

ONE

It's morning again, and I'm waiting for the school bus like a loser. It has now been two months of mornings without Camille pulling up, stereo blaring, in her hand-me-down Ford Taurus. Lately, since she started dating Hunter Collins, the music had changed from soulless pop to moody indie bands neither she nor I had ever heard of, which, quite frankly, seemed a little ridiculous in contrast to her windswept deep brown hair, wholesome cherubic face, and homecoming queen status. Equally ridiculous was loud music on a country road at seven thirty in the morning, pulling up in front of a barn-turned-house-turned-pottery-studio-slash-showroom.

Now there is no ride. I must walk the quarter mile to

Grandma's house on the other end of the property, where the school bus picks me up because that is technically my address. I could have told the driver to pick me up where I actually live—"the slave quarters," as Mom likes to call it—but I couldn't bear to burden him with the knowledge that not only did my best friend die two months ago in a horrible car accident during which I was driving, but I am also poor and living with a crazy "artist" in a glorified shack owned by a grumpy old lady who wants nothing to do with either of us. That's too much bad fortune for most people to bear. People like you to think they care, that they're endless pits of compassion, but in reality, information like this makes them start sweating and getting all squinty, and all they want to do is get as far away from you as possible before they catch whatever you have.

So I keep quiet and let people think the more pleasant stuff about me: straight A student, soccer star, full athletic scholarship to the University of Michigan in the fall. That makes them happy. People love to hear about the kid with the great future ahead of her. I don't tell them how that shining future has dimmed about 50 percent. I don't tell them that Camille was supposed to be my roommate, that we had already secured our dorm room for next year. I don't tell them about our plans, the life stories we'd been writing together since we were little kids, how we were going to be together for the rest of our lives.

We were going to move to San Francisco after we graduated, get an apartment together, be maid of honor at each other's wedding, have kids at the same time and raise them like siblings, buy houses on the same block, and after our husbands died we'd become roommates again, sharing an apartment in some hip retirement community where we'd race each other in our motorized wheelchairs. I don't tell anyone about how we were supposed to be together. Forever. Always.

But enough about that. There is no use whining about what could and should have been. Camille is dead and I am not. What I need to do is focus on the future, when I can leave this place and all of its history behind, when all of this will fall away, when everything and everyone will be new and fresh, when I will be new and fresh, and the world will be full of possibility again.

It's been two months since Camille died, and I haven't cried yet.

In theory, I know this is supposed to be the saddest I've ever been in my whole life. But in practice, I feel nothing. You may wonder how this is possible. You may think *something is wrong with this girl*. But no—I am in fact handling this in the most logical and efficient way possible. Focused. Unsentimental. These are good things. They are signs of a successful, determined individual. Mom, however, disagrees. But she

is not a successful, determined individual. She is a mentally unstable, failed artist on food stamps who sells tourists pottery out of a shed in Middle of Nowhere, Michigan.

Mom takes twisted pride in the belief that her apocalyptic mood swings make her some sort of authority on feelings. On the day of Camille's funeral, she held my wrist in her fingers, and after a few seconds said, "Good, a pulse." I just shrugged and started walking without her to Grandma's for a ride, because (1) it was time to leave for the funeral, (2) I don't have a car, (3) Grandma does, (4) I haven't been too into driving after the accident, (5) Mom never got her license, and (6) even though she hates us and wants to spend as little time with us as possible, Grandma was still, like everyone in the next three counties, going to the funeral, and knew it would be way too evil, even for her, to refuse us a ride.

So Mom grabbed her purse and followed me out the door in her way-too-red-for-a-funeral dress and said, "Kiddo, if I wasn't there to see you come out of my vagina, I'd think you were a robot." She says I didn't cry as a baby; I would just frown and make a forceful yet passionless squawk to make my requests known.

I didn't cry then and I didn't cry at the funeral. I performed my duty, went to the church, hugged Camille's parents, hugged her/our friends, hugged a bunch of people I

barely knew, sat somber as the priest and various people spoke about how great she was. I watched the casket being lowered into the ground, but I knew she wasn't really in there. It was just her body, just her bag of bones, not her soul. That flew away the moment her head smashed in. It could still be flying around, lost on its way to wherever souls go when their bodies fail them. Camille could still be around here somewhere, invisible, looking for a new home.

While everyone cried, I remember wondering who mows the grass at the cemetery. How long does it take to mow all that grass? When the mower guy is finished, does he have to go back to the beginning and start all over again? How does he feel driving over graves, with the blades chopping mere feet above skeletons? These are the things I thought instead of crying.

