Religious Society of Friends

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Elizabeth woke to the harp strings of her phone alarm and a hacking noise, as of wood chopping, somewhere outside. She'd fallen asleep on the couch again, and now the familiar room assembled itself—junk mail in the rocking chair, the Kachina dolls standing guard across the mantle, her mom's Catfight records framed on the wall, the two black disks above the album sleeves forming dilated eyeballs. The same disconcerting face that had been staring at Elizabeth for the past twenty-one years.

Before she thought about anything, she reached down her long underwear, into the warm place between her legs. A pain flared; Elizabeth plummeted. He thing had not vanished in the night, as she'd pleaded yesterday (let this be nothing!) in a way that approximated prayer. Not to God but to something like him; a blurry force or a sound, if she had to describe it, atonal and atmospheric, like the hum of a theremin.

She flung off the blankets and sat up. Through the bay window she saw the source of the noise—her mom striking a barbeque spatula against a Medieval-looking curtain of icicles that hung from the eaves, breaking the spears off one at a time. Without her swami scarf or hat her head was exposed in a way that still startled Elizabeth; she looked almost funny, like a big baby or a rapper, and Elizabeth didn't appreciate the joke the baldness made of her mother's illness.

Already she was in yesterday's clothes. She avoided the bathroom; tamped down her compulsion to look with the hand mirror again, didn't bother to moisturize her face or brush out the wedge of her bangs. It's nothing, it's nothing, it's nothing.

"You're up so early!" her mom said, stomping in the doorway. The cold had flushed her cheeks and ears.

Elizabeth shrugged into her coat and gathered her back­pack. "Label stuff," she said, bending to lace her boots. "Before work."
She didn’t meet her mother’s eyes, or kiss her, as was usual, before she left—afraid that her mom might divine the problem before it had become, officially, a problem.

At the downtown free clinic, the receptionist garbled her last name. Frunczack was one of those Ellis Island mash-ups, the result of a ship’s load of immigrants crowding a gangplank like paparazzi, a cacophony of languages while a secretary went around with a notepad and butchered all the spellings. This was how Mr. Sheridan (with his regular name) had explained it in the third grade. His intention must have been to arm her against the boys on the playground—“Elizabeth” they said regularly, but “Frunczack” they gagged on, convulsed the word from their chests and feigned vomit with various cafeteria props. Elizabeth freak-hag came in the forth grade during a P.E. softball game in which she failed to hit during a crucial inning. But these were only humble precursors to the rhetorical masterpiece born freshman year of high school—Ejizzabeth Fucksack, the playground boys (now woodshop bros) cat-called, sang, scrawled on any available surface like Neanderthals. It caught like a trend. Even Elizabeth recognized the genius of the tri-pun dis; the cruel lyricism, felt deep in the stomachs of all who recited it, like the best poems in the lang arts anthology.

“Elizabeth how-do-you-say-it?” the receptionist asked.

Elizabeth then—and now—was neither sack-like nor fuckable. In the mirror she was always trying to lift her shoulders, which sloped like wire hangers beneath her t-shirts; she was aware that she scratched at her facial blemishes too often, and that her natural voice was not unlike the voice that one might use to imitate a Muppet. After that P.E. softball game Elizabeth had hid in a drainage ditch beneath Washington Street, drawing in the mud and singing fantasy songs about life as a runaway. In high school she learned to hide by other means; she lived in her headphones, and
ventured to all-ages shows, where she stood so close to the speakers that the music rang in her ears loud enough to cover the other sounds.

How, then, had an explicitly un-sexy Elizabeth come to be here? Her clothes in a heap on the chair beside her, the overhead fluorescence turning her skin reptilian, the exam table paper crackling under her butt?

A nurse came into the room and read from a clipboard. "Discharge, itching, pain while urination?" Her makeup—her fingernails—radiated hygiene.

"I—no—I found something in my ..." Swimsuit area came to mind. It was an old term, from summer camp.

"Genital region," the nurse said. An anatomical tour-guide. "Something?" she repeated, and looked at Elizabeth through rimless glasses.

"Like a bump," Elizabeth tried. She remembered yesterday; the hand mirror angled between her legs, her desk lamp shamefully positioned.

"A lesion or a canker? In the vaginal canal? Labia? Anus?" Elizabeth felt hot and faint. "I'm not ..." It was in a non-territory, an undesignated fold. "I think it's probably nothing."

