

These are the things we knew about Sam Decker: Tacos were his favorite food. He had a collie-poodle mix named Rickie. He was a Sagittarius, and the first thing he noticed about a woman was her laugh. We knew that *Flight Opus* was his best movie but that *Sender Unknown* was the one he looked most handsome in, and that he fell in love with Abby Madison when they were filming *Dancing on Thursdays*. We knew he was the co-owner of cocktail bars in Manhattan and London, which made it even more surprising that he would come to a dive like the Shamrock, or even that he would be in Orlando at all. Lindsey was the first one to spot him across the room, and though none of us had any idea what he might be doing there, we intended to find out.

We took copies of the magazines that had taught us these things everywhere we went that summer. We read them at one another's houses, on car rides to and from the city, at swimming pools and beaches and barbecues. We exchanged facts we had uncovered about perfect strangers the way most people exchanged pleasantries. We delivered them as greetings,

mid-sentence, and halfway through conversations about totally unrelated subjects, as one of us sat idly flipping through a worn, dog-eared copy of *Blush* or *Kiss*, half listening to the others. We managed never to pay for them, taking them instead from doctors' offices and the gym where Nina worked. We picked up the copies tourists left on the beach like they were seashells.

While the tourists would've had to turn these magazines aside halfway through them to close their eyes from the Florida light our own eyes had grown used to long ago, we could continue to worry and wonder and bask in the things we most wanted to know, even as the sun did its work: the cut and color of the dress Joni Parsons wore for her dinner out with which Hollywood director, and the name of Corey Jones's fourth-grade teacher, who he had recently thanked in an acceptance speech for an award that no one had heard of but that everyone got dressed up for—the pictures flew around the Internet, and bloomed from the pages of both *Rumor* and *Kiss*, even though they tried never to cover the same events. We cared less about how we would fill the empty nights that followed vast but indistinct days at the beach than we did the brand of toilet paper February Mathis was seen carrying out of the Whole Foods in Beverly Hills.

Until the night we met Sam Decker, it had been too hot for even the beach, even for us, because it was August in central Florida. August came to Florida every year, but it felt like the end of the world every time if only because of how empty the streets and sidewalks became—everyone stayed inside. It got so bad that you started to blame the heat on other things—the palm trees and the beach and the sunsets and the sand—

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because heat that unpleasant had to be blamed on something. It surely wasn't benign. And for all its unpleasantness, it went unseen, measured instead by the size of people's pit stains and just how far out of their mouths the tongues of panting dogs hung.

There was always a day, usually during the second or third week of the month, when the heat broke. It was an unofficial holiday in the state. On the morning of the night we met Sam Decker no one would have braved the sand too hot to stand on without flip-flops, or the lukewarm water that offered no relief from the invisible palm the air held over your nose and mouth. But it dropped five degrees between noon and three, and we followed the temperature like it was the Super Bowl score in the fourth quarter. By the time we hit the outskirts of Orlando that night, it felt like something had been released, like someone had changed the radio from a somber symphony to a rock song, and change of any sort felt promising to us back then, because we were young, and lived almost a full hour from even Orlando.

That we could enjoy the coral orange colors of the sunset without indicting them for their association with the sun was the first sign that it was going to be a good night. The second was that, after parking our car in the overnight garage and walking up and down the same drag we walked up and down every Saturday night, we had seen Lindsey's secret boyfriend's actual girlfriend, Carine, walk into the Shamrock bar. If she had been a color she would definitely have been a pastel, which was only the first of several reasons we hated her. Her equally horrible friends—reasons two and three—were with her. We

had promised we were going to try a new bar that night, but it was late August, which meant Carine and Paisley and Polka Dot, whose real names we could not be bothered to learn, would be returning to out-of-state colleges in only a few weeks, and tormenting them was pretty much our favorite thing to do that summer. So we went to the Shamrock as always.

Carine and the patterns were Golden Creek Girls, but wouldn't be for long. The whole point of attending the sort of colleges they were on summer vacation from was to move away from home for one sort of important career or another—in fields so competitive that you had to go wherever the work was, which usually happened to be somewhere you wouldn't mind moving. Though we knew the distinction of having been from Golden Creek would never fully leave them—it would keep their postures straight, and it would always be one of the first things they told people upon meeting them. We knew they'd be precise—it would always be *Golden Creek*, never just *Florida* or *outside Orlando*.

Golden Creek was the home of the largest collection of saltwater pearls anywhere in the country, and a liberal-arts college that was just as expensive as the ones they had left home to attend. It was a land of golf courses and manicured greenery. It had Florida's vacation climate, but the houses there would've been extraordinary anywhere, with touches of character—a widow's walk in one, a two-story bay window in another—that seemed missing from the identical units in the condo parks and gated vacation-home communities Florida is known for. These houses weren't designed to look like tropical getaways, they were sturdy, stately, and dignified structures

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that sat among majestic courthouses and schools instead of seafood restaurants and T-shirt shops. Golden Creek had cobblestone streets and more nonfunctioning lighthouses and designer stores than any other stretch in Florida. It was the kind of place presidents came to visit. Four American presidents had been to Golden Creek and publicly fawned over its beauty, including Obama.

