

## Chapter 1: May (excerpts)

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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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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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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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.

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## **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, 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.

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.

Verse 3

We met a cock! His name is Tyler.