

The Wayside

“It’s not just the words, it’s the attitude: the excitement you bring to the house and the people who lived here. You have to start animated *and* you have to keep that energy going the whole way through. For example—” he paused for a moment, his finger on his lips, and then put on his tour guide face: eyes wide, mouth stretched into an impossible smile. “Welcome to The Wayside. I’m your tour guide James.” I thought the smile might pop off his face. “The tour should take approximately one half hour, *and* I’ll be available to answer any questions you have up to a half hour after the tour is over.”

He paused and relaxed, still smiling. “Sort of like that,” he said. “I’m sure you’ve got it, May, you catch on fast.”

“Yeah, you keep saying I’ve got it, *but* you haven’t let me do a tour yet,” I said, brushing my hair back with my hand for the millionth time that day. It was the summer between my senior year of high school and my freshman year of college, a humid New England summer that made my hair puff out so that I was constantly pinning or brushing it back despite the low success rate of such tactics.

“You’re almost ready,” he said, “*and* I think you only need a few more tours before we give you a run.”

“*But*,” I said, “I can do it after that?”

We had a war going on between *ands* and *buts*, or, at least, I had a war going on between *ands* and *buts*. James believed *but* was a negative word that subtracted positive meaning from the first part of the sentence, and therefore he rarely used it. He would say things like, “You’re doing a great job entering data into the computer *and* when you file my papers I can’t seem to find them.”

To counter his irrational elimination of *but*, I used it as frequently as possible in places where it was completely unnecessary: “I really like oranges,” I’d say during lunch break, “*but* I really like apples.” I’d never dared to play such a game with my teachers, and maybe I only had the courage to play it now because I knew he wouldn’t get angry—his smile rarely disappeared, as if a parenthesis had been tattooed below his nose.

This was the first time I’d been employed as anything besides a babysitter, and I was unprepared for such thorough and personal training. By the end of my first week, I felt as if I’d been at The Wayside for half the summer. I arrived at work each morning preemptively exhausted to find James smiling absurdly, eager to start. His mouth was frog-like: broad and slightly protruding, his lips long, thin, and pink. I wondered which came first, his smile or the shape of his mouth. He was lean and clean shaven, wore thin silver-rimmed spectacles that nearly matched his silvering hair. I imagined that each morning, after sit-ups and egg whites, he

stood barefoot on a white tiled bathroom floor, shaving carefully, a pile of lather falling into an impossibly white sink.

What I'd really wanted was a job at The Orchard, the historic site next door where Louisa May Alcott had written *Little Women* and also where my best friend Julie worked. The Wayside and The Orchard couldn't be more different. The Wayside *seemed* charming from the outside: a creamy house with green shutters, a wrap-around porch, and an extra room that jutted from the roof alongside three pink chimneys. The Orchard was just a big box with long dark brown siding in the typical old New England fashion.

But inside, The Orchard was bright and cheery as if the little women could come tumbling down the stairs at any moment. The Wayside, on the other hand, was so dreary inside it looked like a set for a murder mystery. It was cold, even in the summer, with bile green carpets and drawn shades that made every day seem overcast and dull. Though The Wayside had housed three notable authors—including children's author Margaret Sidney and, briefly, Louisa May Alcott herself—its claim to fame was Nathaniel Hawthorne, who'd named the place and wrote some of his most famous works while living there.

On my first Friday at work, James and I waited around to see if anyone would arrive at the Visitor's Center for the final tour of the week. Or, he waited for another tour, and I waited for the end of the day. The Visitor's Center was a small building located thirty feet from The Wayside. Here, books were sold, tours began, and life-sized plaster statues of each author stood silently before displays of old pictures and famous quotes.

James finished sweeping, leaned his broom against the wall, then sat in a chair beside me. "What are your aspirations?" he asked. I almost laughed.

"I don't know," I said.

"Writing?" he asked, nodding towards the plaster authors.

"Oh, no," I said. "Not writing." I sensed disappointment, though it's hard to say why since he was wearing his usual smile.

"You can do anything at your age," he said, "and I still believe I can do anything at mine. It's all a matter of enough time," he added, "and you have yet to worry about that."

But I did, in a way, have to worry about that. I was seventeen—not exactly a child, but not quite an adult. The summer felt like a strange no-man's land, and I was trying my best not to consider the before and after that so conspicuously surrounded me.

Just then, a girl and her mother entered the Visitor's Center. "Well, hello!" James said, jumping up as I mustered what I could of a smile.

James stared at the girl for a moment. She was carrying a notebook and pen. He closed his eyes and hummed. The girl watched to see what would happen next. The mother smiled. James opened his eyes, his smile rubberbanding tight across his face. "It just came to me," he

said. “I have this feeling... this feeling that you must be. . . you must be a writer!” He paused. “Am I right?”

The girl giggled and looked at her mother who motioned for her to respond. “I *am* a writer,” said the girl. “And and and,” she looked up at her mother again, who encouraged her to go on. “AND! I’ve wrote a story and it was in the. . . in the *newspaper!*” She said “newspaper” in a whisper, as if it were a secret. James shook his head in amazement. “Wow!” he said. “And how old are you?”

“EIGHT years old!” the girl shouted, and I felt a pang of regret for already being too old to be a child prodigy.

“Well, we’ll need to give you a very special tour of The Wayside,” said James. It took a very special person to give a special tour of The Wayside—it took a very special person to make The Wayside interesting at all, especially with the cheery Orchard mocking us from next door.

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That night, like every Friday night, I had dinner at my dad’s tiny apartment in Carlisle, which was just outside of Concord. It was barely three rooms—a small kitchen attached to a bedroom attached to a bathroom. Instead of doors, the rooms were separated by hanging wooden beads. The place was neat and sparse: no wall decorations, few shelves, an air mattress for a bed. Extra items were kept in piles: cereal here, gray custodial shirts there. He had found a round table on the street and this was where we spent most of our time, sitting in chairs that were missing bars at the back.

My mom referred to the evenings at my father’s as The Weekly Styrofoam Dinners, since we always ordered takeout. After my first week of work, I sat with my legs curled up beneath me and my elbows on the table, eating Chinese food from a black plastic box with a black plastic fork. My dad sat across from me, leaning forward to assess the contents of his box. “How’s work?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, “the guy who runs the place is...” I paused. “He’s very nice.”

“*Too* nice, you mean,” said my dad, poking through his meal.

“Here,” I said, pointing with my fork to a shrimp in my dish. “Yeah, too nice, I guess.”

“Maybe he wants in your pants.” My dad took the shrimp with his fork. He always believed one person was after what was in another person’s pants, probably a projection of his own wishes and, I guessed, the reason my parents had split up.

“He’s over fifty,” I said.

“A young girl like you? He’d love it. Watch out.”

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I arrived at my mom’s later that evening to find the spot where I usually sat at the kitchen table covered in college forms, pages and pages requiring the same exact information. One of the

forms was a housing survey. I was supposed to specify if I was a night owl or an early bird. Everything on the survey was a kind of stupid metaphor like that, and I hadn't fill it out yet.

"What are these for?" I asked my mother, who was in the kitchen making her own dinner.

"What are these for?" my mother repeated. "Maybe they're for you to fill out before they're due? What do you think?"

"Well, you're in a good mood," I said, dropping my purse on the floor and heading into the family room to sit on the couch.

"I hope you aren't planning to go off gallivanting with Julie tonight, because you've got plans, Honey." Had she been like this when my brother Frank was leaving? I couldn't remember.

She walked into the living room, sat on the other side of the couch, and flipped on the news. I already didn't want to hear it. It always started straight away with the wars: this person captured, another person killed, trucks blowing up, buildings instantly in smithereens. No mention of Afghanistan—we'd already forgotten about that war, but hadn't yet remembered to mention we forgot.

"Do you *have* to watch that?" I asked.

"I need to know if my son is safe," she said. Frank was in Afghanistan. I wanted to tell her that her *son* was my *brother* and the news wasn't going to tell her if Frank was okay, all it was going to do was set her on edge and make her worry.

"Have we heard from him?" I asked.

"That email last week," she said, waving me away. "I would've told you."

Frank had gone right from college to the Middle East and had barely returned since, going on new tours every chance he could. I guess he liked war, though it wasn't the kind of thing you wanted to shout from the rooftops in a city like this, even though Bostonians, of all people, were raised with almost a parental love for America, believing that we had been present for both the country's conception and its birth. We loved the revolution, the Constitution, war, peace, and transcendentalism. Every April, Lexington and Concord shut down for Patriot's Day, our own version of Independence Day, which marked the first battle of the Revolutionary War with fireworks, barbecues, and beer. Neighbors who I'd only ever witnessed walking lazily down their driveways in button-downs and khakis on that day in April would march in the street carrying giant flags or fake rifles, wearing white wigs and fancy blue or red coats with golden buttons.

But recently, the fireworks had not been as bright or as high or as many. This year, Patriot's Day came just a month after 50,000 people had gathered in the heart of the city waving poster boards and painted sheets, yelling, "Not one more day! Not one more dollar! Not one more death!" And "How many lives per gallon?" The equation made my stomach churn. I pictured whole lines of soldiers hugging their families goodbye and then, suddenly, in the very

arms of a sister or a parent or a wife, each soldier would melt down into a black puddle shining at their feet.

