

Chapter 1: May

On a good hot Wednesday, I'm in my car in the parking lot of Windbrook, watching people walk in but never come out. I want to assess the level of crazy Windbreak specializes in, want to see if any of the people look like me.

The building reminds me of my elementary school, all concrete and mosaic art. Azalea bushes. But who sees the azaleas, anyway? A regular man with a similarity to Kevin Spacey -- but a larger head -- walks into the building but looks down at the ankles of the woman in front of him. From behind she looks like my Aunt Maureen or a million different high school Spanish teachers. I don't get a look at her face.

I don't want to be in a group with her. Oh, I'm sorry -- support community. The brochure my dad handed me while he sat in his recliner, pulled from the side crevasse of the cushion. The brochure is crinkled, pressed, like he had it there for many days before he gave it to me. With a hearty, loud "May, why don't ya take a look at this."

They have support communities, Aunt Maureens and ankle-gazers, all sitting in a circle in a room with a white linoleum floor like a cafeteria. This is what I imagine. The floor is slick with tears, and I'm there with my arms crossed and they ask me, *did you consider her a sister* and *what are your grief patterns* and I think what to say to these fucks while my eyes go middle-distance.

A woman shields her eyes through the parking lot, takes a wheeled suitcase into the building, tugging it over the threshold. After her goes a different woman with thin cotton pants and white New Balances--and no purse, nothing. She doesn't even have pockets. She's not allowed to have pockets. Pockets have some sort of dangerous quality that she'll exploit in her unyielding ambition to commit suicide.

I back out of the spot. I will continue my daily driving circuit. Windbrook, Windbreak, whatever? Windchime? No time. I'm on the up and up, unlike those people sloshing through paddies of tears and snot. This visit only confirms our differences. I turn on the AC because it's a good hot Wednesday in the end of April. The sandwich baggie containing The Hair flutters up off the dashboard vents. I catch it in my right hand! No, no, you're coming with me.

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Today is positively jam packed. Filled with jam.

I'm listening to Breakbot on a cassette player routed through outer space into the radio of Julio, my car. Breakbot's haunting disco chants, "Trust me I'll be there!" The message is clear: I'm doing things in this jammy-jammed world, too much for meetings and sad sack circle jerks. On the docket is a visit to Amy's mother, who wants to give me something of Amy's. And I'll take a drive, and return some calls, so forth. Prepare for my upcoming trip down to South Carolina to see Tyler, leaving next week. Swing by my sister's to pick up a sleeping bag named the Coffin. Maybe do some body-related improvement like to my fingernails or to my clothes or my hair--

"You're not mine," I say to The Hair in the passenger seat. We go towards Amy's house. Her parents' house. "You stay in the car."

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Amy's parents live in a split-level in a cul-de-sac of brown split levels. When I come to this house now—I feel like I'm forgetting something.

But I was welcome here—this was, half of the time, my afternoon home. I know its basement. The wall had blond wood paneling. An array of toys and stuffed animals and discarded exercise equipment and a television set directly on the floor. We went there as kids and even in high school came down here to watch porn set on mute.

I have seen her parents two times since she died.

I give her mother a hug. Miss Deborah has short and thick curly hair, and I wonder if Amy would have chosen the same hairstyle if she had gotten old.

The house always was covered in pictures of Amy through the years, a quality of her only child status. Now it seems like a shrine.

"I haven't gone up there too much," she says. "Felt like time. If there's anything you want in there...I might say no, but you should ask anyway."

"I'm not even sure about this box you mentioned."

"Oh, it's just a beer box." She points to the corner of the room. Sure enough, a 30 pack of Heineken.

"I kept all her elementary school, and I don't know about her high school stuff—"

"She tossed it. Probably getting ready to toss this, too," I say.

It's spiral notebooks, a nice plastic accordion file filled with handouts.

"How you holding up, May?" she asks.

"I'm fine." We look at each other and nod like bobbleheads. "My dad keeps pushing brochures on me —"

"Windbrook?"

"Has he been talking to you, too, Miss Deborah?"

"No, no but I've been there. For groups. I did a 3-week thing there."