I suppose they had their own reasons for hating us. Golden Creek was closer to Orlando than our neighborhood and a series of nameless towns just like it, and people like us regularly passed through Golden Creek to get to the city. It was more scenic than the highway, and faster. We weren't always sober and we didn't always follow the speed limit, and the people of Golden Creek were the sort who had the time and money to do something about this. In the last two years extra speed patrols had been added at the Golden Creek community's urging, resulting in a speeding ticket apiece for me and Lindsey, and a whopping three for Nina.

That night, our plan of attack on Carine and the patterns quickly turned into a plan of descent on Decker when Lindsey, literally stunned into openmouthed silence, gestured at him with her giant head.

The Shamrock smelled like the inside of a beer bottle or, more likely, like a beer had spilled just a second ago, an illusion the always-sticky tables complemented. It smelled like hops and yeast and, because we were in Florida, salty, water-heavy air. It was that smell more than anything that made me doubt, before he turned to face us head-on, that it was really him. That made me think it was a trick of the light, or even

wishful thinking. That the resemblance was uncanny, but not exact, and that standing twenty feet away was only a handsome but otherwise average man, a banker or even a bartender, who had been pulling girls out of his league for years. They couldn't put their finger on it, but something about him just made them feel like they already knew him. The real Sam Decker couldn't possibly be in a bar the smell of which promised such a cheap, soggy Saturday night.

"Holy. Shit," Nina said, apparently not sharing any of my doubts. "We're *definitely* getting shitty with him tonight."

He turned then, and looked at us for just an instant, an empty, dazed half-smile on his face that we basked in until he turned back to the bar a quarter of a millisecond later.

There was no mistaking that smile, even at half-mast.

"Holy shit," I said, not able to think of anything to say other than what Nina already had. "It's really him."

Nina turned to look at me with her *Um, YEAH, if we're gonna pull this off you're gonna need to get your shit together* look.

"I'm just going to be a human and tell him that I like his movies," I said, edging one butt length closer to the end of the booth. I was bluffing, mostly on account of the look she had given me. I had no intention of being the first one to talk to him.

"Don't be an idiot, Maggie," said Nina. "Once you establish yourself as a fan you've declared yourself on a different level. Like, a level *below* him. He'll ask you if you want an autograph and move on to people who drool with their mouths closed."

"Okay," said Lindsey. "So why don't you practice whatever opening line you're going to stun him with on us?"

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Lindsey was constantly backing me up against Nina. Not because she liked me more, but because Nina never needed any help.

“That’s just it,” Nina said. “I’m not going to use a *line*. I’m going to ask him what he’s drinking.”

“What, like you don’t know who he is and he just happens to be somebody standing there when you want a drink recommendation?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

“Um, because you want him to think you’re from Mars? Or, like, *homeschooled*?” Lindsey asked. “Everybody knows who he is.”

Ironically, Carine was the one to save Nina, by picking that moment to walk across the bar to our table—Paisley and Polka Dot behind her—saving us the trouble of having to do something like send her a glass of milk with our compliments later.

“This is strange,” Carine said. “Fred said he was going to be in Sanibel this weekend. I assumed he was with you.”

She had the pouty, unhappy droop of the blonde girls in tampon commercials before they discover Tampax’s other-worldly leak protection. Period Barbie, we called them.

“Whoah, Whoah, Whoah,” said Nina merrily. “Carine, are you wearing a *romper*? Is that one *giant* piece of neon-green fun? Is there even a *pee hole* in that thing? And do you think you should be drinking in an outfit that’s gonna make it *that* hard to break the seal? You gotta get outta here, man. It’s just not safe in that outfit.”

“I know, Nina, it’s crazy, isn’t it, that they sell pieces of clothing for more than twenty dollars?”

“What’s crazy, *Courtney*,” said Nina, emphasis on the far-less-exotic name Carine had been born with, a fact Nina had done considerable sleuthing to uncover, “is that you date a man under the age of forty named Fred.”

“You know,” Carine said, turning back to Lindsey. “You’d probably be less inclined to do trashy things like sleep with other people’s boyfriends if you didn’t hang out with such trashy people.”

She tilted her high side ponytail in Nina’s direction.

“Oh, wow,” Nina said, showing no signs of ruffle, her voice all innocence and light. “I didn’t realize the Brownies had started giving out patches for being a total cunt to strangers in bars. You’ll be good at that one.”

“Stay out of it, Scarfio,” said Paisley, or maybe Polka Dot—we could never remember who was which.

“I’d love to,” Nina said, nodding at her like she was a small child. “But your camel toe is precluding my enjoyment of this adult beverage.”

