

Human Bonding

It was the semester I snorted coke off a toilet, smoked weed in an alley with a homeless guy named Caesar, and was black-eyed by some girl on the street at two AM, somebody's girlfriend. It was the semester I tripped up the splintering steps of my apartment complex and lay there in my own drool/vomit until morning when a neighbor stepped on my hand, a story that wouldn't be worth telling except that the sole of his shoe said *suseJ*, so that he could leave Jesus prints in the sand or wherever he was, like on my hand, where he left one in a diagonal, purple bruise. When I saw him later in the hall I made sure my hand faced forward so he could see what he'd done, but he just looked down at it with a stony expression and then back into my eyes, one of which was greenish purple and as big as an egg. I figured he viewed the Jesus print as some kind of sign from God, and maybe it was.

"Sorry," I said because I was in his way, though I didn't move to get out of it.

"You're a girl?" he asked, surprised, because I have this pompadour haircut and a James Dean wardrobe, but my voice is unmistakable. He looked at me for a minute like I was a puppy he'd discovered in a garbage can.

It was also my last semester because I stopped going to the class I needed in order to graduate, and I didn't feel like retaking it. But before all of that, it was the semester I met Wendy.

I first saw her in a crowded lecture hall, her golden curls shining from the sea of dull hair, a thin strip of pure white light hitting her head so that it looked like she was wearing a headband. Her dress bloomed with violets. I sat down next to her, blocking the sun, and looked over her arm at the bubbly, printed words at the top of the first page of a new notebook, the date and the day's topic ("Introduction"). Each letter was so defined, so singular it seemed as if it had its own personality. Seeing them, I felt like a child with my face pressed up against the cool glass of a high-rise city window watching a bright, happy parade go by.

The class, which fulfilled some distribution requirement everyone else had apparently knocked off freshman year, met at an unfortunate 9:30 AM, MWF.

"This is Human Bonding," the professor said, extending two hands out over the lectern as if we ourselves were the topic of the class, "but if you came here thinking this class was about sex, then you were more than half mistaken."

This was only my first more-than-half mistake. My second was asking Wendy to lend me a pen, or maybe that was my third, and my second was sitting next to her in the first place. When I asked to borrow a pen, Wendy, whose name I had yet to learn, nodded without a word, which surprised me. I had expected that squint-eyed scrutiny you often get from the kind of girl who writes down the date in her notebook—like the kind of person who's forgotten a pen is also the kind of person who won't return it. Wendy leaned over her backpack and pulled out a pencil case

featuring Hello Kitty's disembodied and mouthless head. She extracted four pens and laid them out on my desk, each one a different color.

"I'm not ambi-ambidexterous," I said, and she laughed even though the joke was dumb.

"I thought you might have a preference," she said. A preference! In pen color! I chose the pink one, and watched to see if this would tickle her, and it did, I could tell by her smile. Her smile was wide and forgiving with deep dimples, but when she started taking notes, her mouth became small and her lips jutted out in a gently pouting kiss.

I copied the date and topic from her notebook on a crumpled piece of paper I'd found in my pocket. I wrote my name at the top, as an afterthought, CHRIS, in all-caps, as if it mattered if I lost this piece of paper, as if someone could somehow return it to me if I did. Taking notes was a particularly fruitless endeavor—my penmanship was terrible, even I could hardly decipher it. In the whole mess of moving in with my grandparents after my mom passed, I missed the unit on cursive, and now I was too lazy to learn it or to pick up my pen between letters, so my handwriting looked like the EKG squiggle of someone near death.

Wendy had already written down four or five lines of notes, bullet-pointed, including things I already knew wouldn't be a problem for her ("Late homework = ZERO."). I didn't feel like copying them, I just watched her arm as it moved back and forth so diligently across the page. That arm was pale white, almost glowing, like a star.