Women would stand behind me in grocery lines saying things like, “Who in his right mind would fight such a useless war?” and “I wouldn’t want my son dying over there for no reason.” For a while, I couldn’t step into a single crowded place without hearing something like that. They claimed to protest on my brother’s behalf, and in the next breath they essentially called him an idiot. Sometimes it made me wish I lived in some other city, the apathetic kind they always talked about on the news.

I told him once that he shouldn’t have to go. “I don’t *have* to go,” he said. “We have a *volunteer* army.” I wanted to say that he hadn’t *volunteered* to be unable to afford college unless he joined the military, but it wasn’t the time to get into it. “I *want* to go,” he said. “What else am I supposed to do? Go home?” I guess it was one war or the other, but I thought the whole rule in the army was that you didn’t leave anybody behind. And Frank had no excuses. He had known what it was like on Evergreen Drive, where, when he’d left, I was stuck alone without him.

When we were little, Frank would invite me into his room when our parents were arguing. Frank’s baby blue room was covered with car posters and dust-covered model airplanes. He’d play music from his lime green boom box, showing me each tape’s case before playing it, pointing to the white sticker where he’d written the album name and artist in careful, black print. “If someone wants to know if these guys are cool, what do you say?” he’d ask. As it turned out, Frank only owned things that were *okay*, *cool*, or *very cool*, so I had three chances.

“You’re an idiot,” he’d say when I got it wrong, and he’d turn back to the boom box and not look at me until I got it right, at which time he’d look back in my direction and smile, throwing two thumbs up right next to his ears. At those times there was not a sound that existed outside of that room.

Between tapes, we’d both shut up and listen. If there was silence, if the argument was over, our game was, too, and he’d rub his hand hard into the top of my head. “Get out of here,” he’d say, pushing me out the door.

He got all the looks: sandy hair, pink cheeks, a square jaw that I also inherited, though it looked strong and confident on him and out of place on me. Anyway, it was a face you could feel alright about being related to, a face you could end up missing if it wasn’t around for you to see it anymore.

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Julie visited me on lunch breaks to get a look at the other employees, like Ted. Ted was a graduate student in Museum Studies completing a practicum at The Wayside. His task, as far as I understood it, was to research the pre-1800s history of the property and write up text for a special installation.

“Hey,” Julie would say to him whenever he passed, and he would smile in our direction.

One day, not looking at me, zipping her thumb back and forth across a copy of *The Scarlet Letter* as if it were a flipbook, probably ruining that edge for good, she said, “You wouldn’t understand since you have, like, *zero hormones*, but I’m telling you FYI that Ted is cute, should you ever be quizzed on the subject.”

“Duh,” I said. Julie mistook a lack of experience for a lack of interest. I’d only kissed one person—twice—and when I’d recapped with Julie later I’d said “it was fine, I guess.” She’d laughed until she couldn’t breathe.

Ted was thin but not lanky like most of the guys I knew from high school. He had dark brown eyes and an easy confidence. But there was something else: It was as if his face had completely and definitively grown into his face, whereas ours still hadn’t quite decided what to be.

Julie and I spent an inordinate amount of time guessing his age. Every time he said something like, “When I was in college...” our ears perked up. We cataloged the references he made to movies, important events, and previous jobs, but we avoided making such references ourselves. In his presence, we never talked about our impending college careers or our recent high school graduation, thinking he might like us more if he imagined we were older. Eventually, we pinned him between 32 and 36, nixing 37 mostly because it seemed too old. As Julie put it: “Practically 40? Just, no.”

If Ted wasn’t there, Julie would settle for picking on Audrey. Audrey took James’ place at The Wayside twice a week. Though she was only 27, her mean-librarian demeanor made her seem older. For lunch, she ate pickles on Hawthorne’s front lawn, directly from a jar wrapped in a brown paper bag. She would hold the first pickle lightly between her thumb and forefinger, biting it with a delicate crack, but by the end the bites were ravenous, like she was a monkey chomping at a banana. Pickle juice flew everywhere, so that for the rest of the day she smelled of vinegar. One day, as I was watching her do this, she looked up at me and hissed, “No, I’m not pregnant, I’m trying to lose weight.”

Audrey was top-heavy, with a large balloon of a chest and a wide stomach, twiggy legs and curveless hips. In the end, though, she was about as not-skinny as I was not-skinny, which was not not-skinny enough to require a pickle-only diet.

“She looks like a dog guarding the house,” whispered Julie one day, her forearms resting on the counter so that the silver bracelets she usually wore leaned sideways on the back of her hand. “Just like a dog, the way she eats pickles on the grass like that and snarls at me.”

“Snarls at you?”

“She obviously doesn’t like me,” said Julie. Julie had just gotten a French manicure, and her fingers suddenly seemed absurdly long and incredibly clean. “She’s so stuck up about her

knowledge of *Nathaniel Hawthorne* and everything else. I bet she wants to go to grad school at *Harvard*.” She tried to say *Nathaniel Hawthorne* and *Harvard* with a British accent, which she felt to be a signifier of pretentiousness, but they came out more with long Boston A’s.

Audrey didn’t quite *snarl*, but she certainly did scowl. She’d gone to Dartmouth and railed on her high school classmates who’d gone to Harvard and were never able to “experience leaving home.” But she was 27 and worked at The Wayside, which was in Concord, which was about as close to not leaving home as Audrey could get. We had a lot of Harvard shirts in at The Wayside, and Audrey looked at them with contempt. She fared better with those from Boston College, Emerson, or Tufts. I was planning to go to an even lesser-known Boston college — not a place of intelligence or stupidity, just a place that offered some money, a resting ground before real life could take hold. And The Wayside? The Wayside was just a rest stop before a rest stop.

“Sorry you got stuck at Wayside,” Julie said scrunching her nose. “Orchard is really fun.” Come fall, Julie would be going to college in Manhattan, which was one reason why I’d wanted to work with her this summer.

“James is going to let me do the tours soon,” I said, though I wasn’t entirely sure this was true.

“He came on my tour on, like, Friday,” said Julie.

“At Orchard?”

“I didn’t tell you? I heard he visits all the Emerson and Thoreau spots, too. He wants to be a writer—he’s trying to soak it all in. His smile is so annoying. Like, Dude, get ahold of yourself. Life is *not* that exciting.”

“It’s like he popped out of an afterschool special,” I said

Julie laughed as Audrey appeared in the doorway. “Julie,” Audrey said in her pissed off way, “you better get back to Orchard.”

“You have pickle juice on your skirt, Audrey,” said Julie.

I wished Julie wouldn’t say things like that, only because Audrey then liked me less and treated me worse, and I had to try to make up for it. But it was true, the pickle juice had dripped into the white script of the A that rested in the bottom corner of her skirt, shading it green. Audrey loved *The Scarlet Letter*. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” she said once, “to be that kind of honorable outcast?” Her wardrobe suggested that when the initialed monogram paraphernalia was having a moment she had purchased all of the A-labeled apparel she could find.

Audrey began organizing the already perfectly organized Hawthorne books on the shelf next to the cash register. “I mean, I like pickles, too,” I said. Or, anyway, I didn’t *not* like them. She grunted.

“So,” I said. “You’re planning to stay in. . . the tourism field?”

Audrey turned around. “I’m going into journalism,” she said. It was starting to feel like everyone around here was a writer or was trying to be one, as if greatness could rub off on people and onto things and back onto people again.

“What’d you major in during college?” I asked.

“Media studies,” said Audrey, who had returned to her organization of bookshelves after a pointed look at me. “I minored in English Literature, which is only one reason why I work here.”

“I don’t know what I’ll major in,” I said. “I’m mostly working here because Julie—”

“Of course,” said Audrey.

“Well, I needed a summer job, Audrey.”

“Why didn’t you go work at the mall or something? Have you even read Hawthorne?”

“In high school,” I said. I had. Sort of. I’d read *The Little Women* upwards of five times as a kid, but I’d barely managed to get through *The Scarlet Letter* once in my sophomore year. All I could remember was that the first chapter was long and boring and about a door. When I’d started working—after I’d already read all of the captions and quotes on the displays and spent far too many hours tapping out *Hot Cross Buns* on the cash register keys—I’d picked up a copy of *The Scarlet Letter*. The first chapter was only two pages. It was still boring, as far as I could tell, and it was still, more or less, about a door.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter,” I said. “Is this what you did before college? Work here?”

Audrey turned toward me again. “Look,” she said, almost nicely, “it’s not like I’ve been working here for my whole life. College is a big thing. You change. Watch it. You’ll see. You won’t want to work here next summer.

“Besides,” she added, “you’ll probably go into something like retail management.” She was at the books again, running a finger delicately across a long, even row of *The Scarlett Letter*.

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One morning I came upon James just as he was opening the Visitor’s Center. It was already humid, but James had a smile on his face and a song in his heart. “You’re whistling, this early?” I asked.

He stopped whistling. “I’m at my favorite job,” he said.

“Are you ever *not* happy?” I hadn’t eaten breakfast yet. My hair was frizzed out in the sun.

