything, freedom and the beauty we'd been promised—our own as well as the world's.

My sixteenth birthday was one of those humid days I left practice and entered the shower not sweaty but slick, like a reptile. Beads of sweat traced a path between my chicken nugget breasts to a space right below my sports bra band, in line with my third or fourth rib, where I crushed them against my t-shirt. Even in the shower new drops of sweat were condensing from the steam in the air, so as I toweled off I was still perspiring, panting. That kind of humid day.

Practice had been a tempo on the trails, shirtless as always, mud splattered, sweating. Tough but together. I wanted to lay down on the deck, to wait for Eva to come wandering through the woods always texting or looking around as if she'd just gotten there by accident.

Instead I wrung my hair out quickly and threw on my work clothes: an overlarge yellow t-shirt, jean shorts and flip flops. Moist blotches of sweat formed immediately on the shirt, which I tucked into my back pocket because untucked I look bottomless. When Jeff (son of Troy, of Troy's Auto Spa) looked at my tan legs sticking to the plastic chair in the summer heat and told

me not to worry about the length of my shorts, as long as he couldn't see ass, I gathered I was supposed to look hot, but not naked. Hot was a category largely unavailable to a flat-chested 16-year-old with braces in a yellow men's t-shirt, so I shot for cute and clothed.

I showed up late, because I gave myself exactly five minutes for the 6-minute drive, and on the way out mom stopped me for a picture of my first time alone behind the wheel. Yay, adulthood.

Troy's Auto Spa was composed of three parts. The car wash itself, the loud whirling, grinding cycle of spray, soap, spray in which the car is attacked by those swirling mop-things that look like automatic toothbrushes.

The guys, usually five or six with varying amounts of facial hair, who appeared on the other side of the wash when the car popped out and went to town scrubbing and vacuuming and generally giving the car a thorough once over. If the car wash was a toothbrushing, these guys were the dentists, picking out all the weird shit in cracks and crannies you didn't know you had.

And me. Under this strangely specific analogy, I was the dental hygienist, or the receptionist, or both. I existed in a little 5x5x10 rectangular booth detached from the rest of the building with a stool, two windows, a cash register, discarded cigarettes and an old computer. I sold the washes, pushed the buttons, and took the money.

Mostly, I just did crosswords, periodically glancing nervously through my window for approaching cars, sweating through my shirt. Occasionally I wandered into the main building, where the guys would be playing games on their phone and watching YouTube videos of guys getting socked in the nuts. There were only guys, since Jeff, son of Troy, who had hired me in a pink snapback hat that simply read *WHITE CHICKS* on it, only hired boys as washers and girls as cashiers.

Let me put it this way, they don't want to buy anything my pretty face is selling.

When the first car rolled up on my birthday I hustled out of my booth to meet it, retucking my t-shirt tail. As I went, I glanced back at the giant sign in front of my booth with all the different washes and their prices listed on it. The type was large enough for me to reference when I was trying to remember how the Total Deluxe wash was different from the Standard Deluxe, but small enough to confuse an old person, which is who I greeted now, a balding man sitting low in an old Toyota. (The difference between the Total Deluxe and the Standard Deluxe was the Total spit out a better kind of soap. The soap was better in a way I refused to remember, no matter how many times Jeff, son of Troy, told me, and with each customer I would make up a new reason—color enhancement, longer lasting, sun protection—that it was superior.) I was paid on commission, but my biggest incentive was that Jeff told me sternly to sell better washes any time I would ring up a Standard, and I squirmed under disapproval of any form. I sold balding Toyota guy a Deluxe, and he handed me two dollars out the window, perfectly crisp.

Oh, you can leave your tip for the guys at the end.

No, he shook his head. *This is for you.*

I tugged my yellow shirt out of my pocket and tucked it back in again, thinking of what Jeff son of Troy had said, of my legs, of what my pretty face was selling.

Eva was the first of us to get a boyfriend—Nick, the second fastest 800 runner on the team, tall and tan and lean. When it rained she would raise her eyes at me as he ran by, his chest wet and shining in the grey light.

They started dating the same way we all did, heads together on the back of the bus, whispering, discreetly lacing their fingers together. I kept turning from my seat in the front with

Rachel to watch Eva's smile dance across her face, until she rested her head on his shoulder and disappeared from view.

Rachel ventured outside the distance dating pool for Alan, a sprinter with a broad chest and dark hair cropped close to his head. They hooked up in the park behind the cross-country course, hidden by the slope of the field and the uncut grass. *What do you mean, hooked up?* I asked. *What exactly?*

Rachel laughed. *You know.*

Shirt off? Eva and I questioned. And when Rachel giggled, *Pants?* But for a long time she wouldn't say. *You'll think it's weird,* she said.

Mike and I started dating a few months after that. Rachel whispered to me one day after practice that he thought I was cute, and when I looked over he caught my eye and grinned boyishly. That weekend he hopped bus seats till he was hovering behind Rachel and me, and asked Rachel if he could have her seat if he beat her in rock paper scissors. She lost suspiciously easily, climbed out of the seat, and let him slide into her place.

He smelled pleasantly of sweat and a musky deodorant that sometimes clung to my clothes after we were together. I pestered Eva and Rachel to teach me how to kiss until Rachel forwarded me links to Seventeen's "how to" articles and Eva sent me unhelpful gifs of people licking each other's faces.

I finally learned in the same field Rachel snuck off to, sitting on a blanket in the tall grass. We stripped our shirts off and I lay down on his chest, kissed his broad shoulders, ran my fingers over the dark line of hair that led into his shorts. We kissed until I thought I would explode.

You're so hot, he whispered, grinning, and I laughed, unsure how else to respond.

My parents watched from the living room window when he dropped me off hours later.

Thought you guys were going on a walk. My mom said.

We were.

Pretty long walk. You must be worn out. She raised her eyebrows.

I shrugged and ducked into my room, stripped my clothes off and turned in front of the mirror, flipping my long red hair over my shoulders. I eyed my small breasts, the curve of my butt, looking for whatever he saw.

We didn't have meets early in cross country season, so on Saturdays in early fall and we'd run long—ninety minutes in the woods back behind the high school that curve up and over the mountains if you follow them long enough. The leaves had fallen early, were clogging up the creek and making everything smell like fresh earth, new decay. October in the mountains. We wore long sleeve shirts and shorts, our legs splattered up the back with mud. The leaves were orange turning brown, the sky was white going gray.

I was trying to ask a question about God, maybe.

So, there's one kind of smallness where you feel like, ashamed, or when you specifically don't like yourself. Like... yeah. Like this feeling of wanting to dig your fingers into your own chest and pull it apart, I said.

Pull it apart? Rachel interrupted, incredulous.

Yea, just pull apart your chest and remove something integral and just throw it away, just PAH, away.

I clenched a fist at my chest and thrust it clumsily forward, before letting it fall back into its natural swinging rhythm at my side. It was mostly me talking.

You would use the word “integral,” Eva said.

The interruptions were expected, part of the established flow of the run and conversation, the same way when we came to a puddle we all dodged it single file and then came together again without thinking, Rachel in front, always pushing, and Eva and I just behind, like a group of geese flying together.

I was pseudo-preaching, like I did sometimes after minute fifty of a long run, when the trees were whispering lonely things to each other and we’d played as many games of Kill Marry Fuck as we could take. (Eva always killed Coach when we threw him into the mix, even when faced with far less desirable options, like Mr. Taylor, the overweight art teacher with garlic breath.)

But I get it. Eva added. Like you want to crawl into something and hide.

Right, right. But the other kind of smallness is like, when you’re standing at the top of a mountain, or watching the sea in a thunderstorm, or when someone does something really really nice for you that you don’t deserve, and you just feel like, wow.

So small, Rachel said.

Like there was no way for you to earn that kindness, and no way to, like, comprehend that power in front of you, waves just crashing or the mountains or whatever.

Do you believe in God? Rachel asked.

Maybe, I said, because I still wanted to believe in the capital G goodness of things.

Well I don’t, Rachel said. I think people can just be good, and the world can just be beautiful, for absolutely no reason other than it is.

Maybe that was nice, but I wasn't ready to think that way yet. I looked across to Eva to see if she felt the same way, but she'd stopped listening. She was looking upward, watching the leaves cast shadows on one another.

So what was the question, Rachel said.

Huh?

Wasn't there supposed to be a question at the end of that long rambling Chase-rant?

Oh yeah. Do you think you could feel the good kind of smallness if you'd never experienced the bad?

I don't know. Probably. I couldn't see Rachel's face, but I could watch her curly ponytail swing as she jumped a log. *All your questions are like this.*

Yeah. They are.

Since she had gotten her license, Rachel had taken to lingering at my house after practice on Saturdays. It was rare for girls on the team to see one another outside of practice or school. It was rarer for us to be still, to do nothing. The time on the porch was sacred, stolen time in the sun, and Rachel wanted a piece.

She always came bearing gifts—fruit or fresh sweet bread from home or the latest team gossip. On the day Eva got dumped, Rachel showed up with pastries and fresh blueberries from the farmers' market.

Eva picked through the bowl of blueberries, ate the fat ones and threw the green ones into the yard as she vented. She told us she had snapchatted pictures—she just said *pictures*, with emphasis—to Nick on the condition he wouldn't screenshot them. He did anyways, promising to only keep them a few days.

He said they were 'too good to resist.' Eva chucked a blueberry over the railing.