"I read about that," I say, though I haven't. I pick up the Heineken box, settle it in my arms.

"I have to say, it helped a lot," she says, in an even measured, maybe medicated tone. I listen for traces of medicine. But maybe I don't know what I'm talking about. "It helped a lot."

I shrug. "It's too late for that, isn't it?"

"I don't know. Does it feel any better than it did?"

"It doesn't even seem like a year."

"There's your answer, sweetheart." With that she smiles and opens the front door for me, but I don't even remember walking out of the bedroom.

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Julianne leaves a nice, thoughtful sisterly voicemail that I immediately distrust:

"Hey, wanted to invite you over tonight. Elliott and I are playing adults and having some of his guy friends over. It'd be nice to have some company."

She's never talked like that in her whole life. Elliott wrote that. She's been extending the laurel branch—the olive branch? What kind of branch is it? It's a tree that is not native to her climate. She was off the map for a few years, off with one crazy man or another, and fuck off to everyone at home. Fine with me. She moved back to the county a few months ago with a fiancé and a determination to befriend me. We've met for coffee a few times, and she's been good, I'll admit. She cussed out the barista at one place so we can't go back there, but. This town has no lack of Starbucks.

Really, she's put forth a good effort. I'll consider it.

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Juli used to call every few weeks, but it's been increasing. It's no secret. She's worried I'll go off the deep end.

The day is circled on everyone's calendar except mine. In a week it will be one year. It was eleven months ago. Do the math any way you please because x still equals x , the day my friend Amy died. My best friend. But I hate saying "best friend" because that just makes me sound like someone else, over-justifying something, someone who talks a lot about reusable shopping bags. I don't want to throw that word around because it seems to have the opposite effect, it seems to make her less so.

She was hit by a car picking up a sheet cake from a bakery, but it took a week for her to die, and during that week, all sorts of bits and pieces of people stopped by the hospital, popped out of no where. Where the hell did they come from? One used the b-word (said, "she was my [b-word] friend, too"), and my brain went into a lock, and not even Tyler could get me out, but he tried. Oh he tried.

Everyone's got their own plan for me. Should I go on this trip to South Carolina? I've already decided, so why am I still asking about it?

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I drive around with the box and The Hair. The past and the present. Though I reject The Hair as mine.

The Hair sits on the dashboard while I drive. Who am I going to show this to? But I need confirmation that it's too long, that it isn't mine. These sorts of plans of mine—Jesus H. Christ.

The date gets closer. This hair is a microcosm of what is happening in general. There is something insane in me that I don't recognize. Who is there to tell? It gets worse every day. On top of this, I need to get laid. Only Juli would understand that. I take a picture of The Hair and text it to Tyler. Though I haven't talked to him in a few weeks, I'm sure he will understand.

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Tyler texts back, after an hour: "What is this?"

I'm sitting in my car, crying, parked in another neighborhood near a tot lot. But I stop immediately when I start texting back. I write: "Is it my hair?"

Tyler writes: "Is this a trick?"

"No"

"Yes it looks like your hair. Why in a bag?" Then a minute later: "Nevermind. It makes sense."

I feel defeated, but I know where I stand now. So I am declining, and still need to get

laid.

More importantly, it's almost 2 pm and I've spent a total of four hours obsessing over this strand of hair that is--yes, it is mine. "It's mine, you crazy fuck!" I yell this in the car to no one. Hearing my voice seems to scoop it all up together.

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The other morning I noticed a long, thin black hair on my pillow that I didn't recognize as my own. For one, it was far too long: My hair is in the chin-length vicinity. Secondly there's a funny little curl at the end, just the end—the rest is straight, so that on the pillow it looked like a seahorse. Poor thing.

But it was and still is a source of concern. I carried it downstairs like it was a woman who passed out in my arms. Don't trip on the last stair, I told myself, so I did trip, but caught myself. Aha!

Dad yelled from around the corner if I'm ok. He asks or hints at a variation on this once a day, but it's never a straightforward "Are you losing your fucking mind?" His concern for me is tucked in the side pockets of his recliner where he can get it easily.