“Sometimes, *and* even sadness gives us a larger view of life.” It was too much at this hour. I was glad I hadn’t eaten breakfast—nothing to puke up. He started whistling again, entered the Visitor’s Center, and began dusting Louisa May Alcott.

“*And*,” he said without looking up, “you can do the first tour today.”

“Really? *But* do you think I’m ready?” I was nervous.

“Just one for today, *and* you can do more as the summer goes on.”

I spent the morning cleaning Hawthorne down to his nostrils, tapping out quick versions of *Mary Had a Little Lamb* on the cash register keys, realigning the spines of books, repeating facts over and over. The dates were the hardest to remember. “Nathaniel Hawthorne, born 1804,” I whispered. “Louisa May Alcott, 1832. Margaret Sidney, 1844.” At ten to noon, a family of four entered the Visitor’s Center.

“Welcome to The Wayside!” I shouted as I stood up, and they all jumped like I was one of the statues come to life. “Would you like a tour?” I asked. “I’m your tour guide, May.”

“Um, yes,” the father mumbled. “A tour.”

“It will begin in ten minutes,” I said, sitting back down, trying to quell my nerves. The little boy started throwing fake punches at Nathaniel Hawthorne’s creamy white leg and the little girl tugged on her mother’s dress, asking when they were getting ice cream.

I did about as well on my first tour as I should have expected. As we walked up the steep steps to the highest point in the house, the Sky Parlor as Hawthorne had called it, the mother complained, “But none of this is even Hawthorne’s furniture?” James trailed behind us, watching how I fared.

“Well, it’s Margaret Sidney’s stuff. She was the last one to live here,” I repeated as we entered the room, dark because the shades were drawn to protect it from sun damage. “You can’t underestimate the popularity of *The Five Little Peppers*.” Truthfully, I’d never even heard of Margaret Sidney, the children’s author who’d lived at The Wayside after Hawthorne, until I’d become an employee. “But, luckily, we’ve just arrived in a room containing Hawthorne’s *actual writing desk*,” I said.

The woman was out of breath, wiping her brow with the neck of her shirt. The children were slumped, the little boy scuffing his feet along the floor. I faltered. What would James do now?

I drew them to the velvet rope before the desk, stretching my arm out to the piece of wood jutting off a wall opposite a window.

“Imagine him standing there!” I exclaimed. “Alone! His back to the world! To society! To everyone and everything he knew! Imagine him trying to come up with the first great sentence, that first line, of *The Scarlet Letter*!”

Nobody was buying it. It was both too much and not enough. The woman’s eyes widened. “Well,” she said.

“That’s not a desk!” shouted the boy.

“I can’t even see it,” said the girl who had barely looked up during the entire tour and who even now was looking at the floor.

“This is a scam,” said the boy. “It’s just a piece of *wood*.”

“Where’s his chair?” said the mother.

“He wrote standing up,” I said. “With his back to the window.”

The mother seemed tired at the thought, and I was tired of her. She should have been more impressed with Hawthorne’s work ethic. Louisa May Alcott, too, sacrificed physical comfort for her work, switching to her left hand when her right one was tired. Most people never loved their jobs that much. I certainly didn’t.

“I want to touch it!” said the boy.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but we have to stay behind this rope.”

“It’s awfully dark in here, isn’t it Arthur?” said the woman to her husband. I had forgotten the husband was there—he hadn’t said a word during the entire tour.

“Very very quiet,” he said.

“Dark, I said it was dark, Arthur,” she snapped. This reminded me, in a way, of my own parents. I waved them back towards the stairs.

“Why *is* it so dark?” said the mother.

“Well,” I said, one foot still in the Sky Parlor, the other hovering over the steps that would take us downstairs, “we have to keep the shades down, as sun exposure can ruin various items in the room, bleaching them of their. . . historical accuracy. . .”

After the family departed, James sat me down. “Good, very good,” he said, “*and* there are just a few things I would change.” It took him nearly a half hour to go through them.

During this, Ted walked in with his laidback sway, as if he were entering his own living room. He flashed me a knowing smile as James talked. A thread of excitement zipped through me.

“My thought is, let’s say, *my goal* when giving a tour,” said James, “is to offer the visitors a sense of the writers who lived here, especially Hawthorne. I want them to see his life so vividly that they feel, if just for a moment, as if they themselves could stand at that writing desk all day. That’s my goal. And when you give a tour, you should have your own goal, too.”

Would I ever give another tour, or would I be condemned to man the Visitor’s Center forever? Maybe James would tell Audrey how bad I was, and Audrey then wouldn’t let me give tours, either. Audrey was an enthusiastic guide and even seemed to enjoy reciting historical facts to strangers. She was especially animated in the Sky Parlor where I had failed so miserably. I had the sense that she felt more love for that writing desk than for any human being.

As a child, I’d loved the little women as if they were alive. I’d read my favorite parts of the book over and over in my bed on Evergreen Drive. Maybe I’d wanted to work at The Orchard to connect with that old self and those old friends. Maybe if I were giving tours of The Orchard, they’d be as good as Audrey’s.

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The irony of living in a tourist town is that the residents themselves rarely visit the historical sites. That was not true of me. As a child, I visited them frequently with my dad. We'd go to Walden Pond or the Old North Bridge or one of the battlefields. We'd buy lunch and sit on the grass with sandwiches, imagining the fighting that had taken place on that very spot so long ago. Sometimes, even now, I would walk the trail at Minute Man State Park or wander through the graveyard at Sleepy Hollow. I could spend days jumping through eras, never quite landing in the now until Julie shook me saying, "College! College! We're going to college!" By the end of August, she'd be in Manhattan and I'd be in Boston, but she had plans for the both of us. We'd visit each other every other month. We'd get fake IDs. We'd have wild adventures—"with boys!" Julie added once with a wink, as if I were ten.

It was the summer of the diner. Julie was my ride home from work, and we'd meet each day on Hawthorne's front lawn, then drive far and wide in her blue Range Rover, doubling back on our favorite diners—the kitschier the better. We'd split a piece of cake and Julie would drink coffee while I drank diet coke.

Eventually, our former classmates Marcus and Raman started joining us at the diners. Since Julie had her eye on Marcus, Raman and I sat together by default, folding our straw wrappers into squished accordions and then dropping water on them so they expanded like worms. On the other side of the table, Julie and Marcus flirted.

One day I stepped out the door of the Visitor's Center to meet Julie after work and found her with Ted on Hawthorne's front lawn. My heart sank. *Of course*, I thought. She'd turned our diner trips into a dating opportunity, we were about to meet Marcus and Raman once again, and here she was flirting with Ted. Worse, he appeared to be flirting back. I could hear him talking about the beautiful sunsets at Walden Pond while Julie nodded sweetly. Her dark, silky hair fell over her shoulder and she brushed a piece of it behind her ear with a manicured finger.

"Sounds cool," she said. "I'd love to see it sometime."

The door to the Visitor's Center was still in my hand, and I closed it with a purposeful click.

"Hey guys," I called. "Julie, you ready for your date?"

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That night, post-diner, I entered my bedroom and knew by the sight of vacuum lines that my mom had been there. Now my messes were re-piled so that for a week anything I looked for would be impossible to find. My bed had been made, and on top of it sat a collection of items that I'd rather stayed lost, things that had fallen into the chasm between my bed and the wall—books from high school I'd forgotten to return, brochures from colleges I couldn't afford, and *Antigone*, the book I was supposed to read as part of a college-wide "Summer Books" project. "I have to read this book, *Anti-Gone*," I'd made the mistake of saying to Audrey one day. She just

shook her head, scowled, and walked away, leaving me to say it again to my mother who corrected me with a similar shake of the head. After that, I'd put off reading the book and had almost forgotten about it. Being too stupid to pronounce *Antigone* made me feel like I was too stupid for the scholarship I'd gotten. I didn't want to look at the book, so I stuffed it back under the bed.

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When Julie stopped by for lunch the following week, we didn't end up talking about much. I thought maybe the week before she and Marcus had hooked up in the car during a long absence in which Raman and I had rearranged our French Fries into the shapes of animals, but I didn't feel like asking her about it. For one, Ted was present, which made us both self-conscious about saying anything at all. I kept stealing glances at him—secretly, I hoped. He'd come in with a stubble beard that was very attractive.

After Julie left, Ted walked over to the register where I was stationed. I felt the top of my head as quickly and surreptitiously as I could, flattening out my frizz. He tapped his fingers on the counter, as if waiting for something.

"Yes?" I asked, trying to keep it cool.

"I don't get it," he said.

"What?"

"The Alcotts lived *here*? But I thought they lived at the Orchard?" He acted for a moment as if he were really confused and then broke into a grin. It was a question I answered daily, since the family had lived in both homes. "You did a tour today?" he asked. "How'd it go?"

I shrugged. "Badly?" I said.

"James give you more notes? He's something else," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sure you were beautiful."

I resisted the urge to smile.

"You, uh, got another double-date with Julie tonight?"

"It's more of a third-wheel situation," I said.

He brushed a finger against the tips of mine. My pulse quickened. "You painted your nails," he said.