If Camille were here, she'd tell me I'm being crazy, that I'm in denial about my feelings. She'd have some great explanation for why crying is good, something about the great landscape of human emotion, the importance of catharsis, how holding back feelings is the cause of psychic distress and even physical illness. She was a big fan of feelings, and she could be very convincing. She was a lot smarter than anyone knew.

Camille would tell me to snap out of whatever this is that I'm doing, and for her, maybe I would actually try. She'd look

at me with her big brown eyes and I'd know I could tell her anything. I'd let her fill me full of ice cream and show me those horrible rom-coms she loved, and maybe I'd actually laugh at the parts that were supposed to be funny, and we'd fall asleep on her parents' big couch with popcorn stuck in our hair, feeling safer and saner than I've ever felt anywhere. Her mom would come in on her way to bed and remind us to brush our teeth, as she has done almost every Friday night since we were old enough for sleepovers. Camille would chase me around the bathroom growling, with rabies toothpaste foam all over her face, and I'd forget what I was pretending to not be so upset about.

It sounds cheesy and sentimental, and I hate that just about as much as I hate crying, but I would be lying if I said Camille didn't make me a better person. Ask anyone who knew us, and they'd tell you the same thing, except probably not as nicely. She calmed me. She helped me breathe. Just being near her, just hearing her voice, made it easier for me to rein in the sadistic drill sergeant part of myself. But now that she's not here, that part of myself seems like the only thing I have left. That demanding voice is the only one I can hear in the space where hers once was. So I listen. It's better than the alternatives. It's better than silence.

But enough thinking about Camille. The more I think

about her, the closer I am to slipping into crying territory, and that is not an option. I have work to do. I have the rest of my life to figure out now that she's not in it.

As sad as this all is, the truth is that tears don't change anything. Tears don't bring Camille back. But no one else seems to have gotten that memo. People for miles around, people who never even met Camille, have shed gallons of tears for the beautiful, kind, and smart homecoming queen whose life was cut too short. I know they cry for me too—the best friend, the driver of the car. Poor girl, they think. I must feel so responsible, they think. They Dr. Phil their way into a diagnosis—PTSD, survivor's guilt. “It wasn't your fault,” everyone reminds me—teachers, classmates, the school psychologist, the freaking mailman. I was driving the car, yes, but I was 100 percent sober. And the driver of the oncoming truck wasn't. And his truck was so much bigger than the car I was driving. And he had the yield sign, not me. And I had my hands at ten and two. And I aced driver's ed. They say all these things, petting me like I'm some fragile thing, praying they won't be the one who finally breaks me. They have a vague sense of obligation to comfort me, to ask me how I'm doing, but no one really wants the truth. No one wants me to actually take them up on their offer—“Anything you need, honey. Anytime.” Their sighs of relief are audible when I tell them I'm fine. They're off

the hook, I'm not their responsibility, they can go back to their lives and forget all about me. But they still get to feel proud of themselves because they "made the effort." They still get to be the hero even though they didn't do any actual work.

Who knows, maybe I am part robot like Mom says. Maybe that's the part I got from my father. Maybe that's the big secret—my father was a robot—and that's why Mom refuses to tell me anything about him except (1) we left him when I was two (she says "we" as if I had a choice in the matter) and (2) he's dead now.

But, whatever. Enough about the Man Who Shall Not Be Spoken Of. I see the school bus chugging itself in my direction as I swat mosquitoes in front of Grandma's house. "House" is actually an understatement. It's a mansion. It has a fancy historical registry sign in front of it because it was built in 1868. A few times a year, cars full of stuffy old Historical Society of Michigan board members and big donors show up for Grandma's catered soirees (which Mom and I are never invited to). She lives in there alone with eight unused bedrooms and six unused bathrooms. I stopped asking Mom a long time ago why we don't live with her, when the house has so much extra space and is so much nicer than our place. She has never given me a good answer. She always says something like, "I lived in that museum for seventeen years and barely made it out alive. Trust me, you do not want to live in there with that woman."

She'd crush us with darkness. We're much better out here in the slave quarters."

I feel all eyes on me as the bus pulls up. I'm still something of a fascination for the underclassmen who don't know enough to try to act cool and not stare. I'm the only senior riding the bus besides Jack "Booger" Bowers and two special ed kids. Just one and a half more weeks of this, I tell myself as I make my way down the narrow aisle to the back of the bus. Just six more school days and one weekend until I'm free from all these peoples' memories. I look out the window and try not to think for the rest of the bus ride. I add up the address numbers in my head. I make up equations with the numbers I see on passing license plates. Numbers are clean. Numbers don't have feelings.

