

The Diary Thief

by Katherine Glover



One

Joan's started writing again, after two months. Tentatively. Cautiously. She doesn't write very often or very much. She avoids certain topics. She doesn't know I still read every word of it.

Her newest notebook is in my lap now, standard-spiral bound like the others, with JOURNAL scratched across the cover in thick sloppy black letters. She still doesn't lock her door. I brought the diary outside because it's October and it won't be warm for much longer. She'll be at band practice for another two hours. I'm sitting on the grass with my bike, and leaves are falling from all direction. I'm not really reading the book, just staring at it.

Joan Symes. She was my twelfth victim, just after the girl in room A7 who opened every entry with the words "Dear God." Joan's the only one, out of sixteen so far, who ever caught on. She never knew who was doing it, but she knew her diaries had been read. When she burned the last of them in a fit of panic, I realized I'd never affected another person that much in my entire life.

A sort of plump girl sits down a few feet away, just on the other side of my bicycle. I've never seen her before; she must be a freshman or a transfer. She's wearing a long floral skirt and her hair is tied back in a messy braid that looks like she slept on it. She's barefoot and eating a strawberry ice cream cone. The wind keeps changing direction and blowing her hair into the ice cream. I watch her attempt to hold back the loose strands with one hand and hold the cone with the other, but her hair is flying everywhere. Finally she looks at me.

"Would you kindly hold this for a minute, please?" she asks. Her voice surprises me. It's high pitched as a little kid's, but soft instead of shrill.

I shrug and take the cone. She shakes out her braid, then pulls her hair back tightly into a thick frizzy ponytail that falls all the way down her back. "Summer Mills," she says in her almost

whisper. "Junior transfer. Majoring in literature. To do away with the standard questions."

I look up sharply. "Summer Mills." I know who she is. Number fifteen. She has penned volumes of her life in immaculate handwriting. She stores all of them in a box under her bed. My old bed. It was a stupid risk, climbing in broad daylight through the window of a girl I didn't even know, but I wanted to know who was lying every night on the same mattress I used to lie on, staring at the same splotchy paint job on the dorm room ceiling. I didn't assume this woman would keep a diary, but when I lifted her comforter to peek under her bed, there they were. Dozens of them, carefully marked, in one big box. I quickly slipped one out from the bottom, and shuffled the rest back into place. I returned it a week later. I don't think she noticed. That was September, and I haven't been back.

"I'm Alexis," I say. "You have my old room. Stone 6. Ground floor. Facing the woods."

"Impressive," she says. "How precisely did you acquire this information?"

"I checked the housing list." This isn't true. She signs her name at the end of all of her entries. She probably guards them well. I'm sure she doesn't leave her door unlocked the way Joan always does. I bet she locks the door behind her even when she's just running to use the bathroom. I wonder if she's figured out yet that her window is broken and doesn't lock. Last year it took me until second semester.

"What's your major?" she asks me. "Or are you undecided?"

"History. Minor in mathematics."

"Ah! My mother is a professor of history."

"Who is she?"

"Not here; in Michigan." 'Here' is Fulton College, 40 miles north of New York City. "Ann Arbor," she says. "Is that your diary?"

"Yes," I lie. Her voice annoys me but I love that she uses the word diary. Most people insist that they keep a 'journal.' *Journals*, you see, are serious academic records of one's own life. *Objective* records. *Dispassionate* records. Not a place where you vomit, weep, and bleed your words onto the page. Me, I like the drama in the word 'diary.' 'Journal' sounds so precise and pristine. In fact, if anyone keeps a journal, it's Summer. "Dear diary. I am not particularly pleased with my own internal reactions to black people. I have found that I instinctively move away from them on the bus. Although perhaps it is more their manner of dress and of speaking than their

born pigment; I do not suspect I would be wary of a black man in a suit. Just a thought from this afternoon." Signed with a flourish, "Summer Mills."

"You are braver than I," says Summer, taking a lick of her ice cream. "I would never take my diary out in public."

"I would never leave mine at home."

We smile at each other.

"It's so helpful, isn't it?" she says, leaning in and scooting closer. "I credit all of my sanity with the ability to purge my thoughts on paper." Her words come out so smoothly I wonder if she has spoken them before. Come to think of it, they sound familiar. Maybe I've read them.

"Although," she continues, "I don't write as much as I did in the past, because I email a lot of things to my boyfriend."

"Long distance relationship?"

"Indeed. Name of Bart. Bartholomew Mason."

"Oh. You worked together your junior year on your high school literary magazine. And you wrote that he was a pompous ass." I almost say this, but I don't. I'm going to get myself into trouble one of these days.

"We're engaged. Two years."

"Two years that you've been together, or two years until you get married?"

"Both. Do you have a boyfriend, Alexis? Or a girlfriend?" she adds, glancing around at the campus self-consciously.

I shake my head. I've only had sex once ever. I sure as hell think about it though; my hormones beat sweatshop owners with their belief in overtime without breaks. But in the real world, away from Internet porn and my own private fantasy, I hate people touching me.

"This place is very politically correct," she says after a pause, still crunching the last piece of ice cream cone in her mouth. "It has taken some getting used to. Do you know Mr. Rosenthal?" She smiles almost dreamily; it's sickening. "He's one of my literature teachers. He's so wonderful! And so funny! There's this awful girl in my class who doesn't like anything we read apparently, and yesterday she made the criticism that everything we read was 'heterosexist.' I've never even heard that word before. Mr. Rosenthal put on this saccharin smile and said, 'this was written before the days of political correctness, Ms. Symes.' I wish people like that were not

required to be in my classes."

"You're in Joan's class?" 6:30 to 8:00, Tuesdays and Thursdays evenings. Safer than daytime.

She bites her lip. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. Do you know her?"

I touch a hand to the notebook in front of me. "Not really," I say.

She looks at the book. "How long have you been keeping it?"

"Uh, three years."

"I've been keeping mine for seven," she says. "Since I was thirteen."

"Do you still have all of them?" I say. I'm surprised at how calm I am, talking about this.

"They're all together in a big box. Hidden," she says. "I should get a box that locks though. I cannot think of anything that would be worse than having someone discover them and read them. That would be the most horrendous, terrifying thing in the world. Quite honestly, I think I would kill myself."

"How?" I ask without thinking, then wince. I'm always managing to convince people I'm creepy. I should just stop talking.

But Summer barely blinks at my question. "Poison," she says. "I'd do it, I honestly would. Reading someone's diary is a form of rape. It is the most intimate violation. I would rather a hundred thousand people had full knowledge of my body than one single clairvoyant could access full knowledge of my mind."

That too sounds rehearsed. "A form of rape?" I repeat. I look at Summer with renewed interest and respect. "I don't think I've ever heard anyone else say that."

"But don't you think so?" she asks.

I look down to the book in my hands. "Yeah," I say. "I do."