I wrapped the hair in a sandwich baggie.

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Text to Tyler, only took me ten minutes to write:

"Might not make the trip. Something's come up."

He texts back the detective emoji. It has blond hair just like him, but he is not that yellow.

I type out "I am mentally unstable" with a pretzel emoji, but then delete it and replace it with "I don't want to run away from everything."

It bothers me that he doesn't respond to this right away. And when he does, it's "Are you working pizza tonight?"

"?????"

"I'm just so hungry"

He is three states away.

"Are you OK with me not doing the trip?" I ask.

"I think you should. I want to see you and you gotta move on, not sit around grieving forever."

On one hand this is exactly what I wanted to hear. On the other hand, there's a real possibility that I am a pretzel emoji collecting my own hair in baggies. And yet, there are very few conditions that aren't cured by a good fucking. That reminds me I need to RSVP to Julianne's Apology Tour Adult Dinner Party.

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Before he invited me down to South Carolina, I'd been thinking of doing *something*. Just last month on a drive I thought I should go on a road trip. I wasn't thinking about Tyler. I just thought, I like to drive. I do a little every day. What if I strung them together? That was about as far as I got. I was stopped at a red light and I was distracted by the people in the car next to me, two women signing to each other with their hands. They were arguing, you could tell. The light turned green and the woman driving made some signs that I imagine said, "I need my hands to drive, but don't think we're done here." Then she put her hands on the steering wheel and drove straight while I turned left. I wished I could've followed them all the way home.

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I call Juli back. "Hello May and I hope you had a good morning," she says, in one breath. "As I said I would like to invite you over tonight. We'll be serving a nice dinner, some drinks—a good way for you to inch back into society. You don't have to do or bring anything except come over I think it'd be a great time so please consider it."

Why might I accept? Why might I reject?

"Okay, I'll go."

"Yes, yes! Elliott helped me outline my argument."

"It was very good," I say.

"Okay listen. Turn your phone on and pick it up. You know it's stupid to keep it on vibrate."

"Mmmm." Her own rhetoric.

"You can distract me from these boring asshats."

"Haven't heard that word in a while. Are you including your fiancé? I mean, why not just come here for dinner? I was going to make chicken casserole for me and Dad," I say.

"Oh god, no. I don't want to feel like I'm still in high school, family dinners. God, no. That would be pathetic," she says.

"Okay." The key is to let the insults roll off you, take them and recognize them as oily

secretions, not purposeful little burrs. Just a thing of hers. Let them slide off you.

“That would be pathetic,” she repeats.

“Hey real quick, lemme ask you, you know I’m going on this trip?”

“What trip?” she asks.

“I might not go anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Is that your question?”

“No, my question is about my hair.”

“You’re cutting it! Thank god. Last time I saw you, you looked like a mess.”

“I didn’t notice it had gotten so long, just today. Still hard to believe.”

“That’s strange.”

“I do look in mirrors. Mostly the one in my car. So I think I was only seeing the top of my head.”

“Well, do what you do.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m not going to cut it. Maybe I should? This was actually not my question.”

“Do you even have proper supplies?”

“I have some scissors in the trunk. They’re not for hair. But a blade is a blade, right?”

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“No, it doesn’t. Well, I’ll look shitty tonight.”

“Don’t try too hard tonight.”

“You’re not even listening. I’m not cutting my hair.”

“I just thought of a reason I called.”

“I called you, Juli.”

“Well I want to remind you to not try too hard. It occurred to me you are, probably.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Please do, because this dinner is going a bunch of boring old sausages, May. You could wear a sack, if you have one. Anything except going all out.”

“So, like an affected casual?”

“Jesus, it doesn’t even deserve this much attention. Just be yourself—but a cleaned up version. Don’t wear the zip-up hoodie or the cardigan with the toggles. You look like a fisherman.”

“Fine.” Hardly worth mentioning that the cardigan was my first choice. “But Juli, listen, I don’t know what I’m doing— this trip I might go on, or my hair—“

“I thought you weren’t cutting it?”

“I’m not. If I go on this trip, though, I need the Coffin from you.”