The nurse planted herself on a low stool and crabwalked toward Elizabeth.

"And you're sexually active?"

Elizabeth shifted and the tissue vest grazed her nipples, perking them terribly to life. Not so long ago, Julian had tested their pliability in his mouth. "I've only done it once," she lied. She'd done it twice. Once with Julian and before that with Boris, her Estonian coworker who'd manned the sandwich station at Squares. "A month ago." It had been two months before with Boris; fifteen days ago with Julian.
"You're a student?"
"No, I'm from here."
"No college?" The nurse frowned familiarly; townie, the frown said.

Elizabeth shook her head. "Not right now." Right now Elizabeth was devoting herself to Crossed Out. The burgeoning label, as her mother put it proudly. But Elizabeth stayed quiet; this didn't seem like the time to defend her extracurriculars.

"I think it's best we test for everything," the nurse said, as though she might administer an SAT, too.

Elizabeth did as she was told, put her feet in the stirrups and scooted to the edge of the table. Physically she remained there, but psychically she fell off; down, down, toward the regrettable memory of Boris. Her stubborn determination to lose her virginity, finally, at twenty-one. Our virginity, Boris had said in his stupid exchange student accent, emphasizing their shared purity as if this somehow fated the union. Elizabeth was less sentimental. It was disappointing to learn that Boris was as inexperienced as she; how could any real de-flowering be done by another flowery virgin?

She arrived at his dorm room to find stinky candles lit and Enya playing, his twin bed neat and at-the-ready, Americanized by a Star Wars pillowcase. He unsnapped the legs of his tear-away pants with painstaking slowness while Elizabeth sat there trying to feel something. The mood stone in her core refused to glow, but by then it seemed too late. He was on top of her, his little flabs of boy-breasts pressing into her, his puppy mouth against her ear.

Something infinitesimal snaked inside her now, and she felt a barb-like scrape behind her bellybutton. The room seemed to balance for a minute. Her mom mentioned this sometimes, the calm a doctor's tools and procedures could bring. "At least chemotherapy smells like it's helping. Smell me—don't I smell like Lysol?" a feeble attempt to make Elizabeth smile on one of those miserable rides.
home from treatment.

The nurse was asking something about monogamy now, about Elizabeth's partner. Julian appeared on the particleboard of the ceiling. She saw him on the stage at the Cinder Block, his Adam's apple protruding against the mic stand. "I don't have one," she said. To call him her "partner" might jinx the already microscopic possibility.

"Did you use protection?"
She felt the alien touch of the gloved finger, and again the sting. "Yes," she said automatically.

The nurse came out from the tent of her legs. "Are you sure?"

Elizabeth flushed. *It's nothing!*

"Because we have something here."

An hour later she was trenching down the snow-walled sidewalks toward work, hypnotized by disbelief. *We* did not have anything—Elizabeth had it, and the something was syphilis. In the recesses of her backpack, a white paper bag held antibiotics—antibiotics! She had rejoiced. *This was curable*, the nurse said. *But we'll have to wait on those other test results.* Relief came and went, and Elizabeth's insides turned stormy. *Other* tests, other results. Acronyms loomed large, bobbing on her internal whitecaps. *We'll be calling*, the nurse promised. She suggested Elizabeth's partner come in for his own tests, *A-sap!* And any other partners Elizabeth might have failed to mention.

She thought back—tried hard to focus and inspect the bleary image of Julian's penis, veering springily toward his left shoulder before he'd covered them both with the afghan. It was a fast glimpse, but she was sure that if something had been there she would have seen it; disease and the milky skin of Julian did not match up. No, Elizabeth thought, the syphilis had come from
Boris, the lying virgin. It was Boris she had not seen, in the dimness of the candlelight. Their sex had been like trying to strike a match with mittens on. The condom had bunched and become unworkable, and finally he'd shed it, tossed it to the floor with such authority that Elizabeth had not known what to say. To argue with the condom would have been to admit their sloppy execution of the whole endeavor. Their mutual badness at it.

An easy hatred overcame her. Boris was back in Estonia, but Elizabeth pictured him in his lame, square-brimmed hat, pressing a panini. In his retarded English, he asked, *What are you going after work?* Boris, who seemed capable of nothing but had conjured, somehow, this sore from across the Atlantic. And infected (probably!) Julian—Elizabeth's Julian.