Two

It started with Joel. I met him pretty much the same way I met Summer, sitting with my bike reading *A People's History of the United States* for the third time. I was in Washington Square Park and it was my first month at school, a little over a year ago. This stout middle-aged man with a brown beard and glasses wandered over and started talking to me. His hair was bushy

and wild and he spoke really fast, like he was used to being cut off and wanted to say as much as he could before it happened. He assured me first-off that he wasn't trying to have sex with me and began this long monologue about people and the city and how you could never just *talk* to people, just have a *conversation*, especially with women, he said, because they always think you want to take them to bed.

"You're whining," I said. It's easiest for me to speak my mind around people who have clearly forfeited the right to call me creepy.

"No, I'm Joel," he said, reaching out his hand.

I stared at his fingers but wouldn't touch them. "Alexis," I said.

"Have you ever seen a UFO?" he asked me.

"Uh-uh," I said.

He told me he was working for the UN on a secret project involving alien life forms. He said he could confide in me because I looked trustworthy, and he could tell I was a believer. I said "Oh yeah," and then I said something absurd and random about how the X-files were based on real-life. He nodded gravely.

He made me laugh. I told him things about myself that were true and other things that were made up, and it didn't seem to make a difference. None of it shocked him. I liked that. After half an hour he asked me for my phone number, but I wasn't sure I wanted him finding me again. "Why don't you just take me home with you now?" I suggested.

Joel looked stunned and his whole body kind of jiggled, and he backed away a little like he was afraid of me, like maybe this was a trick or he wasn't sure I was real, but he managed to shake out the words, "Dugh, okay," and we started walking my bike to the subway.

He lived in Brooklyn. The apartment was dusty with papers everywhere. He didn't waste a lot of time showing me his maps or his pictures of UFOs collection, which I was thankful for. Right away he started giving my shoulders a massage, and it wasn't very good because his hands were kind of shaking, so I turned around and kissed him.

I didn't mind kissing him. I'd certainly thought enough about kissing in my life, that and many other things we did that night, and it was good to finally have someone I felt safe with. It wasn't the greatest thing in the world, kissing; there were other parts I liked better. Afterwards Joel got up to brush his teeth and when he grinned at me from across the room all of this foam

came dribbling out of his mouth. I was glad I hadn't given him my phone number.

I fell asleep quickly. When I woke up it was four a.m. and Joel was snoring next to me. I slowly crept out of the bed, dressed myself, and picked up my backpack. I turned to look at Joel one last time before leaving, and I saw a little red book on top of the wooden stool that served as his night stand. The book was wrapped in an elaborate series of colored rubber bands, overlapping and each wrapped at a different angle, no doubt so that if someone ever opened the book, he'd know.

I took the book on my way out and dropped it into my backpack.

I didn't read it at first. I just kept it beside my bed and stared at it. The idea of knowing someone else's intimate thoughts was fascinating, but also scary. It was two days before I took off the rubber bands.

Joel didn't have many secrets to tell. He wrote a lot about coverups and aliens, and newsletters I'd never heard of, and his frustrations with women, with a few derogatory comments about the stupid people obsessed with JFK. For awhile he was convinced his doctor was trying to kill him, and he stopped taking his medication. He wrote bizarre and senseless strings of words and sentences for weeks afterwards.

None of it meant much to me. I realized Joel's mind wasn't anything I could relate to. I was convinced, however, that there was more out there.

I started reading the diaries of the people in my building. I sat in hallways, doing homework and watching to see who left with their doors unlocked, or waiting for someone to invite me in and then leave the room or run to the bathroom for just a few minutes. I did this all year. I found a spiral notebook dropped inconspicuously into Jacob's backpack, and learned that he was fighting with his father. I found thick expensive blank books bound in flowered canvass and buried in the back of Guinnevere's closet, and learned that she dreamed of getting a law degree and legalizing gay marriage before the Supreme Court. I found loose-leaf scraps of paper clipped together and stored in Siobhan's desk drawer, and learned that her handwriting was completely illegible. My favorite passages were from Zoe, who was a compulsive shoplifter but got an even bigger thrill from jumping subway turnstiles, then exiting one stop down, crossing the street, and sneaking back in again. "Adrenaline! Euphoria! These are my flying shoes! Why

pay for drugs!"

But it still wasn't what I'd been looking for. I didn't actually know what I was looking for, but I was determined to find it. I kept reading, waiting for someone special, worth violating; someone worth this intimate connection. Instead, after Zoe I found Danielle's diary, with entries like, "July 4th. We had chicken for dinner. Dorothy made it; it was really good. Tomorrow we are going sailing."

This was more or less my only human contact until Brittany came by at the beginning of second semester. It was late on a Thursday night and I was typing a paper with my door open. I heard her knock on the door down the hall calling, "Stacy, we're ready." As she passed my room she peered in and smiled at me. "Hi," she said. "You're Alexis, right? I'm Brittany. We're having a party in Deborah's room, girls only. The theme is 'High School Pajama Party.' Wanna come?" She was dressed in a silky lavender nightgown that stopped at her thighs, and she had a stack of movies and a baby blue Caboodle in her arms. I said yes.

I stayed in my faded jeans and grey ARMY T-shirt. All the other girls were in flannel pajamas or loose night-shirts. I guess no one else had a body like Brittany's. When I got there, there were half a dozen girls testing each other's make-up and braiding each other's hair. I got a game of hearts going. I focused on controlling where the queen went every turn, just to see if I could do it. But after I shot the moon a second time, no one wanted to play anymore. They started looking through the videos Brittany had brought. They were awfully fond of an actor named Brad Pitt. I pretended I'd never heard of him.

"I don't want to watch a movie," Brittany announced. "Let's play truth or dare."

"Oh my God that's so high school," said the girl named Deborah, whose room we were in.

"That's the point," said Brittany. "Come on. It'll be fun. What's the worst thing you've ever done, Debbie?"

"I don't know," said Deborah.

"We can all do it. It will be a way to really get to know each other. Alexis, what's the worst thing you've ever done?"

"I've never done anything. I'm boring."

"Liar," said Brittany. "Everyone's done something."

"What about you then, Brittany," Alyssa's voice challenged. "It's your game, you go first."

Alyssa lived on my floor. I'd read her diary. She'd been dating the boy in C6 since the first week of school but she'd hooked up once with the woman across the hall, and every day she had to remind herself, "*Sex with a girl is not really cheating.*"

"Fair enough," Brittany said calmly. "I broke my mother's favorite vase when I was fourteen and I blamed it on my brother."

"That doesn't count!" said Stacy. "You were a kid!"

"It was her favorite vase," said Brittany. "His allowance was suspended for months."

"I cheated on Ricky once," one of the women confessed.

"That's *awful!*" cried Alyssa. "That's horrible."

"Oh as if no one else here has done it!" Stacy cut in defensively.

Alyssa's eyes got wide. "Have you too Stacy?"

"It was high school!" she exclaimed. "What do you want from me?"

"Was it with a man or a woman?" I asked.

Brittany looked puzzled. "Does it make a difference?"

I watched Alyssa out of the corner of my eye. Her shoulders slouched forward and she suddenly felt the need to touch up her nails again. I felt an evil sense of delight knowing her secret. I wondered what it would be like to have dirt on everyone in the room. I wondered if Alyssa could tell that I knew something. I tried to keep a straight face, but that only made me start to snicker.