On their date this afternoon, she had checked his phone while he was in the bathroom and found them still there. She deleted them, first from his photos and then from the deleted album. Total purge. And then she kept looking. She found photos from other girls, past relationships, and started to delete those too. She told the story in half apologies, asking to be understood, her head down, her fingers flitting anxiously through the bowl. There were no exaggerated details, no pauses for dramatic effect. It was not a typical Eva story. It was true.

When Nick got back to the table, he found her bent over his phone, selecting photos of other women's bodies deep within his photo archive and deleting them in sweeping chunks.

Fuck yea, we said. Hell yes.

Eva looked up from the bowl and grinned. *You don't think I'm a crazy bitch?*

The best kind, we said. The best kind.

He broke up with her at the restaurant, grabbed his phone back and drove her home fuming. Those photos were personal, he said. Private between him and the girls. He couldn't trust her anymore.

When Jessica Gray walked up to the boys after practice and asked to talk to her boyfriend, Garrett, Mike grabbed his junk as he walked away and started the call and response:

She's got him by the balls!

The other guys echoed, *Another one fallen, another one fallen.*

I caught Mike's eye and laughed. I was proud I was the type of girlfriend who never asked for anything, never demanded special dates or less time with the boys. I wanted to prove I wasn't delicate, wasn't needy.

Assholes, Eva muttered beside me.

Eva, never one to talk about anything directly, took to recording things in comic book form. She would skip into practice, plop down on the gym floor beside us, and whip out several small, folded pieces of paper from her backpack.

Is it us? Rachel eyed the papers. *Or is it more Kale Boy?*

We liked the ones about us best, stories of the awkward moments that came with growing up—the time Rachel lost the ability to speak near her crush, or I bled through my white shorts in U.S. History class. Eva drew my red hair and stained shorts with pink highlighter.

It's Kale Boy, Eva conceded.

Ba-ba-ba-ba! I wailed a sarcastic super hero anthem.

Kale Boy was Eva's super hero of choice, a caricature of her father, a triathlete and health fanatic. In Kale Boy's first ever installment, he could be seen flying around, his cape of kale waving behind him, trying to solve the world's problems. The first stick figure he came to was drawn with a giant frowny face.

What's wrong, gentle plebian? Kale Boy asked.

Oh Kale Boy, the stick figure said back, via speech bubble, *My poop is whack! I need more fiber!*

I can fix that! Kale Boy cried, and whipped out some kale. Kale Boy went on to fix every problem under the sun with kale, including patching a car tire and using kale as a net to catch someone jumping from a burning building (*Wow, so soft and rubbery!* their speech bubble said.) At the end of the book, Kale Boy was feeling very good about himself when he ran across his

last stick figure in distress. This one happened to have long straight lines of hair not dissimilar to Eva's.

What's wrong, lowly citizen? Kale Boy asked.

Kale Boy, the stick figure said, *I'm hungry*.

I can fix— Kale Boy started.

No, like actually, the stick figure said. For three panels the two stared at each other. Kale Boy's kape deflated slightly.

I can, he started again, but was silenced by a very "v" shaped set of angry eyebrows on the stick figure. *I guess I could go get Chia Girl*, Kale Boy finally conceded. The stick figure threw up her arms in disgust and walked into a nearby Chipotle. Kale Boy fainted. Thus began a series of increasingly complex Kale Boy adventures, which were sometimes nothing more than debates between Eva and her dad about the merits of attaching a BMI chart to the fridge recorded in comic book form. Her locker contained an entire shoe box full of Kale Boy books, as well as the lesser known adventures of Chia Girl, Eva's mom, and LazerBoobz, a particularly loathed 9th grade math teacher who frequently either forgot or refused to wear a bra, even under white blouses. Her comic book persona had the ability to shoot bad guys from lasers located in her unusually pointy nipples.

In this addition, Kale Boy was trying to coax a disgruntled Eva to go on a run while she had strep throat. (*Getting the blood moving will fix you up almost as good as kale!*)

Man, Kale Boy does it again, I said, trading comics with Rachel.

Ba-ba-ba-baaa, Eva trilled quietly in thanks. We all stuck our fists in the air without looking up from the comics and tried to keep a straight face.

Six years after we first met, four years after we could drive with the windows down, I answer my first call ever from Eva with concern, because that is my natural response to change. Eva echoes concern back, floats around the reason for her call. We let this gentle anxiousness hum back and forth across the static, little nervous nothing phrases, until Eva goes,

Chase, someone's been sending me pictures of you.

What? I say, trying to breath. *What kind of pictures?* But I already know the answer to that. What I really mean is: *How. Why.*

They're like, selfies. They're selfies of you, like, -- you're totally naked. Do you know this number?

I don't.

The man texting her wants Eva to send him pictures of herself, or he's threatening to share what he has. Share what is mine. He has more, he says. So many more.

I mean, you can't, I say, digging my nails into my leg to keep my voice from shaking.

I could...

But no. She can't. We can't. For me to ask so much of her would break our friendship. But how cruel of him to make it seem like a choice. My body or hers.

I keep asking Eva, *How? How?*

You've never sent nudes before? She asks. *Never?*

No, I say, and mean it. The photos I took were always just for me.

Eva stays on the phone with me well into the night. She sends me the two photos of my body he sent her, and when I start to cry, big wracking sobs that search for air and find none, Eva does too, whispering,

Fuck him, fuck him, fuck him, over and over again.

Both the photos are from last year, my first year of college. In one I hold up my phone with one hand while the other clenches by my side. I am a hard line made up of hard lines. My feet and jaw are set precisely as if I'm on military parade, my hip bones are unnaturally contoured, my abs hard and solitary. My red hair is cropped short, barely brushing my shoulders. It must have been early spring, right after I cut the weight of my hair from my shoulders to expose my neck to the sun. My last track season.

In the second photo my hair has grown. The mirror has changed color, black to white, so I must have been at home for the summer. I am experimenting with my new softness, stretching in the mirror to reveal new curves, cupping a breast stiffly with one hand as if I'm still unfamiliar with its weight.

The first picture was a data point and the second was an act. I didn't know which is more fragile.

After Eva and I get off the phone I lay in bed, unable to sleep. I want to scream, I want to howl, but my housemates came home while I was on the phone, so I keep quiet. Instead I rake my nails across the tops of my thighs until I draw blood. I open the album in my phone where I hid the pictures of myself and delete them all, but I know it is too little, too late.

I pull up the text from Eva and look at the two photos of myself he sent her. My skin flushes hot and red. Was he looking at these pictures right now, unafraid, unhurried? This was no sidelong glance. He had time, endless time. Time to peruse. To mythologize or debase or examine my body until he grew bored and set it aside like an old trinket you imagine you will return to when the mood strikes.

This idea of boredom made me want to peel my skin off and disappear. The idea that he imagined my body was his, so readily available to him it had become mundane, disposable.

During a quieter time, Eva sat on the porch steps, backlit by the sun setting into the valley. She took photos of the golden light breaking through the maple leaves in narrow golden beams. Rachel sat at the other end of the porch, wrapped in one of the quilts we brought out from the house (evergreen and maroon triangles), squinting at her calculator, notebook propped up on her knees. No one spoke. I could hear the leaves rustling, and when the wind picked up it sounded like rain, or like the forest was shushing itself: *hush hush hush hush*.

The spring after Mike dumped me, Eva fell asleep with her head on my chest at the cross-country sleepover.

It's like being the guy, I thought, and I wrapped my arm around her body and smelled her hair. No one had ever rested on me like this before. This was what it felt like to be on the other end of this equation, to be the one that sat up straighter, tries to be bigger, took up more space, wrapped around and brushed hairs aside and protected, gently. I had always been the head in the crook of a shoulder on a Sunday track bus home, pretending to doze off, smelling a boy's deodorant and sweat through his shirt. Eva smelled of floral shampoo and rain and something unnamable and Eva-like. When someone giggled and asked if we were cuddling, she stuck her tongue out and pulled me closer and I squeezed her back. It was lonely in the dark, lonely to hold someone as they fell asleep and I watched the ceiling. I lay very still and thought of Mike, tried to remember the smell of his deodorant, the feeling of being wanted.

Dreary days were doubly dreary at the car wash. Gray skies heavy with cold, wet air sporadically shitting ice sludge from the sky, the roads just icy enough to be salted. No one would be washing their cars just to drive them through the salt and slush again. It would be a

slow day. Jeff, son of Troy had already let some guys go home early, but he had to keep a few around just in case, and they were pretty pissy about it. No cars meant no tips, which meant they were pulling minimum wage to sit in the office and watch 2012's best news bloopers, which is what they were all up to.

Here comes the umbrella, one said, and sure enough a pink umbrella spiraled across the screen, whapping the reporter in the face. They all knew the video by heart.

To spice it up, the one with the sausage neck was eating onion rings and swiping through Tinder in the corner.

The girls on this get uglier every fucking day.

I craned my neck to see his screen, the pouting lips, the photos of tits in the mirror, tits from above—there are photos of faces, I'm sure, but I don't get a good look. He swipes past those quickly.

Dude, Rick said, and Sausage Neck looked at me fidgeting, playing with the loose end of my shirt, and swiveled his chair slightly so I couldn't see anymore.

I made the varsity team in the fall of my junior year, sometime before Halloween, when the wind had started to nip at our cheeks but wasn't quite biting yet. Three seniors had graduated, leaving vacant spots at the top for those of us at the bottom to jostle our way into. A new reason to push.

We were at a cross country course just off the highway full of rolling hills, a converted pasture complete with hay bales interrupting the course as obstacles. The grass was turning yellow as it grew colder and it crackled dryly beneath our shoes. The metal spikes we screwed into our soles for grassy courses like this made tiny impressions in the soil, like fangs.

