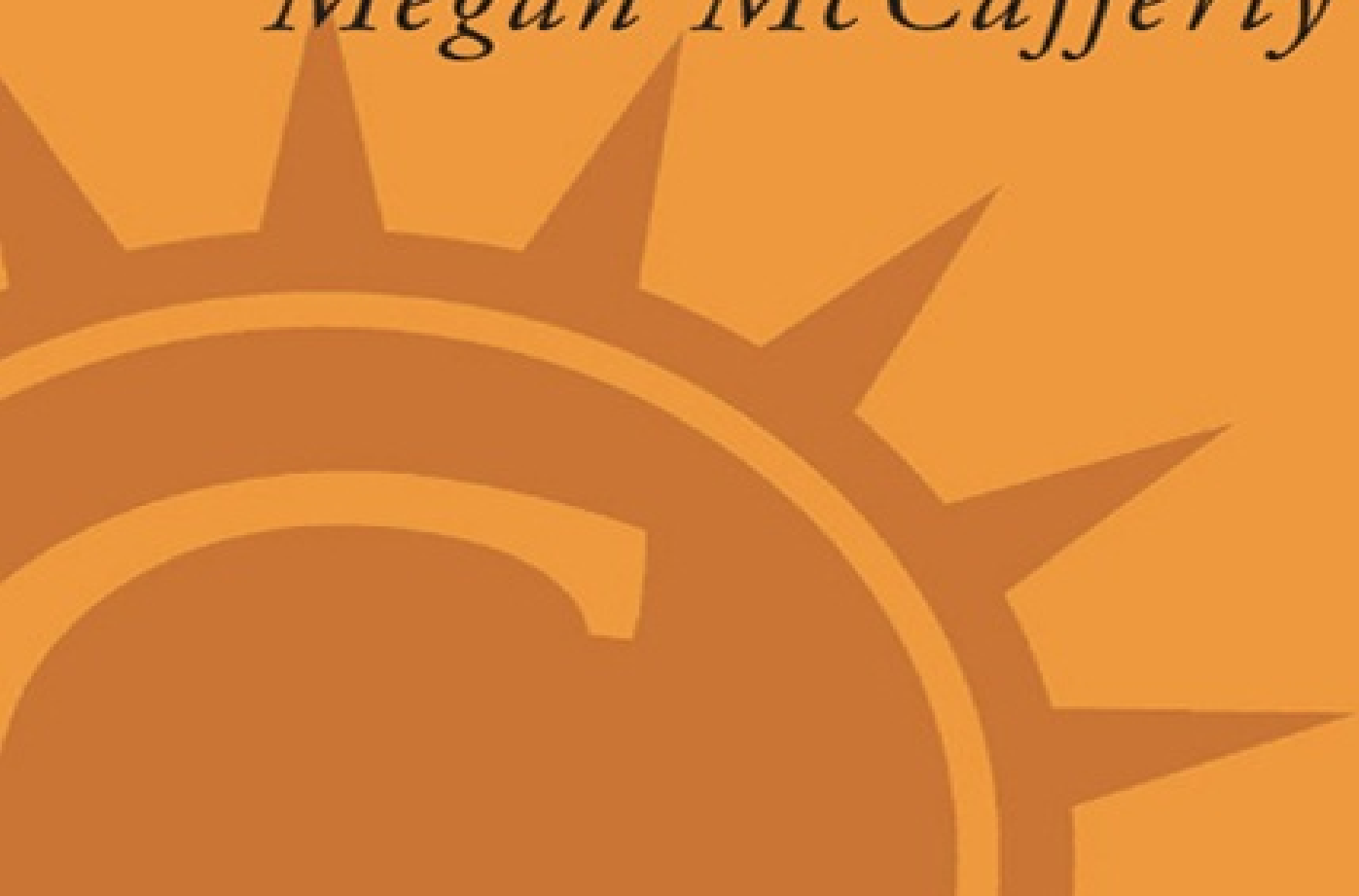


CHARMED THIRDS


Megan McCafferty



charmed thirds

a novel

MEGAN McCAFFERTY

 Crown Publishers
New York

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For all the faces in my college photo albums—
even the ones I can't remember,
but especially those I couldn't forget

freshman summer

june 2003

June 1st

Dear Hope,

Whoever said that you can't go home again was wrong. You *can* go home again. Just don't be surprised when it totally sucks.