"What? What's so funny Alexis?" It was Brittany's voice. Everyone was looking at me, and that only made me laugh harder.

"I strangled my cat," I sniffed. I don't even know where I got the idea. Maybe a dream I had. "That's the worst thing I've ever done."

The whole room shut up.

Brittany tilted her head and studied me closely. "Really?" she asked.

"*Why?*" Stacy finally burst out.

"That's sick," one girl said, and I heard murmurs of agreement.

Brittany's voice came out like a challenge. "For power," she said. "Right, Alexis?"

"Sort of," I said, mumbling my words, uncomfortable with all the attention. "But it would have died anyway."

"Yeah, killing something isn't really power," Brittany scoffed. "Once something's dead you can't make it do *anything*."

I liked having Brittany stare at me, analyzing every line on my face. "And it doesn't *mind* it once it's dead," I added.

"Right. Now if you'd *tortured* it maybe..."

"Oh, I did that too. Before I strangled it."

"Stop it!" said Stacy.

"Cut its eyes out," I said. "Took off its skin." Brittany's eyes narrowed. "Made it buy my groceries," I offered.

I stared back at Brittany sweetly, feeling the edges of my mouth twitch as I tried to look serious. She smiled. "She's lying," she told the room, finally sure of it. "You didn't do it at all."

"No," I admitted. "I've never killed anything. I don't even have a cat."

"You're making fun of my game," said Brittany. "You think it's childish?"

I shrugged, still grinning.

"That's okay, Alexis," she said. "I can respect that." I liked how she kept repeating my name. It reminded me of Joel. Only he kept calling me Alexa. "You guys rather watch a movie?"

"No fair!" said Stacy. "We already made our confessions!" But she was outnumbered. Brad Pitt won.

Brittany actually visited me again the following week. "The girls really don't like you," she said, very matter-of-fact. Future pajama parties were out. But she gave me her room number and invited me to drop by. "I think it was the part about the groceries," she said. She still invited me every time she was playing cards. "We need a challenge," she'd say. One night while she was in the bathroom I paged through a notebook I found under her bed, but it wasn't a diary. She kept a sexual inventory, written partially in code.

8/24: mfs (friend of pt):
him yes, me, no
7" (but thin).
sweat and liked feet.

Brittany was the one who introduced me to Joan. It was March, and Joan's band was playing; they're pretty popular on campus. Brittany grabbed me to go at the last minute because

Stacy or someone was sick. "The bassist is really hot," she promised. I had nothing better to do.

They called themselves Instant Charisma Factor. The guitarist was really good, but Brittany never mentioned him. "Look at Nick, Alexis," she said instead. "Don't you just want to lick the sweat off his neck?" I said no.

Joan was the one that I noticed. The two back-up vocalists wore nylons and black miniskirts, but Joan was dressed like the guys, in cut-offs, Texas, and a long-sleeved T-shirt. She was short but she had a big presence. She made me think of a fire hydrant. "Who's the singer?" I asked.

"That's Joan Symes," said Brittany. "She's cool. She dates that lamppost girl, Katie. She lived in my room last year. So I'm hoping the pattern will stick and next year I can have her huge room in Stephens." Stephens is an ugly dorm that looks like a jail cell. The windows are tiny; the architect was some kind of sadist. But it has the biggest rooms on campus.

"Which room?" I asked.

"She's in 37, I think." Brittany sighed. "Okay, Nick is coming home with me tonight, and that's all there is to it."

I watched the band. The guitarist hunched over his instrument with a facial expression somewhere between pain and sexual climax. Nick stayed relaxed and smiled at the audience. Joan was singing with her eyes closed and her head bowed forward, so her thick hair hung in her face and stuck to the shiny gloss covering her thin lips.

When they took a break, a group of women rushed over to Nick. When he started talking with a girl in a tight T-shirt who kept touching his shoulder, Brittany frowned and murmured something about outsmarting the competition. "Wait here, Lexi," she said. "I'll be back." She waltzed up to the guitarist and introduced herself. I couldn't tell what they were talking about, but her expression was serious and while she talked she pointed at the guitar. He nodded and looked impressed. When the next set began, she came back gleeful and announced he'd invited her to hang out with the band after the show.

After that Brittany retreated silently into her scheming and drifted away into the dancing crowd. After awhile I got bored and decided to take off.

I passed Stephens on the way home. Only a few lights peered out from its four stories of tiny block windows. On a whim, I entered the building and headed for Joan's room. I wasn't

thinking about it at all; I didn't even wonder whether she kept a diary or worry that someone might see me. I just went. Her room was on the top floor, at the end of the hall by the bathroom. The hallway was empty. I turned the knob, and her door opened.

Joan's room was twice the size of mine, but papers, CDs, and dirty laundry covered the gritty grey carpet. The only clear space was the bed. She had a bunch of photographs and band posters taped to her wall, and notes clustered above her desk that said things like, "Madam Boverly paper---rewrite due tuesday" and, "XTRA REHERSAL TOMORROW---DONT FORGET!!!" Her screen saver flashed, "Joan Symes is da bomb."

I found her diaries on her bookshelf. There were eight in all, mixed in with her textbooks and class notes. I found a patch of floor space in the corner and sorted through one of them. After an hour I memorized the class schedule taped to her door and went home.

I came back once a week for about a month, always at the same time. The entries weren't dated but it seemed like she'd write in bursts, confessing every detail of her life for two weeks straight, and then letting months go by with the book untouched. She kept poetry and song lyrics alongside rants about her parents or the drummer giving her shit. She wrote that she was sick of women in the audience who just came to the shows to see Nick. She wrote that she was failing English with Mr. Rosenthal and would probably have to repeat the class. She wrote about her girlfriend Katie, and the time they got their tongues pierced together, and what it meant for their relationship.

And then one day she skipped class and came home early. I was reading one of her many entries about depression, and what a pain it was to wear long sleeves in the summer. It was all pretty normal but Joan seemed to think she was special. She was so determined to keep her depression a secret that she kept her medication under the bed and refused to undress for Katie except in the dark. I was reading a poem about carving "I hate myself" into her arm, when I heard her coming up the stairs.

I knew it was her because she was singing to herself. My brain went numb, but on instinct I quickly tiptoed into the bathroom. I went inside the shower because I was convinced she'd see my feet if I hid in the bathroom stall. Then I was terrified she would decide to take a shower, and when she opened the door and found me, fully clothed, crouched in the corner, she'd connect me with the diary I'd left open on her bed.

Instead I heard her cursing across the hallway, and I realized that without thinking I had locked and closed the door behind me. Her keys were still inside. She said, "fuck" again and I heard her footsteps trudging back down the stairs, off to call security or hike over to the housing office. I cringed alone in the shower and counted to thirty. Then I ran. The next time I saw her, she was setting her diaries on fire.