Carine tried to knock Nina’s drink off the table and into her lap, but she was not a girl versed in bar fights, and was too slow. Nina caught the glass mid-tilt with a lone extended index finger. She let it balance there for a minute, maintaining eye contact with Carine the whole time, before she picked it up and finished the drink without taking a breath.

“Anything else?”

They blew back over to their table in one triangle of evil, and before we even had time to do a *fuck-you* shot, Sam Decker was at our table.



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“Dude, what the *fuck?*” he said. “That was some ice-queen shit. I didn’t know people actually behaved like that outside of, I don’t know, *Carrie.*”

“I just happen to not believe in wasting alcohol,” said Nina coolly. “Is that from *War Addict?*” she asked, nodding at his bomber jacket.

He looked down to check what he was wearing, a move none of his characters ever would’ve pulled. They had an answer ready for everything.

“Oh. No. It was my grandfather’s.”

It hadn’t occurred to us until then that Sam Decker had a grandfather.

“But who cares about that? Seriously, what just happened? Did you guys even know each other? Is that, like, normal for this part of town?”

“Sit down,” Nina said.

None of us so much as shifted the angle at which our legs hung from the booth during the one second he hesitated, looking at the door and then back at us.

“Why not?” he finally said. “I love a good story.”

We were burnouts in a burnout town. It took half the length of a Sam Decker movie to get to Orlando from where we lived, and even the city was a four-year-old’s dream, not a nineteen-year-old’s. The high school that we had gone to was not the type whose graduates went on to Ivy Leagues, or first- or second- or even third-tier liberal-arts colleges. There

was a community college in town where some of our classmates floundered and delayed having to look for jobs that paid by the hour, and the valedictorians usually made it to Florida State or the University of, but that was about it. By not bothering with these consolation prizes, we felt like we were making a point, though I'm not sure we could've told you what it was.

At first this rushed adulthood was all we had hoped it would be. Lindsey and I worked at the mall—her in customer service, me in the coffee shop where I spent most of my time making new creations that the three of us rated using a complicated system of factors, like the aftertaste and the effect on the stomach, and never paid for. Nina started out cleaning machines at the nearest gym but had recently started teaching an aerobics class, a concept we found funnier than YouTube clips of people falling, even when we saw for ourselves that she wasn't horrible at it. "Besides," she said, a cigarette between her teeth, "I'm not exactly fit, but anyone not pushing two hundred pounds counts as trim in this state." Though we were often bored, our jobs were rarely humiliating or uncomfortable or hard, and there was still the novelty of having any job at all.

Life was quieter, maybe, without our classmates, but they had generally been white noise, noteworthy mostly for the extent to which they weren't us. We were well liked enough, but I doubt anyone who didn't live in a five-block radius even wondered what had become of us. And the ones who did we still saw—they drove to their classes in hand-me-down cars instead of living in dorms.

At night we had money to burn. We had decent enough fake IDs to get into most bars in town even though everybody knew

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who we were—they were simply good enough to cover the bars' asses should the sheriff come in for a drink while we were there partaking underage—and we were pretty enough to get into the more upscale bars when we ventured into the city. Though by that night we had grown tired of the wardrobes those bars required, and had pled monogamy to the Shamrock.

We were still pretty in a high-school-girl kind of way, but we wouldn't be for long, and neither of those facts was lost on us the night Sam Decker walked into the Shamrock and renewed our dwindling confidence that we were living the right kind of life—the kind where anything could happen. We adored him ironically—we made fun of his movies but always went to see them opening weekend—but it was with pure earnestness that we watched him slide into our booth and ask us what our names were.

**I**t was dusk, and I knew it would be dark by the next round. I loved the Shamrock as much as the other girls, but it was two different bars by night and day. During the day it was a distinctly Florida bar. Even though it was tucked into the last lot of the street it was on, dwarfed by the other, looming buildings that you had to pass to get to it, and surrounded on one side by dense Florida foliage that came closer to swallowing the entire building every day, the sun still found you there, like it did everywhere else in the state. The light was a tangible thing, another regular.

By night, though, Sal, the bar's owner, didn't do much to light the place. It felt like the inside of a ship. It was entirely

dark wood—the tables, the floors, the walls—that dimmed even the brightest bulbs and made you feel small. Starting to drink in the Shamrock in the middle of the day and going straight through to the night was a little like going down for a nap when it's light out and waking up when it's dark. You always wake up a little panicky, like you gave up more time than you intended to, even if you closed your eyes for only the exact twenty minutes it takes the sun to drop out of the sky.

“Okay, I have to ask,” Lindsey said just after the first bar light came on. “What are you *doing* here?”

All traces of whatever distress Carine had caused—which Nina and I both knew she had, even though Lindsey tried to downplay the fact that she, our most good-natured third, was the one to have found a nemesis—had dripped off Lindsey's posture and sat sweetly in a puddle at Sam Decker's feet.