And so, I wait for the express bus to Pineville, New Jersey. To fake-and-bake salons and acrylic talons. To Confederate-flagged pickups. To DWI guys with suspended licenses pedaling their fat asses on tiny bicycles. To the cross-breeding of pineys and bennies. To certain death by cerebral asphyxiation.

To home, bitter home.

I'm exhausted from dragging myself and two duffel bags down to Forty-second Street. I took the subway, of course; it only *feels* like I trudged seventy-four blocks on foot. The first time I left Columbia's campus for the Port Authority bus terminal—almost six months ago, for winter break—I thought there would be a waiting area with a section of seats attached to TV sets bolted into the floor and I'd be able to pay a quarter for a sitcom or half a talk show. At this point, I'm so brain-dead and bored that I'd pay \$10 for thirty minutes if Jerry Springer had guests who degraded themselves in an entertaining way. I'm blaming the homeless for ruining this pleasure for the rest of us.

Is this an example of how New York City has made me as callous as Marcus fears I've become?

(A parenthetical anecdote to prove otherwise: Stubby is a homeless man who sings Motown songs on a patch of sidewalk near the gothic, wrought-iron gates separating the relentless bustle of 116th and Broadway from the relative calm of College Walk. He's short, as befits his name, and black. He could be twenty-five or seventy-five. He's always wearing some form of Columbia University apparel—shorts and a T-shirt in spring, a wool varsity-style jacket and sweatpants in winter—surely donated by someone affiliated with the school. He's there every day, clutching a grubby faux-Grecian WE ARE HAPPY TO SERVE

YOU paper coffee cup, singing classic tunes like “My Girl,” “I Can't Help Myself,” and “Ain't Too Proud to Beg,” the last of which sung with a hint of irony. What once must have been a caramel-smooth tenor has been ravaged by misfortune. Everyone here knows Stubby; he's as much of a campus presence as the grand statue of Alma Mater on the steps of Low Library. I've never passed him without putting at least a nickel in his cup, usually more. But that's not the compassionate part. One day last winter, Stubby wasn't in his spot. A bit worrisome, sure, but I tried not to think about it because it was during midterms and I had five thousand pages of reading to catch up on. The next day, another absence. And then another. As his no-shows accumulated, I got more upset. Was Stubby dead? Had he frozen to death? ODeD? I would've asked my friends if they'd seen him around, but they all seemed too preoccupied to panic about anything unrelated to academics. Finally, about a week later, on the morning of my Art Hum exam, Stubby was back in his spot. He looked and sounded the same as always: *R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Find out what it means to me!* I remember wanting to ask where he had disappeared to, but I decided to R-E-S-P-E-C-T his privacy. I popped \$5 in his cup that morning, which was a considerable percentage of my personal assets and therefore excuses me from any accusations that I'm just a spoiled Ivy Leaguer trying to pay off my liberal guilt. Then I took my exam and got an A.

See? I *do* care about people! I *am* compassionate about the plight of the homeless! I'm going to close parentheses now before the contents get any more self-serving.)

So far I've taken the NJ Transit #76 Shore Points Express for two reasons: holidays, and aid in nutritional or laundry-related emergencies, specifically, too little of one and too much of the other. On the laundry-related bus trips, I experienced the novelty of being the Port Authority passenger who no one wants to sit next to, as two duffels' worth of moldy clothes made me an even less desirable neighbor than the unlit cigar-chewing old-timer with the spooky glass eye who continually requested help with his *TV Guide* crossword puzzle.

As usual, I've allotted myself too much time for the type of mass-transit travel delays that only seem to occur when I'm not prepared for them. So with nothing else to do, I've spent money I can't afford to squander. I blew \$3.80 on a speckled black-and-white composition notebook to match the dozen or so speckled black-and-white composition notebooks that I have exclusively used for my journals since, well . . . since you moved a thousand miles to Tennessee in tenth grade. I don't even know why I bought it, though, since my old one still has ten blank pages, and I hope that seeing Marcus for the first time since mid-January won't provide more than ten pages of angst.