"Bile green," I said, surprised he had noticed. "To match the carpeting."

This got a big laugh, and I was thrilled I'd managed to say something funny.

"I'm thinking of going over to Walden tonight," he said. "For the sunset."

My heart practically stopped. I half-expected to see Julie pop out from around the corner, snickering. But Ted and I were alone. I looked down at the register, not sure what I was supposed to say. "Cool," I chose finally.

"Yeah? Well, you should come."

“Oh, I don’t know if I can,” I said. I mean, *could* I just go hangout with Ted?

“You don’t know if you can watch the sunset?” His lips spread into a charming smile. “Well, it’s true, you aren’t supposed to stare *directly* at it.” He started writing his number on a stray receipt. “7:30?” he said.

*

“Marcus texted this afternoon,” Julie told me after work. “We’re hitting the diner.”

We were standing outside of The Wayside. I looked out across the road towards the parking lot instead of at her.

“I can’t,” I said. “I have plans.”

“*You have plans?*” Julie said. “I’ve known you for, what, a billion years? Have you ever made *plans?*”

“Maybe I have my own secret life you don’t know about,” I said.

The truth was, in our whole history together, she’d asked other people to hangout while I stood behind her like a scared younger sister, waiting for results. Besides, she was my ride. She knew everywhere I went.

“Alright,” I said. “I can go, but I have to be back here by 7:30.” I’d asked Ted to pick me up at The Wayside. I didn’t want to deal with questions from my mom.

“What for?”

I paused. “I’m meeting Ted,” I said.

“TED?” she answered. “YOU?”

“Shush,” I said, looking around. “Don’t be so surprised.”

“You won’t even make out with Raman!” she said, as if I should just automatically want to date the best friend of whoever she was interested in. “What the hell are you gonna do with Ted?”

“Just watch the sunset,” I said.

“Oh, I guess that’s his big line then,” said Julie. She stomped off across the street towards the parking lot saying, “God! Nothing about you makes any sense!”

“Let’s go!” she called from across the road. I walked slowly toward her with my arms crossed, like I was walking towards my mother.

We met Marcus and Raman at the diner with the mint green plastic seats and the laminate countertops covered in pink and turquoise triangles. “Hey Babe,” Julie said to Marcus when we arrived, giving him a hug with one arm, her silver bracelets hanging coolly from her tiny wrist. “Been waiting long?”

I slid into the booth next to Raman. Julie talked about The Orchard as if nothing had happened between us. I kept feeling my pocket for the receipt with Ted’s phone number on it,

proof that he'd actually asked me out—though was it even a date? Maybe he just wanted to give me a lake-side pep talk. Maybe it was a mean trick.

I stacked the jelly packets into towers, each tower a different flavor, and then built sugar-packet roads between them.

"How adult of you," said Julie, but Raman leaned over the table behind us to gather apricot jellies, handing them to me with his long fingers.

In the car, Julie and I were silent until I realized we were heading toward my house, not The Wayside. "Where are you going?" I asked.

"He's older than, like, Mr. Moreno," Julie said. Mr. Moreno was our senior history teacher, married with two kids. "You don't even know what you're getting into."

"You've got to be kidding me," I said. I felt dizzy with anger.

"Look, you can do whatever you want," she said, "but won't be any part of it." As if she had spent a lifetime taking the high road.

"You're just jealous," I said. "You thought he was going to ask you out."

"Dude," Julie said, "just because I was flirting with him doesn't mean I want to date him. Unlike you, I flirt sometimes."

I sat in the passenger seat seething, my arms crossed over my chest. I felt like I was fourteen again, arguing with my mom in the car.

I didn't even have my own cellphone to call him and cancel. Of course Julie had one. She had everything first: a computer, the internet, her period, a car, a boyfriend.

"Give me your cell so I can tell him I can't go, at least," I said. She reached into her purse without taking her eyes off the road and practically threw her phone at me. I felt dumb and defeated calling him in front of Julie, asking for a rain check.

*

The Visitor's Center was still locked. I leaned against the building, eating my bagel, then decided to look for James. When I turned the corner to the back of The Wayside I saw him atop a metal ladder stretched to the roof of the house, talking to a man who stood at its base.

"No one seems to care about the maintenance of this house," James told the man. His voice was as close to annoyed as I'd ever heard it.

"We do, we do care about the maintenance of our historical houses very much. It's just that we have not hired or paid you specifically to clean the gutters, so I ask you to please get down from there."

"If I don't clean these gutters, who will?" asked James. He leaned precariously far from the ladder to pull off a piece of peeling paint with his fingers. "The government paint job has not fared too well, *and* it was only done three years ago!" He dropped the paint chip and watched it flutter down to the man's feet.

“Sir, it’s a liability issue. I’m really gonna need you to get down.”

I waited for James to do his thing: big smile, popped eyes, impassioned lecture against those who let historic sites die: “This is the only National Historic Site to have housed *three* literary heroes!” etc.

But what he did was look at the sky. “I’m not sure how you’re going to get me down from here,” James said, “if I decide not to come down.”

“Seriously?” said the man.

James and the man were silent.

“Look, Sir,” the man said finally. “I don’t want to do this, but I can have you fired. Is that what you want? Will that get the house painted? Will that clean the gutters?”

“So fire me,” said James.

“Just come down,” said the man.

James looked down at the man. He looked at the sky. He looked down again.

Finally, he took a deep breath and began stepping down the ladder.

When he got to the bottom, he shook the man’s hand. “I’m sure you can see that maintenance is a big issue here, and I know you’re just doing what you’ve got to do.”

“Sorry, Sir,” the man kept saying as he helped James put away the ladder.

I ducked back around the corner of the house, embarrassed for James who was so concerned about the dreary house of dead authors that most people have never read or even thought about.

I waited for James at the door of the Visitor’s Center, pretending I hadn’t seen a thing. When he came to unlock it, his smile was as broad as it has always been, and he was whistling.

It threw me off guard. But I said, “Are you always this happy?” something I’d become accustomed to saying almost every morning.

“No,” he said with a smile as he let us in.

*

“I’m going out after dinner,” I told my dad as we ate leftover spaghetti from white Styrofoam boxes. “With friends.”

“Can’t you go on your mother’s nights? She only has six of them,” he said.

“It’s a Friday,” I said.

“Did you get your room assignment for fall yet?”

Jesus, I thought. Despite not speaking to one another, it sometimes seemed like my parents coordinated their questions so I had to say everything twice. “Not yet,” I said.

“You should call them, make sure they have your registration stuff.”

“Mmmhmm,” I said. I bit a meatball in half, the middle still cold.

“Are the dorms co-ed?”

“I think so,” I said.

“The bathrooms, too?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s hope they aren’t—guys are disgusting.”

I nodded.

“Let me know when you find out. I can call the school if it doesn’t come soon.”

“I’m sure it’ll come soon,” I said, though I’d only just mailed the forms.

My dad ate a piece of day-old garlic bread in nearly one bite. “So, has he tried something on you yet?”

“What?”

“You know, the man at work who is *very nice*.”

“Oh come on,” I said. For a second, I’d thought he’d meant Ted. “He wouldn’t do anything. He really is just very nice.”

“You don’t know the power of a young woman on a man.” He paused, thinking.

“Parmesan cheese!” he said. “I knew we forgot something.”

I couldn’t get the image of James up on that ladder out of my head. James cared for The Wayside the way my father had once cared for the battlefields. We used to lie on our backs in the deep grassy field near the Old North Bridge, which arched its way elegantly over the calm Concord River, watching the white clouds float through the sky. Though this was where soldiers had bled and died, the place was peaceful, like the quiet eye of a storm. The first shot of the Revolutionary War had been fired here, one bullet I imagined flying slow-mo through the air, setting in motion events which had led America to now. Europe and Asia had sites that were thousands of years old, but this is what we had, this was our history. Funny, Frank almost never came with us, and now there he was, halfway across the globe on a sandy battlefield of his own. Had he really gone that far to get away from us?

I thought about the place we used to live, my childhood home, a little rectangle set on a gentle green slope, with burnt red siding and a gray shingled roof. It had long ago been bought, invaded, remodeled. I missed it. The Old North Bridge, those battlefields, they were as close as I could get now to going home.

*

Ted picked me up around seven.

I’d changed into a blue dress.

“This a date?” my father asked, like it was a joke, but I could tell that he thought I looked nice. He waved at Ted from the window. “Is he going to come up?”

“No,” I said, giving my father a kiss on the cheek.

“Sorry about that,” I said in the car.

“About what?”

“The waving,” I said.

“Not a problem,” said Ted.

We arrived at Walden just before sunset. A breeze carried the scent of pine needles and pond. People were speckled across the beach, leaning back on blankets and chairs, layering on T-shirts and shorts over swimsuits as it cooled. I wondered what Ted and I looked like walking together. Did people wonder what I was doing here with this handsome, older guy? Or did they wonder what he was doing here with me?

Ted was telling me about his research, how in the early 1700s a minuteman had lived on The Wayside property, how in the late 1700s enemy troops had marched right past on their way to the Old North Bridge. I kept saying “cool” and “wow” as if I had no other vocabulary.