“I'm here for some Disney Channel reunion,” he said, clearly grumpy about it.

We remembered, then, that he had gotten famous because of *The New Mickey Mouse Club*, which seemed strange to us, even though we had grown up watching it, because we couldn't remember a time when he didn't have stubble. We liked to joke that there was a clause in all of his contracts that demanded he be allowed to keep it, no matter the role—he was the grungy heart surgeon and the baker who couldn't be bothered to wear deodorant.

“No offense,” I said, “but aren't you a little too famous for that?”

“Are you *ever* too famous for Mickey Mouse? He's like the animated Harvey Weinstein. You don't say no to him.”

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We looked at him blankly. His eyes went wide at the fact that we didn't know what he was talking about, but he deflated into the booth instead of explaining it to us.

"I'm kidding. My agent made me go."

"Does that mean Clive Bennett's gonna be here?" Nina asked, as if the reunion was going to be held there in the Shamrock.

Clive Bennett was another *Mickey Mouse Club* alum. He was currently on the show *Buckle Up*, about traffic cops and the crazy, heavy shit they got into that nobody would ever suspect them of because they were traffic cops. It was a good show—we all watched it—but we knew that even good television shows ranked far below movies.

"No, and that's the problem." Decker took a swig of bourbon that he put his whole body into, nearly finishing it. "But that guy's a dick anyway."

"Um, he goes to Rwanda like once a year," I said, putting on my snottiest voice and hoping he realized I was kidding.

"Ha. That guy couldn't show you Rwanda on a map if it bit him on the dick."

"Ouch," Lindsey said. "I had no idea that was a problem you people faced."

He had just taken another sip of bourbon and he almost didn't get it down. And we knew it was a real laugh because we knew his acting laugh intimately, and this wasn't it.

"Ha. That's really funny." He turned to me and Nina. "She's really funny."

"So if he doesn't have to be here, why do you?" Nina asked.

Lindsey gave her the *Seriously?* eyes, probably pissed that Nina hadn't confirmed how funny she was.

“My agent thought it would help me reconnect with my original fan base. The box-office returns haven’t exactly been what they once were.”

It never occurred to us that Sam Decker checked his box-office returns, given how busy he was escorting Abby Madison in and out of expensive cars and five-star restaurants, and parties full of people even more important than he was. We had noticed that one of his movies had gone right to DVR, but that happened even to people like Jennifer Lawrence and Christian Bale sometimes.

“He always has these big plans but never has the time to see them through.”

He shook his head and reconvened with his bourbon, looking into the glass he tilted toward himself as if he expected a prize like the kind you find at the bottom of a cereal box to float up.

“So does that mean the reunion’s off?” I asked.

“No, it just means he was supposed to come with me and canceled at the last minute,” he said, looking back up at me with a face that was still jarringly beautiful even after twenty minutes spent looking right at it. “And now I have no one to drink with.”

“Well,” Nina said, “thank God you found us.”

Though she had a rule against makeup and kept to a uniform of hooded sweatshirts and running shoes, Lindsey was the prettiest. She had deviant curly hair that couldn’t decide if it was dirty blond or auburn, but didn’t waste much

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time thinking about it. Like most things in her and everybody else's life, she tried to control this force of nature by pulling it into giant knots on the top of her head and nautical French braids, but it usually got the better of her. The stray curls that escaped even her most intricately conceived hair plots were always leaping from behind her ears, where she tucked them. She had been awkwardly tall for as long as we'd known her, but somewhere in between sophomore and junior year even the latest-blooming boys had caught up with her, and she complained about it less. The hard, lean figure she'd always had from years of sports made her seem older than she was, chiseled and able, like a woman who knew how to garden and sail, but the freckles that covered her body kept her young-looking. Nina liked to say she had *an ass that wouldn't quit*, mainly to make her uncomfortable—she had skin that showcased every blush, so she could never hide when she was flustered, delighting Nina—but it was also true. She bought her jeans two sizes too big, but there was no pair of pants she didn't fill the seat of.

Her mother had died when she was four, but Lindsey still told stories that featured her regularly. They always sounded nice, but we assumed they were made up because we couldn't remember anything before six. We knew there was a chance that one of her four older brothers has passed them down to her, but because we had never heard more than three consecutive words out of any of them, we doubted it. They were sluggish, not terribly clever boys who Lindsey had a bond with that Nina and I could never understand, maybe because we were both only children.