Rachel and I were running with the varsity squad as a trial run— to see how we held up against a competitive field, our teammates who had already earned their place. We stood in our starting box like nervous race horses, stomping and shaking our legs and blowing into our numb hands. The soft baby hairs below my racing spandex stood up in the chill fall air. Before the gun went off, we huddled together, arms wrapped around one another, while Cat, our flat-chested captain with no-nonsense eyes, spoke.

We've done the training, now just let it work for you. If you can do burpees in, ahem, freezing rain...

She smirked at us and we all laughed nervously, remembering Coach cheering for us from his car as the sleet came down one practice last winter.

...then we can do this. Alright. Cat made eye contact with each of us and we began to sway back and forth as a group, one mind. *How strong are we?!* It came out of her in a deep roar.

Too strong! We yelled back, beginning to bounce up and down on the balls of our feet.

How strong are we?

TOO STRONG!

And with my arms around Eva and Rachel I believed our cry with a certainty that made me grin furiously. Whatever I thought of myself individually, I could believe in my strength as a piece of *our* strength. I could believe in us.

We broke apart, still bubbling, bouncing on our toes with nervous energy.

In the months that followed, I ran with Eva, Fatima, Cat, and the other faster girls more and more often. When we went out on a warm up jog I would invite Rachel along, make sure she knew I was not trying to ditch her. But during the workout itself, I suddenly believed I could hit

times I had never considered before, and I pushed to reach them. I was slowly closing the gap between myself and the first pack of girls circling the track. Rachel continued to line up with me for intervals, but she started to fall away from me halfway through. We would run the second part of the workout alone, one of us propelled by our separation, the other drained by it.

I got up even more often for morning practice, finally convinced that I was expected there, that I belonged. I followed Eva's black tank top in the deep lavender half-light of early dawn, legs pumping through our 30 second intervals, watching her fling her elbows especially far back, the way she did when she was really pushing. I tapped a feeling of raw effort and power when my strides grew long, and I pulled up alongside Eva, saw her glance at me out of the corner of her eye and then set her gaze forward again. I was keeping up. We were driving forward, feet smacking the pavement in a discordant rhythm; it was hours before most people would even wake up and we were just shadows on shadows.

Sometimes I wonder about the moment I became self-aware. The first time I looked at my pudgy toddler hands and thought, *mine*, the first time I ran, stump legs pounding, for the couch, and leapt into the cushions and thought *me, I*.

I jumped, I ran.

I don't remember that moment. I probably became aware of myself the same way I became aware of the space my body took up: slowly, then all at once. Slowly, I watched my mom meticulously log every calorie on her phone, typing away diligently, tamed. Slowly, I watched Eva's mom quietly set aside her coffee when it came with real sugar instead of Splenda. Watched that coffee go cold. Saw the note on fridge at Rachel's house,

Rachel, are you hungry, or are you bored?

And then quickly, so suddenly it broke my heart, I was talking to Coach, in the hall outside the gym after practice, staring at the white and blue tiles under my feet. One of my feet was broken. It was cracked, the bone was splintered but whole, the way you might find a crack snaking up old china. For one season, I had been the seventh runner on varsity, the last one to break through, to grab that lead pack and hang on for dear life.

Then the pain, the silent gnawing in my foot that I did not mention for so long because I knew this would happen, this talk in the hall. Coach was conciliatory, but not distraught. I never got good enough to mourn.

Just cross train like crazy and be careful what you eat. You're used to eating a lot, but nothing burns as many calories as running. Stay sharp.

Stay small.

The pool was a fitting place for my limbo. At first, I went alone. I woke at 5 to drive on empty roads to the rec center, hustling through the cold dark mornings to get to the moist tiled rooms smelling of chlorine. I swam the workouts coach assigned, trying to remember the lessons I had learned on my fifth-grade summer swim team.

Keep your head down, I told myself, watching the black line on the bottom of the pool and resisting the urge to thrust my head up the moment my lungs started fighting for air.

Breath out as you go. Slowly, slowly. Bubbles tickled my upper lip as they trickled out. I imagined a controlled leak from my nose, even and steady, for one, two, three strokes before I surfaced. *Go slow to go fast. Go slow to go fast.*

As a kid my instinct was to force the air from my lungs in one quick propulsion, to breach the surface with frantic power. I would beat my arms against the water, trying to force it to make way for me. I liked to pretend I was chasing an evil underwater criminal, that my fatigue was part of his plan but my tenacity was not. I wanted to use my anger like fire, like fuel.

Slow down, the young swim coach with broad brown shoulders would say when I hit the end of the pool gasping. *You're fighting too hard.*

As we got older, Eva started to talk about her body while we laid out on my porch in our sports bra. *I look like dough*, she said, and laughed. *You could knead me.* She sat up and folded over her knees, peered down at her stomach,

Look at all these folds.

I looked. But I didn't see what she saw. When Eva bent over her long hair fell around her shoulders, her hazel eyes were always curious, smirking, even as she picked at herself. Her legs, crisscrossed in front of her, rose and fell with smooth curves of muscle. The folds in her stomach fit together beautifully. They belonged.

Stop, I finally had to say. *Please don't say that stuff.* If she was ugly, what was left for the rest of us to be?

Going to practice before I'd accepted I was broken had been painful. Every step brought a deep, shooting pain. I fell behind on workouts; my stride became crooked as I subconsciously tried to lift the burden from my broken bones.

But going to practice after I knew it was broken, with a useless boot swaddled over my jeans, was even harder. Coach would drag me along to watch everyone in a perverse attempt to

include me. Watching them flash by on the track while I sweated pointlessly in the sun made me feel like I was rotting.

Coach kept a running monologue going: *Fatima always even splits, you see that? But I think she's too comfortable. We could get her a couple seconds faster. Eva's looked rough on that mile. Is she still taking iron?*

Yea, I shrugged. We all took iron. It wasn't always enough. Half the team didn't get their periods till after they turned sixteen. Sometimes we were still just... tired.

Rachel is looking really good. She's got a strong kick. She could be pushing for that seventh spot, huh?

The seventh spot was the last varsity spot, the spot I had given up with my broken foot. *Yea*, I said weakly. *She's strong*. The problem with working up together is eventually you're competing at the threshold between good and great and it is easy, very easy to get left behind. I had left her. Now she was leaving me.

He noticed my expression. *Just stay consistent. You'll be back.*

Back where? I wondered internally. *Back to the beginning?*

I stopped going to practice. Eva and Rachel would occasionally ask tentatively about my cross training, but mostly it was a tender subject no one wanted to broach. I couldn't catch a ride with Rachel anymore, so I rode the bus home, sweating on the sticky plastic seats. For the most part my seniority scared away the middle schoolers, but occasionally Joey, a chubby seventh grader who always wore a sweatshirt decorated with the cookie monster flashing gang signs, would pop his head over the back of my seat and fire something off like:

Do you know what cunnilingus is?

Fuck off, Joey.

Oo, you said the F-word... I'm gonna tell Ms. G...

Ms. G was our bus driver, a little scrap of a woman who wore men's undershirts and boxer shorts to drive and could barely see over the wheel. She didn't stop the bus for anything—even the occasional stop sign—unless someone drew blood.

Do it, I snapped, Go tell her I said fuck, and that I said if you pop up behind me again I'm going to play whack a mole. I picked up my textbook and mimed slamming it down over my knee.

Ha, you couldn't whack me, Joey grinned, his bowl cut sinking halfway behind the seat again.

I dropped my voice two octaves and stared at him till he realized I wasn't joking. *Leave.*

You said fuck... Joey sang, and finally sank back behind the chair.

I felt lost in my house in the afternoons. I wasn't used to being there when it was still light outside, when the day was still nice and crisp. I kind of worked on homework, but mostly I just wallowed in the excess of time. I drowned in it.

Even on the days I was productive—when I swam, did my homework early, read a book for fun—it was never enough. I felt like I was waiting for something that would never come.

I never fully admitted that the problem was I just felt unremarkable.

There was no hard work to be proud of, no *faster, stronger*. I was just a high schooler, with coarse red hair that was splitting at the ends, I noticed now. A high schooler who had run too much to develop the actual shape of a woman, but was also losing the lean athletes' build she had accepted in exchange. I was decaying. I was average. Average and vain and miserable.

The day Rachel started to join me at the pool, she leant me her old swim cap. I liked the smooth, clean feel of it, how streamline it made me. And I liked Rachel. I was grateful to her for showing up in a way I couldn't articulate, as much as I loved to talk. The chill tile felt less cold with her there. A shared austerity. With Rachel there, swimming felt less like a punishment, and more like another symbol of our parallel striving. She hadn't left me behind.

Rachel showed up to swim on the days there was no morning practice in the hopes that an extra morning workout would make the difference between her and the next girl. She had bought into the gospel of more: that there was no limit to the miles you could invest in the bank. Rachel swam competitively up until high school, so her strokes were smooth, she laughed watching me come up for air,

You look like a breaching whale!

But then she would soften, remind me how to turn my head slightly, how to work less for more. She was far better at this quiet effort than I was, but brushed it off, saying it was only because I couldn't push off the wall with my broken foot on the turns.

Don't fight, don't fight, I thought as I chased her frothing feet. Go, go, go. Even in the easy strokes, there was no room for rumination. Thoughts upset the balance, the steady rhythm of churning limbs. Thoughts turned my back crooked or sucked water down my throat. So I picked a phrase and swam with it. *400, 400, 400 to go.*

Don't fight, don't fight, don't fight.