I can't get off the bus fast enough as it pulls up at Well-spring High School. I don't enter the school through the front door anymore. I don't want to walk past all those huddles of people, all the cliques in their usual places. There are some I want to avoid more than others, the various gradations of friends and half friends. I don't want to see their sad, expectant eyes. I don't want to have to make another excuse for why I'm not stopping to talk.

So I go around to the side entrance where all the computer geeks congregate. They are all so wrapped up in their various

handheld devices that no one even notices me. I make a quick trip to my locker, arrive to class early, and take my seat in the empty classroom. I take out my book and homework and set it on my desk. I open the novel I'm reading and shove my face in it—the universal sign for “Leave me alone.”

Two months is long enough for most people to stop feeling the need to hug me, which is a huge relief. Camille was always the hugger, not me. It's been long enough for teachers to stop offering me extensions on assignments, which I never took anyway. Coach Richards stopped bugging me about my quitting track and field weeks ago, after there were no more races left to run. Classrooms no longer turn silent when I enter. People have more or less gotten used to this half version of me, the Kinsey-without-Camille, the girl with the dead best friend. They keep their distance accordingly, as if death is contagious.

One by one, our friends have taken my hands in theirs, looked into my eyes, and, oh so earnestly, said something to the effect of “Kinsey, we already lost Camille. We don't want to lose you, too.” For a couple of weeks, I went through the motions of caring. I sat at our lunch table pretending to eat while they talked about everything except the fact that they had already spread out to fill in Camille's usual spot.

They had always been Camille's friends more than mine. I'm not like her, not the social butterfly who considers dozens

of people “friends.” Truthfully, I only ever had one friend. The rest were acquaintances, people I could take or leave, people I don’t miss now that they’ve given up trying to keep me in their circle. They have filled in my space at the lunch table now too. It’s like we were never even there.

I’ve started bringing my own sad lunch to school so I can avoid the cafeteria—PB and J or leftovers of whatever I can find in the kitchen. I’ve never liked crowds in general, but now the lunchroom is completely unbearable. The seniors seem even more manic than in years past, as if the upcoming graduation means leaving more than just high school. It means shedding the heavy tragedy that still poisons the air despite everyone’s crazed attempts at cheerfulness. They can shake off Camille’s death when they throw their caps in the air at graduation in two weeks. That will be the real goodbye, more so than the candlelight vigil, the assembly at school, the standing-room-only funeral, the interviews with news reporters who came all the way from Grand Rapids and even Chicago. In only a handful of days, high school will be over. Everyone will finally have permission to forget.

I eat outside behind the gym, even though it’s humid and pushing ninety already, even though the mosquitoes have come early and the news has been warning that the Midwest is on track to have the hottest summer on record this year. “Global

warming!” my mother always wails when it’s hot. That’s when almost anyone else around here would mutter “Damn hippie” under their breath. This is the part of the country where science is called liberal propaganda.

But I’ll take the company of the mosquitoes over the cafeteria any day. At least I can breathe. At least I don’t have a couple hundred people looking at me and whispering, waiting for me to cry.

I’m the only one out here except for the burnouts under the bleachers. I can see their heads bobbing through the slats, the cloud of smoke hovering in the heavy, wet air. If I was someone else, I might want to join them. I might want to deal with Camille’s death by getting lost in that cloud of smoke, by simply trading in this world for another.

But that is not my way. I am not weak like them. I will stay in this world and I will follow my plan no matter what. I am stronger than sadness and loss and tragedy. You have to be if you want to succeed. At the end of the day, that’s what matters: Strength. Endurance. Perseverance. Moving on in spite of everything.

One more day, done. Just five more school days until the end of high school forever.

The bus is loud on the ride home. Everyone is giddy with

their upcoming escape. I stare out the window and try to tune them out as I watch the world go by. We drive through town before heading onto the rural roads. A few tourists wander the sidewalk like zombies, looking for things to buy. People vacation here for the lake and the dunes, but they always end up in town at least once. When they realize there's nothing for them but a grocery store, a couple of crappy antiques shops, and a working-class town trying to survive, they head back to their vacation homes. I think they're shocked that real people actually live here, that we're not all on vacation like them, that most of us can't even afford most of the stuff they do here. Except for maybe Hunter Collins's family and their Midwestern empire of crappy chain diners called Kountry Kitchens.