Maybe it was because she played so many sports, and the coaches at our high school loved to use battlefield metaphors, but Lindsey had no trouble doing what needed to be done, stoically, without asking any questions. If you needed someone to pull the plug on a beloved vegetative family member, Lindsey would have been your girl. Not because she didn't care, but because she understood that someone had to do it. She was our puller of splinters and killer of exotic Florida bugs. Maybe it was because nothing would ever be as bad as her mom dying and maybe it was because of her four older brothers, but she could do things like watch tigers disembowel antelopes while they were still alive on the nature channel without turning away or even starting to while everyone else squealed and demanded the channel be changed. The thing that made her a magical creature instead of just creepy was that she didn't sacrifice an ounce of cheerfulness or optimism to this acceptance of life's unpleasantries. She was as likely to be found baking cookies as she was looking for worms after a rainstorm. She drew hearts over her *i*'s and loved maudlin, sappy endings more than anyone I knew.

Though we counted Carine an unreliable source on all things, she wasn't incorrect about the fact that Lindsey was sleeping with her boyfriend, Fred. We didn't object to the affair on principle, but we were confused as to why she would ever want to see him naked. He was hot in a lacrosse-player kind of way, but his face was the human-face equivalent of vanilla ice cream. He had no distinguishing features whatsoever—even the accidental cookie-dough chunk or Reese's Pieces that had snuck in. If Nina was the one dating him we would've



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asked her flat out what the appeal was, but we knew that Lindsey had said yes to him mainly because he was the first person who ever asked.

I had spoken to Fred only twice—once when Lindsey invited him over to her father’s backyard to drink with us without any warning, and once when he came to visit her at the mall—and I still couldn’t pick him out of a five-man lineup. If I hadn’t held him in such low regard I would have been worried that I was going to snub him one day through my sheer inability to recognize and respond to such a stock, cardboard-cutout face. Though we would miss Carine’s horror at her inability to prevent Lindsey from having something she didn’t want her to have, Nina and I were both looking forward to Fred’s return to school in New Hampshire in September.

The one mark in his favor was that he bought Lindsey expensive gifts, mostly jewelry and flowy silk clothing in prints that girls who wear Laura Ashley when they’re young wear when they grow up, and at first we were surprised at how pleased she seemed to receive them, given that she would rather shave her eyebrows than wear either. But then we remembered that, because she worked in customer service at the mall, she had no trouble returning them for cash. We knew exactly what they cost because she pointed the items out to us in catalogues and online. So while we appreciated the times she picked up the tab and insisted on one more round, promising to cover it, we also knew that this generosity wasn’t putting a very big dent in her savings, wherever she was keeping them. Nina and I occupied the nights Lindsey was with Fred trying to guess what she would eventually spend it on, no

easy game, given that she wore the same Fruit of the Loom uniform everywhere she went and had no aspirations to move out of her father's house. All of her brothers still lived there.

When I think of Lindsey now, I think of this time, right after graduation, when we were done with school but didn't yet have jobs, when we went to the beach every day. Outside of that one stretch we didn't really go as often as you would think we would, living so close, but we thought of the beach as some sort of kid brother—loud and attention-hogging—and all the tourists that it drew were the kid brother's loud, annoying friends who laughed too hard at his fart jokes. But for like six weeks we went every day, to the same spot. And this one day, halfway through that stretch, we saw this three-legged cat. It was big and muscular enough that it might have been a bobcat. Though this guy had certainly won his fair share of fights, in addition to missing the leg, he had about half the whiskers he was born with and generally looked like the first cat God ever made, but he was hopping around like it was no big deal. Like cats made do with three feet all the time. But there were no other animals on the beach when we saw him. Most stretches of beach, private and public alike, had about four different kinds of wildlife for every person. We knew that cats were territorial creatures, and that maybe this relative wasteland was only the result of him successfully claiming this piece of land for himself, but it felt more like the rest of the animal kingdom had smelled his three-legged fate, and wanted to be as far away from it as possible. And it made the ocean look even bigger and more indifferent than usual.

We named him Ralph.

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Nina and I were pretty impressed by how well he was doing on three feet—he really was hopping every which way, getting his half-whiskered face into every potentially fish-bearing mound of sand in sight—and we were pretty optimistic, really, about his long-term chances of success. But Lindsey insisted he wasn't long for this world. And she wasn't sentimental enough to try to save him and make a pet out of him; this was a woman raised by men. Instead, confident that Ralph was on his last legs in more than just the literal sense, she insisted that we give him half of our picnic food, because he should have one last nice thing in his life before whatever savage end nature had in mind for him. Ralph happily took our sandwich meat and buns, and even the cupcakes we had brought for dessert. And he must have been restored by these reserves, because for the next few weeks, he was there every day, waiting to see what we had for him, until finally he wasn't. All Lindsey would say about him not being there was "fucking cat," as if, suddenly, she had forgotten the name we had been calling him even when we weren't with him, finding it hilarious to wonder what Ralph would do in various social settings if he were there. But when Nina gave a blow job to one of the lifeguards who worked that stretch of the beach, he told her Lindsey showed up every morning at dawn—before even the old people who walked the sand and waded for exercise—with miniature feasts under her arms. And even though she never talked about Ralph ever again, we knew that she was always looking for him when we went, and that when we stopped going to the beach every day, it wasn't because it had gotten too hot, it was because she had given up on him.