Swimming never quite filled me up the same way running did. Didn't make me feel loose and free.

Instead, it became like a meditation. It was repetitive, it was steady. The calm it required could not be faked. With my broken foot came an unused energy that it clogged my chest and

made it hard to breath. The moments I was submerged in water, counting off my strokes like heartbeats, I was almost free of it. When I emerged, the calm lasted only for an hour, maybe two.

After that, different controls started to take over. In the single month I had been off running, I could already feel my body changing. I loved my legs—sometimes when I walked up the stairs from the high school parking lot I would watch them tense on impact, rest my hands on them to feel them harden as I pushed off. Now they were softening almost imperceptibly around the edges. My left leg, which carried the broken foot, especially frightened me. No matter how much I swam, it still seemed to dissolve inward, as if it were eating itself.

Stay sharp, Coach had said. Stay hard, I thought. Stay tight. Stay small, stay small, stay small.

I cried to my mom after the first few pounds. Big, ugly tears that made it sound like I was drowning. She held me in her arms for a long time, ran her fingers through my hair. Finally, she said,

Honey, you act like this is something you have no control over! Here, this is what I use. She handed me her phone, where a fitness app glowed on the screen.

I downloaded it, found a new outlet for that unused energy. Here was a place I could still exert control. It was math, clean and simple. I added my calories meticulously. And then, as much as I could, I subtracted, subtracted, subtracted.

The app gave me daily summaries that often prompted me to eat more protein and fewer carbs. I blanched at the idea. Carbs could be stretched, savored. A bag of baby carrots could be nibbled on for an entire history class, meat eliminated whole blocks of calories out of my day in

an instant. I liked foods that let me eat for hours, long and slow. There was a unique pleasure in doing the one thing I was always thinking about.

I was cleared to rejoin the team July before my senior year. I felt unexpectedly strong coming back. Coach had to force short days on me because I was gleefully sprinting every run, celebrating.

Still, I was nervous for my first 5k back on my new wheels. Coach had decided to rest Eva, now our top runner, in order to give me a chance to earn a spot on the varsity squat again. I was sick to my stomach the night before. A few seniors had graduated and left open spots, but those had quickly been filled by younger girls who had gotten faster in my absence. Rachel held solidly to the seventh spot.

But right before the gun went off to start the race, I softened. Everyone around me was vibrating nervously, jumping up and down and letting their spikes stick in the earth. The air was dewy, just warm enough to be comfortable in our tank tops and spandex, and just chill enough to keep me alert, jittery. To hear that nagging, *go, go, go* coming from my legs.

I should be grateful, I told myself, *just to be here, just to be running*. And I was. I grinned, purposefully relaxed my shoulders and patted Rachel on the back. *Let's go*, I whispered, and she shot me a steely grin back.

The gun went off.

Don't think, don't think.

A new mantra. I ran 10 yards behind Rachel, watching her braid swing. My legs complained as I pushed forward, but I could hear Coach yelling,

Perfect, you're good there, hold there!

And Eva beside him, *you got it Chase!* dulling the strain in my legs for a second. As it returned I thought,

Hold here, hold here, breathing evenly as if I were in the pool, practicing being steady. I help until I was at Eva's shoulder. She looked sideways and I glanced back, and we ran through the last mile mark together, elbow to elbow. I willed more from my legs and to my surprise they responded, and all of a sudden I was cruising down the last hill without Rachel, all alone. I thought of nothing except *hold, hold, hold.*

I collapsed at the finish line, shaking with relief. I was not broken. I still belonged.

After I got water, I asked Eva to help me find Rachel.

I think she went to go have some time by herself. Don't feel bad.

And then I realized what I had stolen and started to cry.

Eva wrapped me in her arms. *She'll be ok. You ran a great race! Aren't you excited?*

But I wasn't really. I wanted us both to have what we fought for. On the bus ride home, Rachel sat alone and stared silently out the window, running through the monologue that our letters had tried so hard to hold at bay.

I attributed the PR I set that race to my new weight. It was the only thing that I thought could've changed for the better during the injury. Coach called it my dedication, but weren't we talking about the same thing?

So even after I could run again, I kept an eye on my food. I stayed late staring at the ceiling, adding calories for lunch the next day. I stopped measuring out a cup of cheerios as an exactly 100 calorie midday snack (partly because Eva said it made me smell like a preschool). I

was far less tortured by donuts. I ate with slightly more forgiveness. But I had a new awareness that couldn't be totally unraveled.

When I complained I was hungry before lunch and Rachel offered me a Clif bar, I shied away. Too many calories to waste in one sitting.

The composition of all of our lunches began to change. Eva started packing raw broccoli and baby carrots, 150 calorie yogurt cups. Rachel stopped finishing her lunches.

The problem wasn't was that restriction broke me. At least not at first. That would come later, hunched over fractured legs on a college track. That would be hunger in another form, hunger as my personality.

The problem was it worked just like coach said it would. A few pounds off the scale, a few seconds off your time. If it hadn't, pragmatism would've beaten fear. Instead the two were married. Being small worked, so we made sure we stayed that way. I eventually tried to maintain my weight, stopped pushing for less because I thought I was close enough to that slim edge—a few pounds above underweight, the ideal zone.

We all picked different places to go to college—Eva went to run for a D1 school in the eastern part of the state, and Rachel decided to go out of state for academics. Our families all expected that we would go to college, and we had never expected we would end up in the same place. It wasn't something I wished for anyways—I was scared transplanting our friendship into a new space would ruin it, reveal some hidden shallowness to the connection.

In fact, that summer did the opposite. When we left high school running we left the petty differences in rank, the feeling of pushing each other down in order to succeed. What was left was a deep, unspoken care for one another.

The week before we all left for college we booked an Airbnb together by the river as a last hoorah to say goodbye. It was a 100-year-house with huge open rooms and antique furniture that we got for cheap because it had no internal heating or A.C.

We ran through all the rooms like little kids and leapt onto the big king bed together, giggling. The quilt was floral, pulled tightly across the bed, and it dimpled where we sprang off of it. We danced on the cusp of freedom, feeling the thrill of standing at the edge of something beautiful and unknown.

In that moment we knew we loved each other, and it filled us with a big yellow joy that burst out in loud exclamations and cackling breathless laughter and gleeful skips around the room that nearly knocked the antique lamps over.

We were outside ourselves, watching each other celebrate, and soon we grew quiet. Melancholy. We pulled the covers to our chins and whispered,

I wish this had happened sooner.

This unfolding, this revealing ourselves to each other. We had not even known that dancing with our eyes closed was a joy to be deprived of until now. Knowing, without having to ask or look over our shoulders, that we belonged, that we were loved, filled us with a stupid joy. We were briefly unafraid.

We put on a movie and cried together at the end. It was about mothers and daughters and growing up, and we all loved our mothers and did not want to grow up, felt confused at leaving behind a world we felt we were finally mastering. The other two looked beautiful in the blue light of the laptop screen, Eva's freckles bright on her face and Rachel curls falling over her shoulder in a wave of shimmering hair.

This is great, Rachel said sadly, and we murmured our agreement.

I wished we had met a hundred years ago. I wished this yellow moment had come at the beginning of our story, so that we could've had a thousand more moments in comfortable silence, solidifying around each other.

I carried the yellow inside me when I went to college. I signed for a college team in the mountains of North Carolina. It was a little D3 program, and on my visit they took me out on trails that wound through mountains that rose and fell steadily like at home. I thought if I formed my life in the shape it was in high school, it would fill with the same moments, the same beauty.

3

I didn't exactly find what I had hoped for.

Greg, my college coach who insisted on being on a first name basis, had incognito weekly weigh-ins that were not, for liability reasons, strictly required, but very strongly encouraged. Opting out was equivalent to admitting failure. He had a five-page, front and back packet on how to eat, including carbohydrate ratio guidelines (a low number), advice on how to avoid over-eating, a brief overview of the calorie-in calorie-out theory (the more you burn, the more you can eat,) and a list of prescribed foods that included chicken, broccoli, and infinite variations of the two—lean meats and vegetables. At weigh-in, Greg would stand behind the scale, watching the numbers light up the screen as each runner stepped on.

Good, he would mutter occasionally. The silences in between were enough to drive the message home. His eyes slid over the group while we stood at team meetings and I wondered if he was looking at the curve of my legs and my stomach, thinking I didn't look fast enough.

The BMI chart is bull shit, that's the number one take away, he like to preach. It was made in the 19th century to guess what an average person should look like. We were not average. We could go smaller.

I built on the restriction I had learned in high school. It warped, became something stronger than I was willing to admit.

And in the meantime, we ran like hell. We would do long workouts in the morning, pushing paces I usually didn't hit in high school unless I was racing, get a brief reprieve in class, and then prep for afternoon practice. I ran four, five hours a day. It felt like I could never quite get a full breath of air. My body ached for food and rest, and when I wouldn't give it enough of the former it tried to steal away the latter. I was constantly fatigued, dragging my feet. I imagined myself as a bridge built on collapsing pillars.

Rachel joked that freshman year was hard, that there were too many nights out, too many random ways to get distracted. Someone chucked the mounted head of a moose down the stairs of an old party house one night when she was out. She and her roommate kissed the same two boys in the same night and giggled about it afterwards. There were times I sensed the disorder might be too much for her, in the clipped way she wrote some texts or the way she left certain details about schoolwork out. But I could hardly see that through the haze of my own exhaustion, and I suspected Eva was the same. I had tunnel vision—if I just moved from one workout to the next to the next then I didn't have to look up and see that I was miserable.