He would hate her the way she hated Boris. How would she tell him?

Where the campus bordered downtown, she pushed through groups of students clogging the street corners, through so many nylon jackets and soggy Sherpa boots. It seemed crazy to be out among people at a time like this. She wanted to hide in her room with the record player on until she was cured. But her mom would be at home—and what would her mom think? That awful pity-look would shift across her face—that silent, expressionistic moan. When Elizabeth was in high school her mother had heard the signature nickname, for the first and only time, yelled by Damien Morris just as Elizabeth was climbing in the Volvo. Her mom had turned to her in the passenger seat—*Fucksack?* she mouthed, and the pity-look descended. She flung open the door with the engine still running. *You piece of shit Damien, you don't talk like that, not to my daughter, not to ANYONE! DON'T you smile—Does your mother know what a little prick you've become? Because the next time I see her—and then she growled with frustration. She and Elizabeth both knew that the next time she'd see Anne*
Morris would be on Sunday at Quaker meeting, and that was no place for the conversation she was threatening.

They drove home at first in silence, but then laughing, laughing until they were crying.

Ahead, the purple and ooze-green sign for Squares jutted crazily from the side of the building. Every time Elizabeth crossed the restaurant’s threshold, she was reminded of its patheticness—and her own, for working there. Its mixed odor of Belgian fries and cheap disinfectant, the lidless vats of mayonnaise, her zombie-faced coworkers in their franchise-issued polo shirts. She had come to think of the job only in terms of numbers, of money earned and banked in her label fund. Now she made her way to the break room before anyone saw her. The schedule on the bulletin board proved that Miller, her manager, had been serious about last week’s uniform infractions; he’d demoted her from the register to “working the corner,” as they called it—soliciting in the freezing wind, waving coupons for rhomboidal waffles and corporate crepes and focaccia pizza. Even worse than subjection to the cold was the social exposure. Two ninety-nine teriyaki Tuesdays! she’d yell, the Ugly Stepsisters or T Rex or whoever blaring from one strictly-forbidden earbud, hidden beneath her hood. All too often the solicited person turned out to be someone Elizabeth knew, bundled and winterized beyond recognition when Elizabeth exclaimed the deal. Then her cheeks would thaw with embarrassment, she’d lower her leaflets and make awkward small talk. An hour later the acquaintance would walk by again, returned from wherever he or she had been, and the two would repeat the whole thing over—another wave, another exchange. The person had gone somewhere and come back, while Elizabeth stayed frozen in the same place. The metaphor in this was not lost on her.

It happened that day with Kayla Kaspers, the last person in the world she expected to see.
“Elizabeth?” Kayla said. She was walking a floppy black dog with a graying snout, and the dog looked up at Elizabeth, then back at Kayla, bored.

“Hey!” Elizabeth mustered, shoving the coupons into her pocket.

Her corner that day was actually the entrance to the old walk-through mall, where the winter sun filtered through the glass ceiling in perfect rays, and the yellow tile gave everyone’s skin a photogenic softness—but all these tricks didn’t account for the visual transformation of Kayla—this new Kayla—who stood before Elizabeth. As kids the girls had been semi-friends in the social margins. Kayla was cast out for the flesh-colored brace she wore to correct her scoliosis, and because of the Ren fair accent she’d adopted, inexplicably, in the seventh grade. And Kayla had a nickname, too—at a sleepover sophomore year, she’d exclaimed, Black people love Jiffy Pop! and her reputation as weird-girl collapsed into weird-and-racist girl—KKKayla—rendering her as untouchable as Elizabeth.

“Old friend!” she gushed, her voice less Shakespearean but still lilting, as if she were stoned or had reached enlightenment. She pulled Elizabeth into a hug and Elizabeth’s cheek pressed against her floral hair.