Three

The class Summer shares with Joan meets at 6:30pm on Tuesday and Thursday evenings. By late October six thirty is getting dim, and few people are out. I want to know more about Summer, and this time I can peruse her books leisurely, so long as I keep one eye on the clock.

I sneak in through her window the day after we meet. She's just started a new book, neatly labeled, "Summer Mills, Diary No. 32." It's a commercial blank book with quotes from Shakespeare on every page, and a forest green ribbon neatly marking her place. Most of the entries are about Bart, I imagine because he's the one topic she can't "purge" herself of over email. She confesses that she feels comfortable with him, and not much more. She talks about sex, and how they haven't had it, because they made the transition from friendship to romance while she was away at college, and spent summers working internships on opposite sides of the country.

She wonders if this is normal. *"I just don't have any urges toward that type of experience. I don't even like kissing. I have never had these urges, not for anyone, and I simply cannot see myself developing an appreciation for such things. It doesn't offend me, it just seems so pointless. Will this prove a problem in our married life? Does Bart have these kinds of silly thoughts for me? I can't imagine it."*

And then I come to this:

Dear Diary,

Today I had the most interesting discussion with a young woman I met by the name of Alexis. We soon stumbled onto the topic of whether or not reading a person's diary against their will qualifies as "rape." We decided to go to her room and utilize her dictionary for testing our hypothesis. This particular dictionary was one her mother had acquired in high school, and the

definition read as follows:

rape, v. 1. Archaic. To seize and take away by force; to plunder. 2. To commit rape upon; to ravish. -- n. A seizing by force, robbery. 2. Law. The illicit carnal knowledge of a woman without her consent.

*Alexis said this definition is flawed. For one thing, she said, rape of military men is a routine war tactic for interrogation or intimidation, so the word "woman" is inappropriate. I believe she possesses much knowledge on such matters; it seems to be an obsession for her. I took a look at her bookshelf, and it was almost all books about war and rape and slavery and the holocaust, along with Machiavelli's *The Prince* and the *Satanic Bible*.*

We talked about the word 'knowledge' for a time and then she asked me to look up 'illicit,' which was defined as 'not permitted' or 'unlawful.' Alexis shook her head quickly and said if that was the legal definition it was 'entirely fucking redundant.' I believe she lost interest in the project after that, or perhaps just respect for the dictionary. She strikes me as very logical, very intelligent. Also very unusual. I noticed that she has taped newspaper over her mirror, covering it entirely. Her walls are bare except for pictures of three astronauts cut out from a magazine. I asked her about it and she gave three names and said they were the men burned alive in an Apollo capsule during a test on the ground. There were no other pictures on the wall. When the time came for me to leave, she shrugged and turned on her computer and barely said good-bye. It is my analysis that she is lonely.

That week Joan starts telling everyone about her scars and her depression. Brittany passes it on to me as gossip, and later I overhear Joan discussing it with some friends in the cafeteria, her voice light and casual, her eyes suspicious and probing. Talking about it is a way to take control of the information, but I don't think that's her only reason. She's looking for a reaction, of prior knowledge. She's looking for me.

I think about the night she burned the diaries. I was downstairs in the laundry room, and she was outside, at the back of the building where she thought no one could see her. She was crouched behind the bushes with her diaries and a bottle of Southern Comfort. The laundry room was dark and I could see her through the tiny windows. I stood on one of the dryers to bring my eyes to ground level and watched her pour the alcohol like syrup over a stack of pancakes,

keeping her eyes on the path, never thinking to look behind her. She pulled a lighter from her pocket and torched the diaries. She watched, still and silent, until there was nothing but smoldering ash, and I watched with her. And somehow, it felt more intimate than anything I did with Joel.

Friday evening there's a knock on my door. Yawning, I set down my class reading on the Athenian system of government and look at the clock. Brittany lives in my building again this year and we still play cards, but she's always out after nine. I hobble over to the door and crack it just enough to peer out into the hallway.

It's Summer, with beads around her neck and her hair french braided, in a loose blue shirt made of wrinkled rayon. It's been five days since we met. "Good evening, Alexis," she greets me.

"Hi," I say. She smiles nervously and tugs at one of her silver rings.

"Um, may I come in?" she asks.

"If you want to." I open the door and step back inside.

I've left my vibrator lying out on my bed, and it's still plugged in. It's a huge arm-sized thing that's marketed as a commercial back massager, though any idiot can tell you it's a lousy back massager. Too late to move it now, I realize, so I just sit down at my desk and watch Summer's reaction. She looks at the vibrator on the bed and then she looks around for another chair. There isn't one. She leans against the door instead of sitting. "I was going to a diner tonight. Someone told me about it and I'm sick of the cafeteria. I was wondering if you would like to join me."

"I could stand to get off campus," I say. "When?"

Summer smiles. "I have to get some work done and acquire directions. Maybe two hours from now?"

Summer drives a ten-year-old white Chrysler with Michigan plates. There's a dent in the passenger door and the paint is rusted. The back fender is bent. "Bartholomew named it Jesus Chrysler Supercar," she tells me. She doesn't know where we're going so she concentrates on the road signs and doesn't talk except to ask me to read the directions. The handwriting is thin and slanted; someone else must have written them down for her.

Jesus Chrysler Supercar's hood seems to stretch yards in front of us as we drive. I stare at

a white splotch of bird shit that almost blends in with the paint.

"Left or right?" Summer asks me.

It's just past midnight when we get to the diner. There are eight or nine groups of two or three seated and a bunch of high school students who are telling jokes and bellowing with laughter. An older couple keeps glaring at them. Summer asks to be seated at a distance from the commotion, and points to a table in the corner. The host shrugs and hands us menus, then turns his back on us and moves behind the register. I notice that there are uncollected tips still lying on three of the tables. Things like that always surprise me. I figure some customer would palm it on the way out.

Summer brushes a loose strand of hair out of her eyes and puts her glasses on to read her menu. A waitress drops two glasses in front of us and water splashes over the sides. "She looks quite tired," says Summer when the waitress is gone. "We ought to leave a generous tip."

"If she's a good waitress," I think, but I don't actually say it.

We study our menus. Summer says something about her conversation in lit class yesterday. I don't really have a response. The waitress comes back. I order a burger and Summer orders a chicken salad. "So," says Summer.

"So," I say.

We stare at each other. "So what classes are you enrolled in this semester?" Summer asks.

"Calculus. Russian history. Ancient Greece and Rome." There's a pause. "What about you?"

"Oh, literature classes mostly," she says vaguely, as if uninterested in the question. "And poetry."

The waitress finally comes back and scoops her tips off the tables. "Our waitress is really weird," I say.

"In what way?" says Summer.

"She just picked up a bunch of tips that have been lying there since before we got here."

"So? They're not going anywhere."

"I always figure someone would take them."

"Why?" asks Summer.

"I don't know. Because they could get away with it."

"People can get away with a lot of things."

"I know. I'm always surprised when they don't."

"But why would they?"

I stare at her, frustrated. "Because that's how people are."

"I'm not. You're not."

"How do *you* know?"

"Okay. What awful and immoral things have you endeavored?" She gives me a mockingly patient smile.