Speaking of, I promise you'll get more mail from me once Marcus and I are reunited. You've been very kind not to remind me that I haven't been sticking to our **Totally Guilt-Free Guidelines for Keeping in Touch**. Especially when you wrote monthly, called weekly, e-mailed/IMed daily, and *still* found time to emerge as one of the most promising visual artists in the history of the Rhode Island School of Design. (I know you hate hype, but those black-and-white portraits of “notable nobodies” from your “(Extra)Ordinary” photography project were so tragically brilliant—even as mere JPEGs via e-mail.) I'll redeem myself over the next few months, you'll see. You escaped more than three years ago, but I still consider you an honorary member of Pineville High's Class of 2002 (a dubious honor, that). I'm sure you can't wait to hear all about the former classmates I'll try—and fail—to avoid all summer.

So, yes, I've been the hetero-female variation of pussy whipped. I wrote to Marcus so much this past year that it was hard to find time to write to you, too. (And while I'm making excuses, I'll also mention how I actually had to apply myself for the first time in my academic career.) I'd like to apologize, but I won't, and not just because a lack of contrition provides the very foundation of the **Guilt-Free Guidelines**. You know me well enough to recognize that I'm in agony anyway because it's been a loooooooooooooong time since I've enjoyed more than the—ahem!—figurative effects of my sexually spellbound condition. . . .

Dickwhippedly yours,
J.

To: jdarling@columbia.edu
From: flutie_marcus@gakkai.edu
Date: May 31st, 2003
Subject: Poetry Spam #21

furious flutter
awakened hummingbird heart
hello hello love

—Original Message—

From: Joe Mailbiz [zihxziwkyg@mailbiz.com]

Sent: May 30th, 2003

To: flutie_marcus@gakkai.edu

Subject: hello objectify simmer tenement checklist

roadway hunk mat freudian mischievous buckboard love gubernatorial snuggle cretin flatulent furbish quantity furious
seventieth controlled con tireless stereoscopy hummingbird lunch mutineer fourth dialysis backlash concur triumphal
percussive allotting coxcomb desist copter aforesaid percent income causation frilly incorporate awakened crosslink
bleach apollonian skullcap suspend betray ethel adjourn inhibition heart consider fell pride compose foster dope
inviolate flutter assuage chock whale singlehanded sawtooth condescend sunshiny connote dehumidify prissy hello

the first

I keep rereading Marcus's latest haiku, printed out precisely for this purpose. How did he come up with Poetry Spam? Where did he get the idea to turn his junk e-mail into poems? I marvel at his talent for revealing the hidden beauty in ordinary things.

I miss him and I know he misses me, too.

There's nowhere to sit in Port Authority unless you buy something. I got booted from Au Bon Pain because I stupidly disposed of my \$4 shot glass of orange juice. The eagle-eyed Garbage Guardian informed me that I was no longer allowed to occupy one of the umbrellaed tables. I left, dejected and dehydrated.

I'm now at Timothy's World Coffee, where there are no open indoor umbrellas to bring me back luck. I'm sitting on a stool, breaking in my new journal, trying to take teeny-tiny sips from my overpriced bottle of Poland Spring water just so I can preserve my right to be here. I'm broke, and there aren't any water fountains for free, germ-ridden refills.

This is bad because I can chug gallons at a time. Accutane sucks every drop of moisture out of my body. I am one large flake of dandruff. The corners of my mouth are split open and bleeding, and I have to spread Carmex beyond my lip line, which makes me look like I've spent the morning sucking on a stick of butter. I hope that by the time I see Marcus my lips won't be so crusty/greasy.

Sahara skin and lips are just two of Accutane's side effects. According to the information booklet I should BE ALERT FOR ANY OF THE FOLLOWING:

-
- DIARRHEA, RECTAL BLEEDING
 - SEVERE HEADACHES
 - NAUSEA, VOMITING
 - CHANGES IN MOOD

Well, if suffering from diarrhea, rectal bleeding, severe headaches, nausea, and vomiting doesn't swing your mood in *some* direction, nothing will. Because my mood crests and crashes just fine on its own, I went on Accutane only at my mother's insistence. As a firm supporter of any and all advancements in the cosmetic sciences, she believes that not providing one's child with flawless skin is akin to child abuse. Accutane cured Len Levy, who was covered in pissed-off, purple pustules back in high school, so it should work for me. My acne isn't nearly as all-over and angry as his was, but I have to agree with my mother when she points out how my complexion is never completely clear. I always seem to have one knotty cyst somewhere on my face, and when it goes away, another takes its place. One after the other after the other.

My daily dose of Accutane is the standard prescription for a person twice my weight. Three squishy yellow pills. This is my third cycle of the drug—the first two times didn't work—and I feel strangely proud when my doctor says that in twenty-five years of practicing dermatology, he has never seen such resilient zits. I'm a medical freak of nature.