We walked past Thoreau’s cabin, which might have been the only place in the greater Boston area smaller than my father’s apartment. It had a sign out front: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life.”

The essential facts of life? What were they? Thoreau had never been a teenage girl.

We sat down on the sand. I zigzagged my finger up and down the space next to me, hardly leaving a trail because the sand caved in on itself. A hazy reflection of pine trees and low, pink clouds floated in the water. The sun bubbled over the tree line.

“Hey,” Ted said, taking my hand. When I looked at him, he looked at me right back. Right in the eyes. “This is nice, right?” I wanted to look away, look out into the water or at the children building fortresses in the sand. “You know why I invited you here?” he asked. I shook my head no. “It’s because you’re funny,” he said. “Plus, you’re pretty cute.”

“Come on,” I said, still zigzagging my finger through the sand. “We all know Julie’s the cute one.”

“I mean, sure, she’s attractive,” Ted said seriously. “But, I don’t know, you aren’t trying so fucking hard.” Ironic, because I felt like I *was* trying pretty hard. “Julie thinks she’s special,” said Ted, “but you’re oblivious to how special you are.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

After sunset, we sat in the car. I was so nervous that I could feel my hands shaking. When we kissed, I felt lightheaded and robotic. Where was my tongue supposed to go? What was I supposed to do with his tongue, which was in my mouth? What about this build up of spit? Was I messing everything up? I was, wasn’t I?

When we parted I was blushing, but Ted pretended not to notice.

When he put his hand on my thigh, near the edge of my dress, I went stiff.

“Hold on,” I said.

“What?” he said. He didn’t take his hand away.

“I don’t know.”

“What don’t you know?” he asked.

The truth was, I hadn’t bargained for more than a kiss, and I didn’t know how to proceed. Maybe Julie had predicted this. *Of course* he wanted more than a kiss. He’d probably been with dozens women. He’d lived *two* of my lives. He was old enough to be married, divorced, and married again.

I wondered what my parents would think if they knew I was here. Maybe nothing. This is exactly what my father expected from a guy. What about James? What would he think?

“Julie just—I don’t know,” I said. “She thought it was a bad idea. Like, because... I don’t know. Well, you’re older than me, I think.”

“You came here for a reason,” he said. “I guarantee Julie is fucking with you because of her own shit. You’re an adult, May. You can make your own decisions.”

Maybe he really didn’t know how old I was. Regardless, I didn’t feel like an adult. When someone referred to me as a woman, I looked around to see who they were talking about.

“You just need to relax,” said Ted. “Don’t let Julie make your decisions for you.”

I did need to relax. I needed to reset, try again when I wasn’t so nervous. “We should probably leave anyway,” I said, looking out the window at the emptying parking lot.

“That’s what you want?” he asked. “Your decision,” he said. He waited until I nodded to take his hand off my leg.

*

When I got home that night, my mother was sitting at the table, which was set for dinner with the utensils and two blue cloth placemats. “Hey,” I said. Only when she didn’t respond did I notice that her cheeks glistening under our fluorescent kitchen light. She was staring out the window, oblivious to my presence. I didn’t want to move or to speak again, for fear of alarming her.

But finally, quietly, I asked, “Are you okay?”

“Your brother—” how quickly a heart stops “—is getting married.”

My whole body seemed to go soft. I wanted to melt into the kitchen floor or get down on my knees and thank the lord I didn’t really believe in or smack my mother’s wet cheek. My mother sobbed, a hand covering the side of her face nearest me, as if that would prevent me from seeing or hearing her.

“What’s the matter?” I said. “Who’s he marrying?”

She kept crying and then stopped with the noise of a stalled car, grabbing a napkin and wiping her face, still not looking at me. “A woman in the army,” she said. “He’s really gone, May,” she said. “He’s not coming back.”

“What do you mean?” I said. “His tour’s almost over!” But the relief I’d felt a moment ago had already disappeared.

*

One afternoon at the Visitor’s Center Audrey took the jar of pickles from her brown paper bag to make sure the lid was screwed on. One of the visitors laughed. “I used to bring jars of pickles like that to work when I was pregnant with my first,” she said. “People thought I was crazy.”

Audrey’s eyes flashed. “I am not pregnant!” she shouted. “Simply because I am overweight and 27 does not mean I am having a child or am married or have a boyfriend. I’m single, and I want to be single! Can’t anyone just accept that I like pickles?”

I had never seen Audrey like this before. The handful of other visitors in the room looked down at their feet. The lady who had spoken took a cautious step backward. “That’s fine,” she said. “That’s fine.”

Audrey looked around at everyone not looking at her. “What?” she cried, and then she walked right out the door.

“Um,” I announced. “The next tour will begin in approximately 35 minutes. Audrey, the tour guide, is having a rough day, but she’ll be better after lunch, I’m sure.” Then I left to find Audrey, who was sitting in the front lawn eating her pickles fiercely, juice flying everywhere.

“Audrey!” I yelled.

“What?” said Audrey, taking another savage bite. “You’re supposed to be in the Visitor’s Center! Did you put up the sign? It’s my lunch break now!” She looked like she was going to continue speaking, but instead she stopped, ate the remaining half of a pickle in one bite, and wiped her mouth with her arm.

“You’re scaring away the visitors, Audrey! Nobody said you were pregnant, God!”

“Fuck you,” said Audrey.

She wiped the wet edges of each eye with her wrist, which only made them appear wetter because her temples were now slicked with pickle juice. “My twelfth rejection,” she said. “Count them! Count to twelve! You can’t! You don’t have enough fingers!”

“What are you talking about?” I said.

She didn’t look at me, seemed to be speaking to the air. “I’ll never be a broadcast journalist. I’m too fat.” It occurred to me that even if Audrey had been overweight when I met her—and that was debatable—she certainly wasn’t anymore. She was getting thin and, perhaps, even *green*.

“I thought you were going to be a writer-journalist,” I said.

She snorted. “I am,” she said. “I’m going to write my stories, and then broadcast them. But not if I don’t get a job! Not if I’ve been rejected by twelve stations! And I’m not pregnant! There is absolutely no possible way I will ever be pregnant!”

“You can’t get pregnant?” I asked.

“Forget it,” she said. “I’m going to end up just like Christine, I know it. If I ever get a job, it will all end up that way.”

I didn’t know who Christine was, but I knew Audrey had a habit of referring to famous people as near acquaintances, like her good friends Louisa and Nathaniel. “Christine?” I asked, taking the bait.

“Christine Chubbuck! A woman you would know if you had any interest at all in broadcast journalism!”

I had almost no interest at all in broadcast journalism.

“She committed suicide on live television during her broadcast. She was 29 and lonely and depressed and she never dated and she told everyone she was going to kill herself, and then she did, on live television. At least she became famous!” She stuffed an entire, final pickle in her mouth, and it snapped in two on its way in. Then she crumbled the brown paper bag into a ball and just sat there. I returned to an empty Visitor’s Center.

I followed Audrey on her next tour, to make sure she was okay. In the Sky Parlor, one of the tourists asked why the shades were drawn. Audrey explained it beautifully, fully composed and without a trace of her earlier outburst. A woman wanted to touch Hawthorne’s desk, and even though the meaning of a velvet rope should have been obvious, Audrey calmly explained why no one could touch the desk. “Not even the staff who work here have touched it,” she said. I wondered if that was true, if Audrey or James had never touched the desk they so admired, if they had ever hoped that luck, directly from the site of creation, could rub off on them.

*

Ted picked me up a block from my mom’s house, at a place he probably assumed was my actual address. I’d never done this sort of thing in high school, and I felt like I was getting something essential out of the way.

We went to a diner Julie and I had long ago deemed far too unkitsch with its dearth of aluminum and boring white linoleum table tops. I’d already eaten, so I just ordered a diet coke and fries. Ted ordered a massive two-patty hamburger with sweet potato fries, coleslaw, and a side salad.

“You think you have enough food there?” I asked, trying to be funny and flirty and casual, or whatever I was supposed to be.

He nodded. “Gotta watch out, though,” he said, tapping his stomach. “Not so young anymore.”

I split my fries into pieces so I would eat them slowly, sucking the salt and grease from each piece before eating the next. Ted was talking about his graduate program, how Museum

Studies was housed in three different departments, how his department was really the most important.

I spent most of the meal feeling grateful that he was still hanging out with me. I asked him questions about the program, hoping to avoid talking about myself. I was afraid that anything I might say—about living with my mom, about dinners with my dad, about going away to college—would either reveal to him or remind him of my youth. I managed to remind him anyway as I stacked the butter pads into a four-walled tower. “Cute,” he said.

We made out in the car, but it still didn’t feel natural. I kept changing the position of my hands, first putting them on his shoulders like I was slow dancing, then moving them to his back.

“You’re very pretty,” he whispered in my ear. “You just gotta let go a little bit.”

This was probably true. I probably did have to let go. I let his hands creep up my thigh, up my shirt, to the back of my bra, which I felt click open.

“Wait,” I said.

“For what?” he whispered.

“Not now.” I said. Was this really how fast adults went?

“When though?” he said.

“Really,” I said, moving away from him, trying and failing to clip my bra back together with one hand.