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That semester, I woke up in many different beds and in many different conditions, but I would always arrive at class MWF relatively on time. Headached and hungover as I often was, I liked having a destination other than my stuffy apartment, which had no furniture save an airbed and a microwave, and made me feel like a squatter in my own life. Wendy was already in class, always, settled into her seat completely, notebook page dated, pens spread across my little beige flip-up desk for the choosing. She was my tour guide through the syllabus ("Short answers due Wednesday," she'd remind me as we filed out of the lecture hall), my summarizer of readings. Hers was the notebook I'd look to after I'd accidentally fallen asleep or gotten lost in a daydream.

Wendy was different from the women I usually woke up next to. She was fresh and balanced—not chipper per se, but she seemed like she slept eight hours each night and had milk and cereal for breakfast with slices of banana cut on top.

One morning, her dress looked like a garden, and the blue and purple flowers seemed to spring from her very flesh. After my usual *hmming* bit over which pen to choose, I asked Wendy how old she was. Class hadn't started yet and students were still shuffling in around us. I don't even know why I asked—I already knew she was freshman. I had this weird, half-idea that she might be one of those kids who skipped high school and went straight to college.

She was eighteen, as she should have been. “Is it because of this?” she asked, holding up her pink pencil case and looking concerned. Hello Kitty stared at me with that expressionless face, just two black oval eyes that you could pretend meant anything you wanted.

“No,” I said, waving it away, but that wasn’t entirely true. Of course it wasn’t *just* the pencil case, it was the whole thing, her ambiance, the floral dresses and the dimples and the way she smiled. I knew things just by looking at her, the way, when people saw me, they knew instantly I was a fuckup.

I wanted to tell Wendy that she should like what she liked, that not pretending to be the same as everyone else was what made her more interesting than these people all around us. Case and point were two girls a row in front of us with orange-brown spray tans and hair solidified with so much product that it practically clinked as they turned their heads, which they often did at the same exact moment.

But I didn’t elaborate because I knew where compliments could lead, and it wasn’t a place I wanted Wendy to go, not with me at least. I clasped my hands together like my mother used to tell me to do when I was little, when I couldn’t seem to prevent myself from getting into trouble.

When I picture my mom, I picture her above me, a shadow, hovering or holding me, scolding or comforting me after I’d done something wrong. A golden cross always rested on the flat plain above her breasts. That cross often swung above my head like a pendulum as my mother leaned over me, or was clutched in my fist, the tall point rising between my fingers, warm from her chest and surprisingly sturdy for something so thin.

My mother, so kind and patient and still I had discarded everything she had ever given me, my name and the lessons she had taught me, how to sew and sift flour, how to braid my own hair and say the Lord’s Prayer: *And lead us not into temptation...*

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I was buzzed on tequila, standing outside of a bar off College Ave that had once let me in with a fake ID identifying me as a race I am not with a color hair I don’t have. It was newly dark and a little cool, and I was smashing a cigarette under the toe of my sneaker, feeling smugly proud of myself—that I’d more-or-less shown restraint—a few shots of tequila, one cigarette, still relatively early, time to go home—when Wendy walked by, looking down at something in her hands, not noticing me, the skirt of her dress flowing along below her purple backpack like flowers in the wind.

“Hey,” I yelled. She stopped, turned, waved, walked back to me. The moon was as round as a quarter, and under it Wendy’s curls glistened. “Your hair looks nice,” I said. She smiled down at the ground as I moved my foot forward to cover the cigarette. “You at the library?” I asked. “Until now?”

“Flashcards,” she said, holding up a stack of colored index cards. I squinted in hopes of making out that bubbly handwriting I liked so much, but all I could see was a blur. I counted in my head how much I’d drunk, little shot glasses floating over a fence like sheep: one, two, three, etc—it was hard to say, but it seemed like they’d all caught up with me.

“What are they for?” I asked.

“Our class,” she said. I stared at her dumbly, and her face went serious. “For the test tomorrow. I told you.”

“Shit,” I said before I could stop myself. I tried to remember whether or not we’d reviewed the syllabus together that week. “Can we go through them?”

“Now?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, and you could say I didn’t know what I was doing, but I am often both stupider and not as stupid as I seem.