I'd like to think that Marcus would call me unique.

Dr. Rosen also says my condition is stress related. No surprise there. Two weeks ago, I wrote four term papers and filled nine blue books over the course of five exams. In the midst of finals, I impulsively (and stupidly) chopped off my ponytail to get rid of my elastic band scalp-ache. The fix-it-up Supercut was supposed to give me a short geek-chic bob with bangs, kind of like Jordan in *Revenge of the Nerds*. But with my hair's trademark flyaway frizziness, I look more like Mitch. The only upside to this coiftastrophe is that in my state of scalp-ache-free concentration, I nailed a 3.85 GPA for the semester, which will make my parents happy, though only temporarily so. While my stellar grades help better my chances of postgraduation financial solvency, they do little to relieve my current money troubles. My parents give me minimal fiscal assistance because, in their own words, I made the choice to go into debt by selecting Columbia over my full scholarship to Piedmont. I still stand by my choice, though less passionately now that I have a much better idea of how long it will take to pay Sallie Mae the \$100,000 I'll owe for my BA by the time I graduate. Not to mention the cost of the MA and PhD I'll have to get if I want my undergraduate psychology degree to be worth anything at all. I've only got about half a semester's worth of my grandmother's inheritance left and zero summertime moneymaking prospects because no well-paying employer is willing to hire me, train me, then let me leave for the entire month of July for my incredible, albeit totally unpaid internship at *True* magazine. During my salary-free servitude, I'll be staying in New York with my sister, Bethany (with whom I have nothing but DNA in common); her husband, G-Money (who has earned his nickname through gaining and losing millions on the stock market, yet still having enough spare scratch to buy into

local frozen custard and donut franchise in the hope of taking it national); and my niece, Marin (who is very cute, but has projectile-pooing issues), enduring yet another separation from a boyfriend I haven't seen or touched for six months, one who lives down the hall from a nudist Buddhist (Nuddhist?) named Butterfly who thinks clothing is oppressive and can't understand why people think nakedness always has to be sexual . . .

So. Stress? *Naaaaaaaaaah.*

Sitting in the booth in front of me is a cutesy young couple still in the honeymoon phase of their relationship. Or they're lovers recently reunited. They're annoying to everyone who isn't them and haven't stopped pecking each others' faces since they sat down. Back and forth and back and forth across the booth, peck and peck. I prefer juicy tongues to these passionless kisses that are as dry as my needy lips.

I just tried Marcus on my cell. Topher, one of his "cottage-mates," told me he was on "cleansing." He told me this the way other roommates at other schools would say someone is on getting shitfaced. Marcus's world is so foreign to me that I can't help but feel that the person who inhabits it is a stranger. I love when I reach Marcus on the phone and as he says hello, I can hear the music he's listening to in the background. That music is the sound of him without me. How he surrounds himself when I'm not there, which is almost all the time.

And will be for three more years.

the seventh

I'm sitting in the room that was my bedroom for the first eighteen years of my life. It's still called my room but it really isn't my room anymore despite all the evidence to the contrary. The John Hughes movie posters are curling up at the corners yet are still mostly stuck to the bruise-colored walls. The plaques and trophies with my name inscribed in celebratory script still topple over one another on the shelves. And the framed mosaic of Hope and me—made by the artist herself and given to me on the day she moved, eighteen days before my sixteenth birthday—is still in its showcase spot over my bed. When packing for college, I intentionally left these things behind in Pineville, just so I could return to someplace that felt like home.

But after nine months at school, I'm seeing this room and its contents as through a haze of psychological, if not actual, dust. It's like examining the artifacts found at an archaeological dig where I can study the CD player on which Jessica Darling once listened to Morrissey, or the desk on which she once completed her college applications. The carpet on which she once failed to twist herself into impossible positions during her brief flirtation with yoga, or the skinny bed on which she once succeeded in twisting herself into the very quietest of possible sexual positions with her boyfriend while her parents sat downstairs on opposite sides of the ultrasuede couch watching a To

And yet, my dorm room, which was decorated in much the same way, isn't my room anymore either. I'm a refugee, one seeking asylum from my niece Marin's first birthday party.