“Which coffin?”

“What?”

“What?”

“The sleeping bag, Julianne.”

“Ahh, The Coffin. I don’t have it anymore. It’s at Mom and Dad’s.” She will always call it this even though Mom doesn’t live here.

“Nope, you have it,” I say.

“Where?”

“Trunk of your car?”

“You might be right. Well, it’s yours. Come over whenever, but soonish, because I’m going to have sex with Elliott right before guests arrive for dinner. I guess you could stay downstairs.”

“No, that’s fine. I’ll come over now.”

“And if no one answers the doorbell, just come in.”

“You leave it unlocked?”

“No one’s coming after us.”

“I’ll just come over.”

“Are you delivering pizzas?”

“No, not at this exact moment. If I was I wouldn’t be able to come over tonight.”

“I was going to ask you to bring a pizza.”

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I have tried a number of things, but not really. I have a part-part-time job, delivering pizzas on Saturday sometimes, when Mr. Patel’s American Pizza is so busy he’s forced to hire a female.

He likes that I have a college degree, exactly the last person on the eastern seaboard impressed by that degree. Communications—didn’t matter. I think I majored in it mostly because I’m not good at anything, except driving. The classes were chock-a-block full of people who had

no idea why they were in college, couldn't tell you what liberal arts were, thought they could make texting while walking into a career. I actually dislike my phone, a secret I clutched ecstatically. It was thrilling to think someone might discover me.

Amy's English degree seemed almost vocational, compared to the supreme uselessness of mine.

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I have an hour before dinner, and I'm not going to hang out while Juli and Elliot have sex, so I'll keep driving.

I drive because I love to be in motion. Literally, not figuratively. One or the other.

I go back towards Windbrook again, start trying to see myself sitting in the group circle. *I don't have anyone to talk to*, I tell them. They all raise their eyebrows, because what I have admitted is too pathetic even for them.

So I imagine myself in one-on-one therapy with a man with a pointy beard. *What do I do, Doc?* I say, though it sounds like Julianne's voice, not mine. *Doc, am I schizo or what?* The doctor man says back, *You said something just now, May, and now I'm legally obligated to lock you up.* I ask him if I get a phone call. He tells me this was a test and I passed it and they won't lock me up but that doesn't mean I'm not still broken as hell. I ask him, *When am I going to feel whole?* But he shrugs and I realize I can't even imagine the answer to that.

When I look up, I'm on New Cut Road, my very favorite road. In high school, the boys loved to drive fast on this road, which follows a little river, or creek, down in a brown valley packed dense with trees. Sometimes I drive here on purpose and sometimes I drive here without thinking, realizing only when I've parked the car—when I'm looking for a parking space on Main Street.

At the end of this road, past the stop sign bent in half, is Old Ellicott City, full of antiques and specialty boojie stores. Jewelers and bakeries and two stores with puns on "wine seller." There is a feeling of danger of Ellicott City, from the winding and narrow road there.

A driver hit Amy here. Crossing Main Street, carrying a sheet cake for our graduation and my birthday. I was twisting the crepe paper for decorations. These are details I imagine my new therapist will probably want to know.

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Today I choose to float down New Cut Road. Behind me a black sports car, a little

something foreign. I like to see the driver but it seems like the front windshield is tinted. He tails me for a while.

The best way, the only way, to stop a tailgater, is to slow down. It forces him to drive slowly. Or he gets tired and passes by. Except New Cut Road is a one-lane road, with no passing marks. That's the way it has to be. It's not safe. Except the black car chooses to pass me, anyway, angrily. Making a show of it. Good luck to you, I say.

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There are things you have to do because you have to, and they may be dangerous or evil, but you have to pretend it's fine. Zoos, animal testing. Driving is the top of the list. Everyone knows about it, so now it seems fake. Everyone knows someone who got in a car accident, everyone knows kids from their high schools that died.

Up ahead I see the beginning of the turn, before it tucks away behind the trees. The black sports car has finished passing me. Did he see the 25 mph sign?