Our college team attended parties as a collective— a wall of women with hard legs and a performed confidence I could hide behind, disappear into. Some of my teammates made the transition between athlete and woman fluidly, let their hair down and slipped on shorts that

revealed hips I never noticed when I was chasing their legs. Others looked slightly out of place, like someone had tried to put a crop top on a machine, or a predator.

I learned the taste of Burnett's vodka and box wine, to associate their saccharine bitterness with a kind of undoing. I told myself because I didn't go out often, when I did I could simply let go. And go and go and go and go.

The first time I went out without my team, I was still new to parties.

Still eyeing the guys at the door, briefly worried if they'll stop me, ask me what I was doing there. But I just got a nod and past into the kitchen, into the press of people packed near the counter making drinks and moving back and forth to the main room, where the music throbbed through the walls. I picked out the sweaty frat dudes who were hosting this party, all slightly more at ease, standing in larger groups than the others, and among them smaller pockets of girls wearing black tank tops that plunged to just above their belly-buttons, with straps woven back and forth across the deep v, or tight crop tops that hug their tits. Several of them wore glitter on their faces that makes them sparkle in the dim lighting.

The music, so loud it was indistinct beyond a beat that shook the house like a thunderous heartbeat, combined with the damp heat of human bodies, human wanting, made me feel like I was within some great beast.

I wore mascara, plus some other shit my roommate, Sarah, had put on my face, that had a heavy stickiness to it that reminded me of Halloween as a kid. I felt the same anonymity, the same sense of being powerful and foreign to myself as I had dressed all in black as a grim reaper, dangerous.

I grabbed a drink and found Sarah dancing in a group of girls.

Sarah kept a list of the names of all the boys she had ever kissed. Some people got their full names recorded, others just first names or simply a few memorable features. Afro red shirt. Goatee guy. Etcetera. By the third month of school she was at nineteen, twenty-one counting repeats.

She pulled me toward her and shouted over the music, daring me to collect a few names for a list of my own. *Your turn*, she said, and I danced into the mass of people sweating in the middle of the living room, trying to disappear into the crowd.

I met the eyes of a guy also searching the room and reached out to touch his arm.

Hey.

The moment was too quick to even break down into distinct steps. Our eyes met, and we kissed. No smile passed between us.

He tasted like beer, and his lips were thicker than I expected. They probed my mouth forcefully, and his hands wandered uninhibited over my hips, my ass. I felt a thrill at being wanted so blatantly, so unabashedly, and pressed myself into him. As I did a wave of hollowness followed the thrill, moved through my body and stayed there like a chill wind. I was in that mid-drunk space where things could go from being trivial to being deeply, existentially sad very quickly. There was something about this first anonymous kiss, after years of kisses with boys I had crushed on and misunderstood and loved both misguidedly and honestly, that felt distinct. That felt wrong.

The fact that I wanted, strongly, for it to mean absolutely nothing. The surprise that his tongue, pushed uncomfortably far into my mouth, felt not just undesirable but almost medical, a foreign entity to be endured and observed. The way that he had hardly even looked at me before

he kissed me. I had extended an invitation and he had accepted, and it wasn't because my ass looked great or my makeup framed my cheekbones, it was just because I was *there*. Which meant that not only was the kiss not about my body, it wasn't about me at all. There was some need in him that he was trying to address with the sloppy, almost frantic way he was groping my body. I pitied him, and it killed all the fun of the game of fishing for boys.

When I dislodged myself and turned to go, the crowd blocked my way, and the guy kept his hand on my hips, pulling my butt into his crotch like so many of the other couples around the room. I moved my body against his to stall, relieved at least to be free of the kiss. His hands slid further inward, held me tighter, moved closer to my crotch. I froze. I couldn't see Sarah in the crowd. Across the room a girl danced on a guy while he massaged her boob from behind. No one saw me, because I belonged.

I was beautifully anonymous.

I had approached this guy, implied that I wanted him, and now I was lodged squarely between a feeling of obligation to maintain this lie and a desire to flee. I kept dancing as his hand moved beneath the button of my jeans to rest on my underwear. The room roared while he thumbed the lacy band, slipped his fingers to the skin underneath, which was stubbly because I had been putting off shaving. The embarrassing intimacy of that detail was what finally allowed me to take a step forward, push out, and say,

I-have-to-run-to-the-bathroom, blushing, before fumbling away through the crowd.

I did go to the bathroom. I rested my elbows on my knees, waited for the room to stop its slow circular swaying. The shower curtains were surreally childish, covered in cartoon fish. I grabbed a chunk of hair in each fist and pulled till I felt a hard sting in my scalp, a release of tension as a few hairs came free.

I sat on the toilet so long my feet went numb. I dwelled not on the moment he toyed with my waistband, but the ten thick seconds afterwards I did not move. The time I gave him to explore.

As freshman year progressed, I often told people I had forgotten to eat, and simultaneously loathed anyone who said the same and seemed to mean it. Who actually forgot to eat? My appetite consumed me. I didn't realize hunger could be so big, so wide. It always seemed to win. I spent hours adding and subtracting macros and calories in my head, bargaining with myself about what I could eat now and what I should save for later. If I could just wait till dinner, I might be able to go to bed full enough to sleep. And if I could keep dinner small, then I would hit that golden calorie deficit by an even bigger margin.

But I would break and buy muffins or tall sandwiches with mayo and white bread from the local coffee shop and obsess about it afterwards, calculating and recalculating the number of calories I had spent. I called it cheating, indulging. I used the words I learned from my coaches and my friends and our mothers, the language that pitted us against our hunger.

Over time, I became obsessed with my teammates' painfully efficient look—every pound seemed to be a muscle pushing them forward or a vital organ, without an extra ounce anywhere. Their legs were like pistons set so far apart that shorts of any size hung off them. It became miserable to attend parties with them—every girl wore crop tops that displayed flat stomachs ridged with abs, tiny shorts—the usual college uniform on a set of elite mannequins, each harder and more flawless in my eyes than the last.

I started taking pictures of my body, locking the door to my dorm room and then standing naked in front of the mirror. I lifted my phone from my bedside table and leveled it at my reflection, so the image of my body appeared twice over, my breasts shallow, my thighs lean and distinct. My legs were still my favorite part of my body, and I kept returning to the mirror, to the photos, to see if my stomach and hips had finally begun to emulate my legs' tight strength.

I had rules for my photos: I was not allowed to flex my muscles or angle my body or suck in my stomach for the photos. The record had to be consistent. I saved them in a folder titled *Freshman Progress* buried deep in my photos app with practiced ease. A title too neutral to provoke attention, I thought.

For a long time after I took my daily picture, I stayed in front of the mirror, berating myself for the body I lived in. Every curve, every fold, had become a sign of weakness. I worried I would never feel strong again.

The few girls on the team who were slightly fat—*no, normal, normal*—I thought, even as I tugged at my fat—*not fat, skin*—didn't stick around long or were extraordinarily fast. Results were the only thing that could keep Greg off your back. You could be slow or you could be big, but you couldn't be both.

It was my diet that finally broke me, that ran cracks through my bones over and over again until tears welled in my eyes when I tried to open up my stride and let loose on one of the quick sprints through the woods I used to love.

But at the time, all I could think of was all the tiny, hard women on my team that hadn't broken yet. I saw all my failures lined up, one after the next, like participants in a sad military parade. My body still didn't look like the girls on my team, I thought. It was an ever-extending

challenge—if only I could lose more, be less, then I would finally stop breaking, finally earn my right to line up with them and square my shoulders and belong.

My races got worse and worse. Greg gave me separate workouts to do after each new fracture, apart from the team, doing laps alone on the track.

This is what he does, an older girl told me, *when he wants someone gone*. He wasn't building me up, he was pushing me out.

I would push past the point of true, deep discomfort into outright pain, the edge of my vision blackening, and still feel my legs moving slower and slower. The place I had always found my strength was robbing me of it. I clung to my cracking legs and empty miles because if I caved and quit, I was worried I would never quite be...enough again. I knew how to build back from an injury. But if I willingly let go entirely, there might be nothing left to me.

I hung on so long that by the time I finally did leave, it didn't feel like a choice. Greg pulled my scholarship, and I finally gave. I was too deeply tired to fight any longer, and I finally ditched the evil I knew for the evil I didn't.

I quit the team March of my freshman year and then held my breath, waiting to see if anything would be left to fill its place.

Nothing jumped in immediately to fill the void that running left. My doctors told me not to run, to give my body a chance to rest after all the injuries. I found that the same restless energy that had overtaken my body during my high school injury had returned, only now it was coupled with a heavy fatigue that went beyond apathy. I couldn't bring myself to embrace swimming, my old stress relief. I could barely do enough schoolwork to pass my classes.

I wasn't just indifferent. I hated myself with a certainty that dulled every moment, every desire. I finally started to eat—but not sandwiches and snap peas and guacamole, not the food I had loved before I took it away. I ate the food I had learned to fear and crave the most when I was truly starving myself. I ate chips and donuts and pastries and ice cream with a vacant look on my face, shoveling food into my mouth anxiously. I was too broken to quiet my anxious, shaking hands with movement, and so I tried instead to silence them with food.

But the monsters that spoke *failure* in the voices of my mentors still lived, so when I did not binge I hardly ate at all, in an attempt to make up for the day before. The photos I took of my body increased, they became a special kind of punishment as I grew larger.

The more I stared at them, the more I hated myself.

It would have been kind to myself to eat like a child again, to eat enough, to eat without a second thought food that made me feel strong, food that made me happy. But I had forgotten so many things—too many things, I worried. I had forgotten how to know when I was full, how to look at food as simple, without the baggage I assigned it. I had forgotten how to be kind to myself or the body lived in. I had forgotten why I would want to.