After high school they’d kept in touch the way that people do, with quantum nudges across the cyber world, little thumbs-ups on pictures. Elizabeth knew that Kayla was at the New School for painting and that she lived in Brooklyn; that she had a sleek orange kitten named Thurston Moore, and that Kayla listed her hometown as Detroit, not Ann Arbor. But here was the three-dimensional evidence of what Elizabeth had distantly sensed, and it was startling to see that someone could evolve so rapidly. Kayla’s waist squeezed into a heart-shape by her jeans; Kayla’s Francoise Hardy bangs, straight and reflective as wire; and her foal-like eyes rimmed black.
“But how have you been? It’s been forever!”
And her vintage red letterman’s jacket. And her high-heeled boots that she didn’t seem to wobble on. And, and, and.
“What’s new with you? Tell me everything!”
Syphilis, Elizabeth thought. “Not a lot.” She bent to pet the dog, who tolerated this without enjoying it. “How’s New York?”
Kayla had a braggy way of talking about the city that made its excitement sound unimaginably boring. She listed the bands she’d seen and the museum exhibits, dropped the names of Brooklyn neighborhoods and restaurants Elizabeth half-recognized. A multi-layered envy was unfolding inside her. Elizabeth hadn’t been to New York since middle school, but the idea of it had occupied her fantasies so consistently that she felt she’d already lived a speculative variety of lives there. When she and her mom talked about the future—those conversations that hinged on remission, as if it were a decided given—they talked about New York, where they might go and spend a fall.

Kayla put her hand on Elizabeth’s shoulder. “We should hang out this week,” she said. “I’ll message you.”
She wouldn’t, probably, but it was nice. The gesture said I like you, even if it was a compromised like—I like that I can impress you. It meant that Elizabeth was someone worth impressing, and the thought was enough to make bearable the rest of the shift, the bat-in-the-cave feeling in her chest, the dread of Julian and her impeding confession.

When Elizabeth first saw Julian Black, she assumed he was—politically incorrectly—a bum. This had been in the maze of Shantytown Vinyl, where she went most days after work to lose herself among the sagging shelves of warped LPs, the crates of 45s in their rumpled parchment, the precarious wall of as-is turntables and busted
speakers. He knelt on the floor, hunched in a voluminous army parka and flipping through the dollar bin. Elizabeth went to work on the Bs of solo rock because the As were right above the parkaed guy. Here was a Syd Barrett import, and she slid the record out to check its condition.

“That’s probably great,” he said. “Never seen that before.” She jumped. The store was so much Elizabeth’s place of refuge that sometimes she forgot she was in public.

He was not the person she’d initially thought—no, the enormous eyeglasses betrayed his hipness, the kind of thing only ’90s talk show hosts wore. He was twenty-four or twenty-five, she guessed. A cowlick pulled his blonde hair back at the part. He smiled—dopily, beautifully.

She swallowed. “Yeah, me neither. It’s an import.”

“Where’s it from?” he asked, setting down his own records. “It looks Korean or something,” she said stupidly.

“Here.” He reached out for the record and flipped it over. “What, you don’t read chopsticks? This says Pink Floyd,” and he pointed to one of the characters.

Elizabeth stood there seriously looking, but he laughed. “I’m just fucking with you.” He handed the record back and turned again to his bin.

She had the impulse not to let him get away. “What’d you find?”

On top of his stack was a moldy Reggae compilation. “Oh, nothing really. Trying to get some samples of some really, like, damaged shit for this song I’m working on. Just to make it dirty or whatever.”

Elizabeth nodded vigorously, knowingly. “Yeah, cool, totally.”

“All the clean-sounding stuff that’s happening right now” ...

He whipped his head back in an abbreviated orbit, and a section of
hair swung out of his face.

"Yeah, I know, over-produced electronica," she hurried.

"It's so glitchy. I think it's hard to actually, you know, connect with. There used to be a good garage scene here—"

"Oh totally. Fucking MC5? I grew up on that. And Iggy's from up the street, right? I just found this reissue ..."

He splayed his records across the linoleum to reveal the familiar pink cover of the Catfight EP. "Have you seen this?" he asked.

Elizabeth was stupefied. Shantytown displayed the EP at the counter, the first—and so far the only—Crossed Out release. It was a reissue, technically, of their first demo, recorded in 1978 just down the block, at a studio that was now a dog-grooming place. She'd Xeroxed and pasted the cover herself; an old picture of the band sitting on their amps, her mom in the middle with leather boots up to her knees, a Mick Jagger haircut, her eyes painted to look like arrowheads. Elizabeth had long been numb to the image, but now, in the setting of this boy's record pile, it was reborn. The mystery and magic of her mother's past struck her, as it had at odd moments since her adolescence. Here was her mother in the heart of her life. She was just about Elizabeth's age.

"Linda Frunczack," Julian said. "Babe."

Elizabeth laughed once; looked up at him, then down.

"Yeah, she's my mom."