Make that her *second* first birthday party. My parents insisted on throwing a soiree for Marin's "New Jersey friends." Bethany and G-Money failed to persuade any city folk to come out to our "house in the country," a seventies bilevel in a bilevel/split-level subdivision that my mom described as possessing "a retro charm, with every modern amenity" when talking it up to her real estate associates. That means the architectural ugliness is redeemed only by new wood siding, extensive landscaping, and upgraded kitchen and baths.

But Jersey being Jersey, nothing could lure the New York City hipocracy that make up B&G's social circle, not even their offer to charter a luxury bus equipped with TVs for every seat, all tuned to Nick Jr. (They could afford such an extravagance now that they're conspicuously rich again, as five new Papa D's Donuts/Wally D's Sweet Treat Shoppe drive-throughs are already in the black. Not that they were ever *poor*, even after a dot-bomb comeuppance.) They ended up hosting a party last weekend for Marin's "New York friends," one dozen Benetton babies from Brooklyn's hippest family-friendly neighborhoods, all dressed in miniature versions of their parents' outfits. Girls: Lilly Pulitzer sundresses. Boys: seersucker suits worn "ironically" with tiny Che Guevara T-shirts. In her first year of life, Marin has somehow managed to acquire more friends than I have in nineteen.

Equally disturbing was Marin's insistence on having a Pinky the Poodle theme party, inspired by her favorite television program. Not only has this sunshine-blond, deep-dimpled one-year-old developed a definite preference for one cartoon character over another, but she can clearly express her love by screeching, "*PEE! POO! PEE! POO!*" The thought of this picture-perfect child embarrassing her mommy with these seemingly scatological outbursts makes me weep fewer tears about my losing battle to improve my niece's intellectual fate.

In keeping with the theme, her grandparents (my parents) hired a neighborhood kid to dress up as the shopping-and-shoes-obsessed canine. The costume can be best described as a fifty-pound fur ball. It's ninety-five degrees and chunky with humidity, so who can blame the kid for not showing up for this humiliation? And take one guess who's the only one who fits into this fuzzy pink prison? Suffice it to say that Pinky's trademark tap routine to her theme song ("I'm the Prettiest Quadruped!") was less inspired than usual. Try as I might, I just couldn't lift my weighty paws high enough.

"Do the kicks, Jessie—I mean Pinky!" my mother shouted from the sidelines. "One, two, three!"

"Boooooooooooooooooooooo!" the anklebiters wailed as they pelted me with Jelly Bellies.

"No! No! No!" Bethany chastised the toddlers with a wag of her finger. "We are *not* unkind animals!"

Oh thank you, Bethany. Thank you.

Then she turned to me. "Come on, Pinky! Shake that tail of yours!" She twitched her juicy peach of an ass, almost obscenely perfect in a denim miniskirt. Often mistaken for Marin's au pair, my sister

is the textbook definition of a MILF. If I had it in me to lift my hind leg, I would've pissed on her.

My father was the only one who seemed concerned for my health. "Take it easy on her," he said. "Jessie's not in the peak physical condition she used to be, back when she was a serious athlete." Christ. It's been two years since I gave up competitive running, and he still can't resist any opportunity to remind everyone of my deteriorating muscle mass. Of course, he himself was still spandexed and sweaty from a ninety-minute bike ride because dangerous weather is never a deterrent for one of his yellow-jersey jaunts around town.

And so, I wasn't driven to my room (which doesn't feel like my room) by the heckling or her exhaustion or even anaphylactic shock from an allergy to synthetic poodle fur. I'm here because I had forgotten just how much I can simultaneously love and hate these people called my family. When I was at school, I kind of missed them. Not as actual people, but for their comfortable predictability. My dad always asks if I'm still wasting my time with my Psychology major or if I get bored clocking seven-minute miles around Columbia's one-tenth of a mile indoor track. My mom always asks if every girl at school dresses like a lesbian. Bethany always asks if I've gone to some invitation-only velvet-roped club. G-Money always ignores me because he's too busy coming up with new and creative ways to profit from the recession-proof futures market of American obesity.

I've gotten so used to these and similar familial annoyances that I wouldn't know how to react if my family members didn't play their parts. Plus, I'm always more forgiving of their flaws when I'm still in the thrall of the hygienic and nutritional comforts of home. Here, I not only have unlimited access to a washer and dryer but a willing laundress who skillfully separates the darks from the whites and folds them up for me when they're finished. Here, the cabinets are stocked with genuine Cap Crunch—not the generic Colonel Crunchies bought by the ton at SaveCo. Here, the fridge overflows with Coke Classic.