And now, as if the thought conjured him out of thin air, there he is: Hunter. Camille's boyfriend. On the sidewalk. Riding his skateboard with a paper bag in his hand. It's the first time I've seen him since the accident. I'd heard rumors that he'd gone off the deep end, stopped going to school, started drinking a lot. The bag in his hand is crumpled around the shape of a bottle.

He has the blue eyes, tan skin, and chiseled cheekbones of an all-American boy, the star quarterback, the homecoming king. There's a sense that he could have been any of these

things if it weren't for the slouch in his posture; the permanent scowl; the greasy, chin-length hair hanging in front of his eyes, so greasy I can't tell if it's brown or wet blond; the cloud in his eyes, the mix of sadness and anger. It's like he's a good design that somehow got mangled; somewhere on the assembly line, a piece of him went missing.

Camille always accused me of secretly looking down on her for being popular, for being homecoming queen, for loving horses, for genuinely liking her family and her life. But the truth is I was in awe that anyone could be that happy; her capacity for joy was superhuman. There's no wondering what Hunter saw in her. Everyone loved Camille. She was beautiful, yes, but that's too obvious. She was one of those rare popular girls who was also incredibly kind. Not *nice*—that's different than kind; that's just acting. Camille was a genuinely good person, and genuinely cared about pretty much everyone and everything she met. She cared about me. For some mysterious reason, she loved me best out of everyone who loved her.

I look at Hunter now and everything about him is the opposite of that girl I remember, the darkness to her light. What did she see in him? Was he something for her to fix? To shine and make pretty? Something to make her feel serious, to give her depth? Or was her desire something as shallow as the good girl wanting to take a spin with the bad boy, senior year,

a few months before college, slumming it before growing up?

But she said she loved him. She didn't tell me much, but she said that. She only ever said that. And maybe that's the reason she didn't tell me anything else, because when she looked me in the eye and said, "Kinsey, I think I'm in love with Hunter Collins," with the most serious, earnest look I'd ever seen in our fourteen years of friendship, I laughed in her face. Because the first thing I said was, "You can't be serious. Not that loser."

Looking at him now, at this brooding, half-drunk boy across the street, I still have no idea what she could have loved. Something inside me squeezes tight, pushes the air out of my lungs. My heart caves in, stops beating, at the realization that there are things I didn't know about Camille, huge expanses of her insides that she never showed me, a secret life where she was capable of loving this feral creature on the sidewalk, where her love of him meant she must have loved me less. And I hate him for it.

I close my eyes to make him go away. I count to ten. This is the closest I've ever gotten to remembering Camille since she died. *Really* remembering her. She is suddenly more than a name, more than a timeline and empty facts. I have gone beneath the surface, something I promised myself I wouldn't do. I let this feeling get too far; I didn't stop it soon enough. It

takes all my concentration to push it away, to clean my mind, to empty myself of these useless feelings.

But when I open my eyes, Hunter seems suddenly closer.

His eyes meet mine like magnets.

I am colder than I've ever been.

I can't look away.

The world falls away and there is only us.

He is standing on the sidewalk with his skateboard in his hand, with the same look on his face I must have on mine, one of surprised terror. The cloud in his eyes is gone. It has been replaced by something even sharper than fear.

Something has shifted, started, some kind of ticking, a timer; where there once was stillness there is now vibration, tiny unravelings. I have become a time bomb. Something inevitable is going to happen. The bus starts moving and our heads turn, synchronized, our eyes holding on to each other. He starts walking, then running as the bus picks up speed, but he can't keep up. He jumps on his skateboard but it is too late. The bus turns the corner and he is gone, as easy as I conjured him.

When he is out of sight, I can breathe again. My body goes back to normal. I have no idea what that feeling was, but it's over now. Hunter is gone, out of my life. There will be no more surprise rushes of feeling, no more losing control.

I look up to find a sea of beady eyes staring at me. He was not my apparition. They all saw him too. They saw me see him. They saw him running after the bus. There will be talk, people will speculate about what this means, but I don't care. These people, this world, will be out of my life soon. They can go on thinking whatever they like while I move on and leave them behind.