He—Julian—had a solo project that was kinda like ... and he compared it to a handful of low-fi, pseudo-tribal, psych-pop bands Elizabeth knew. Technically he lived in Philadelphia but he'd been touring for months, trying to garner some buzz before he released anything. Now he had a three-week lull between towns, and was staying with his old friend Rob G. Elizabeth knew Rob, too, sort of; he played keyboards for an instrumental band called White..."
Flag—and by the celestial connectedness of everyone (or so it sometimes seemed to Elizabeth—everyone excluding herself) Julian and Rob had grown up together. Somewhere in Pennsylvania that Julian called "Nowheresville."

"Oh shit!" he said in the Shantytown doorway, pulling a flier from his bag. He handed it to her. Julian Black and the Black Lights. "You should come," he said. "It's free."

Her heart thudded. "Cool," she said. "I'll see if I can make it," knowing that it was all she'd think about for the next two days.

The Cinder Barn wasn't a barn at all, but a freezing, badly lit warehouse out past the mall where a group of poli-sci dropouts held monthly shows. Elizabeth walked in as the last of Cannibal Con's feedback whined out. Most of the crowd she recognized. She waved to Jenny Phillips and said hi to a group from the food co-op, two boys with matted dreadlocks and a girl with distended ear-holes wide enough to accommodate Coke bottles. But she stood alone, in a spot behind a cluster of tall guys in sweatshirts drinking from brown bags. As the Cons dismantled their drums, Julian appeared, wearing a Navajo blanket like a cape. His set-up was more complicated than Elizabeth had imagined—a laptop, sampler, and drum machine, a milk crate of effects pedals he and Rob G. unpacked and untangled. Two guitars and a Moog, which Elizabeth knew was pronounced with a long-o, should the Moog ever come up in conversation.

Julian put on the Fender and stepped to the microphone, tuning up.

"Check-check-check. Alright, let's get started. I'm Julian Black, and these—" he gestured behind him, where there was no one, just the jumble of equipment on the makeshift stage and a half-dozen candles—"these are the Black Lights."

Already she knew that he'd be good—he couldn't not be.
A modest, tinny beat began, before he activated the laptop and the first song exploded into being. The guys in front of Elizabeth rocked on the balls of their feet. She could see Julian perfectly through a narrow slot between them. He turned to the Moog and tapped out a spacey melody that looped upon itself, then came back to the microphone and launched into a virtuosic guitar solo—the kind of performative shredding Elizabeth was a sucker for. The solo turned to fast, hard chords. His whole body vibrated. She was overwhelmed by the desire to touch him.

Halfway through the set he whisked the cape off and threw it into the audience. His bottom lip pressed against the bulb of the microphone as he sang, Gina, Gina, oh Gina, or maybe Cheetah, cheetah, oh cheetah. Savage yips and yelps punctuated his vocals. He howled for Gina or the cheetah to please, please, cut your nails!

A humble fantasy played out in Elizabeth’s mind—she saw herself calling up Sam in Chicago, who would press five hundred seven-inches for two thousand dollars in cash. She imagined traveling there by train with Julian. Imagined a record release party; herself behind the merch table on his next tour.

One song morphed into the next. Elizabeth moved her shoulders without thinking. Her ponytail loosened and her hair came undone around her face. The crowd lost themselves in a reverberating calypso sample that built layer upon layer, while the distorted guitar whined relentlessly, and then Julian stomped a pedal and the noise ceased abruptly.

In the ringing silence, the applause sounded so unappreciatively thin that Elizabeth did something she never did—she hooted. The crowd dispersed and she pushed through to the stage. Julian’s back was turned and the guitar off. He took a long swig from a flask.

“Hey that was great,” she said.

He spun around and pulled out two earplugs. Sweat coated
his face and his t-shirt was soaked. He looked as if he’d just slaughtered an animal.

“That was, like, really amazing,” she said again.

He looked at her blankly. “Thanks.”

For a terrible moment it seemed he’d forgotten her. Maybe he was one of those messianic musicians, she thought, like Brian Eno or someone, who lived so much in his own extraordinary world that unremarkable people simply flitted by and were dismissed.

But he set down the flask and began coiling a cable around his arm. “Some people are going to Rob’s. It’s fucking dismal here, right?”

“Yeah, totally,” Elizabeth said.

“You wanna load up with us and then we can go?”

She soared. “Yeah, okay.”