But now that I've enjoyed a few weeks' worth of April freshness and a steady intake of vitamins and minerals, it's getting more difficult to overlook the tension created by what has been the most controversial subject in the household. Rather, it's a nontopic, one so taboo that it never gets brought up at all, as is customary in the Darling household.

Only once Marin had been scooped up by her doting Granny Darling and swept across to the other side of the yard did Bethany break the silence.

"I've been dying to ask you," Bethany said, flipping her golden hair, puckering and unpuckering her glossy lips. Sometimes I wonder if she realizes that she's flirting with her own sister. "Did you win the money?"

That's her way of asking if Marcus and I are still together. Only Bethany is brave enough to ask That Which Can't Be Asked. And even she waits until my mom is out of earshot and hides behind a euphemism referring to the money up for grabs in the Breakup Pool. Since I didn't document this (or anything else) for myself this year, I will explain the rules of said pool.

I was one of a few lucky first years to score a sunny, spacious single in Furnald, which is arguably the most beautiful, most conveniently located dorm on campus. Built in 1913, it was

renovated less than ten years ago, so it's both traditional (with its granite façade and soaring, crystal chandeliered oak entry hall) and state-of-the-art (air-conditioned!). It's got views of the campus action on one side and of Broadway's hustle on the other. Furnald is also known as a bit of a party dorm, with each floor boasting an expansive lounge that lures even the most antisocial A-types away from the rooms with ample afternoon sunlight, cushy furniture, and free cable TV.

On my floor, there were fifteen first years and ten sophomores. It was quickly discovered that most of the first years on my floor were still involved in high school relationships. It wasn't difficult to figure out who the ten were, as they (okay, by "they" I really mean "we" but I hate to admit to that type of behavior) often began sentences with the phrase, "My boyfriend/girlfriend . . ." As in "My boyfriend loves Coldplay, too!" Or "My boyfriend has a sweater like that, too!" Or "My boyfriend eats and sleeps and excretes waste, too!" Since no upperclassman would ever, ever, ever put a confining label like "boyfriend" or "girlfriend" on the person she/he was hooking up with on a semiregular basis, it was obvious that anyone making such a bold declaration of commitment was referring to a youthful union forged in the halls of her/his former high school.

The world-weary sophomores all looked at us with contempt. "You won't make it through freshman break," they said. "And if you do, you're just doing it to prove us wrong."

Of course, we of the High School True Love Society were outraged. "We're different!" we all said. "We're not like the rest of them!"

Thus, the Breakup Pool was born. I can't remember who came up with it first, but F-Unit perfected it. F-Unit is a group of guys all enrolled in the Fu School of Engineering, who want to break the stereotype that all engineering students are nerds. Of course, F-Unit's gangsta engineers spend an inordinate amount of time on projects like the Breakup Pool because they don't have girlfriends themselves, which does little to thwart the nerd stereotype.

Rules of the Breakup Pool

1. Participants in the Breakup Pool are restricted to those residing on the fifth floor of Furnald during the 2002–2003 school year. Couples comprised of a First-Year student and a High School Beloved (HSB) are referred to as Daters. Single First Years and Sophomores participating in the Breakup Pool are referred to as Haters.
2. After paying a \$25 entry fee, bettors are asked to predict which of the ten couples will last the longest, thereby winning the title The Couple That Outlasted All Others and Showed the Haters Who Said That High School Relationships Don't Last.
3. Daters cannot bet on themselves. (A rule designed to prevent Daters who have grown to detest their boyfriend/girlfriend from sticking it out just for the cash.) However, any mercenary Dater doubtful of the strength of his/her own relationship can pay a \$25 fee to bet on another couple's union outlasting his/hers.
4. Daters in the Breakup Pool are asked to operate on the Honor System, by which it is the Dater's

responsibility to report any breakups or hookups with anyone other than the HSB. (Second person eyewitness testimony will also suffice.) For the purposes of the Breakup Pool, the term “hookup” refers to activities including, but not limited to, kissing, oral and manual stimulation, intercourse, and any other physical activity that is generally considered to be more than platonic.