I pause. "I worked this job," I say. "In an organic grocery store co-op. Very granola. And we got 15% off anything we ate on our lunch break, and we just wrote it down in the charge book, and they would add it up every two weeks and take it directly out of our paycheck. But I couldn't believe that employees weren't just ripping them off all of the time, little by little, taking a juice here or a plum there, marking 8 ounces of trail mix when they'd really taken two pounds..."

"But did you take anything, Alexis?"

"No, I *didn't*, but only because I was *afraid*. That just that day someone would see me eating a cookie and then *happen* to flip through the charge book and land on my name by chance and just glance at it and realize I hadn't paid for it."

Summer laughs. "Isn't that guilt, what you're describing?"

"No, it's *different*. Because I *would* have if I could have gotten away with it."

"You said you *could* get away with it. You're contradicting yourself." She smiles, triumphant. I can tell she doesn't really believe I would be capable of such a thing. I feel patronized. I frown and promise myself that if I ever work a job like that again, or if I ever see tips free and unguarded on a restaurant table, I'm gonna take them. You have to seize your opportunities while you can.

The whole evening is a little awkward; mostly we talk about our classes, and I don't find hers particularly interesting. I tell her about the brutality of the Spartans. She stops by my room the following day.

This time I'm lying in my bed by the window, dressed in my wrinkled clothes from the

night before. My vibrator is unplugged and resting in the windowsill. Summer ignores it and looks at my walls. She stays standing. "Your astronauts are gone," she says. "Who is that?"

She's pointing at a girl with stringy hair cut out of a newspaper. "That's Cindi," I say.

"Who is Cindi?"

"She's a prostitute who was brutally raped by a cop. I read about it in the Voice."

"My goodness, that's awful! He was dismissed I hope?"

"No. She was arrested."

"Oh," says Summer. She starts to say something else, but then stops and echoes, "Oh."

"Yeah," I say.

She looks away. I see her glance at my bookcase, and she gives a puzzled look to the Queen of Spades I've taped to my door. "Why are you obsessed with people who do terrible things to each other?" she asks me. "I find it disturbing and sad."

"I'm not," I say truthfully. "I'm obsessed with people who have endured terrible things."

"Oh." There is a pause. She doesn't know what to say to that. "I've been thinking about the definition of rape since our first conversation," she says. "Specifically, about the feminist theory that rapists aren't really motivated by lust, but that rape is about power. What do you think of that?"

"Maybe they're just lonely."

Summer snorts. "Here's the thing that doesn't quite resonate, Alexis," she says. She crosses over and sits next to me on the bed. "According to traditional roles of gender, women have no interest in sex, while men are helpless slaves to their hormones, yes?"

"Sure, right, women have no interest in sex." I pick up my vibrator. "What are hormones?"

Summer's eyes get wide and a laugh bursts out of her mouth. "Oh my God, Alexis. Oh my God." She brings a hand to her mouth, then laughs again. Her laugh is this inelegant, piglike sound I could never have imagined coming from this woman in mocassins and floral dresses, and I laugh with her.

"What?" I ask innocently. "What are you laughing at? Finish your story." I set the vibrator next to me on the bed.

She's still staring at it and her eyes are grinning. "Right," she says. "Okay, right. Well,

legend also has it that when a man gets what he wants from a woman—that is, sexual intercourse, home run, or whatever terminology, after he's 'had his way with her'—he loses interest, and coldly drops her, often behaving subsequently as though they are strangers."

"Legend has it."

"Well if a man is so thoroughly dominated by his testicles, then wouldn't he want to keep a girl around if she was willing to put out, instead of abandoning her and entering an indefinite period of abstinence until his next successful conquest? Isn't it actually the stereotypical woman who, in picking out a particular boy for a long-term relationship, is giving herself the time to train a man to properly serve all of her sexual needs?"

"Good plan!" I say. "Well you've been with Bart for two years; he must be pretty well-trained by now."

Summer frowns and changes the subject.

We return to the diner a week later. We have the same waitress, and she still looks tired. I order another Burger, and Summer gets the chicken salad again. Then Summer asks if she can interrogate me.

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything," she says. "Tell me about your aspirations. Your childhood. Anything."

I tell her about my mother and the novel she was always trying to write when I was young. I tell her I have three older brothers, and she asks about them. I tell her I don't see them much, and shrug.

"I bet that you were one of those people in elementary school whom none of the other children liked," she says, "because they were unable to process their own jealousy. I bet you read all of the time, even during class, so you were oblivious to all of it. And I bet you could walk down the hall with a book in your hands and not bump into things."

I think the table I had to myself every day in the cafeteria, and about reading Madeleine L'Engle and being completely shocked when I got to the part in *Many Waters* where she first talks about sex and virgins and unicorns. "How did you know that?" I ask.

Summer smiles mysteriously. "We are a cult, Alexis. You, me, Bartholomew. There are children like us everywhere. Some day we will band together and take over the world."

I laugh. "What else do you know about me?"

"Hmm... I'm going to guess your parents are divorced?"

"Oooh, not so good," I say. "Too bad."

Summer shrugs. "The prediction was only derived from statistics. There are exactly five families remaining intact in the United States, and mine is one of them. Maybe we should find the other three and have a party."

I laugh again. "Intact maybe isn't the right word. My father was always out of town, and he would call for escorts. All the time. Escorts or women he met in bars. When I was eight, my mother finally moved into the guest room." That's something I remember clearly. She stopped writing her novel and tried to get me to stop reading books so I would watch television with her. Before that she was always trying to keep me out of her way so she could work. Eventually she made my father build her a darkroom and she took up photography. I don't think she ever went back to the novel.

"I'm sorry," she says softly. "That must have been hard."

"Nah," I say. "What are your parents like?"

"They're great," she says. "We get along really well. Although, they're both professors, so grades were really important to them. They never let me do anything until I finished my homework."

"My parents trusted me," I say. I wonder if this is true. More likely they had more important things to think about.

"You're wrong on another thing," I say. "I knew people didn't like me." I tell her about seventh grade, when I had the lead in the class play, and some snotty would-be actress cornered me and said I just got the part because nobody liked me and the teacher felt sorry for me.

She laughs. "I remember in seventh grade I was reading *Jane Eyre*," she says. "I even read it during classes that bored me. People thought I was a freak."

"That's what you get for reading heterosexist novels like *Jane Eyre*," I say.

She snorts with laughter and her glasses slide off her nose. She takes them off and puts them away. "Did you do a lot of drama?"

I tell her about the different productions I worked on, and Summer tells me about playing volleyball and working on the literary magazine with Bart. "We hated each other!" she laughs.

"We were really competitive. We both wanted to be the senior editor, and when Miss Hall picked both of us as co-editors, I thought only one of us would survive the year."

"Ah, the dramas of high school," I say, and she makes a face at me.

I tell her about my best friend Beth, and her whirlwind of crushes and crises which she would describe under her breath in excited detail before every rehearsal.

"I'm familiar with the type," Summer laughs. "Do you still keep in touch with her?"