The black car is gliding on the inside of the curve, but going too fast to take it. He crosses over the yellow. I only see the beginning of another car, a tan minivan, a bland standard, suddenly made personal. The black car clips the front corner of the van, like two people bumping shoulders on the street. They push off each other in a sort of spin, and the van goes off the road, down a hill towards the river. The black car is spun almost around, facing me as I approach, like he was in the middle of a three-point turn.

I check my rearview mirror before stopping. Somehow I am bothered by this instinctual action. Like even witnessing an accident isn't enough to make me stop thinking about how I drive. There is nowhere to pull off to the side. I park my car in the road, along the stretch, so people will be able to see. I run up to the black car, crunched up. Inside on his airbag, he looks dazed, a bloody nose. He is young, blond haired, fuzzy bearded, longfaced. He looks up at me. "Are you hurt?" I say. He shakes his head. The minivan is at the bottom of the valley. Its front also crushed in, turned up. I call the police as I begin going down, stepping over sticks, but what am I going to do once I'm there?

It's full of children, I think, it's full of children and a pregnant mother. But it's just a big man with a mustache. His window is down. He looks like he could be asleep.

I hear myself say, "I'm at an accident on New Cut Road, I just witnessed a head-on collision."

I suddenly think I should get the license plate of the black sports car, because it seems feasible he'll try and escape. But when I go up the hill, he's sitting on the ground, leaning up against the front tire, and he's crying. The front of his shirt bloody—of course he's crying. Because his life is different now, demarcated into before and after. Everything will be worse now. So I sit with him until the ambulance comes.

I think it is agreed that we won't mention how I'm involved in this accident. Am I the catalyst, the person he passed less than a minute before the crash? Do I matter?

The cars are starting to line up now.

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In Baltimore, they mark the death on the side of the road with helium heart balloons, enormous stuffed bears. I've never been there for day one, when the balloons are smooth, taught, reach for the skies, and the stuffed animals look clean, not mangy or rabid. After a short while the balloons become crinkly and look soft, like tin foil crumpled and opened again. They have poster board, markers running in the rain. It's a Valentine's Day from a parallel universe.

Suburban Christians have crosses. Crosses crosses.

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You don't even know until you've seen a dead body that it doesn't matter. Living cells, dead cells. Ugh. Someone told me that hair is dead. Who keeps telling me all these fucking depressing facts?

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I won't make it to Juli's. In my car I pull over, text her an apology, she responds, "you suck," and we're good.

Amy's mix CDs are on my bed. My bedroom is tainted. The bathroom down the hall, however, is as pure as the driven snow.

And has very good acoustics. I can sit in the bathtub and call Tyler without too much reverb. But first I set The Hair up on the tank of the toilet, leaning the baggie against the wall so I can see it from the tub.

"Hi," Tyler picks up.

"You know where I learned the word *reverb*?"

"Yes, I know. Same place you learned where babies come from?"

"No no. I taught her where babies come from. She taught me *reverb*." He knew this. "Did

I ever tell you that story? I did. She probably thought babies came from a record store.” A pause. “I’m afraid if I’m here I might go out of my mind, never come back. No one understands,” I say, looking at The Hair.

“What do you think?”

“I think about how time moves. And my birthday. It’s not real. I can’t believe I ever enjoyed it. Birthdays are cruel fucking jokes. It’s too close.”

“When is it?”

“Two weeks from now. That’s a week after she dies.”

“Just try...try to enjoy your birthday.”

“Come on, Tyler. It hangs over everything.”

“Then get it all out of you first.”

“I like that idea. I wish I had somewhere to go that day—a little room I could rent to scream all day —“

“A padded cell?”

“Not even funny.”

“Just come down to Charleston. We’ll get it out of you. I know you’re a mess.”

“Yes.” I want this. I’m flooded, suddenly, with the idea of him. I want him. Sometimes the sadder I get the more I want him. No need to mention it.

“And you don’t sound like you’re upright or sober.”

“I am sober. But yes, I am reclining. In a bathtub, in fact. No water in it.”

“And.”