Ted put his hands on the steering wheel and stared out the front window. “You know,” he said, “I want to be honest with you. I kinda feel like I’m being jerked around. Like you want the attention, but then you back away. Which, where does that leave me? What do I get from that?”

Why was I always in the passenger seat of a car, feeling like a kid in trouble? One of us had misjudged my potential. I felt like I was being dropped off at the bottom of the Alps when I was still learning to ride a bike. What I wanted was to go slower, but you didn’t ask a thirty-whatever if he would go slower, you just had to catch up, pretend you were right there the whole time.

He started the car. “I like you, obviously,” he said. “I wouldn’t be hanging out with you if I didn’t. But you have to make a decision about what you want.” He lowered the hand break and started backing out of the parking space. “Because other people get tired,” he said. “Their interest wanes.”

What was I supposed to do? I thought of the lifetime I’d spent listening to advice from my parents and teachers and friends, from song lyrics and TV shows and movies: Go for it. Just say no. Seize the day. Trust your instincts. What was my instinct? I felt like a deer in headlights, trapped in the middle of the road, unwilling to go forward or back.

Was there really middle ground here? We weren't going to go "part way." It was not, as they say, horseshoes and hand grenades. It was more like: you either passed a test or you failed it, you won a game or you lost it, you were a virgin or you weren't.

All of a sudden it hit me, what Audrey had really meant by saying she couldn't be pregnant.

*

James decided to take me on a "one-on-one practice tour." He said I'd "gotten the facts and stories" and he wanted to work on "the nuances." On our way around the house, he talked about his life, still smiling: a wife who had long ago died of cancer, a grown son who visited often, his writing career which hadn't, just yet, taken off. "Can you *really* be this happy?" I asked him again.

"Why can't you believe that? Tell me, you're so young and why can't you believe that?" Something was bothering me. Something about how he was always smiling, about how he seemed to believe that *and* — that words at all — could ward off negativity like a cast spell. I told James I'd seen him on the ladder, that I knew he couldn't've been happy then. "But when you came down to unlock the Visitor's Center, you didn't know I'd seen and you were whistling again, just like that! Wasn't that fake?"

"I don't want to bring down morale here—the gutters, the peeling paint, the shades, they bring down morale enough." He nodded to himself. "I can see how my smile might feel like a lie to you, *and*—"

"*But*," I said.

"*And*," he said with a laugh, "I don't mean it like that. For me it's ... aspirational."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"I'm glad we've had this summer to get to know each other," he said. "I think it's important to find friendships with people of all ages and types, so you can understand the world in contexts other than your own. That's why reading is so important. That's why writing is so important."

When we arrived in The Sky Parlor, James shook his head. "I just wish we could pull the shades up! How wonderful it would be, to look at the things as Hawthorne did!"

It did seem ridiculous, this order to keep the shades down, an order given by the same people who refused to repaint the house. No wonder the place was so dreary, no wonder visitors were unimpressed; we were blocking out the light and the view! It wasn't fair to the house, or to history, or to James, or to me. The darkness made the house seem unreal, a caricature of what it once was. Why had The Orchard been given more grant money than The Wayside? The Orchard's shades stayed up and sunlight poured through special, protective windows. It was as if The Wayside had literally been put by the wayside because it wasn't special or interesting

enough, the loser of some literary popularity contest that I had cast a vote in by wishing I was working at The Orchard.

I realized I admired James. He managed himself the way he tried to manage The Wayside: clean the gutters, paint the siding, and step by step it might all one day be as good as he dreamed.

“Do you ever lift the shades?” I asked. “Have you ever? I would love to see them lifted.”

He paused for a moment. “I have,” he said. I looked around the room, imagining it swallowed by light. “Just briefly, just quickly. I wouldn’t want to ruin anything. I think it’s important for the house to feel, sometimes, the way it once was.”

I walked over to the velvet rope, swinging it back and forth. “What about his desk?” I asked.

“Don’t tell,” he said. “But I stood there. I touched it. I felt like a writer. People can be connected like that, through things and places. I wish everyone could see this room that way, could have that feeling.” But he did not invite me to see it that way, perhaps because I had no aspirations of becoming a writer.

*

Now when I saw Ted he nodded his head at me like teachers used to do when they passed you in the hallway and couldn’t remember your name. I flashed him a quick, awkward smile and looked back down at the register, my face burning.

Later, James asked, “How are you getting along with the folks here at work?”

“What do you mean?”

“Julie hasn’t been coming around. You don’t seem to talk to Ted anymore.”

I shrugged, but I was surprised he’d noticed. I’d barely talked to Ted at work in the first place.

“Ted’s a lot older than you,” he said.

“We were hardly ever even friends,” I said.

“And Julie?”

“I don’t know,” I said, which was the truth. The rest of the truth was that work was starting to feel lonely. I gave tours and tried to think of my goals, but I didn’t have any. I punched the keys on the register one at a time like a typist who doesn’t know where any of the keys are, and I abandoned my barrettes and headbands, letting my hair do whatever it wanted. I surrendered, finally, to *Antigone*, wanting to give it a chance like I’d never really given Hawthorne. If Audrey was Hester Prynne, maybe I was Antigone, my brother away at a war nobody in Boston believed in, and he was fighting it for me and he was fighting it for them and he was fighting it most of all for himself, and it didn’t matter what I believed in besides my

brother, besides believing that he believed in what he was fighting for, and I thought, sure, I would bury myself with him if it came to that.

Some days were so hot and humid that being outside seemed to switch off my brain. The drives to work with Julie were quiet and sad. She stopped asking me to go out with Raman and Marcus. “That Ted thing is over, anyway,” I said to her one day, and just getting it out of my throat felt like a defeat. After that, she started smiling at Ted again, flipping her hair back and forth in his presence, but she hardly said a word to me.

*

Audrey was sitting on Hawthorne’s front lawn when I arrived at work one Friday morning. This was unusual. She was wearing a low-cut white shirt, a little loose on her now, with a red, scripted A in the corner. She kept taking something out of her pocket and rubbing her fingers below her eyes. It took me several glances to realize that she was just putting on makeup.

When Audrey came in I could see that she was wearing both mascara and eyeliner, thick and dark as if she were going to a nightclub. She had half-moons of makeup under both of her eyes, her foundation a shade too light. She took out her compact again and rubbed a finger under the bottom rim of both eyes until I blurted out, “It’s fine!” for fear of it getting cakier.

“You take the tours today,” she said, smacking her makeup container shut.

During my tours I tried to work the magic that James had taught me, but my jokes fell flat. In a morning group of elderly woman, only two advanced to the Sky Parlor and by the time they got there, they were too tired to be interested. Around lunchtime a young girl on a small tour said loudly to her mother, “The other house was better.”

In the late afternoon, a new tour gathered: a family of four, a senior couple, a youngish professorial guy. Audrey hadn’t spoken to me since that morning, had simply sat in the register chair as if it were her throne, reading a novel and surveying the tourists. But now she jumped up. “I’m doing a tour,” she said.

I followed behind the group. She toured with her usual ease, but I was uneasy. I led the guests down from the Sky Parlor back to the Visitor’s Center. When I got downstairs, I realized Audrey was missing.

“Is someone still up there?” I asked, though it wasn’t that unusual for an interested party to hang back with the guide, ask a few more questions after the tour was over.

I rang up a few books, then sat back at the register, wondering what was going on with Audrey. Just as I got up to see if Audrey was returning, I saw a man, the professorial guy, exiting the house, power walking towards the parking lot. I ran out to the front lawn to find out what was going on when I heard Audrey. “It’s free!” she was yelling. “It’s free! I promise, I won’t tell anyone!”

I watched her run out of the front door, her breasts and small gut bobbing up and down. It didn't really hit me that she was naked until she stopped, suddenly, in the middle of the lawn. The guy was gone but she whispered anyway, "You can have me. Don't you want me? Don't you want me? Who wants me?" She sat down right there on the lawn, her head curled up to her knees, her entire body rocking back and forth, a giant sob bursting from her as sudden as a firework.

"Audrey!" I yelled. I looked for something to cover her, but there was nothing nearby. Where were her clothes? "Audrey," I said. "What happened? Let's get your clothes." I put my arm in the nook of her elbow and made a motion like we should stand up, but she wouldn't move. She didn't push me away, she didn't yell, she just kept sobbing, louder and louder.

People had gathered, watching or staring or pointing or walking swiftly back to the parking lot. I let go of Audrey and stood right in front of her. "Hey, you," I yelled to a woman who was staring, wide-eyed. "Go in the house and find her clothes." The woman just stood there, looking around her. "Yeah, you!" I shouted. "Come on!"

The woman returned with Audrey's clothes, which had been inside one of the bedrooms, but they turned out to be useless, because Audrey wouldn't budge. Finally, I asked for a phone and called 911. I couldn't think of anything else to do.

*

"Wow!" said my dad as soon as he opened the door. "You're a star! That story is everywhere!"

The local news station had arrived on the scene soon after the ambulance, and I'd mumbled a few meaningless words in front of the camera.