Beth is living with a two-year-old baby and a snarly husband who once yelled at me that it wasn't so special to go to some snotty ivy college and I should quit acting like I was so goddamn better than everybody else. Then he told me to get the fuck out of his apartment, and Beth didn't talk to me much after that. "Not really," I tell Summer.

She asks me if I still do theater, and I tell her I hate it, that I always hated it, that I only did it because I seemed to be good at it. She asks me what I want to do after college and I shrug. She says that she'd love to be a poet but she doesn't think she'd make any money and she'll probably wind up an English professor like her father.

"And you and Bart will be, you know, holy macaroni and all that," I say.

"Legally bound in holy incarceration? Yeah..." She trails off thoughtfully. "It will be very stable, and very boring."

"Two years, you said. So you're waiting until you graduate from college?"

"Yeah. You have a good memory."

"Like a steel trap."

"Ick, cliché," says Summer.

"So? You're the lit major, not me."

"Touche."

"Cliché, touche," I muse. "Did you know that orange rhymes with door-hinge?"

Summer laughs. "You're a funny girl, Alexis. I'm glad I found you."

We leave the diner and go to my room. We continue talking about our pasts and about Summer's future. When she leaves it's nearly one in the morning, which, for Summer, I guess, is late. She hugs me before she leaves my room. I sit down at my desk. I try to go back to my integrals, but for the first time I can't concentrate. I open one of my Russian books but I can't read either. Finally I give up and brush my teeth. My throat is tense and there's this gnawing

sensation in my stomach. I climb into bed and lay there for ten minutes, still wide awake, staring at the ceiling, thinking about Summer. *"I'm glad I found you, Alexis. You're a funny girl."* The gnawing gets worse. I want to shred my math book and smash something against the wall; I can't explain it. I sit up and punch my pillow, and suddenly my cheeks are wet. I thrash against my bed, trying to shake off the tears, until I exhaust myself and lie still, still crying, and slowly melt into sleep.

A week later we have our first fight. We're at the same diner, and the waitress recognizes us. "The regular?" she asks. We say yes. Summer also orders a Diet Coke. Summer pokes at me, asking more questions about my childhood. I don't seem to be giving her the answers she's looking for. At the end of the meal the waitress forgets to charge Summer for her drink.

"Fiddlesticks," says Summer. "Hold on. Ma'am?" She tries to get the waitress' attention.

"What," I say, "You're gonna tell her?"

"Of course. Ma'am, excuse me!" she calls again.

"Oh come on, let's get out of here." I'm annoyed.

"It will only take a minute."

"But why bother?"

"It's two dollars, Alexis. It's not worth it."

"Exactly!" I say, and just then the waitress comes back to our table, looking irritated.

Summer explains with a patient smile that she consumed a diet soda and failed to be charged for it. The waitress takes back the check with a glazed look.

"It's not worth the guilt," says Summer when she's gone. "It's only two dollars." I just roll my eyes.

"I still can't believe you did that," I say when we're in the car. "Even the waitress couldn't believe it."

"Alexis I told you. It wasn't worth feeling bad about."

"Why the hell would you even feel bad about it?"

"I don't know! Just a little bit? You wouldn't feel even just a little bit bad, even for just a second?"

"No."

"Okay, I'm unusually sensitive about these things. I would have felt bad, just for a second.

But guilt is an instinctive human emotion over which I have no control."

For a moment we drive in silence. "No it isn't," I say quietly.

"No *what* isn't?"

"Guilt. Isn't instinctive. I think it's learned."

"On what grounds?" she nearly snaps.

"Oh, I don't know. The Roman emperors. The Russian Czars, and then the Communist leaders. The SS army."

"Okay Alexis, granted, there are people like Charles Manson and Stalin and Hitler. They are called *psychopaths*."

"No," I say. "I didn't say Hitler. I said the SS army, who, given the opportunity, did not hesitate to carry out orders, or even gratuitously torture people on their own time. That's a lot of fucking psychopaths. A mighty frightening percentage."

"At what price if they *hadn't* followed orders?"

"Come on. We don't even have to *talk* about the holocaust. What about sweatshop labor? Jim Crow laws? Japanese Internment campus? Do you know what goes on in Washington and in corporate America? Do you think they all cry themselves to sleep every night? Do you know anything about the history of the labor movement? Have you read *Grapes of Wrath*?"

"Yes," she says, rolling her eyes. "I have read *Grapes of Wrath*."

"Not to mention all the people who are in jail for legitimate reasons. You think every one of them feels guilty about what they've done?" I pause. She doesn't answer. I look out the window. "Two dollars," I smirk.

"Shut up Alexis. Just shut up." She talks fast now. "I don't need you making fun of me for this. I think it's *special* that I feel guilty over something so small. If all these people you're talking about felt that way, those things you're talking about wouldn't happen. So just leave me alone."

There is another long silence. Do unto others before they do unto you, I think to myself. It's one of Brittany's new favorite quotes. I'm disgusted with Summer. I vow again that if I ever get a chance like hers just now, I will not be so fucking afraid.

Summer writes in her diary that I must have been abused as a child. "There's something wrong with her. She's been hurt by something." She also writes that I'm a perfectly nice girl but I

refuse to admit it, acting as if my instincts run baser than they really are. I wonder if I made up something about being regularly beaten if she'd get off my back.

She's in my room the night after our argument at the diner. She's a bit more quiet than usual, but she doesn't mention the screaming from the night before. She starts asking me questions. "So what about your father?" "What was the worst thing ever done to you by your jealous peers?" I decide she has issues. I tell her they didn't do anything mean to me that she hasn't already heard about; they just ignored me.

She writes almost exclusively about me and Bart. She writes about how fabulously funny I am. She writes that Bart bores her, and she doesn't know what to do about it. She mentions that she used the phrase 'holy incarceration.' She writes that he's a good listener, but he doesn't seem to say much in return. *Sometimes I think he serves merely as an open space into which I can throw my philosophical thoughts, for he fails to challenge me. The rare occasion on which he disagrees, his ideas are so poorly reasoned that I can't bear to take them seriously.*

And then she discovers her window is broken. *It looks like it's locked, but it isn't. All this time... It's silly, she writes, but the only thing I really worry about is someone coming in and reading this book. If that isn't the most paranoid thought I've ever had...*

It makes me sad to read this. The next day when she mentions the window to me, I hug her and tell her not to worry about it.

"Tell me more about Beth," she says. I'm surprised she remembers the name; I think we only talked about her once.

"Well, I told you she was crazy. Her parents were really strict, but she would sneak out all the time. I was her chauffeur. For the longest time she was dating this guy named Nathan, so the three of us would hang out together. For about a year and a half."

"Didn't you abhor being a third wheel?"

"I didn't mind. It kept them out of my hair. Plus, they were cool about it. I mean, they didn't make out in my car or anything. Actually, we got kicked out of the prom because Nathan went in drag and Beth was my date."

Summer snorts. I realize the sound has become incredibly familiar. "I applaud you," she says.