“I was going to go to Juli’s for a dinner party. Everyone knows something I don’t. I witnessed a car accident. A man with a mustache died, maybe. I sat with a guy who did it. Everyone there was a monster android. It’s a social test. Everyone, maybe everywhere, is an android except me, you—maybe my dad. There were cameras somewhere. The test is, how much until I break down? The test is for me.”

“Of course.”

It feels good to talk like this, but what if someone is outside the door, listening? It would be nice to be able to talk to Tyler face-to-face, now, in a trustworthy room.

“Every room I go into starts out safe but then soon I don’t trust it. It’s just this house. I know how bad this is.” I wipe my face with the shower curtain.

“I hear the shower curtain rings,” he says.

“Doesn’t this bathroom have some good acoustics?” He doesn’t say anything. “Yes, I’m coming. It’s hard to say so. I don’t know why.”

“I want you to be here that day. It’s not just for you. The social test you’re experiencing may be just for you, but this wouldn’t. I don’t want to be alone either. Stay a few days, whatever. Right?”

I nod. He’s said everything else. There’s no need for me to talk.

“Right?” he repeats.

I shake the shower curtain a little.

“Okay, good. Okay. Wipe your eyes, get out of that tub.”

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I drive down Route 40 on the way to Walmart. I buy a hunting knife and granola bars. When I open the trunk, I see the Heineken box of Amy’s notebooks.

I don’t want to be the kind of woman who papers the walls of her house with this. I will never forget her. Do I need these? Do I need this depth of pain and torture?

I take the box out and put it on the grass near the Wendy’s. I am not going to be that lady, crying in the empty house. I will set aside one day, and I will fuck Tyler and do drugs and get it out, out. Then I can go back and see what happens.

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The next night we’re watching *The Hound of the Baskervilles* on PBS. Jeremy Brett sashays around and solves the thing. When it’s over, Dad says to me: “You should just talk to someone. I’ll pay for it. My old coworker Jim Muzzolini, his daughter talked to someone.”

He always calls him “my old coworker Jim Muzzolini.” I have known him most of my life, and known about his daughter and Windbrook.

He continues, “They’re not just in-patient, also have little groups, of, ah, people your age, or you just meet with a licensed person.” He gestures in circles with the remote. “To talk about things.”

“I could—but after I come back.” Though I don’t want to and I’m not going to. Dad nods because he probably knows. No doctors.

I heard something outside the blinds—something big and I wanted it to be a car on fire or a cloud of locusts. I want to get up and open the blinds – I do it, yank the cord and the blinds go

RZZK but all that's out there is the lawncare service for the Ellengolds across the street. The sky is peach and there is a gold cloud, it's coming down, it's coming—

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Tyler was smarter about it from the start. When he picked me up to go to the viewing and he said, "I'm going out to find work in California," and I said, "Why?" I asked a lot of worthless questions and I still do. He said the winter was too bad here. What a cliché he was. I asked what he would do and he said it didn't matter but that he needed to be somewhere different.

I told him that running away doesn't solve any of your problems but he told me to shut up. I said, "Well, I can stay here, I'm going to. Someone needs to stay here." Like I would have been the only person in Maryland if I had gone. Like I planned on visiting her mother every week or seeing any of our other friends once we closed the car door and walked towards the funeral home. Like I had any interest in the conversations I had there while standing near her dead body and eating sausages and cheese. Like I cared about it here, like Maryland gave me any sort of sense of place at all, like I was proud of it here. Like I had a plan, and for it to work I needed to stay here. Like I wasn't infuriated with every thing I saw. Including those sliced sausages—she did not eat pork!

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She had a favorite saying: "A fart is a poop's cry for help." When she first told it to me I gave her a shove on the shoulder, I was so disgusted. But the more I thought about it the more I decided I liked the idea, a poop's desperation, crying for release. At the viewing I somehow got stuck in a circle of people remembering her, or, really, interspersing different memories with clichés from Nicholas Sparks books.

"She had such a radiant laugh," someone said.

"She touched the hearts of many," a man said. What did that mean? What dead girl doesn't touch the hearts of many?