“Hey,” Julian yelled to Rob, who was hefting an amp. “You got the keys? Elizabeth’s gonna help.”

In her euphoria, she had a synesthesiac vision; her name, glowing in Julian’s mouth. He might as well have just sung a song about her, studded a whole chorus with Elizabths, for how singularly noticed she felt in that moment.

In hindsight, it was probably the highpoint of their relationship—their friendship—whatever it was—before everything slalomed into surreality. At Rob’s they’d abandoned the group to listen to records in the basement, where Julian was staying. Rob had filled him in on the Catfight EP, Julian said; he knew Elizabeth had put it out, knew all about her label project. “You’re, like, paying for everything yourself?” he’d asked. “The pressing, the recording, the... you know I do all my own recording, I just need some monetary backing...” His words oscillated and slurried. Even then Elizabeth sensed that anything she said on the subject would be forgotten
by morning. She was drunk on whiskey from a coffee mug. He knocked over the bong that balanced precariously on an ottoman. And then he stepped toward Elizabeth and put one hand on her hip, the other in her hair, and kissed her. No one had ever kissed her like that—with their hands so undeniably on her—and it was cinematic and scary. Upstairs, people laughed. They lay down on the futon and a strand of Christmas lights turned them orangey; at first just their faces and then their bodies, revealed. The cat came over and flicked its tail perversely against her bare leg. Are you healthy? he asked. Her head swam; what did he mean? She was under-weight; she had not had a period in months. But she must have said yes, because something miraculous happened then: Elizabeth felt herself divide in two—the old her and this new, unfamiliar her, and the old Elizabeth flew off like a ghost.

It was dark by the time her shift ended and she caught the bus. She sat curled in the plastic seat, biting at a cold tortilla and scrolling through their minimal correspondence since that night. Two days after the fact, she’d texted boldly:

ARE WE FRIENDS?
Julian: FTF
Elizabeth: Haha

And today:

I have to talk to you
Julian: What abt?
Elizabeth: Important. 2nite?
Julian: whnr
Elizabeth: cool

There wasn’t much comfort in the missives; she had not felt “haha,” she did not feel “cool,” but now she was on her way and there was no going back. All day, time had been speeding up and slowing down with a sickening irregularity. Now the bus dropped
her and she moved up Rob's salted walk, onto the rime-slick porch, ahead of herself. The front door was unlocked.

"Hello?" she yelled from inside. Music, the Kinks, rose from below. She opened the door that led to the basement and called again.

"Down here," a voice, Julian's, answered.

Her throat restricted. She threw her boots on the pile of sneakers in the entryway and padded down the stairs in her socks, shaking out their fetid smell as she went. Here was the cave-room where it had happened—the walls of tacky stone and the calico carpet, the Christmas lights, the futon where, now, Julian and Rob G. lounged with their feet on the coffee table among a dozen empty beer cans. Julian had his laptop on his knees, and the cat was stretched out across Rob's lap. A third boy, whom Elizabeth didn't know, was positioned fetally in the nest of a Papasan chair, rolling a joint on the cover of a huge textbook, though the air was already ripe with smoke.

She looked at Julian and instantly her face burned. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," Julian said.

The kid with the joint glanced up at her, then back down.

"What's up," Rob said.

Just to fill the space, Elizabeth heard herself describe her day pushing chicken wraps.

"You should quit," Rob said.


Julian cleared a space among the empties and set the computer on the table. "I could go for a chicken wrap right now." He stood and yawned, stretching his arms above his head so that his t-shirt rose to show the line of hair that led into his pants. Elizabeth felt it acutely—the pain between her legs. She could just leave. She could do this on the phone or in an email.
“You want a beer?” he asked.

“Sure,” she said. She didn’t. There was nowhere to sit, so she went over and perched awkwardly on the arm of the futon with her backpack still on. Julian’s laptop was there in front of her, open to a grid of pictures: towering, industrial buildings at night in a snowy field, their windows garlanded with cyclone fencing. The façade of a bar—a chubby girl in a fur coat flipping off the camera. Rob G. and a kid with a neo-Nazi haircut smoking. A band—Wanted Widow, she thought she recognized—streaks of pink light and a double-necked guitar, the disembodied leg of a crowd surfer. Elizabeth puzzled it together—a show in Detroit, probably at the Dover Club.

“When was this?” she asked.