"Yeah," I say. "And then we hung out in the parking lot on the hood of my car with a

bottle of peach Schnapps until we got booted from there too."

"They put you behind the wheel of a car inebriated?" she exclaims.

"I was driving," I say. "I don't drink."

"Not at all?"

"I like to stay in full control of my faculties." Oh my God, I think, I'm starting to talk like her.

"Really? I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I'm always shocking people at a parties. I absorb more liquor than a fraternity pledge. I don't look like the type, do I?"

I giggle. "You'd be a funny drunk," I tell her.

"I've been told I am."

"Nathan never really liked me," I say, "And I think that was why. He always referred to me as 'Miss straight-edge.'"

"He must have appreciated having a designated driver."

"I really don't think he cared."

"Oh," she says.

"He actually did some time, right after our senior year. Workhouse, not prison, but still."

"What did he do?" Her eyes are wide.

"Oh God. Statutory rape. Consensual. She was fifteen. They were stupid; she got pregnant. The state prosecuted."

"Wow."

"Pretty fucking weird, huh?" She doesn't answer. I stare over her head at my picture of Cindi the prostitute, and my eyes slip out of focus. "I remember sitting with Nathan and Beth, looking through the legal file. I think they broke up that day, actually. I mean, he had cheated on her with a fifteen year old girl; she wasn't too happy about it. But the thing that most struck me was... the evidence. This girl's entire diary had been photocopied and was there in front of us. And Nathan was reading aloud from it, and I just sat there thinking, this is the crime. Not agreeing to have sex with her. Taking her fucking diary."

There is a pause. "Oh my God," Summer breathes, so softly it's almost a whisper. "That's awful."

I smile and look up at her. "We were talking about this the day I met you, remember?"

"Yeah," she says.

"Would you..." I start. "Would you ever do a thing like that? Would you um, ever read Bart's diary? If you could?"

She laughs. "I wonder what sorts of things Bart would write about, if he kept a diary. What he would say about me. I'm sure it would be helplessly sappy. But no, Alexis." She's smiling as if I've asked a completely ludicrous question. "I would never read someone else's diary."

"It's... intimate," I say. "I think it's more intimate than having sex with a person. It's like... having knowledge of who they really are. Seeing them when they're not pretending to be... anything."

"I bet there are people who lie to their diaries," she says mildly.

The thought never occurred to me. I feel suddenly vulnerable. Could they have lied to me all along? "Summer," I say. She looks at me. "You remember the diary I had in my lap the day we met? It wasn't mine."

"Yeah? And whose was it?" She is still calm.

"It was..." I'm not sure I should tell her who. For some reason it feels like an invasion of Joan's privacy. "Well never mind who it was, but Summer it-"

Summer's body tenses up. "Oh my God you're serious." Her body goes rigid and her hands pull away from me towards her chest.

I can tell I've made a mistake. Her face is a stony mask of disgust and horror. I picture myself grinning and telling her, no, no, just trying to scare you. I wouldn't do a thing like that. But the words don't come out.

"Alexis, I have to go."

"No, wait-"

She stands up. "No really, I have to go."

I grab her arm but she pulls away from me. She runs out and closes the door with a crash. I stare at the door for a long time. The queen of spades stares back at me.

Dear Diary,

I think Alexis is the ugliest, most disgusting woman on this campus. I'm not going to waste any more of my time with her just because I feel sorry for her. It's her own fault that she's

so creepy and socially retarded that she can't make her own friends. No wonder her only friends in high school don't talk to her any more. No wonder she hung out with pervert criminals. No wonder...

That's all she writes. The pen strokes are dark and thick. She doesn't sign the entry. I sit in her room for an hour. Her box of books isn't under the bed; there is only this one, its green ribbon resting delicately on that page. This is worse than Joan. I've never made anyone so angry. I've never made anyone so afraid.

I move the ribbon six pages forward. When she opens the book she will see only blank space. Then I open the window and leave.

I go home and read ahead for my Russian history class. I read the entire textbook, even sections that will never be assigned. I read an excerpt from Trotsky's *Communism and Terrorism*. I spend a lot of time staring at the wall. *'How would you do it?'* *'Poison.'* The next day I don't go to class. I stay in bed. I don't eat. I don't leave my room. I wonder how long it will take them to find her body. Her classmates and teachers will call her room, and the phone will ring and ring. It will drive her neighbors crazy. Maybe someone will knock on her door, but it will be locked, and there will be no answer. How long before security comes to break down the door? What if no one thinks to worry until the body starts to smell?

Or maybe she told someone. Maybe she wrote a letter to Bartholomew. Maybe she called him as she was doing it. "Bartholomew, I love you. I'm calling to say good-bye. I drank the poison. It's too late." I imagine her head tipped back as she gulps her last sip of poisoned Diet Coke, tears covering her face, her eyes fixed forever in a listless stare. Or maybe she sips poisoned red wine out of a glass goblet that is still in her hand when they find her.

I imagine the cops sifting through her stuff. Will she leave a note? Will she mention me? What the hell could she say. Summer's not that stupid. "My early death is the fault of one cold woman on this campus, name of Alexis. She read my diaries. Arrest her." Ha ha.

But if there is no note, they will be looking for evidence. They will want to know why she died, and they will read through her diaries.

At night time I am hungry. I slip out at eleven and walk to the campus grille, head down, trying not to make-eye contact with anyone. A boy in my class on Greece and Rome is the only

familiar person I run into. He smiles and waves; I nod in return. I pay for my food and stuff it in a paper bag, then steal back to my room.

Brittany is stumbling across the hallway when I come in, dressed in the same lavender nightgown she wore the night we met and high heels that are too big for her. "Hi Alexis," she says. Her voice is pouty. "Have you heard the news?" She offers me a drunken smile.

I concentrate on the muscles in my face, trying to keep them relaxed. "What news?" I tell myself she won't remember the details of this conversation by morning. I prepare myself to look shocked about Summer.

"Some students vandalized the hallway," Brittany says, giving 'vandalized' too many syllables. "And the whole floor has to split the, um, pay for it."

I shake my head. "Sucks," I say. I go back to my room. I eat my dinner with music on loud. I email my parents to tell them about school and stay up late looking for information about Sharon Tate. I don't read anything; I just bookmark it. I set the search engine to ignore any site with the phrase "Marilyn Manson."

I don't remember ever climbing into bed but when I wake up, my face still dirty and my teeth unbrushed, I feel better. Clearheaded. My digital clock reads 11:14. Calculus started at eleven o'clock. I throw on jeans and go.

One of the math majors announces she wants a "math-girls only lunch gathering" in the cafeteria. I've never gone with them before but I go this time; I don't know why. They spend the hour gossiping about a rumored affair between our married teacher Mr. Horne and a senior named Kyle.

"He is not gay!" one of them insists.

"Just look at how he dresses! He is so gay."

"You mean Kyle or Mr. Horne?"

"Oh honey, *everyone* knows Kyle is gay."

"We've talked this to death," one of them tells me. "We do this every week."

"Yeah, what do you think Alexis?" another one shouts. "Fresh perspective."