The only story you really need to know about Nina to understand *her* is that she didn't know the name of that life-guard she gave the blowie to. But that she cried over what he told her about Lindsey. Later, when she was alone.

She had one of those mothers who wanted to be “friends” with her daughter, which really meant not bothering with any parenting. The effects were more pronounced in Nina because her father wasn't around, either. She never even met him. As we got older, we came to appreciate Elaine more, because she actually gave good “friend” advice, especially where dating and love were concerned, and I think her intentions were always good, despite their results. But I think Nina would've gotten fewer detentions and drawn less ire from the teachers and maybe made it to a few more classes if her mother hadn't spent so much time during the early years out in the trenches, gathering the hard way the advice she would later gift us.

I, meanwhile, always felt a step behind—not just of them, but of the entire world—which led to destructive, nonsensical decisions that confused even me. Like moving out of my parents' house that summer with no money saved, into an even dumpier part of town and pretty much the one apartment in Florida I could afford on a mall-coffee-shop salary. I think my parents assumed I was moving in with my boyfriend, Jay, and their feelings were hurt all over again when they found out I was living alone. I would've complained to Lindsey and Nina about how measured my parents' voices had become in the weeks before my move, even more polite and distant than usual, but I don't think either of them understood why I, the

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only one with two parents, wouldn't keep living the dream for as long as I could.

We sound ordinary, I know, like a million girls everywhere. But we weren't. Lindsey had taught herself to play the piano without a single lesson; even though her father couldn't afford a piano, she just kept getting better. We used to stay after school with her so she could play the piano in the band room that Nina figured out how to pick the lock for when we were sophomores. Nina and I would share *Ho Hos* and read *Kiss* and *Blush*, pointing out particularly beautiful or awkward or compelling pictures to each other, or just listen to her play. Lindsey could play just about anything without the music for it—theme songs to our favorite after-school sitcoms, commercial jingles, the latest radio hits. We used to try to stump her, demanding she play this or that, but she got it right every time. She never joined the school band, maybe because it would have been a bore to someone like her, but it's equally likely that it was in service to spending more time with us.

We were the only ones who ever heard her play.

Nina's imagination was a beast the likes of which only she could've created, even if she just showed you the tip of it. She told stories better than anyone else I knew. And not just recaps of the absurd things she actually did. She used to make up wild stories to captivate the school psychologist when our high school principal threatened to expel her if she didn't go, after she was caught miming fellatio to the baseball team with the erasers she was supposed to be cleaning as punishment for talking back to the school's least popular teacher. Mrs. Horvath had stopped her in the hall and asked to see her hall pass and

when Nina said she forgot where she put it, Mrs. Horvath asked her where in the world it could've gone during the short walk from Nina's seventh-period math class to the stretch of hallway Mrs. Horvath's classroom was on. Nina told her it might very well be caught somewhere between Mrs. Horvath's second and third chins. She never had any trouble coming up with a line like that, when the rest of us would've just surrendered with an apology. And while the totally over-the-top sagas she created for her therapy sessions were amusing to her and to us, on whom she tested each story she had planned for the next appointment, she claimed she was doing it for the school psychologist—an eager, unimaginative woman just out of grad school who had moved away from her family and friends in order to fix our problems, whose eyes just went so deep when Nina painted her mountains of pain. She gave that psychologist a purpose, and made sure she never knew that Nina had been making the focuses of their sessions up, even when Nina stopped having to go see her. She wasn't making a fool of her, Nina swore, but fulfilling all the expectations that had drawn her to the job. People who felt fulfilled by their jobs were probably better at them, she said, which meant she was doing it for all the screwed-up kids who came after her, who would probably need a good therapist. One who had heard it all.

Someone might have noticed this cleverness, and the ease with which she told complicated, gripping stories, and helped her do something with it other than make us laugh, if Nina ever bothered to attend an English class. But she skipped as many of those as she did all of her other classes.

I was their audience, a generous one, the witness to their

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lives. Whenever one of them came alive with fury at the mistreatment they perceived from one party or another, I showed them a kinder, more generous version of what might have happened. I reinterpreted their lives in a way they could stand. I was patient with them when they lost patience with each other, and tried to distract them from the flaws they couldn't change. They said that I was gifted at doing this because I had come from a stable home where the curtains matched the rugs and I wasn't allowed to eat Fruit Roll-Ups for dinner, but I think I did it because one of us had to.