That spring, there was a historically long, uninterrupted series of intoxicatingly pleasant 80-degree days. The campus exploded with life. Even some of the nocturnal drug connoisseurs took to driving around in a SUV with the windows down, drinking cheap beer and passing around a dab pen.

One afternoon I drifted restlessly into a day party at the track house, where I was still well-known enough to be welcome. Skinny boys were drinking beer on old couches and lawn

chairs in the backyard and tending to a bonfire. A guy with a sharp jaw line and blond hair wielding a hammer in one hand and a forty in the other waved me in.

Come play stump! We've got room for another nail.

His name was Jason, and he stood behind me while I gripped the hammer, talking me through the throw, repositioning my fingers with his own. The premise of stump was simple. Every player took a nail and dug its tip into the surface of the stump, so it stood upright. Everyone got a chance to toss the hammer into the air—the higher the toss, the higher the number of rotations, the more times you were allowed to hammer another player's nail. If your nail was hit, you drank. If you dropped the hammer, you drank. If your nail got entirely buried into the stump, you drank a lot.

When Jason eventually said, *it's kind of an art*, I rolled my eyes and he laughed at himself and backed away.

Later, after everyone else had left, we sat on the sagging orange couch, using the constellations as an excuse to lean into each other, the outsides of our thighs touching in an open question.

Look, I said. The seven sisters.

Do you have sisters? Jason said, and I thought of Eva laying on Rachel's stomach on the bed of that old house.

We whispered about running—he had tried to walk on to the team and had been rejected. He joked that he was retired, that he practically lived on this couch the nights they had parties.

They probably never had a spot for me in the first place. His laugh never reached his eyes.

I liked that he didn't hesitate before he kissed me. He put his hands on my hips and ran them upward. Outlined me. When he lifted my shirt to touch me I pulled it off for him and tossed it in the grass. We kissed loosely, drunkenly, fumbling unembarrassed in the dark.

When he started to work his zipper loose and push my hand towards his crotch, I whispered, *Not right now*. His hand left mine and then returned. And returned again.

Each time it was harder to repeat, each time his silence made me smaller. *No*, I whispered, barely audible. *Not yet*,

No.

Please. He was boozy, smirking and pleading, all at once. It was so late. When did it get so late?

No, I said, softer than before. Could he even hear me?

You're so hot. He said, just like Mike had, except now it was an excuse, not a compliment. He tried to smile again, kissed my neck. *Come on, don't leave me with blue balls*.

I'm sorry, I said, and finally my voice was clear as I pulled away. What did it mean to find my voice in an apology? Why did it come so easily? *Can we just keep making out?* I leaned in to kiss his neck but pulled away when he didn't respond. His body had stiffened and the air around him seemed taut. His eyes seemed to have sobered instantly. Hardened.

It's fine, he said, not looking at me. *I'm going to bed*. He walked into the house without looking back.

I picked my shirt up from the grass and crumpled beer bottles and walked home in the dark, my arms crossed over my chest, shivering in the warm air.

When, slowly, my legs started to heal, I still found it difficult to leave the dorm to go on runs. Running alone had always been something I did when I felt energetic, when I felt like I had no choice but to bounce out the door. The days I was tired I ran with Eva, distracting myself with conversation, pulling myself forward with her momentum.

But there was no Eva here. There were no days I felt energetic. So when Jason invited me to go on runs with him, I agreed. Whatever it took, I needed to leave my dorm room.

I think I'm finally learning to handle my depression, he opened conversation one day while we jogged down Main Street. *But every time I think I'm handling it, I'm not handling it. I mean, I'm fine, but it would be good to eventually be different.*

Different how? I asked.

Not depressed!

I thought you were saying you were handling it?

Yea, like I don't lay in my bed and play video games for five hours at a time and eat Cook Out and text my ex anymore.

So, that's good...? I said impatiently, waving him along with my hands.

Yea, but I still want to! He grinned. It was one of those jokes that's blatantly not a joke. He'd gotten a lot blunter since he determined I probably wouldn't have sex with him, but he still kept his cries for help thinly veiled. He spiraled off on a tangent about Tinder conversations and jokes about the me too movement, which, unsurprisingly, didn't go over well with the girl he was messaging.

It was a joke, he said. *Jesus. This is why I need to buy a golden retriever and move to a cabin in the woods by myself. Love is an illusion.*

I think love is a choice. I said, half to myself. *You know, something that you have to actively choose to buy into—*

A choice to believe in an illusion. He cut me off, waving a finger around with fake bravado.

I was silent for a few seconds.

What? He probed, always looking for a reaction.

Can you at least try to be less depressing?

Listen, maybe if I weren't so permanently fucked up by the crushing rejection you dealt me sophomore year... He laughed. My chest tightened, and I went silent. I was willing to forget it. I was willing to be the cool girl, to let it roll off my back. But he wouldn't let it go. This was not the first time he had brought up that night.

I know, I know, you weren't into the hook up thing then. What can I say, I have a thing for the unavailable types. He side eyed me, smirking, waiting for me to get in on the joke that is also simultaneously a cowardly pick up line. One more opportunity for me to let him back in the door. *I like a little give and take.*

Give and take as in, the girl says no and you say, pretty please I have a boner? My tone was colder than I expected.

Now there's a me too joke, he said half-jokingly.

I grunted.

Geez you're feisty today. He glanced at the set in my jaw and read that that wasn't landing well.

Hey, really though, I was a fucking drunk idiot. I listened though, didn't I?

Yea, you listened, I conceded. It's the most honest he has sounded in a long time. The regret in his voice made me pause and say, *We're good, we're good.*

He remained unusually serious, looking at my face for clues that I was ok. *And you know I'm kidding, I'm not actually mad about that at all, that was totally reasonable. I'm not actually crushed.* I nodded, felt my eyes getting hot. It is, ridiculously, the first time in months I felt like someone cared about me.

Then he cracked a grin again and the tone of the conversation swung away again. *You know why I'm not crushed?*

Jesus, I'm going to regret this. Why?

Because I just got another Tinder notification! He held up his phone for me to see as he ran. *The fragile male ego will live to fight another day!* He pumped his fist.

I rolled my eyes, but more like a disappointed but amused mother. All the fight had gone out of me. I was letting him off the hook, again. He saw and grinned toothily back at me.

A mouse pulled a parm bite twice its size through that hole last week, Jason said, and pointed to the wall and laughed. It was the first time I'd been to his place. He had been trying to manage my expectations all week, first about the frat house he lived in, which still had a liling cedar tree out front from Christmas, decorated with beer cans and parm bite boxes and an old flip flop, and then about his roommates, Ryan and Greg.

They're not really, uh, your types of people, he had told me.

What's that supposed to mean?

Like, you know. Super... PC.

I can talk to republicans. I'm not like, frothing at the mouth or anything.

No, just... he had shrugged, as if to say, *if you say so. You'll see.*

We were going to make dinner together, but his roommates were already in the kitchen, in the midst of a heated argument. They were comically juxtaposed, like two henchmen in a cartoon. Ryan looked like a sausage with blond curls—he had grown vaguely cylindrical as his beer gut grew. Greg was stick thin, with a quiet intensity, harsh cheekbones and an almost aggressively large nose.

Jason! Ryan yelled as we walked in. *We need to ask you a question.* He spoke to Jason but cast quick glances back at me as he spoke. *In the course of your young, twenty-year-old life, have you ever been sent a nudey-picture from a woman?*

The childishness of the language made me cringe. Jason flinched, and then cast me a knowing glance, as if to say: *Told you.*

He had, he admitted. Further questioning revealed he had saved them too, and that they remained on his computer somewhere, although he claimed he no longer looked at them in voice that was just slightly too clipped, too casual. The way the suspect in a tv show says, *Yea, we were friends*, when asked about his relationship with the victim.

See, I fucking told you, Ryan said to Greg. *I'm not saying you're like, still jerking off to these pictures, but no one goes through and deletes every single one. That would take forever.*

Greg countered. *He's trying to tone down the real argument here. You can answer this too—he pointed at me—Is it weird that he has pictures of a dozen random girls on his computer?*

A dozen? Jason said, looking at Ryan incredulously. *You've never spoken to a dozen girls in your life.* Then he glanced at me and mouthed, *Do you want to go?* But I rolled my eyes and shook my head. No way he was getting off that easy. I had to hear how this played out.

Ryan flicked him off, flipped open his laptop, and began scrolling quickly up and down through a photos folder. *They're from high school.* He tried to achieve an off the cuff tone. *We used to trade them.*

Like Pokémon cards, Greg rolled his eyes in disgust.

The photos on the laptop were still dancing up and down over the screen—an insane number of topless shots, but full body ones as well. There must have been at least ten to twenty girls, judging by the various skin tones and bathroom lightings and body shapes. Watching these bodies flash onto the screen in the comfort of this kitchen, where liquor bottles lined the windowsill like trophies and a poster of Kanye hung on the wall next to a fraternity flag, made me squirm. I didn't know yet that I was also in an album like this, on somebody else's laptop in somebody else's kitchen, cataloged and contained.

I was just trying to imagine who these girls were, imagine how the pictures were performances, gifts, totally unlike the version of themselves they knew. How they probably waited till they trusted their boyfriends to send them. Now, the sheer quantity of them all together, the availability of them, made it hard to remember these bodies were even women.

The balance of things felt wrong. Why wasn't he embarrassed to have these? Why wasn't he embarrassed to show me? Why was it *my* face that was growing hot?