"Slow news day," I said. Really, though—slow news day? We were fighting two wars. And what could the news ever know about Audrey? Audrey, who, I supposed, for years and years had carried around what she hadn't done like a weight that had finally crushed her.

"She just ran straight out of the house, no clothes?"

"I guess," I said.

"Where is she now? Mental institution?"

"I guess," I said.

"What? You didn't like her. That's what you said, wasn't it? That she was mean."

"That's not the point," I said.

The phone rang and my dad answered it. "Hello?" he said. "Yeah, she's here." But he didn't hand me the phone. "Sounds like the lady went off the deep end," he said. "You must have a lot of a red tape over there with the whole incident." My dad nodded. "Yeah, okay, here she is."

"How are you?" asked James. He must have found the number in my emergency contacts.

“I’m okay,” I said.

“You did a good thing there.”

“I don’t feel like I did much of anything.”

“You did, you were there for her,” said James. “I wanted to let you know that I talked to Audrey’s parents. She’s going to spend the night at the hospital, then go home. She won’t be coming back though, to The Wayside, I mean. If you’re willing, you and I can tag-team and fill in for Audrey, keep the ship up and running.”

I was happy he’d asked me, even though there was no one else to ask.

“I’m glad you were there today,” he said. “Call me if you need anything, okay? I’ll let you get back to it.”

As soon as I hung up the phone, my dad said, “He does seem very nice.”

“He really is.”

For a moment, neither of us spoke. “Are you sure he doesn’t want to get in—I mean, you’re a woman now. Are you sure he isn’t after you or something?”

“Dad, shut up.”

The room fell silent. I looked down at my hands, the white crescents of my fingernails chewed nearly to nothing. I thought of Julie’s nails, how she let them grow, glossed them clear so that even in the diner’s dimness they each reflected a thin, white strip of light that floated back and forth across her nails as she moved her hands. How could you tell a girl from a woman? It wasn’t age, anyway.

I couldn’t do this tonight—this small room, this small meal, these small boxes. Was there anyone left in this town besides James who I even remotely understood?

“I forgot,” I said. “I have plans. I need to use the phone. It’s late.”

In some other time, I would’ve called Julie. And in some other time before that, I would’ve knocked on Frank’s door, let him push me around a little.

I called Ted.

“May?” he asked, like he’d forgotten who I was.

“May,” I said again. “I’m ready. To go out. Walden.”

“Now?”

“Yeah.”

“The sun’s already setting,” he said.

“Just pick me up.”

Before I left, my dad looked out the window from the sink where he was rinsing off a pile of plastic utensils. Ted had grown a new goatee that made him look older. “Which friend is that?” he asked, his thumb rubbing the dent of a spoon. “I don’t remember him.”

As soon as I got in the car I told Ted, “We can sneak in, on the far side of the lake.” I’d never done it myself, but it was a well-known entry point among high schoolers when Walden closed after dark.

“What do you suggest I do with the car?” Ted asked.

“You don’t have to go,” I said. “You can drop me off at my mom’s.” But I didn’t feel like going back to my mom’s. I put my hand on his thigh. I didn’t look at him. It’s funny, how quickly you learn what bargaining chips you have.

“My mom’s house is nearby,” said Ted. “We can get bikes from there.” I hadn’t known his mom still lived around there.

His mom’s house was a giant white rectangle with a red front door. Ted tapped a number into the keypad and the garage door hummed opened. He rolled a bike towards me, one where the center bar faded from dark pink to purple. “My little sister’s,” he said.

“You have a sister?”

“Step-sister, actually,” he said. “At boarding school. Well, camp for the summer, or, really, some kind of course in New York. I forget the specifics.” He rolled out his own bike from behind a garbage can of sports balls.

“How old is she?”

“Fifteen? No, sixteen. Like your age.”

My stomach dropped. He thought I was even *younger* than I actually was?

Ted sped out in front of me, looking back to make sure I was keeping up. I rode in his wake, happy to be outside, helmetless, moving. My sweat cooled as the darkness came in. We left our bikes by the road and snuck quietly through the woods.

By the time we were on the shore the sun had long disappeared below the horizon. Only the thinnest sliver of moon and the dots of stars lit our way. We stood close to each other, our hands clasped, walking slowly and silently across the sand. When we reached the water Ted bent down and felt it with his hand, then took off his shoes and put in his feet. I put my feet in, too. The water was warm from the hot day, warmer than the air.

“Let’s go in,” he said. Before I could answer, he had let go of my hand and begun taking off his clothes. I squinted in the dark. He was not one of the hairless creatures I’d been friends with in high school, though I had never seen them naked.

He had a trace of a six-pack. A thin trail of dark hair led down from his navel. I felt like I wasn’t so much here on this beach, but watching a movie. It was Julie who should be with a man who looked like this, who should be with a man at all. Or Audrey, maybe she should have this.

“Come on,” said Ted.

“I am,” I said, though I hadn’t moved. *Sixteen?* I kept thinking. What did it matter? It was practically true. Why did I care if he was taking advantage of my age? Maybe I was double-crossing him, getting something I wanted, too.

I waited until he got in, and then I took off my clothes with as little ceremony as possible and got into the water, where the reflected moon reminded me of Julie’s fingernails.

Ted swam perfect freestyle back and forth, and I doggy paddled in place until he came up behind me, feeling my wet back with his hands, and bringing them further, cupping my breasts. He whispered in my ear, “The shore?”

I nodded in the dark. Maybe pretending that you knew what you were doing and actually knowing what you were doing were almost the same thing.

I lay on my back, the sand sticking to everything wet, which was all of me. He fished around in his pile of clothes to get to his pants pocket.

“Relax,” he said as I closed my eyes, “this is the fun part,” and he didn’t say much else after that.

How quickly the things you hear so much about are over, and how little you need to be a part of them.

We lay there for a minute. The sand itched, had invaded every crevice of my body. I shivered. Ted’s breathing was heavy, but mine was shallow. I tried to listen to my own breath, just so that my heart would beat slower.

He rolled away from me. “Let’s rinse off,” he said.

He jumped right in, but I got up slowly. All of the blood in my head rushed down to my feet. I felt dizzy. I squinted towards the ground below me. Even in the night I could see the dark spot in the sand.

Did all rights of passage include blood? Men and women went to war and spilled blood, and teenage girls spilled their own blood just like this. It seemed stupid. Still, I wished for a moment that I could keep it, some proof in case I didn’t believe myself in the morning.

Earlier that year, during all of those rallies protesting the newest war, I had seen a college student with punky pink hair and a nose ring carrying a sign written in different colored Sharpies, peace signs in the Os: “Fighting for peace is like fucking for virginity,” it said. Behind her stood a slew of others, holding signs made from ripped cardboard boxes, saying: “Make love not war.” They chanted it, over and over, as if the two were opposites, as if one prevented the other. But sometimes making love was like heading into battle, and maybe for my brother heading into battle was like making love.

“Come on,” Ted called into the darkness.

I rubbed the spot away with my foot and dashed into the water. Despite how warm it was, my teeth clicked together in a shiver that I couldn’t seem to stop.

*

I awoke the next morning scratching sand out of my ear, and I thought of my brother who, on his first tour of Afghanistan, had written home: "It's hot and sandy as hell. I don't own anything without sand in it." I wished he were here right now, not just so I could be sure he was safe or so I could meet his fiancée, but so he could attend a Styrofoam Dinner, could look out the window at my father's and say, "Hey, how old is that guy?" because he would know the right questions to ask.

Once, when Frank was in high school, he pinned me against the wall of our house. I had been hanging out with a girl two years my senior who had been caught smoking cigarettes behind his school, among other things.

"You stop hanging out with that girl," he'd said to me.

"Why?" I said, struggling to get out of his grip. He already had muscles like the hulk.

"She does all kinds of stupid shit," he said.

"Let go of me!" I said, making a new attempt to get out. "I'll yell," I said.

He put a pre-emptive hand over my mouth, I spit into it, and he promptly wiped my own spit across my face. "Listen, you stop hanging out with her or I'll tell mom and dad."

"They won't care."

"If they don't care, I'll find some other way to make your life miserable."

"It's not fair," I said. "You can't control me."

"Listen," he said, letting me go. "The truth is, you're cooler than she is. So just shut up, get over it, and do this one thing for me." The funny part is, I was relieved. I had an excuse. Maybe part of me wanted to be the kind of person who smoked cigarettes behind the high school, but it turned out that I didn't actually want to smoke cigarettes behind the high school.

*

I thought Ted might call on Saturday, but he didn't. On Sunday, I called Julie and asked if we could all go out for brunch, the four of us, like we used to. I didn't even feel like I was giving in. I was just tired of being alone. We went to the diner that Julie and I didn't like, the one Ted had taken me to. "Marcus likes to go here," said Julie. "He says it's fancier." She'd forgotten the whole point of going to the diners in the first place.

"So," Julie had said in the car. "Audrey must have been insane all along. I knew she was kind of crazy, but this just proved it. It's too perfect."

"You could probably stop making fun of her, Julie."

"Jesus Christ, May. You've had a stick up your ass all summer. What happened to you?"

Our table was spectacularly white, like milk. I kept putting my finger in my ear and finding sand. A few grains spilled onto the white table, standing out like little periods on a blank sheet of paper.