Wendy looked down at her flashcards, and then up at me as if she had to choose between us. I tried to stand steady. “Alright,” she said. “Alright, yes. I live right over here.”

She lived a few blocks from the bar. We walked up a dark stairwell where peeling paint revealed layers of rejected colors all the way down to 50s mint green. The wooden stairs were creaky, like some animal was under there moaning in pain every time we took a step.

“Why doesn’t someone get these stairs fixed?” I asked.

“They’re just creaky,” said Wendy. But this wasn’t the kind of place Wendy was supposed to be living, with stairs you could probably fall through into an apartment below, some drug-dealer’s lair for all anyone knew.

Her apartment, a studio, was much nicer than the stairway, and I knocked on the wall as if from this action I could decipher something about structural soundness. A rickety-looking round table was covered in opened textbooks, stray papers, a mess of pens, a plate covered in crumbs and deflated grapes. Her beige linoleum kitchen was stacked with precarious towers of dirty plates, bowls, and mugs. Several posters, including Van Gogh’s sunflowers, were tacked right into the wall with red and blue pushpins.

The main event of the room, though, was perfectly organized, and I thought the best representation of Wendy herself: a futon folded out into a bed with a multicolored floral comforter and two matching pillows, a collection of stuffed animals nestled between and in front of them, arranged by height, with the smallest not more than five inches high, sitting at the very front. They were all staring off into space with hard black plastic eyes and soft threaded smiles.

I sat on the floor across from Wendy, running my finger up and around the knots in the wood, trying not to look at her. But even from that position I could still see her knees tucked under her, white and smooth, the snowy peaks of two mountains. I watched her delicate fingers pick a word from the tall rainbow of flashcards, listened to her soft voice as she read aloud. The

cards were all about how a baby attaches to its mother, how that's some kind of template for the future, like if you don't give a shit if your mother leaves you alone in a playroom when you're two, you're fucked for life, and you'll never give a shit when anyone leaves you in the future. As if life could be boiled down to one variable.

I didn't want to look up at Wendy's face, because I knew what that would come to, and even as I didn't look at her face, I knew that I was simply delaying the inevitable. I knew a lot of things about the future. I knew that I should leave, for example, but I also knew that I wouldn't, not unless Wendy asked me to, and in a way I hoped she would.

"Hey, you okay?" Wendy asked, tapping me on the knee.

I looked up at her and nodded. Her curls, her pink cheeks, her pink lips: a porcelain doll. Something flashed through my mind, something my mom had always said, that I was like a bull in a china shop. *Don't touch now, Baby*, echoed through my head.

But I always did.

I swirled my pointer finger down the length of one of Wendy's curls. She put her fingers around her flashcards, realigning them. I saw her lips turn up in a little smile that she wanted to keep to herself. I put my finger under her chin. She was warm, pulsing with energy, like a child or a star, but she didn't move. I kissed her. "I shouldn't do this," I said, but my hand was already working through the buttons in the rose bush of her dress. My hand was shaking. "You shouldn't let me do this." Her chest was blinding white. I closed my eyes. I didn't want to see. It was like undressing a doll. I was vibrating, my whole body. She put her hands under my shirt, spreading her fingers out over my bare back and down my sides like a waterfall. I kissed her neck. She was right there, under my tongue: Wendy.

Wendy led me to the bed. It unnerved me a little, how naturally she did this. I took off my clothes, even though I was feeling self-conscious, which was weird, because I'd done this a million times, even with girls who were kind of gross, girls with missing front teeth and meth problems and BO. She pushed all of the stuffed animals off the bed in one giant sweep, then lay on her back. With the stuffed animals all sprawled out across the floor, the whole place was a disaster.

I started kissing her, working my way down, but nothing felt right, nothing felt natural. The stuffed animals that had landed face up—teddy bears and monkeys and a goddamn pink caterpillar—were all staring at me. Their mouths were spread into thin, knowing smiles, like they had been taught the facts of life a long time ago. They had eyes like the Mona Lisa.