Next to me Jason was failing miserably in an attempt not to watch as the pictures went by.

Shit, how many pictures are there in here?

About 500, Ryan shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

500, the guys echoed. *Jesus.*

I thought of Eva and the pictures she sent Nick, how for months after she deleted them off his phone she was worried the boys were calling her bitchy, controlling, crazy behind her back. I thought of how hollow her beauty would've looked in a file like this.

That summer, Eva and I reunited at a waterfall about an hour drive from our neighborhood, one of our old favorites. While we hiked we talked as if no time had passed, but we fell silent near the falls, as if its distant hum demanded respect, stillness.

Eva crawled down the embankment towards the creek the falls fed into, and I wandered for a moment, admiring the trees. Moss grew on the trunk of the nearest one like fur on a massive beast, and I ran my hands up, tiny whispers soft on my fingertips. As the moss thinned the trunk felt more solid against my palm and I stretched my arms out around its damp thickness, eager to embrace something so solid.

It was a giant from another time, thick roots rising and falling in the earth like thick tongues of an otherworldly beast, tails of Loch Ness monsters, anchoring it to the side of the trail right where the ground begins to slope and fall away. Below a rushing vein of water frothed against mossy rocks and tumbled onward. I watched as Eva's bare feet carefully probed the damp rocks below, moving into the center of the river with precision.

When she turned upstream, an angular chin and camera lens appeared beyond a curtain of long hair, straight and thin enough at the bottom to stir in a soft breeze. On the far shore rhododendrons crowded for a spot near the water, the waxy sheen and deep evergreen of their leaves adding gravity to the picture.

Further up the waterfall roared gently, the sound of a wave perpetually crashing. Water split over a flat rock in fifteen directions and descended separately, like the ends of Eva's hair.

The camera clicked, a rapid series of the waterfall. Then, something Eva found on the rock, likely the salamanders she's been scooping up and naming all day. Then the lens swivels in my direction. I rolled my eyes to ward off the attention and start down the bank, sliding downhill a few feet at a time as the loose dirt moves beneath my feet.

The water tugged at my ankles as I stepped into the river, always a bit more forceful than I expected. Eva was still clicking away. I squared myself towards the camera and ran my fingers through my hair, lifted my arms to elongate my body, twirled and looked backward, and then spun and waded through the water to Eva's rock. I forwent the more delicate route across the rocks, stumbled in the current.

Tens of thousands of pebbles on their way to becoming sand met my feet in the shallows. Tickled under my calluses, shuddered in the current between my toes. I ground my feet into riverbed. Some pebbles slipped away downstream. Others ground back into the balls of my feet, scrubbed me, cleaned me, stripped away some of that hard skin and sent it dancing away. I clambered onto the rock Eva was perched on, skinning my calf on the rock as I went. The blood collected in the beads of water clinging to my leg and turned pink. Beside me, Eva stacked small river rocks on a pile in front of her.

I love this, she said, picking up their conversation on the hike up. *I don't want to go back.*

Have you thought about quitting the team? I watched the waterfall. *Not to push, but E, it just sounds so shitty.* She'd had the same problems I did—the same struggles with injury, the same unexpectedly, subtly cruel kind of coach and, although she didn't say it outright, the same struggles with eating. I could count her ribs now, and every mention of food seemed... heavy. Loaded. But unlike me, she'd held on through the end of the year.

I mean yeah, it's probably not good, she said. I know it's not good. But it's one of those things where I've been running so long, if I stop, like, a shrug. She let it hang there.

You don't know who you would be, I finished, because I knew.

A nod.

Hhmm.

Other people are making it work, Chase. I feel like I'm failing at the only thing I've ever really been good at.

Eva...

Ok, fine, ever tried at. Really tried. Maybe if I just changed something...

I cringed internally. Eva was on a regimented training schedule. The only thing she could really change were her habits outside of running: stretching, sleeping better, eating differently. I knew where the bulk of the attention would fall.

Geez, I mumbled. She seemed not to notice, absorbed in her thoughts, still stacking rocks in little piles to form concentric circles.

Plus, there's my dad...

Kale boy?

Ba-ba-ba-baaa! Eva agreed, sounding the superhero anthem throwing her fist into the air. It's Kallllle boy! Chase, he literally put a beet in his blender the other day. It's like a magician's hat in reverse. Anything can go into that thing. The other day he just stuffed a whole bag of spinach in with almond butter, chia seeds, soy milk, a pepper...

Kale?

And fucking kale! He's basically stopped adding fruit. 'Too much sugar.'

Oof. I grunt my most irritable emotions.

He's got my mom on a Whole 30 diet, Eva added.

OOF. Aren't they already vegan?

Yes! Eva threw up her hands, accidentally chucking the pebble she had been adding to her newest rock pile. Why was it so easy to be outraged on someone else's behalf, and so hard to demand more for ourselves?

What the hell does she eat? I asked.

Fucking kale! We both screamed, almost in unison, cracking up.

Let's go, Eva said, rising. She hopped from rock to rock till she reached a long slender slab that rested an inch or so below the water. The light coming through the trees made the shallows iridescent. Eva's steps split the bright reflections into ripples that wavered and re-formed behind her. I followed her towards the waterfall, probing the rocks with my toes to find those deceptively slick spots, watching as tiny shadows created by the ridges of the Eva's spine fell across her back below her sports bra. I reached around to my back to pinch the skin over my own spine with my fingers. No ridges. Just flesh. My fingers traveled nervously around my torso, pulling at my skin, wishing it would disappear.

The waterfall sounded like a wave crashing infinitely. As we got closer it began to hiss and roar and froth in our faces, a beast barely contained. Water droplets beaded in our hair. The water fell from thirty feet up over a rock wall, and we could edge our way, with our backs to the wall, behind the falls and get entirely swallowed in the noise.

We sat for a minute, just listening. White noise on full blast. In minutes we were completely soaked. Eva moved to exit the other side and I followed, getting as far upstream from the waterfall as we could without actually scrambling up to the precipice it fell from. Here we

had a better view of the large pool the water emptied into, stiller on the outer rim and churning angrily just beneath the falls, before it flowed away through the shoots and funnels of the fat stream.

I dove in, immediately fighting the urge to curl my knees in and wait for the shock of cold to run through my body, instead swimming hard. I always leapt too close to the falls. I liked to feel the audible churn of the waterfall actually come to life on my skin, the chaos and urgency. This permanent spin cycle had the potential to suck me in in a second and refuse to let go. I could lose track of up and down, spend my energy thrusting my limbs more and more desperately, grasping for some sense of control and finding none. I liked toying with that helplessness, tasting it on the edge of my fingers as I made wide breaststrokes. I kicked, rejoiced that the strength in my legs was still there, that the forward momentum always came.

Part of the success of the dive was knowing just how close was too close to jump. But part of it was also having the power in my body, pure kinetic ability, to sprint past death. My eyes were pressed shut and the muffled roar of the falls was familiar and otherworldly all at once, like listening to a friend speak underwater. I didn't hear Eva jump in, but I felt her fingertips on my toes as she caught up to me, both of us pushing hard until the roar dulled enough and we knew we were clear. Our heads rose simultaneously. We pushed hair back from our faces, found rocks to lean on where the edge of the pool met the downstream current.

I swear to God, you get closer every fucking time, Eva said, panting slightly.

I grinned, also taking deep breathes, letting the current push my back against my rock so I could rest.

Got to make sure I've still got it. I don't know what you're whining about. You never have any trouble.

Eva rolled her eyes, then pushed away from her rock into the nearest current. I scrambled to follow, using my feet to navigate toward the middle of the flow, where the water was fastest and smoothest. It chuckled around my ribs as I floated downstream, and ahead I could hear Eva laughing happily at nothing at all.

Back at home, showered and dried and huddled in her room, I inevitably found my way to the mirror.

She must think I've gotten so fat. I thought, feeling very quiet all of a sudden.

I turned back and forth, remembering myself 10, 20 pounds lighter. Eva was a D1 athlete running even more than I had before I quit, and she still couldn't stand to be in her body most days. She never said so, but whenever her dad came up...

Oof.

I blew air through my nose in frustration and stripped my clothes off, stepped in front of the mirror with almost vengeful force.

I found a pale, fleshy image. Textured shadows created by dimpling fat. I had an involuntary loss of breath at the sight, even now. The person in the mirror was so foreign, repellant. I recalled a time in high school I could skip by my reflection unbothered, sending a brief wave to the girl in the mirror I wouldn't even make eye contact with now. Oscillating between being the person on the outside the mirror, repelled, and the person within, ashamed. Humiliated.

I lifted my phone from my bedside table and leveled it at the mirror. Stared through the screen at my thighs growing to kiss each other, the soft smile of flesh growing beneath my belly button.

4

Six years after we first met, four months after Eva and I tested our strength at the waterfall, I curl inward and freeze there. It feels like my heart rate never slows. A reverse Google image search of my photo reveals rows and rows of the same picture, the same me, inhabiting a dozen websites I've never heard of. On each website, the account that posted the picture has some variation of the same name:

tlcowe11

tcowell55

tlcowell

The contrasts between the dull usernames and the vulgar web addresses seems like an insult. He maintained his dignity while stripping mine. Next to my photos he added my name tag, my digital address:

Chase Anderson

20

IG: @chasingold5

FB: www.facebook.com/chase.anderson

And then, at the end,

305 Cedar Lane

Davis, North Carolina.