Everyone for miles around knows the story of the accident. Most probably assume we're some kind of unit now—Kinsey Cole and Hunter Collins, the best friend and the boyfriend. The survivors. But the truth is, that night was the first and only time I ever met Hunter Collins. Being present at the same death did not turn us into friends, did not automatically create a connection where there was none to begin with. It was simply an unfortunate coincidence that we crossed paths at that particular moment. Then our paths went in different directions. End of story. Until now, I suppose. But that was a fluke, never to be repeated.

It shocks people to discover that Hunter and I are not in touch, that we haven't latched onto each other for comfort, that we haven't established some sort of support group where we relive the accident over and over and cry in each other's arms about how much we miss Camille. Until now, I haven't seen him since that night and I don't plan to. Why would

either of us make the effort to connect when all it would do is remind us about the one tragic thing we have in common? The logical thing for both of us is to move on and try to forget.

But I can't help remembering the night they met. I can't help thinking I could have done something to stop it. It started out a party like every other party Camille dragged me to so I could be more "social." She had dressed me up in some of her clothes, none of which looked right. She had been complaining about how sick she was of the boys at our school, how she had known them all since kindergarten, how boring they all were, how shallow. I was trying to be useful, telling her to wait for college. But she was never good at waiting.

I remember the moment she saw Hunter across the room. I saw the look in her eyes that said she had just made up her mind about something. I looked where she was looking, saw the long-haired, heavy-lidded guy with the beer in his hand leaning against the wall, looking both cooler and more dangerous than any of the guys at school. We both knew who he was. Word gets around when someone new and mysterious shows up. I knew as much about him as she did: recent relocation from Chicago, senior at the high school the next town over, rich, rumors of drug selling, a possible criminal record, a drinking problem, maybe even a violent streak.

All I did was say, "Camille, no." But she started walking in

his direction. I did not follow, did not grab her arm, did not make up some excuse for why we had to leave. As soon as I saw her plastic cup greet his in its muted cheers, I turned around, left the party, and walked the three miles home.

But I don't want to think about that. I don't want to think about Hunter. I don't want to think about Camille, but no matter how hard I resist, she keeps trying to come back, even after I took all the pictures of her down from my wall, even after I put away all the things she ever gave me or let me borrow, even after I stopped doing all the things we used to do together, even after I stopped returning her mom's phone calls. It should be easier to forget. It should be easier to wipe my mind clean. I've been able to handle it until now, until Hunter showed up and made his messy appearance in my tidy life. I've always been able to fight off the memories before they solidified, but now it feels like a barrier's been broken, a wall has come crumbling down, and I am suddenly exposed, vulnerable. How could seeing someone I barely know for a few seconds do this? Maybe I'm tired. Or maybe the memories are getting stronger than me.

The bus drives out of town and into the cornfields. I try to forget how much Camille changed in the three short months they were dating, how she waited so long to introduce us, how suddenly she had secrets. I try to forget how little Hunter tried

to win me over the night we finally officially met, how he didn't seem to care what I thought of him at all. Everyone talked about how he wasn't at the funeral, just like they talked about how I didn't cry. I shove all of this out of my mind as the bus pulls up in front of Grandma's house and I get off. As I walk the quarter mile to my house, I ready myself for another game of avoidance.

There's a rental car parked in front of the PEACE DOVE POTTERY sign (I can tell it's a rental because no one actually drives white midsize sedans by choice). Mom has customers. I practice a smile in preparation.

The bells on the door jingle as I open it and for a moment I feel like a visitor in my own house. I have to act different when there are customers around—friendly—and, quite frankly, I don't have the energy right now. I want to run through the showroom to the kitchen, shove my face full of cereal, and peacefully study for my last round of tests before it's time to leave for work.

As I enter, I am attacked by something fast, white, furry, and yapping. I feel a sting in my ankle as the creature latches onto my pant leg, so I do the only thing any sane person would do in this situation—I kick. The thing goes flying across the room and lands at the feet of a severely obese woman standing next to an equally obese man.

“Kinsey!” my mom yells.

“Snowflake!” the fat woman cries.

I pull up my pant leg to see two small beads of blood, like the bite of a baby vampire.

The woman lifts the dog off the floor and starts babbling at it in a baby voice. Mom glares at me, like it’s my fault I was attacked.

“Sorry,” I say. “Is it okay?”

“Snowflake is not an *it*,” the woman says. “Snowflake is a *she*. Aren’t you, baby?” She nuzzles her chubby face into the evil puffball’s neck.

“Sorry,” I say again.