We loved one another purely, without the complications teenage girls so often bring to everything. But I wouldn't be telling it right if I didn't also tell you that it felt, by that night, that a sense of uneasy anticipation filled any room the three of us were in. It felt like someone had just farted in a very formal setting, and there was no pretending that it hadn't happened, but nobody wanted to be the one to acknowledge it and move things along. Nina hadn't even taken that much pleasure out of calling Carine a cunt, which normally would've had the power to turn a Wednesday afternoon into a Saturday night. It felt like we were running out of things to say, and in the silences we let settle resentment had time to mount. At the fact that we had all reconfirmed for each other that our collective aimlessness was a good idea. That none of us would have been bold enough to forgo any investment in our future without the other two, and that we wouldn't be sitting where we were, in seats becoming worse by the minute—obstructed view, with no padding, and at the back of the house—if it weren't for the others. We were starting to panic, and when we looked around

for something to pin our regret on, all we found was each other. Sam Decker being at the Shamrock was a miracle, our miracle, and my first thought when I saw him was that he might be miracle enough to give us back to each other.

So, man, this is like a *real* bar, huh?" Decker said. He tapped his fingers on the table as he looked around. We would measure the number of drinks he had across the night by the pace of those manic taps. Like the rest of him, they mellowed with every round. They had no rhythm or beat, which made their sound feel frantic, more caged animal than *I have this tune in my head*. He looked expectant, like we was waiting for someone who was supposed to meet him there even though he had already told us he was alone.

"As opposed to what?" Nina asked.

"I mean these are people who come in here just to drink."

"Um, yeah, it's a *bar*," Lindsey said. "Were you hoping to have your taxes done or something? There's an accountant's office next door, but they don't sell booze. They probably wouldn't mind if you brought your own, though." "Didn't that guy go to jail for fraud?" Nina asked. "Probably," Lindsey said. "I guess you'll have to stay here,"

she said to Decker.

"That's not what I meant," said Decker. "I just meant it's not somewhere you come to see or be seen or meet up with people. Like those old guys over there." He nodded at Bob and Jax, two of the most dependable regulars. "They look like they've been here awhile."



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“Yeah, probably,” I said. “I’ve never been here when they weren’t.”

“And they’d keep on drinking even if they were the only ones here,” he said.

“I’m pretty sure they think they are,” I said.

“And this *music*,” Decker said.

Frankie Avalon’s “Venus” was playing. The oldies were pretty much the elevator music of Florida, not least because the stereotypes about the number of old people here are true. While Nina, Lindsey, and I normally preferred the Katy Perry/Lady Gaga fare that most girls our age did, we had grown used to the oldies that Sal made his patrons listen to, and maybe even liked them a little by the night we met Sam Decker. Sal told us it was good for us to get to know these older musicians—they told whole stories in three minutes, while our generation tried only to shock, he said. But we knew that at least part of the reason for the limited selection was that he didn’t have the time or desire to listen to any of the new music he claimed to hate so much, and would never let any foreign influences find their way into the Shamrock.

“You could live a 1950s *childhood* in this bar. It’s like a time capsule.”

“I mean, if that’s your thing . . .” said Lindsey.

“That’s awesome. I love that. It reminds me of this bar I used to go to in Anchorage,” he said. “The *décor* was pretty much the same, too.”

None of us made any indication that we had known he was from Anchorage, even though this, too, was in our catalog of facts. We couldn’t figure out what he meant by *décor*—the kitsch

and posters and random collection of garage-sale rubbage that covered the walls of so many bars like this one had been outlawed along with pop music. There was wood, and there were beer taps, bottles of liquor, and glasses to put them in, and that was pretty much it. In that way, Decker was right. It really was just a bar.

“There just seem to be so many fewer assholes here than in your average bar,” he said.

“Eh, I think you’d be surprised,” said Lindsey. “Assholes look different in different places.”

“Yeah, and what constitutes an asshole?” I asked.

“People who see bad movies.”

“I’m *so* sorry not all movies are as good as yours,” said Nina, warming up for her A-grade flirting.

“Oh, no, I was counting my movies in that category. Well, most of them.”

We had not seen this coming. Self-deprecation was not a trait we associated with Sam Decker. He was one of the few actors of his generation whose career wasn’t built at least partly on irony.

“I bet half the people in here have never heard of me,” he said. “And I love them for it.”

Our favorite section of our favorite celebrity magazine that year was “10 Things You Don’t Know About Me.” It was exactly what it sounds like: Each week a different celebrity listed ten facts about him- or herself, ranging in gravity from their favorite TV show or their favorite nail-polish color to

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their ethnicity, or the person they were named after, or how old their Sicilian grandmother lived to be. You might read that someone's splurge food was truffled macaroni and cheese right after you discovered that they raised money for and participated in the AIDS Walk every year because they had an Uncle Tony who died from the disease. We loved the pictures of stars in action, going about their daily lives, unaware of the trailing camera, that ran before and after these lists, but it was the lists that gave these photos their power. As intimate as those pictures were, there was a distance to them, too. The subjects rarely looked right at the camera, and there was a danger of feeling like you were spying on them, no matter how little you pretended to care. But with these lists, our most beloved stars—the ones most worth watching even when they didn't know we were—were inviting us in. You could argue that Chelsea Pauly might not have worn so short a skirt if she had known there were going to be photographers outside her brunch, or that Bobby Lobo might've held the door for the old woman walking into Barneys after him—that they never meant to subject us to such bad behavior—but with the lists there was a sort of willing participation that gave credibility to everything around them. It felt as close as we would ever get to these people we loved.