And then she saw Kayla Kaspers. A red straw between her lips. Then Kayla in perfect profile, talking to another girl. Then Kayla next to Julian, his arm around her shoulder, Kayla looking straight into the camera while Julian looked at her, both of them grinning wildly.

The pain moved into her chest, where it flared open and closed.

“Uh, last night? Night before? Fake Jamaicans opened, they killed it,” Julian said. He set down Elizabeth’s beer and plopped back on the futon.

The world felt rattled. She tore her eyes from the pictures and looked at him. “You’re friends with Kayla Kaspers?”

Julian picked up the computer and scrolled.

“Oh, he wants to be friends with Kayla,” Rob laughed. He made quotations with his fingers. “Fuckin’ waiting to ‘befriend’ her.”

She struggled to keep her voice even. “How do you know her?” KKKayla, Elizabeth thought.

The kid in the chair lit the joint and the air became thick.

"What do you care," Rob said.

She took a long drink of the beer. It came to her that Julian hadn't told Rob about their night together. "I don't," she said smally. She'd left the morning after, retreated like an awkward dream, just as he was waking up. He hadn't protested her going.

Above them, the front door slammed and there were voices, shuffling. Steve Spinaker, Vickram Jansen, Ted somebody and Jenny Phillips filed down the stairs. As if they'd come to stage a reenactment; it was the same group from two weeks ago, from after the show.

Steve balanced a twenty-four pack of PBR on his head; Jenny carried bags of takeout in purple boxes.

Elizabeth knew those bags, those boxes, the burnt cheese smell. Nausea washed over her. So far today she'd taken three antibiotics—three times the amount prescribed. Now she felt a noxious fizzing in her stomach, as if all of the capsules had opened at once.

Julian looked concerned. "Where's everybody else?"

He meant the other girls. All of the world's other girls. He took out his phone and began pressing keys.

"I'm gonna go," she said to no one. She pushed up the stairs, past the group.

In her wake, Julian called, "Easy E—I thought you wanted to talk business. Have a cigarette—"

"Are you okay?" Jenny asked.

But Elizabeth was running now. A sulfurous bile shot into her esophagus and it was all she could do to push through the basement door, then the front door, onto the porch. Who was Easy E?

She spewed a mess into the new snow.

The realizations mounted, pyramidal. Two weeks ago, Julian had wanted to get laid, and Elizabeth was the only available
person to lay. The possibility descended—maybe it had come from him? Maybe he'd gotten it from someone in Toledo, Pittsburgh, Ithaca—maybe he'd found another Elizabeth or Kayla in one of those towns and gotten it from one of them. Maybe he'd gotten an acronym and passed that along, too. She sucked back her phlegm and looked up at the sky, deep into the beer-commercial oblivion. Against the black the snowflakes became very huge very fast, just before they landed, like down, on her cheeks.

"Hey," Julian said behind her. There was a long pause. She couldn't face him. "You left your shoes."

She turned with her hand shielding her eyes. "I know," she said violently.

He tossed the boots onto the porch and then went back inside. Elizabeth stripped off her wet socks and put her feet into the fleecy interiors. A minute later he came out again in his parka with a wad of toilet paper. He offered it to her. "You wanna come in?"

"No," she said, wiping her nose. Julian put his hand on the back of her neck and mashed her there. Electricity shot through her body; a pulse, despite everything, in her swimsuit area.

"Come on," he said. His voice was soft. "I'll show you what I've done with the van."

She followed him down the block to where the van was parked, and when he opened the back doors she saw what he meant. The bottom with built up with plywood to make a floor, and he lifted the edge to show Elizabeth the grid of cubbies underneath, stuffed with cassette tapes, t-shirts, beef jerky. Julian was only passing through. She'd known this from the very beginning.

They climbed in and he turned on the ignition for heat. Arthur Russell came through the speakers—*I close my eyes and listen, to hear the corn come out*. In the glow of the streetlights they
unfurled a roll of egg-crate foam and sat cross-legged, their knees just barely touching.

"When are you leaving?" she asked.

"Couple days. I have some West Coast stuff lined up."

His nonchalance burned. "What about Kayla?" she tried to joke. It didn't come out funny.

"What about her?" Julian asked.

"Are you trying to date her?"

He pulled a plastic baggie and rolling papers from his pocket. "I'm not trying to date anyone," he said. He made Elizabeth's language sound absurd. "It's not about... dating."