"Hell," I say. "What can you do with a name like Horne?"

"Trust us, we've been there," they say, but they laugh anyway. I'm in a good mood for the rest of the day and I spend all afternoon solving calculus problems in the library. I eat dinner

alone at the Grille and come back to my room. I drop my backpack on the floor, sit down at the computer, turn it on, and then suddenly I crumble. I grab a shirt off my bed to wipe away tears, but they keep coming. I feel empty. I don't feel guilty but I feel bad about not feeling guilty. Eventually I curl up on the floor in the corner and let myself cry.

I don't know how long I cry but it feels like it goes on for an hour. When I finally stop, I leave the computer on, skip showering and brushing my teeth, and just go to sleep.

For two days everything moves really slowly. I do my work but everything around me seems far away. I don't cry again, but my joints are stiff and my eyes feel crusty. I start taking long showers. I don't eat as much. I spend a lot of time lying on my back, staring at the ceiling above my bed. I am exploring this new state. The sluggish tears behind my eyeballs that won't come out. The anxiety of my stomach when I think about food. The stiffness in my shoulders and my neck. But it's all ruined when the phone rings.

"Alexis?" Her words are abrupt and emotionless. "I'm in my room. Get over here. Now."

She hangs up. My mouth opens once and closes uselessly. I even think about not going, just leaving her there, sick and alone. She's not dead, I keep thinking. I wonder what she wants from me. Now there is fear. I explore that state too. The gurgle under my rib cage; the tension in my neck. Or maybe that's just left over from before. I can't remember now what it was like before she called. I don't think my fingers were drumming like this against the side of my bed. I lift them off and put my shoes on.

I knock on Summer's door. She opens it slowly and stares at me, her hazel eyes vacant. She's wearing a long nightgown, white splashed with huge red flowers, the colors thin and faded. Her hair is unbrushed and hangs limply. She lets me in and gestures to the red chair at her desk, padded in vinyl. "Why, Alexis?" Her voice is tired. "I trusted you."

I think about saying *'I'm sorry.'* I don't say anything.

Summer sits down on the bed across from me. She lifts her hands as if to surrender. "I don't know what to say, Alexis. I've been thinking about it for days. I just don't possess the knowledge." There's a pause. "Help me, Alexis. Say something."

"Have you... have you been okay?"

"It hasn't been the happiest week of my life." Her voice is a rude snarl. "I've been okay."

"I thought... I thought you were going to kill yourself."

She laughs harshly. I don't recognize her like this. "I've got the poison. It's on the desk, see? Right next to my tea mug." She crosses the room slowly and downs half the cup in one sip.

"Why did... why did you change your mind?"

"I wasn't going to commit fucking suicide, Alexis," she says, setting down the cup and nearly grinding it into the desk. "Don't flatter yourself."

"Then why-?"

"I bought the poison to make you feel guilty. I had staged this whole dramatic scene... I thought it would. . . God. It was juvenile. And I'm not even certain you would have stopped me." She pauses. "You didn't read the diary entry, I take it."

"I haven't read a word since..." Since I moved the ribbon, I am trying to say, but I still don't want to actually confess.

"Here then. Allow me." She picks up her newest book, bound in deep green canvass, and holds it open in one hand. "Dear diary," she recites sweetly. "Nothing I say or do is safe. No thoughts are truly my own. I have nothing. New paragraph." She looks at me. "I can't stand it anymore. This violation, this betrayal, has shaken everything I ever believed in. I have lost my ability to trust. I don't want to be able to love again. I want to turn off, shut down, like a machine. I try reading poetry I once loved and it only seems insipid and empty and false. New paragraph. But I am waiting." Summer lets out a short laugh. She reaches for a Kleenex. "I don't know what I'm waiting for, but I have always scoffed at the women and men who landed themselves in hospitals with the diagnosis, 'attempted suicide.' I will not 'attempt' suicide. If I make my decision to leave this life, the decision will be final. If I take that step, there is no going back. I'm not convinced yet that there can be no redemption. I'm not convinced yet there wasn't a reason for everything that transpired. I want to believe some good can come of this. Some new understanding." She dabs at her eyes and takes a breath. "Maybe it's naive. Probably. But in the meantime, as I sip my tea and stare at this bottle of poison, I take comfort in the knowledge that the end lies within my control and within my reach."

There's a pause.

"Signed with a flourish, Summer Mills," I finish, deadpan.

She laughs because she's crying. "Yeah," she says. She sits on the bed and presses her lips

together. I don't understand what she is feeling; it's out of my reach, and it strikes me as pathetic and repulsive. She folds her head over her knees and I hear a soft whimper. I sit frozen at her desk, not wanting to do anything, not knowing what it is I would do. When she can stand to look at me again, she lifts her head. "Yeah," she says. "It was pretty stupid."

"Did you tell anyone?"

"No one. I haven't answered my phone for days. Alexis... You were really important to me."

I don't say anything.

"I know you don't, I know you don't *care*. I just wanted you to... know that. That you were really important to me." She sounds like she's losing it again. I look away. The phone rings. "Hang on a minute, Alexis. Hello?" She picks up the phone. "Oh," she says. "Bart." There's a pause. "Yeah, I know. I know, I'm sorry. Things have been... well, not hectic exactly. Look Bart..." She takes a deep breath. "Maybe now is not the best time..." I hear yelling coming from the receiver. I can't understand the words. "Yeah, I know. Okay. Alexis? I need to take this call. I'm going to take this into the bathroom."

"Go right ahead," I say.

Now I'm alone in her room. The phone cord spirals under the bathroom door, and I can hear her muffled words. "*Just don't feel the same way... No, I think it's been like this for awhile now.*" Her voice is steady; she isn't crying anymore. I bring my knees to my chest and pull my hands inside my T-shirt. I hate her, I tell myself. She's a coward, and I've always hated her. It isn't true. She's never going to speak to me again. I'll see her on campus and she'll look coldly away. It was easier when I thought she was dead.

I try to ignore her and look out the window. I'm suddenly restless. Her room is dim and stuffy, and I want to be outside, walking in the dark. Her tea is on the desk in front of me, half full and half empty. My hands take the cup through the fabric of my T-shirt; it's still warm. I laugh, remembering the completely silly and inane arguments I used to have with Beth over whether life was half full or half empty. "If it's half full," Beth once said, "There must be a fly in it." "Flies are good for you!" said Nathan, and he smacked his lips. "Nutritious and delicious." Beth squealed, and Nathan and I cackled.

I hear Summer's voice louder through the door now, and I exhale sternly. I've grieved for

her already when I thought she was dead; I'm not going to miss her now, I tell myself. But it was easier when she was dead.

I realize I haven't put fingerprints on her glass yet. I think of the Diet Coke she insisted on paying for. I think of our first night at the diner, and the tips left out on the table. I realize what I could get away with. I look at Summer's diary, which she's left open across her pillow, with her entry about suicide. I look at the still-warm tea-mug, which she will sip from when she comes back into the room.

Scarcely daring to breathe, I look at the open bottle of poison.

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