Mom smiles her winning smile and pats the woman’s shoulder. Only I know how much she really hates these people. “It’s all right,” she coos. “I think everyone just got a little startled. Isn’t that right, Snowflake?” Snowflake doesn’t answer. “Kinsey, why don’t you go in the back and do your homework, okay? I’ll start wrapping these up. The berry bowl and the two mugs, right?”

The woman narrows her eyes like she’s being tricked. “Yes,” the man finally says, pulling out his wallet, no doubt wanting to get this over with as quickly as possible.

The door to the kitchen is behind the counter where they’re all standing, so I have to maneuver awkwardly around them.

Mom taps away at her calculator, even though she knows this equation by heart. These are her two best sellers: fifty dollars for a bowl with holes in the bottom; twenty dollars each for coffee mugs with her cheesy dove logo on the side. Hippies love it because it's the sign of peace. Conservatives love it because it supposedly has something to do with Jesus. Mom loves it because it's an easy twenty dollars for something that takes her no time to make.

I grab a bowl of cereal and pour some soy milk on top, then plop down on the couch in the big open space that is our combination kitchen/dining room/living room. Mom declared our household vegan two years ago, very much against my will. "But I'm an athlete!" I protested. "I'm a growing teenager. I need protein." Beans and tofu have protein, she said. Tempeh. Seitan. So I supplement my diet of whole grains and organic vegetables with milk shakes and chili cheese dogs at work. Sometimes I eat up to four hot dogs a night. It's disgusting.

"Fucking tourists," Mom says as she enters the kitchen. I can hear their white car crunching away on the gravel.

"The season's just starting," I say. "You can't be burned-out already."

"Like those two even eat berries," she says. "That bowl is going to end up holding candy or potato chips or whatever it is those pigs eat."

“Be nice,” I say. Among other things, my mom is a food snob. This is a strange thing to be when you’re on food stamps and living in rural western Michigan, where most people’s idea of fine cuisine is fried perch or some kind of casserole doused in cream of mushroom soup. She refuses to make anything resembling a casserole. Instead, she experiments with things like massaged kale, toasted quinoa, acai berries, and various other ingredients she has to convince the grocery store in town to order even though she’s the only one who will ever buy them. It’s been sixteen years since she lived in San Francisco; you’d think she would have gotten over it by now.

“How was school today?” she says in a sarcastic voice. She’s not one for parental conventions like caring how your kid’s day is. She’s standing at her stage behind the kitchen island where she concocts her culinary experiments, like the rest of the room is the audience to her cooking show. The studio is where she makes and displays her pottery, but the kitchen is where she does a different kind of art with food. With all her creativity, it’s pretty remarkable that I got none at all. And she never fails to remind me how much this disgusts and disappoints her.

“Fine,” I answer.

“Don’t ‘fine’ me.”

“Don’t ‘how was school today’ me.”

She throws some roots and vegetables onto the counter. “I think I’m going to make a stew in the slow cooker. It should be ready in about four hours.”

“I’m working tonight,” I say, drinking the slimy sweet sludge from the bottom of my cereal bowl.

“Do you really need to work this much?”

“Mom, you know I’m saving for next year. I’m going to have expenses.”

“You and your planning,” she sighs, chopping a purple potato from the garden. “You’re so stuck in the future all the time. Always preparing for the worst. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy, you know? If you expect something bad to happen, it will.”

“Somebody’s got to think about the future,” I mumble just loud enough for her to hear. I walk over and put my bowl in the sink. She chops vegetables violently as I walk away.

It’s 4:41 p.m. when I get on my bike to ride to work for my shift that starts at five. I can usually get there in eighteen minutes if I haul ass, with one minute left to put on my apron and wash my hands. Like many things, I have this down to a science.

I ride a few miles through farmland, then a patch of what’s left of the forest that used to cover this entire area, hearing nothing but the buzz of bugs and the crunch of my tires on the

road. In these moments, with my lungs and legs burning, with nothing and no one in sight but road and trees, I can pretend for a moment that I'm somewhere else, somewhere forested and exotic like the Pacific Northwest or Costa Rica. This road could be leading anywhere. I could be an explorer. I could be on my way to discover something no one's seen before. But then the fantasy is inevitably shattered by the homemade sign for SHERI'S HAIR STUDIO tilting precariously in front of a bubblegum-pink double-wide trailer. Half a mile farther is a sign for BOB'S COMPUTER REPAIR at the end of a long weedy driveway. There's nothing exotic in the middle of all these trees, just regular people trying to make a living. Camille and I never had a problem making fun of these roadside businesses and how embarrassingly country they all are, regardless of the fact that my mom's studio and her parents' horse-boarding business are in the same category. This was the only time Camille would come close to showing any meanness—she loved her parents and she loved horses, but she wanted out, same as me. Neither of us was rich. Neither of us was worldly. We were both country girls who desperately wanted to be something else. When things like pizza delivery, high-speed mass transit, corner stores, or ice cream trucks would show on TV, we'd both get quiet, yearning for these urban things as if the tragic lack of them made our lives incomplete.