Her pride floundered, then left her. "Fine, fucking." And because the cause was already lost—"Is Rob right? Are you trying to fuck her?"

He sighed as if her questions were impossible, and tore at the nest of tobacco. "I don't think you get it. It's like, no one's everything. Some girls are pretty, some are cool, some just have style. Some girls are different. More like you."

Her mother had warned her once, never to trust a boy who tells you you're not like other girls. He's trying to turn you against yourself.

"How am I?" she asked.

He licked the cigarette and sealed it. "You're not, like, shallow. You're not always thinking about how everyone sees you."

Her heart flapped. It wasn't true. She felt a nebulous sense of guilt. "I have syphilis," she said.

The plainness of the confession isolated the sound of her voice, froggy; as when she heard herself echo back during bad cell phone reception. Way down in the pit of the moment, everything about her seemed ugly and silly.

Julian looked frozen in space and time, the unlit cigarette held out before him.
She rushed into the larger story then, anxious to soften and modify the news. The free clinic, the test, the antibiotics; the statistical facts of how really common it was. An Estonian person had given it to her. This last fact hovered doubtfully between statement and question, and she hurried, “Is there any way you could have gotten it—?” She couldn’t ask more than that.

He set the unlit cigarette down, like an admission of defeat. “Did we use something?”

She shook her head.

He nodded and took his glasses off, staring at nothing. For a minute he looked vulnerable; a little like the bronze statue of Benjamin Franklin in the law quad. Then he lay back on his elbows and began to unbutton his jeans.

Sometimes people did things that were so unfathomable to Elizabeth, so different from what she herself would do, that her view of the human world expanded for a minute, and she felt overwhelmed by the unpredictability of everyone; of life itself. Its capacity to surprise and mortify and hurt her.

He opened his fly, then held up his phone to illuminate the slug of his penis. “Do you see anything?” He flopped it from one side to the other. “I thought I saw something this morning. There. Right there.”

Elizabeth’s heart racketed. She was repulsed. As if to overcome it, she scooted closer. “Where?”

“There,” he said. He tautened the skin between two fingers, then took her hand and placed it on him.

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The Friends meetinghouse was a sprawling craftsman mansion full of upright pianos and second-hand sofas, their upholstery long permeated with the smell of lentils and black tea. On the main floor,
the newer addition of a large, windowed hall butted up against a forested nature preserve, junglous and sheltering in the summer, but barren and fragile-looking in winter. When Elizabeth was young her mom had explained that they weren’t Quaker-Quakers; they were just people who went to Quaker Meeting. It was about being quiet and still; it was like mediation. God—what’s God? her mom had asked. She was seven and she was told she could decide for herself. This was around the time Elizabeth first heard the theremin sound, like a spiritual placeholder.

Elizabeth rarely went to meeting anymore, but that morning she had the compulsion not to be too far from her mother. Now that they were here, though, she doubled back on her decision. People she’d known her whole life removed their shoes, kissed her on the cheek. No, the long quietude was not what she needed. The room full of blank faces, everyone turning inward, further inward, listening. The “sharing.” Members of the congregation rose to say naked, emotional things. Elizabeth was afraid someone might say something to break her. She did not want to cry in front of everyone.

It was cold out, but not the kind of face-aching weather it had been yesterday. She followed the trail that looped through the woods, down to the river, over the arc of the wooden bridge, its circle reflected on the river. The sky was as flat and white as a freshly painted wall. She’d forgotten her iPod, and the silence felt claustrophobic and empty at the same time. The Arthur Russell song still lingered in her head; now she never wanted to hear it again. She closed her eyes and when she opened them, they were wet.

She had not found the thing he was trying to show her. Beneath her fingers he sprang to life, and then he put his hand on hers and guided it. If she broke the action down to its minutia, it was nothing more than a movement; like a handshake or a dance. If
she thought of it this way, it was almost insignificant.

The trail led back to where it had started and she approached the meetinghouse again. From this distance, the glass hall looked like a diorama, everyone inside preserved. It was her mother who was standing now, a rarity; the last time Elizabeth could remember had been a year ago, just after her diagnosis. But now her mom's chin was high, her eyes closed, her mouth open. The song came wordless and sweet across the landscape. Experimentally, Elizabeth opened her own mouth and released a high, steady note. There was no one around to hear. What had her mother heard in the silence to make her rise? What bell had rung inside her, to make her want to stand, and throw her head back, and sing?