“Are you alright?” Raman asked after I’d torn apart several packets of sugar, first dumping the sugar into the coffee I’d ordered, and then shredding the paper.

“Fine,” I said. “Tired.”

The coffee was terrible, but I downed the whole thing anyway. “See,” said Julie. “It’s not so bad.”

It was so bad. What was bad was that life was all about waiting for adult things to get less-bad. Children were smart, they just liked things that were already good, like swing sets and cereals with marshmallows and candy shaped like bears.

A group walked in, sitting a few booths behind us, laughing and talking. They looked eons older than us.

I kept looking back at them. I could picture Ted among them, maybe with his arm around the pretty one with the shiny brown hair.

“Really, are you alright?” Raman asked again.

Julie was stirring her coffee with a little red straw. She’d only drunk half of it, not even. Raman was onto his second Sprite. “Maybe it’s the coffee,” said Julie. “May’s not used to drinking coffee.”

“I’m used to more than you think I’m used to,” I snarled, in far too Audreyish a fashion.

*

I went home and I went to bed. I stayed in my room until my mother left for some groceries in the evening. When the phone rang, I had to go into the kitchen in my underwear to answer it. Maybe it was Ted.

“Hello?” I said.

“Heyyy,” said a far away voice that I recognized immediately.

“FRANK!” I yelled. “Frank, you should come home!”

“Home, man? I’m getting hitched.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve heard. So crazy. Congrats!”

“You’re gonna love Shelly,” he said.

“Yeah,” I replied, putting on my tour voice. “I can’t wait—we all can’t wait.” *All?* As if in his absence we had become some kind of family unit. “We want to see you and her and, you know, have you shove wedding cake in each other’s mouths.”

“I’m sure you’d love that,” said Frank. “Is mom there?”

“No, she’s getting groceries. She’s gonna be pissed she missed you.”

“Shelley’s calling card has been fucking up and she’s been using mine to call her family, so there’s, like, no minutes left. So I have to go pretty soon anyway.”

“Man,” I said, but didn’t know what to say next.

“Are you all ready for school?”

“Eh.”

“You’re gonna love it,” he said. “You’re gonna be fine. What are you doing all summer? Hanging with Julie?”

“Kind of,” I said. “She’s being annoying.”

“Well, Julie was always kind of a fucktard,” he said. “What’s the place you’re working at again?”

“The Wayside.”

“That fucking place,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. What could you say in a two-minute phone call?

“Look, I should go. Tell mom I’ll call her soon.”

“Alright,” I said. “Love you.”

And I knew my mom was right. He’d gone to the Middle East to get away from us, and he was finally returning now only because he’d be returning with a new wife, and within her he’d find a new family, a new home.

*

When I finally returned to The Wayside after the weekend, for the first time since Audrey’s incident, I felt somehow like I hadn’t been there for an eternity. Everything should have changed, but it hadn’t. The plaster statues had not stopped smiling, they had not stopped being in the middle of the actions they had always been in the middle of and always would be in the middle of, and even the books had not stopped being stacked as neatly as Audrey had left them. The paint had not stopped peeling, the furniture had not escaped from any rooms, and the visitors had not stopped coming. In fact, there were more of them. I answered questions concerning Audrey as calmly and tactfully as I thought she would have herself.

“You’re doing a great job with the tours,” James said as I swept random spots on the floor whether they were dirty or not. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“Everything is just different now, even though nothing has changed,” I admitted. I pushed the frizzy hair up at the nape of my neck. I swear there was still sand in my hair, or maybe I was imagining it.

“Things are different,” said James. He sat down in front of the register. “Seeing someone you know get so out of touch with reality like that, that had to be a shock.”

I wanted to tell him about Ted, tell him I had just done it to get it done with, to be Julie, to not be Audrey, to find out if that was the difference between the last piece of my life and the next, but that I didn’t find out anything. Sometimes the only difference between doing something and not doing something was what you could claim later.

“Audrey and I didn’t even get along,” I said.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “It’s still allowed to affect you.”

“I don’t even think she ever touched Hawthorne’s writing desk.”

“Few people have,” said James. He stood up and put his hand gently, kindly, on my shoulder and then took it away.

A little later, Ted arrived. “Hey,” was all he said, nodding towards me.

“Hey,” I replied without smiling.

When James was off leading a tour, Ted and I spoke.

“Alright,” he said, “you mad or something?”

“Should I be?” I said.

“Look,” he said. “To be honest, I didn’t really feel like you were into it that much.”

“Whatever,” I said. “We’re finished anyway.”

“We weren’t even—I mean, it works differently when you’re older, you know?” He had finally pulled the age card.

“Okay,” I said. I didn’t want to be with him, yet every word out of my mouth felt like a concession.

“And you called me,” he said.

“*Okay*,” I said.

“Alright,” he said.

I restocked books with a kind of vengeance. “Thank you for coming,” I said tersely to our guests, throwing down their purchases. I wanted to get out of there. I wanted to get out of suburbia and Boston and Massachusetts and the summer and the heat and my teens.

But I couldn’t leave any of it, no matter what I did. Even on the last tour block of the day any hope of closing early was foiled by some tourists on their final literary stop of the afternoon, a young woman and her father. I assumed she went to Brown, since that’s what her T-shirt said. James’ broad smile stretched across his face. I was reminded of those first days when I thought the smile might snap off and take on a life of its own. “You two are lucky,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “A private tour! As you probably know this is the home of—”

“Oh, she knows,” said the father.

“Ah,” said James who put his hands to his temples and closed his eyes for a moment as if she were a little kid. “You’re a writer, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” she said. “Or, I want to be.”

“Don’t let her fool you,” said the father. “She’s very talented.”

“Thank you, Dad,” she said.

For a moment, I felt like this was the same girl—the eight-year-old writer—who had walked in that first week of the summer. I felt like I’d been working at The Wayside so long that she’d already grown up.

“Do you have a favorite Hawthorne work?” asked James.

“Well, there’s always *Young Goodman Brown*,” she said.

“Excellent choice!” said James. I’d been with him enough this summer that I could read the different permutations of his happiness, and finding a fellow reader and writer was its own category of joy.

They began their private tour, and I stayed behind in the Visitor’s Center, doing nothing. Waiting. After forty-five minutes they should have been back. I was getting antsy, and after the incident with Audrey, a little nervous. I put up the away sign and walked into the house. I heard them upstairs, up-upstairs, in the Sky Parlor. I tiptoed up, hoping to hear the tour’s final monologue, which would mean everything was fine and we could all go home soon.

From halfway up the stairs I heard James say, “Oh heck!” A pause. “No one is here. Just for you, for you the writer and reader, to encourage you to write because it’s a hard job and an important job, because of that, we’ll open the shades. Just for a minute. Just so you can see.” My heart stopped. I could hear the plastic rolling upwards. I didn’t dare move.

“Beautiful,” said the father.

“You see how he wrote at the desk? With his back to the window?” And then I heard it, the clink of metal, the sound of a hook coming out of its loop, a velvet rope being taken down.

“I’m not supposed to do this,” he said. “but you’ve traveled a distance. Go ahead, stand in front of it.”

My breathing was heavy. I tried to stay quiet. I thought I would cry.

“What’s the matter?” I heard him say. For a moment, I thought he was speaking to me, but he didn’t even know I was there.

“Aren’t you going to touch it?” I could hear his smile.

“Can I?”

Maybe he let one person touch it each summer, chose the person who would benefit most, who would receive the magic he believed was in it and then would use that magic. I could imagine her touching it, standing behind the unhooked rope, the light on her back, feeling like a writer with a world of possibilities opened to her because she knew exactly what she wanted and everyone believed she would get it. I thought of Audrey and her journalism, the doors that had closed on her for reasons I couldn’t understand. And I thought of myself, aimed at no door in particular, making decisions that now seemed random, standing on the steps of a home where three great writers had walked and kissed and talked and cried, and me there now, crying for the first time that summer.

*

“Are you sure you’re alright?” James asked when we were both back in the Visitors’ Center closing up.

“Uh-huh,” was all I could muster.

“Are you thinking of Audrey?”

“Uh-huh,” I said again, and I was. I was thinking of how much she wanted to be an adulteress like Hester Prynne, a heroic outcast, and how much she wanted to be a broadcast journalist, and how mean she was most of the time, and how messily she ate her pickles, which was probably why no one wanted her to broadcast the news. I thought of how she deserved to touch the desk more than I did and how I deserved it more than that woman who had traipsed through last minute like that. How my father thought James wanted me in the way that Audrey wanted someone, anyone. How James wasn’t like that at all, but how I wished that he wanted me in some way, any way. How I had gotten what Audrey had wanted, but in the end maybe it wasn’t even what she’d really wanted. Right then I wanted to live in the ugliness of the dying Wayside the way I sometimes thought I could sleep forever near the Old North Bridge. I wanted to make a home there, and I didn’t know why.

“I think I’ll be a writer,” I said.

“It’s a hard life. You have time. You can do anything,” said James, smiling, dusting the shoulder of Nathaniel Hawthorne.

But he didn’t believe me, and I never touched it.