Our disdain was always strongest on the way to the beach, when we had to pass through Tourist Hell to get to the part of the lake only the locals know about. We'd hold our breath when we turned right on Lakefront Road, when the forest opened into Sunset Village, which is basically just a string of cheap motels, RV parks, and crappy restaurants lining the shore of Lake Michigan. In Camille's car, we felt at least somewhat impenetrable, but on my bike I have to dodge ATVs and mothers yelling at screaming children running across the road. This strip serves a very different tourist from the ones in town nearly fifteen miles away. Sometimes these tourists wander that way, unaware of the unspoken segregation, but mostly they stay here. Somehow they know town is for a different kind of clientele, people who do not stay in RV parks or overcrowded campgrounds or motels boasting free breakfast buffets. South of here, it is like a completely different lake, with no public beaches for miles. Instead, there are dunes and forest dotted with vacation cottages, either owned by their occupants or rented for hundreds or even thousands of dollars per night. The word "cottage" is a misnomer, a strange part of Midwestern vocabulary that has never made sense to me. "Cottage" makes me think of something tiny and quaint, like a life-size version of a gingerbread house. But here it means any vacation home, ones with satellite dishes and hot tubs and

tennis courts and three-car garages, ones that are ten times bigger than the shack I live in and used only on weekends for a third of the year. As soon as the leaves start turning, all those miles are abandoned, all those beautiful houses locked up, empty until the sun shines again.

The tourists in Sunset Village will never own cottages. They are lucky to share this cramped, dirty beach with a bunch of other people who will never own cottages. Instead of fine wine, they drink cheap beer in cans softened by beer cozies that read “Beautiful Lake Michigan,” even though their section of it is muddy, oily with speedboat exhaust and sunscreen, and dotted with the occasional floating Band-Aid or lost toy. Instead of drifting along the coast in private sailboats, they rent dune buggies to take out their aggression on the sand. Instead of golfing on perfectly manicured courses, they play miniature golf at Art’s Arcade & Holes. Then, sunburned and beer-tired, they come to my work demanding hot dogs and milk shakes.

As I coast into the parking lot of Gabby’s Snack Shack, I feel a momentary shock of guilt for looking down on these people. It’s my mother’s judgmental voice in my head, not mine. For someone who’s still technically living with her mother and barely making enough money to feed her daughter, she still manages to be a snob about a lot of things. Whenever the

topic of Sunset Village tourists comes up, she always gets a disgusted look on her face. She refers to them as “those people.” When I tell her she’s being elitist, she refuses to believe me, as if her liberal beliefs automatically trump her actual behavior. Sometimes she’s just as bad as Grandma.

I lock up my bike and fall through the door of Gabby’s Snack Shack at exactly 4:56 p.m., a new record. Contrary to the name, there is no Gabby. My boss, Bill, bought the place eight years ago from a guy named Kevin. He didn’t know who Gabby was either.

“Ahoy there, matey!” Bill says from the cash register, where he is ringing up a very sunburned family.

“Hi, Bill,” I say. As much as I hate serving tourists, I always feel a strange sense of relief when I hear Bill’s welcome. Especially lately, work has become one of the four things I look forward to, besides running, sleeping, and eating. Bill never tries to talk to me about Camille. The tourists don’t even know she ever existed. Here, I can be totally anonymous, someone besides the girl whose best friend died. Here, I’m expected to just do my job, eat as much free food as I want, and listen to Bill’s bad jokes.

“Don’t sweat on the food,” Bill says. The customers don’t find it as funny as he does. They follow me with their eyes as I throw my bag under the counter, tie my apron around my waist, and wash my hands.

“How’s tricks?” Bill says.

“Meh,” I respond. Bill is one of those jolly old guys who it’s impossible not to like. And what’s crazier, he genuinely seems to like people, *all* people, even the most demanding and ungrateful and untipping of tourists. It’s impossible to not cheer up at least a little when you’re around him, which is part of why I actually like my job, despite the horrible clientele, terrible pay, and the fact that I go home smelling like grease after every shift. It’s nice to be around someone who always seems so genuinely happy to see me. Sometimes I feel like Bill’s the only person in western Michigan who isn’t waiting to see me cry.