5. If only one bettor puts money on the last couple standing, he/she wins it all. Should more than one bettor choose correctly, they split the take. In both cases, The Couple That Outlasted All Others and Showed the Haters Who Said That High School Relationships Don't Last does not win any money, but proudly wears said title.
6. If *no one* bets on The Couple That Outlasted All Others and Showed the Haters Who Said That High School Relationships Don't Last, the winning Dater keeps *all* the cash, but only when his/her relationship makes it to the end of the 2002–2003 school year. (Otherwise, all bettors get their money back.) Likewise, if there is *more than one* Dater still in the running at the end of the spring semester, the money is split evenly among the remaining couples. (These rules seemingly contradict Rules #3 and #5, but it is widely accepted that any Dater desperate enough to stick with a detested girlfriend/boyfriend an entire year deserves a piece of the prize.)

Once the rules were established, F-Unit created odds using ancillary data, such as geographic distance between Dater and HSB and length of the relationship before separation. (They wanted to include other variables that could help determine the probability that one would be led astray, but “Hotness” and “Horniness” were too difficult to quantify.) The odds wouldn't affect the payout but were devised merely to enhance the gaming experience.

Marcus was my first love and my first sex partner. I was his first love and his forty-something sex partner. We were together only two weeks before he left for California. I have done one tab of ecstasy and attend one of the most acclaimed universities in the world. He has smoked enough pot to be put in the High Times Hall of Fame and is attending Gakkai College, an unaccredited Buddhist school at which it is possible to major in Chanting and Purification. He was best friends with my best friend Hope's brother, Heath, whose heroin overdose was the tragic catalyst for her parents' sudden defection to Tennessee on the eve of Y2K. Our convoluted courtship was rife with his contradictions. He made out with his girlfriend but kept his eyes on me as I passed them in the hallway. He wrote seductive poetry but claimed he didn't want to sleep with me. He acted as Cyrano for his best friend Len, telling him exactly what he should do and say to win me over, but shed a single tear when obliged. He confessed that I was the woman who changed his life but chose to go as far away from me as he possibly could within the continental United States.

No wonder our odds were a hundred to one.

Yet, despite the promise of a full payout, no one bet on us. I thought they were all suckers. I was certain we would stay together. Marcus and I had been through so much that our lasting union seemed like the only logical reason for it all.

I wasn't tempted to stray. I mean, there were a few guys at Columbia who were the geek cute kind of guy I go for. But—oh!—those bright-eyed, death-cab cuties, I didn't even get a chance to be dashbored by them all. Because they weren't just *my* type, they were *many* girls' types, which is why they were all married off before the end of orientation. But that was okay. I had the real thing. I had Marcus. And I tried not to worry about him and other girls, but it was kind of difficult to believe that someone with a carnal history as long and varied as his would be able to subsist on school-break sex fests alone. Especially when he told me about Butterfly, who just doesn't understand us silly girls who still live in the “textile world.”

But all things considered, I didn't blame people for not putting their money on us. And I couldn't help but feel vindicated when Marcus and I were only one of two couples who made it through the academic year. That we split \$375 with an Indian couple who is in an arranged marriage situation made the victory even sweeter.

I had just finished explaining this all to Bethany when my mother swooped in with Marin to “get in on the girl talk.”

“What money?” my mom asked, briskly wiping her hands of nonexistent dirt. An aspiring GIL she was dressed similarly to Bethany in her silk halter top and denim skirt, though she had the sense to lower the hemline by about six inches.

“Well, I doubt you'll be interested, because I was just telling Bethany how Marcus and I were one of only two couples on our floor to stay together all year.”

Disgust would have dented her forehead; that is, if my mother hadn't recently Botoxed the space between her brows. (I can't even comment on this latest vanity, so disturbing is it to me.) My mother must have learned a sudden-change-of-subject approach to Handling Your Daughter's Bad Boyfriend on a shrinky segment of *The View* or something, because the next thing she said was, “Jessie! Is Len back from Cornell? You should call him!”

My mother just can't let go of Len, who dumped me senior year—on Valentine's Day of all days—to be with Manda, the Official Revirginized Reformed Slut of Pineville. (Really. It's in the brochures and everything. Okay, not really. But that's only because Pineville sucks too much to have a brochure.) Len and Manda have been together for more than a year and still claim they haven't had sex. They're very proud of their chastity, which is why it's common knowledge around here. Want to hear something people *don't* know? Earth? It really *is* flat! And the Sun and planets revolve around it, not vice versa! I know this because a fleet of winged space monkeys just flew out of my butt and took me on an intergalactic tour of the cosmos! *Wheeeeeeeeeee!!!*

Needless to say, I think their celibacy is suspect.