The address to my off-campus apartment, the physical location of my real body, my flesh, the hands that shake over my laptop keys and the breath that comes quicker and quicker, as if it is building toward a horrible, unknown crescendo.

As soon as I see my address on the screen, I go to the police. The threat finally seems real enough that I feel ok asking for help. But immediately, we get held up on... semantics.

Honey, I just don't understand why you would have those pictures on there in the first place.

Officer Yardley, the police officer I meet with, has a thick, multi-chinned neck, like melting gelato. His voice is deep and level, with a southern drawl that usually would remind me of my uncles but does nothing to redeem him today.

Well, I—I don't know. I assumed, like, no one else could gain access. I wear jeans and a sweatshirt, even though the weather is finally dancing with the 60s. I want to be shapeless. I never thought this would be a problem.

But why would you keep a photo like this at all?

He turns his computer monitor to show me one of the stolen pictures. His computer monitor is thick and black, with the same institutional look as the ancient monitors in the high school computer lab. It gives the photo displayed within it a sense of permanence.

I fight hard not to see myself in the picture, because if I do I will cry, and I do not want to cry. Not here.

It was just... for me. I say it softly, with a shrug. *I wasn't sending them to anybody. They were on my iCloud account.*

He sighs. There is a pause while he waits for me to answer his original question.

They were stolen. It doesn't matter why I have them, right? They were stolen and now they're being used to blackmail people!

There is no crime being committed here, he says. At least not one they can prosecute. If I was under 18, it would be a straightforward case of child pornography. But I am a woman, not a child, and the ways my body can be shared has changed. There is no basis for a theft charge, no proof I didn't sent him the photos.

The officer went on, *And if he is who you say he is...*

He is. Thomas Lee Cowell, a tax attorney from Ohio with well-cut suits. It wasn't hard to track him backwards from his username. We were even friends on social media, before I deleted my accounts. I'd accepted his friend request absentmindedly my senior year of college. We had mutual friends, other runners my age, and I assumed he was another college scout. According to the internet, Facebook was probably the trapdoor he slid through to get to the photos in my iCloud.

...then we'd have to work across state lines for a case with no evidence.

I noticed that there are five dark hairs between his eyebrows that don't quite qualify as a unibrow, but nonetheless make him seem more Neanderthal, implacably mannish beyond his expression of strained sympathy. I get the sense he prides himself on a soft touch.

I make a muffled snort of frustration and begin crying quietly and shaking, almost shivering. It feels like my anger is leaking out in irrepressible pulses.

Officer Yardley rises slowly from his desk. *I'm going to give you a minute to collect yourself while I go to the restroom.*

I sit in my chair and shake, imagining him being beaten to death. In my mind, I see a god-like hand descend from the sky and pluck Yardley from the toilet like a Sim in a video game and drop him into a world like Shirley Jackson's *The Lottery*. His whole idea of fairness and justice

and safety is undone as hordes of people push past each other to get a chance to beat his thick body while he cries, pleading, reduced to a weakness that is all the more satisfying because I imagine it surprises him.

Then I amend the original scene so that it is Thomas Lee Cowell that cowers on the ground. I make the townspeople strip his clothes as they beat him, rip his fitted suits, reveal his soft edges. I wanted him to feel small in a way he's never felt small before. I want fear and humiliation violently paired.

When Officer Yardley reenters the room, tears are streaming down my face and my cheeks are an angry shade of red.

Oh sweetheart.

This only makes me cry harder—his condescension, not his sympathy. I take took one shaky breath. Two. Wipe my eyes and stare pointedly at his desk and skip to the piece he never let me get to.

He posted my address. I say, my fists shaking in my lap. *I don't feel safe,* and *safe* comes out like a curse, with as much rage as I can muster.

He is unphased. He offers to bring a police car around that night, if it will make me feel better, but they can't be there every night, not until I received a believable threat.

I had gotten half a dozen DMs on Instagram from unknown accounts before I deleted my account—some random clips of porn, some more personalized messages. A few just suggested we hang out sometime—those could have been harmless, if they were just random guys stalking my account. But I never knew if they had been pulled there by the photos, if they had seen my address in addition to my Instagram profile. Then it didn't really come off as a suggestion anymore. But there hadn't been any threats.

He tells me if I have a copyright for the photo, I can contact any website directly and get it removed. *There's a process.*

A process to buy pictures of myself.

He bobs his head down, half a nod, as if to say: *And...?*

I want to use a voice that clangs the door shut on intimacy and trust, a voice that pretends this has been a formal interaction between citizen and civil servant that did not involve saving photos of my naked body to a case file. A cold voice. In reality my voice trembles, and I hate my words as I speak them: *Thank you.*

Happy to help.

I drive to Charlottesville, ostensibly to talk with Eva in person about the malicious unknown number, but also just to leave 305, which now feels haunted. It's a five-hour drive, and with passing hour I can feel my lungs expanding a little bit more. We run in parks and greenways around campus together slowly, breathing easily, just creating an excuse to be together. Plus, movement makes the words come easier.

You found him? Eva tries to keep her voice even. *You found this fucker? Are you going to press charges?*

On these unfamiliar streets the conversation seems safer, less anchored in reality.

The police say there's not enough evidence, I say. *I tried the police in his town and they said the same thing. I even tried the FBI, like, four times.*

The FBI? Shit.

I mean, it seemed like it should be illegal at some level, right?

Right! Eva snaps. It shocks me how good it feels not just to hear her agreement but to feel her anger in the way her stride quickens. *You have his name and his account, they should be able to trace it back to him.*

I... yeah, I fall silent. I'm not sure I have the energy to be angry. Sometimes it catches me like a wave I can ride for a few hours. But mostly, I am scared.

I have a reoccurring nightmare where I'm in a totally empty version of my house. No parents, no furniture, no pictures on the walls. I know someone is chasing me, but I don't know who he is or what he plans to do once he finds me. I can hear him talking as I sit there, he's a voice in the sky that comes from everywhere, telling his team to barricade this street and check that alleyway. So I run. I burst out the back door and onto the trails, which stretch further and deeper than they ever did in reality. Every time I reach into my reservoirs for more energy I find it. I never get tired. I am flying forward, my legs cannot be fatigued, and all the while I can still hear the voice, I can hear him moving troops and closing in. My own strength is euphoric—it's the best I've ever felt. But as I keep running, I suddenly become aware he will catch me. I am certain in the way you can be certain in dreams. I don't know where and I don't know when, but he will. And for no reason, my legs start to give way. There's nothing physically wrong with them, but it's as if their spirit has been drained and they've finally given up.

Eva wants to tell someone, Cowell's boss at his firm or the press.

I feel weak, frustrated. *But the thing is he still has those pictures, I'm sure they're backed up. If I get him fired, he could put them anywhere.*

I deleted my Instagram and Facebook, but I still have a LinkedIn. My friends have social media profiles, and so do my high school teachers. My dad just made an account that he uses to post pictures of his engineering firms' newest projects and Dilbert cartoons.

A few years ago, it made me laugh to think of him holding his phone steady to get a good picture of the Sunday morning comics, his tongue sticking out like it always did when he was concentrating.

Now the thought made me sick.

5

I always prided myself on my ability to run alone. I set out on the trails for miles by myself, even after a couple was murdered in the national forest I did my long runs in. I raced down the road at night, the streetlights glowing focus points, my feet so near invisible it felt like I was floating.

You're leaving now? My mom would say. When will you be back? Take a light. Take a phone.

Eva always carried a phone when she ran after dark. Rachel's mother wouldn't let her run trails alone. But I did not want to restrict my freedom with fear. Anytime, anywhere, I had the ability to pick up my feet and go. That was power, and I refused to give it up to monsters without shape or form, to an amorphous fear of being human, and thus fragile. Of being female, and thus watched.

I think my mom knew this because in the end, she always let me leave.

But right after Thomas Lee Cowell texted Eva, I hesitated. I stood at the door to my apartment, phone in hand, wondering if I would be safer with or without it. Someone could be watching me leave 305 Cedar Lane—but could they also be tracking my location through my phone? I felt all the weight of the words I had tried so long to push aside. Fragile.

Watched.

Some days I never left my room, curled up and scrolled through YouTube under my blankets like a child, too anxious to concentrate on homework. I searched the pictures of myself over and over again, sending requests for their removal to each new website that displayed them, my newly acquired copyright attached. The photos always resurfaced. Now they were posted under a variety of usernames—RHarris69, KingKock170—people who had saved the original and were now reposting. Spreading the love. When a car stopped outside the apartment, I ran downstairs to double check the locks on the front door, watched from the window as the driver parked and walked away. I felt like I was clawing at the confines of my own skull, always on the verge of panic, always ready to flee.

But the more months that pass without incident, the more my anger swallows my fear. My legs are whole again. My foot is not cracked down the middle. My body can move, and I won't wait for permission any longer to bust out the door and *go*.

When I hesitate on the front steps, I remember my power is mundane and beautiful. I cannot make Cowell pay for what he's done—at least not yet. I can't prosecute him. I can't drag him in front of a jury and tear his life apart. But I can take back what is mine.

Now when I stand in front of a mirror, I try not to look at the individual details I used to find so revealing. I try to see a complete body, a body that others have tried to take and own and grab and break and shrink, a body that stands, despite that, defiantly whole.

I tie my shoes and walk out the door. I start at a jog, then open up my stride and race down the street, around the corner, and into the woods until the smell of pine is thick in the air like perfume, and whoop because *this is mine*, these legs that carry me and these arms that pump

and this mouth that opens to laugh with relief at the realization I can take back what I thought I had lost.

This is mine, I think. this is mine, this is mine, this is mine.