**Personal Development**

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You are fifteen and a half. It’s the baby unit and you have to carry around a raw egg. Liberty, the school across the river got a grant from the state because so many of them got pregnant last year. They have to use Ready-Or-Not Tots for the baby unit. You are lucky to go to Central. If your egg breaks, you can just take another one from the fridge. You need an A in Personal Development. You need to go to a good college.

The baby unit is right before prom for obvious reasons. It’s also during String Festival, but that’s just a coincidence. Nobody gets pregnant at String Festival. Backstage, the Central kids’ raw eggs sit quietly in their instrument cases but the Liberty kids’ Ready-or-Not Tots howl when their parents leave them.

You don’t mess up your gavotte, even though your hands shake. One of the judges from Des Moines says you are “very poised.” You zip up your case, feeling poised, and you decide, because it is Friday night after all, you will get Hawaiian ice. You will pretend your car is full of friends. You will roll down the windows and pretend you are listening to music since you aren’t allowed to play music while you drive. You will get mango tango and eat it in the Aldi parking lot. Then you will wipe the orange off your tongue, because if you go home with an orange tongue your parents will say, “Who did you get Hawaiian ice with?” and you will either have to lie or you will have to say, “nobody.” If you say that, your parents will look old and sad and you will think about how someday they will die.

You hear three sophomore violas—Lila and Cristian and Mike saying they are going to Hawaiian ice, so you decide to go home. You don’t want them to think you followed them. You stand by the flagpole pretending to text while they walk to Lila’s car, their viola cases banging merrily against their legs.

When you look up, a Liberty boy is wrestling his Ready-Or-Not Tot out of his backpack. When it comes loose, so does one of his folders, and a gust of wind sends papers spilling across the sidewalk. You run after the papers. You crunch them into wads and hold them out to the boy. His hair is as shiny as ribbon. He isn’t wearing a coat. You can see his muscles.

“Thanks dude,” he says. You are glad to be wearing a dress. You hope he thinks you look this nice every day. “Yo, do you have a car?” he says.

“What?” you say, not because you didn’t hear him, but because he is so good looking that you can’t believe it’s a Friday night and he doesn’t have a ride to a party in someone’s basement or the mall or wherever people besides you go on Friday nights. Then you say, “Sorry, yes! I do. Do you want a ride?”

“That’d be great,” he says, and then, suddenly, you are one of those girls who walks through parking lots with boys. You are poised. You picture yourself sitting in bleachers at a swim meet or a basketball game, wearing eyeliner, holding up a sign with his name on it, pointing at him saying, “that’s my boyfriend.”

You unlock the car, grinning. You place your egg in the drink holder. The boy swings himself into the passenger seat, throws his backpack and Ready-or-Not Tot on the floor, then jams a water bottle into the drink holder. You hear your egg crunch.

“Shit, your baby!” The boy says. “Sorry dude. I’ll buy you another one.” The boy tells you to drive to a gas station, so you do. Then you are a girl walking through the aisles of a gas station with a boy. Mist glides out of the refrigerator when the boy opens it. You imagine you are wearing a prom dress and he is wearing a vest that matches your dress and he is kissing you in the mist.

He has a real leather wallet like a dad. He buys eggs and a package of antibacterial wipes to clean your drink holder. He hands you the carton and says,

“Now you’re a mother of twelve. Congrats.” You laugh like it’s the best thing anyone has ever said to you, because it is.

Then you are in front of Dolphin Point, the trailer park by the highway. Your dad always jokes, “Where are the dolphins?” You think about making the joke to the boy but you don’t.

“This is me. Thanks dude,” he says. He unlocks the door, cradling his Ready-or-Not Tot. You want to ask him to be your boyfriend, to twirl your hair between his fingers, to say you smell good, to kiss you, but he jogs away and you are alone with your eggs.

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You get into a good college—one where the lawns are as smooth and green as pool tables. Nobody sleeps. The boys dress like they might need to sail a boat at any moment. The girls talk about sex. They whisper about it during lectures. They laugh about it at breakfast. They cry about it in the basement of the dorm, clinging to the arms of other girls. You sit in circles of girls, holding blue beer cans that make your hands cold. You dump them in the sink when you go to the bathroom. You tell the girls you have done it with five boys—in France, on a roof, in a library. They nod and pretend to believe you, because you pretend to believe them.

You are invited to the Crew Screw Dance. Your roommate curls your eyelashes and slides you into a dress. You wobble through frost-covered grass to the crew team house in a pair of your mother’s high heels. There are recycling bins of punch, snacks on the floor, and a strobe light. A nametag is pasted to your chest.