Someone I never met before in my entire life said, "She used to say, 'live as if there were no tomorrow,'" and I did in fact reply to him:

"She also used to say, 'a fart is a poop's cry for help.'" The group laughed too loudly. I think they were nervous and I wanted more, so I continued. "No, really, she did. She was a caring soul like that, always thinking about the needs of poop. She touched the colons of many."

"Well," he said quietly. "I'm not sure that's appropriate."

“Sure it is,” I said, and I was going to say more, maybe hit him, but Tyler came up and scooped me away, nearly literally. He wrapped an arm around me and pulled me back towards people I knew, people who knew her.

“You can talk all you want about poop but you have to do it away from those people.”

“Those people are horrible people,” I said. “Those people should probably leave. Should I ask them to leave?”

He lowered his voice. “Are you faking this?”

“Faking what?”

“This total insanity. Is that real?”

“Yes it is. I think. Are you really leaving for California? Is that real? You cunt.”

“Yes,” he said. “I can’t be here.” He looked at me and I was so surprised that I hadn’t see how totally devastated he was. He hid it so well. Or it looked so different on him. Or it matched his ensemble. He was wearing a black suit. He looked so beautiful.

“But who is going to take me away from those groups of people? I ask you, who is going to stop me from embarrassing myself? Getting into fights?”

“Who did it before you met me?”

“She did,” I said, and I gestured towards the casket at the far end of the room. Neither of us had really acknowledged it until then, and I regretted being the one to do it. “This loose insanity of mine, this recent thing,” I said, and he nodded with me. “It’s really cramping things. Isn’t it? It’s really a fucking annoying thing.”

“I do miss the normal you. I never thought I would miss anything the way I miss, like, her and me and the normal you, a month ago.”

“Well. She’s gone.” I don’t know if I meant normal me, or that girl in the casket.

Chapter 2: Dave

My roommate Dave 3 is collecting things to use for an art project. I am also Dave.

He has been kicked out of two art schools, once for grades, once for public nudity and the administration came down hard and now he’s in the sex offender’s registry. I know him through

friends, barely, but he was kicked out of RISD and MICA and we both needed a roommate.

You can't actually tell how it is to live with someone. He's fastidious in the kitchen and bathroom, but started collecting broken pottery when we first started out, so I asked him to find a new place for it. He bought a small Amish shed, disassembled it, and reassembled it on our roof, which is strictly illegal, but he believes in asking forgiveness instead of permission. That some transgressions do not involve forgiveness as an option (sex offender) hasn't altered his philosophy.

He could live in the Copycat building but 1) he is not really working on anything, just collecting and 2) he says most artists are assholes—just the type of thing an asshole would say. Some types repel each other even though they're the same, like the right ends of the magnets. They need the opposite.

Dave 3 is this way. He says he likes what I do—provide tech support.

The pottery shards are still up there, but his collecting habit changed over into interesting pieces of scrap metal and then abruptly, ephemera. He started dropping the word in. I am almost positive he got it from an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* we watched — it defined the term clearly. He didn't use the word before that, and then he didn't use the word for a few weeks to be safe, and then when he did, just to throw him a bone, I asked him how he ever came to know such a term and he said it was art school.

Ephemera, ironically, has lasted the longest, partially because his collection was ruined by the rain a few months ago—the shed had a leak, to no one's surprise. He lost a lot of it. I would have given up then, but some people are only spurred on by loss and rejection. He doubled his efforts.

He piled up things that were not meant to last, like tickets and posters and bar mitzvah napkins, lists and notes.

I let him keep the collection inside. I can't bear the idea of him going through an Amish shed full of wet paper. Or he said he was going to cover it with a tarp. Never heard anything more pathetic.

One fine day I go with him to the thrift store. I like to look at the electronics. Also Dave 3 said girls are plentiful, though I've never noticed them there before. I try not to think about all that. I would be so pointless. Even thinking about it now — I want to go get the plastic bat.