We spent a fair amount of the time we spent drinking in the Shamrock lauding what some celebrities chose to divulge about themselves in this section of the magazine, and lambasting others. What people chose to reveal about themselves changed how much we liked them, and the degree to which a celebrity came off as profound and thoughtful or shallow and douchy

didn't necessarily correspond with the impressiveness of his or her career. It was a risk, we learned over weeks of reading the column, to show your hand like that. It was like going on a first date with all of America at once, only you got to the restaurant first, so they had a chance to study you from afar before approaching the table, and even bail if they needed to.

Sometimes there was a particularly disastrous week of "10 Things," or one that inspired us to give a flailing career a second chance, or to try at least one episode of a show that had never captured our imagination, because the second lead proved he was quirkier and less predictable than we ever would've guessed. Then it became clear to us again how important it was to be able to present yourself neatly and colorfully to the world. To spin the facts of your life. Those weeks, we debated the ten most noteworthy or surprising things about each of us, and how we'd word them in the magazine. We never discussed how or why we might become famous—why anyone might care that Lindsey had broken seven bones or that Nina had pet hermit crabs as a kid—but we took discussions of the list as seriously as if we had an actual plan, or at least a talent, to reach a point in our non-careers at which people would demand access to this trivia. The night Sam Decker walked in, my list might have gone something like this:

- I was eight weeks pregnant by Jay, my boyfriend of four years, who I loved, but was no longer in love with.
- My favorite drink was called a fire engine, which was just a Shirley Temple with vodka in it. It never occurred

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to me that the fact that I still liked grenadine might be an indication that I was too young to be drinking.

- I had assumed since junior year, when I tried to break up with Jay and he started crying and then said “no” just once, that I would have his babies, but now, not even showing yet, this baby felt like an actual person, and it felt far crueler to let another person waste away in a town with one bar for every ten churches than it ever would have been to tell Jay that I was sorry, but he would find somebody better if he would stop crying long enough to try.
- My rent was due in nine days, and I had less than half the amount I needed, and my next paycheck was eleven days away.
- I knew that Jay would be a good father—he was a good, kind person who was both reliable and hardworking, and was unbothered by the limits to his charisma and intelligence. I knew he would do all the right things, like whisper to my stomach—I couldn’t stand to call it a belly even then, which is maybe the first sign I wasn’t ready for motherhood—and hold my hair back when my morning sickness got a jump start in the middle of the night. But also that all those things and others would be wasted on me, and that our child would grow up having no conception of love except for one she formed from movies like the ones Sam Decker was in.
- I had never seen snow, and when asked to think about my ideal vacation spot—a popular topic for the “10

Things You Don't Know About Me" column—names of places never came to mind, but I always pictured a big open field covered in an untouched layer of snow.

- I had started looking online to see if at that point in a pregnancy a baby had fingers and toes yet, and when it would start to grow eyelashes or be able to feel pain. If it was the size of a walnut or a fist or a piece of fruit, and I had Planned Parenthood's price list memorized, but also the numbers in my bank account.
- I used to live two blocks away from a girl named Becca Voigt, who I played with when I was in a fight with Nina or Lindsey, or when they were grounded or on vacation. When we were in the tenth grade she got knocked up, and a few days after the news broke, she was sent to live with her grandma in Idaho before she had a chance to say good-bye to any of us. Her grandma had come to visit once when we were nine, and we had spent a full week after she left talking about how bad she smelled. Becca told me that one time, when her grandmother was napping on the couch—she was always napping on the couch—she was so still that Becca thought she was dead, and it was only when she started sucking on her dentures that Becca realized this wasn't the case. She imitated what that sounded like and, accurate or not, thinking about it still makes me shiver and then brush my teeth. Even all these years later, her having to go and live with a person who had horrified her to such a

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degree still felt like punishment for going past third base. Even if it was meant to protect her.

- Lindsey and Nina had proven to be my most reliable and creative allies in outsmarting the conundrums I'd found my way into since the second grade, when the peanut butter I had put on the earpiece of our telephone after watching the movie *Little Monsters* broke my own grandmother's hearing aid, but I hadn't even tried to tell them yet.
- I had not stopped drinking—had, in fact, started drinking more—in the weeks after marking my menstrual cycle on a calendar with cats posing in different Halloween costumes each month, confirming for certain that I was either going through menopause at the age of nineteen or pregnant. I knew how bad that was for whatever project my body had started against my will from those late-night online searches, and also that this decision seemed to imply that another one had been made.