“Thanks!” you yell over the music. You are duct taped to two bottles of beer and a freshman boy on the team. He wears a blazer and a backpack, which he must have been planning to take off, but now he is stuck with it on because he is taped to you. You and the boy cannot be untaped until you finish the bottles, a senior tells you.

“I’m Adam! I’m pre-med!” the boy yells in your ear. “Sorry I can’t shake your hand!” You laugh. You sit with the boy on a leather couch beneath a painting of an old man. When Adam moves, the duct tape tears at the hair on your arms.

“Where you from?” he yells.

“Iowa!” you yell.

“That’s insane!” he yells.

“Why?”

“I don’t know! It just is!”

“Where are you from?”

“Outside Boston!” he yells. You tell Adam you are gluten intolerant so you can’t drink the beer taped to your hands. You hope he didn’t see you eating Ritz crackers before you were taped to him.

“You know what? Fuck this!” he yells. You are impressed. He walks outside into the cold and you follow. He un-tapes you from his arm and from the bottles. It hurts. You wonder if getting your vagina waxed would hurt even more. “Let’s get out of here,” Adam says.

You walk to his dorm. You sit in the basement and eat Cheerios out of a box that was in Adam’s backpack. He is drunk and he forgets you were gluten-free half an hour ago. You show Adam how to use spit to stick Cheerios together and make a tower.

“I used to do this on road trips with my cousins,” you say.

“Wholesome,” he says, and puts his arm around you. There is still duct tape on his sleeve. Soon the Cheerio tower is the tallest one you have ever made. Adam leans toward your face and his Cheerio-crusted teeth bang into yours. He turns off the light. His face is orangey-pink in the glow of the exit sign. He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a box of condoms. He tears the plastic wrapping off of the box with his teeth. He kisses you again and a small piece of plastic goes down your throat. You cough.

“I’ve never done this before,” you whisper “But I’m down.”

“Woah. Are you kidding?” he says.

“No,” you say.

He holds your hand gently, like you are his grandmother.

“I don’t want to take your virginity. I don’t think I like you that much. I wouldn’t want the chemicals in your brain to get the wrong impression.” He says. “I’m premed.”

“You told me,” you say. “That’s fine.”

“Do you want to keep the Cheerio tower?” he asks.

“Sure,” you say. You carry the tower back to your dorm and it stays on your windowsill for the rest of the year.

Three weeks later you do it with another boy, also named Adam, also from outside Boston, but on the squash team.

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You move to New York. You eat too-expensive omelets and drink too-expensive cocktails with the girls from the dorm basements. There are new things to lie about—jobs, rent, serious boyfriends. The boyfriends get so serious that they become more important than brunches and lies. You tell the girls you love them over the phone on their birthdays and in toasts at their weddings, but you do not love them the same way you once did and they do not love you. They love their boyfriends—at least they say they do.

When you are twenty-eight you meet your husband on an app. His name is Kyle. He is a banker from outside of Boston. He loves things un-ironically. He loves pancakes. The gym. Dogs. Watches. Every time you buy him a watch he says,

“Baby, I just fell in love with you all over again.”

Your parents divorce the same year you get married. They ask you if you want the official date of the divorce to be before or after the wedding. Before, you tell them.

“We’ll still walk you down the aisle together, of course,” your mother says. You and Kyle honeymoon in Hawaii. You get drunk and sunburnt and you swim with dolphins. “Here are the dolphins,” you think. You almost tell Kyle about Dolphin Point, but you don’t.

Your mother visits you and Kyle in New York a year later. Kyle works in New Jersey and has to leave at 6:30, so for your last half hour of sleep each morning, you get the bed to yourself. It is your favorite half hour of the day. You listen to Kyle shower and shave. Then you hear the covers rustling again and you say a silent prayer that he does not want morning sex. You peer through your eyelashes, trying to look asleep. A body is beside you—a wrinkled double of your own body—your mother’s. She reaches for your hair on the pillow and French braids it. You pat your scalp and it feels the way it did when you were a little girl. When Kyle is gone your mother says,

“Sweetheart are you lonely?”

“What kind of a question is that?” you say. “I mean, I don’t think so. Are you lonely?”

“Yes,” she says, and pulls the covers up around your cheeks. “I think everyone is desperately lonely until the day they die, secretly.”

“Huh,” you say, “Well I don’t think I’m everyone.”