“Have I got a surprise for you!” Bill says. He often speaks with exclamation points.

“A raise?”

“Even better!” he says, then calls over to the back of the restaurant, “Hey, Jessie, come over here. I want you to meet Kinsey.”

From behind the soft-serve machine emerges a mousy girl I think I recognize from school. “Hi,” she squeaks. She squints as she stares at me. “You’re Kinsey Cole.”

“Yes,” I say. “I know.”

“Oh my god!” She covers her mouth with her hands and her eyes grow wide. “Is this Camille Hart’s job? Did I take Camille Hart’s old job? Oh my god.”

There is nothing I can say to make this not suck. Bill swoops in to save the day. “No, no, honey,” he says. “Camille didn’t work here.” He catches my eye and blinks an apology. “In fact,” he continues, his voice so upbeat I can tell this Jessie girl is already forgetting what she was upset about, “it’s just been me and Kinsey the last couple years. But this summer’s going to be busy, I can feel it! And that’s where you come in, Jessie. You’re going to save the day!”

Since when do we need someone to save the day? Why didn’t Bill tell me he was hiring someone new? Did he actually think I’d be happy about it? All this means is I have to share my meager tips with someone else. And now I have one less thing in my life that doesn’t suck.

If Bill thought hiring someone new would mean less work for me, he was sadly mistaken. Not only did I have to run the register while he was in the back cooking, I also had to train the incompetent Jessie and run interference all night to try to prevent her from knocking things over. For someone so small, it’s pretty amazing how much damage she can do.

I ride my bike home in twilight, sticky with four-hour-old sweat and French fry grease. My shorts are slimed pink with the remains of a double-scoop strawberry ice cream cone Jessie seemed to have flung across the restaurant at me in an epilep-

tic fit. I have no idea how many times she said “I’m sorry” to me over the course of the night, but I would estimate it to be in the hundreds.

If I ride fast enough, I can’t smell myself. So I tear through the night, fueled by three hot dogs, two bags of potato chips, a root beer float, and frustration. Bats dance their creepy silhouette against the darkening sky. Something about them makes my heart clench tight with an impending memory, but I push it away before it has a chance to solidify, an action that has become so automatic I barely notice it anymore. In my head, I cross off “work” from the short list of things I enjoy.

In a few minutes, I will be home. Mom will be working in her studio, one of the few times she doesn’t feel the need to talk to me. I will take a shower, brush my teeth, crawl into bed, and drift away to a place where things are still as they should be.

Forest. Night. You call bats flying vermin. You are trying to make a joke. But I can't laugh. Not tonight. I am stone, my jaw cement. I am trying to punish you.

You say, "Say something, Kinsey."

I say, "Something."

"Very funny."

The lightning bugs are early. You want to stop and catch them but I keep driving. This is not a time for diversions. The night is

unsalvageable. You are the only one laughing. You laugh harder to fill up the silence, to make up for me, to make up for him, to make up for the fact that neither of us is trying.

We should have known. The bats and the lightning bugs making ominous promises, all their dashing and blinking, their violent silence screaming a warning.

“Kinsey,” you say, but you are not talking to the girl in the car. You are talking to the sleeping girl, the watching girl, the Kinsey of now, the Kinsey outside this memory. I am driving but I am not driving. We are here but we are not here. We are only visitors, tourists. You are taking me on a trip. You are my tour guide. Making me remember.

“What, Camille?” I say, my voice slicing the dark.

This is where you take me. The night, dark. The party, painful. Hunter and me, lost in our own silences. He has too much to drink. I stay too sober. I insist on driving. You say I always want to drive when I can't fix things.

This is how we cope: You laugh when you get nervous. You laugh when you are scared of the dark. A shadow in the shape

of Hunter is slumped in the backseat, nothing more than a mannequin for this memory, a placeholder. He knows so many ways to sleep. I hold on to the steering wheel tight. The whiter my knuckles, the safer I feel.

“Kinsey, the next part is going to suck.” This is not what you said then, but it is what you say now.

“We can stop it,” I say.

“No we can’t,” you tell me. “It already happened.” Then you laugh. “And you’re supposed to be the smart one.”

“We just have to try.”

“But, Kinsey,” I hear your voice say inside my head. “You can’t fix everything. Some things you just have to let happen. Some things you just have to let go.”