I wanted to leave. I heard Wendy saying, "Hey, hey," in a voice like a mother patting her crying baby on the back. "Don't worry about me," she said. I figured one of us better finish fast, so I abandoned the task of getting Wendy off and just went at it for my own pleasure.

When I was done, I peeled my sweaty body off her and began collecting my clothes from the floor. I couldn't look at her. "I have to go," I said, jamming my arm through the hole of my tee shirt and flipping it over my head. The radiators were making violent, hammering sounds now, like the moaning creature under the stairs had clambered up through the pipes and was trying to get in. It had gotten hot, so hot it was hard to breathe. "Sorry," I added.

Wendy looked down over the edge of the bed, and I was afraid of the expression I'd see when she turned back towards me: dimpleless cheeks, jutting lip, eyebrows bent up in sorrow, all because I was an asshole.

But when Wendy turned back toward me, her face was dimpleless, yes, but not pained either, not even stoically expressionless, it was just a face completing a task, which had been to grab her underwear from over the side of the bed and slither back into them. She was composed, but not overly or showily. It was like she had expected me to be awful, and she didn't even care.

I slipped my sneakers on without untying them, the backs bent under my heels. "I have to go," I said again, dumbly.

"One sec," she said, and she pulled at the sheet from under the wrinkled comforter, to untuck it from the bottom of the bed, then stood up and wrapped herself in it, and for the first time, in the dim light of the messy room, she could have been any other girl on campus and it made my fucking heart want to crawl into some safer location.

She followed me as I shuffled to the door in my sneakers. "Test at nine, remember?" she said, as if we were just parting ways at the lecture hall.

As soon as she closed door, I sprinted down the moaning stairs, my toes clawing into the front of my sneakers so they wouldn't come off. I started walking up the dark sidewalk, chilly because I hadn't brought a jacket. I fished around in my jeans pockets for some pharmaceuticals. That would have been another good reason to bring my jacket: more pockets. I took whatever I found without even looking, chewing the stuff, letting the bitter taste spread out across my tongue.

I stopped back in the bar, where I'd begun the night hours before, and had a few shots. I felt far off again, the way I liked it, myself once removed, like I was controlling a character in a first-person video game. The bar was a dive, all dark wood lacquered in years of beer spills, so the tables and seats were always sticky, and it seemed like no one was ever in there but regulars until it was late, and then wasted college kids came in, like this gaggle of girls in blue-sequined shirts piling in, probably from some themed party. Even in the low light of the bar, their shirts sparkled across the walls like disco balls. Two of the girls were a couple, one of them with big eyes and jet black hair, the other plain and stiff. They made out in the corner while some townie at the bar cheered them on.

A little later, Big Eyes sidled up next to me to order a beer, and I wrapped my hands around her waist and flung her out into the open space of the bar and started dancing and she giggled and said, “What are you even doing?” I put my cheek to her cheek, the way they dance in old movies, and maybe I tried to kiss her. Then I left.

As soon as I stepped back out into the night, the door hardly out of my hand, I felt a hard tap on my shoulder, and almost by the time I turned around, or at least by the time my vision caught up with the turn, I had already been punched in the eye, a knuckle-cracking whammy followed by a tirade I didn’t try to decipher and probably couldn’t have because I was too fucked up. My vision tunneled into a pinpoint of black and then expanded out again.

I stumbled backwards against the brick wall and then sank down to sit on the sidewalk. The upper-left quadrant of my face ached with heat. I seemed to have been holding my breath, and I let out all in one puff.

The gaggle of girls gathered in a shimmering blue cloud trying to talk down Big Eyes’ girlfriend, who wanted to punch me again. I tried to wink at Big Eyes, but my left eye wouldn’t open. Out here in the dark, her eyes were less big. In fact, her whole face seemed different, uglier. People never really were who you wished them to be, were they?

The girls floated down the sidewalk together, glancing back at me with pitying half smiles. For awhile, I could still hear their voices echoing into the night, then it was silent save a low building buzz. I laid down on the cold sidewalk and closed the eye that still worked, smiling to myself. I’d never been punched in the face before, believe it or not. It felt good, it felt like justice.