The thrift store does not have any girls in it, in the end. There are older women, but no one to

consider, no one to titter at the outside frame of my vision. It is the same feeling I had when I was in middle school. You could sense when a female your age was coming, from up — I tested this — up to 1/4 mile away. Their appearance was less important. There's a twiddling in the chest. There's none of that at the thrift store. Dave 3 doesn't seem to mind. He is too excited looking through the domestic goods for ephemera. I can't bear to mention that no one would donate or sell ephemera at a thrift store. Almost by definition. He seems to realize it after we look through the whole store. He buys two George Carlin books and a shot glass with 3-d breasts on it.

He says it is for art, but wasn't most of the first human art just sculptures of breasts, anyway? Fertility? Clearly, everyone needs to enjoy the feeling of getting hard from looking at tiny boobs. The first entry in the masturbation catalog.

I don't even know what is in my catalog. This spring I am working on killing that part of myself. Or, really, euthanasia. It was already sick and weak.

I don't see the point.

On the way home we decide to go to Wendy's to get a burger on a pretzel bun. It's nearly unspoken. We both saw it advertised multiple times last night during *Chopped*. Our shared tolerance for almost any type of television is one of the reasons Dave 3 is so much better than my last roommate and is one of the reasons I say you can never tell what kind of roommate someone will be.

We eat in the car so we don't look like a couple. I'm the one who sees the box in the grass at the edge of the lot, near the dumpster. It is a small border of grass attempting to persuade us we're not in a shopping center.

"Look in the grass," I say. "I am the grass." I don't even hear that word without thinking of Sandberg's poem. "You think it's full of beer?"

"Dave, probably something better. No one leaves a box at a Route 40 Wendy's unless it's something they can't put in a dumpster."

"Babies—or puppies."

He goes to get the box and he comes back with it, stands behind my car. "Pop the trunk."

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"Good thing we left the thrift store. You have to give up to get what you need," Dave 3 sermonizes. Everything feels related to sex, I'm tempted to think, but then I realize he's full of

shit, because I have heard him croak about the importance of perseverance in art.

We go through the box, full of spiral notebooks and accordion files. The handwriting is an even mixture of cursive and print. It has an interesting quality. Mostly, notes from Literature classes, some sociology and linguistics. I pick up a blue notebook with “World Religion” written in white-out. I’m interested because it is the most used notebook. There is only one page of notes, from the first day of class, marked 8/27. Then a blank page, then, on the third page: THE WASHOUT GOSPEL.

THE WASHOUT GOSPEL

Verse 1

The Washout Gospel is the mountain funk jazz of being an unimportant spunk stain on the world. It means no one cares at all about you or your terrible food photography. Or what kind of flowers your boyfriend bought you. He’s still not a good person and neither are you. Your existence is an apathetic accident. Just a total shrug. Anyone could tell you—no one cares about your major. No one cares about you. You are a sweatmark on the universe’s collar and no one even cares enough to remove you with a bleach pen.

Verse 2

He who hath the scissors hathetheth the power. Secrets abound.

This morning in the bathroom I thought I would shit a pumpkin, nearly tore my asshole.

Meanwhile, May gets fucked to Tuesday, and it’s the second week so far? I want to know, but of course I don’t. I console myself with masturbation, music, and marijuana.

I’m probably the only person who wants to dye her hair mousy brown. I’d kill for a mousy brown. But then I’d be a freckled chick with brown hair, and no one would understand why. I woke up this morning with a piece clipped, I swear, clipped. I accuse May first.

But then we both realize it doesn’t make sense. Neither of us even owns scissors. It must have broken in my sleep.

—OR—

It was a small growing bit and I never noticed it.

Things like that upset me more. To think that something was growing that I didn't even see. I don't know. Feels like having a tapeworm.

I don't even know why I'm writing this—the pen feels good and I'm bored.

We're not going anywhere tonight—Rikoloff (Uncle Ricky) in the mini freezer and a sparkly bud from someone May made out with (my guess). I would like to make some new friends, maybe. If only for the possibility that one might know some people who might know someone who has a cock.

Even thinking that weirds me out. What am I going to do with a cock?

A cock strolls in the dorm room. “Hello ladies,” it says. Takes one look at me. “Hey Red—what happened to your hair?” May tries to charm the pants off him, succeeds, they boink while I sit out in the lounge.

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Verse 3

We met a cock! His name is Tyler.