“Scotty's also back in Pineville,” my mom continued, her eyes straying toward the snack table on the opposite side of our swimming pool. She was clearly torn between her two favorite hobbies: playing Martha and torturing me. “He had a tough year, Jessie. He always liked you. You should call him! You could help him get through this difficult time.”

Everyone knows Scotty spent the whole basketball season on the bench and quit the team shortly thereafter. Unlike Len and Manda, Scotty didn't go out of his way to broadcast this news. But his grotesque face puffery said everything anyone needed to know about his participation in the ritualistic alcohol abuse that inspires his fellow Lehigh University students to brag about their perennial top-five spot on Playboy's ranking of biggest party schools. (This is an apocryphal honor because Hef has only published the list twice. In 1987, Lehigh wasn't mentioned at all, and in last year's rankings it was number twenty-three—far from the top five. I go out of my way to mention this because it makes the alcoholic pride all the more hilarious. Or sad. Depending on how you look at it.)

I doubt Scotty's fall from grace or inflated face negatively affects the onslut of willing sex partners. Indeed, the Mother of All Gossipmongers still considers him “quite a catch.” She has sycophantic devotion to Scotty, who just happened to be my first boyfriend, if you can call him that when our entire relationship lasted for eleven days in eighth grade. It ended when he mistook my mouth as a repository for his saliva; you know, to avoid a global crisis should there be a worldwide shortage of this valuable natural resource in the future.

I will never quite understand what Scotty ever saw in me.

“Oh! And did I mention that Mrs. Milhokovich said Bridget will be back in a few days?”

I'm actually looking forward to seeing Bridget for the first time since winter break. But I'm worried, too. She said she couldn't visit me at school during spring break because she was still recovering from the removal of what she calls “ugly marks,” aka benign moles. She had been talking a lot about how cosmetic surgery is a fact of life in LA, and no more out of the ordinary than, say, brushing one's teeth. So I'm troubled by the possibility that the moles were just a front, and she now has the artificially pneumatic look favored by starving starlets and the horny casting directors who bang them.

“Oh! Grant said that Wally and his daughter are supposed to stop by later. Sara graduated with you, right, honey?”

Of course my mother knows that Sara graduated with me. It's just one of the asinine questions she asks as a means to launch into the meaningless conversations she holds so dear. But my mother may not know that Sara was caught trying to cheat on her Introduction to Fundamentals of Conceptual Finite Mathematics (aka Numbers for Dummies) by copying the formulas she had written on the inside label of her water bottle. She should have failed the class and been put on academic probation, but Sara's dad—the legendary Wally D'Abruzzi himself—promised to open a drive-through combat Papa D's Donuts/Wally D's Sweet Treat Shoppe on the Harrington campus and all was forgiven. I find it hilarious that Harrington prioritizes fast-food funding over an endowment for like, oh, I don't know, a *library* or something. And knowing Sara's love/hate relationship with hydrogenated fats, it's even funnier. Because G-Money and Sara's dad have made it their joint mission in life to take Papa D's Donuts and Wally D's Sweet Treat Shoppe national, I will bear unwilling witness to Sara's foibles for a very, very long time.

Thankfully, Sara was the last of my mother's name-dropping material. When she trotted out her earshot, Bethany leaned in conspiratorially.

“If you and Marcus are still together, why isn't he here?”

And that's when I decided I needed a break from the festivities and went to hide in my room.

Marcus is still in California, away from me for two more weeks so he can attend an elective “Learning Cluster” on The Creative Coexistence of Nature and Humanity.

You know what would be *really* creative? The coexistence of Marcus and his girlfriend. Me.

It's not entirely his fault. I'm the one who's leaving in July, not him. It's the promise of my internship at *True*, of doing something cool with one-third of my summer, that has made this very uncool Marcus-free part of my summer bearable at all. Of course, the irony is that the internship itself will actually extend the Marcus-free part of my summer. Get it? It's an enigma, wrapped in a riddle, wrapped in a clusterfuck.

I can hear footsteps. It's probably my mom on her way upstairs to demand that I stick my hands back in my paws, put on my poodle head, and get out there to perform another tap—

MARCUS!

MARCUS IS HERE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

the eighth

I have imagined my reunion with Marcus in many ways.

In the PG-13 version, I'm wearing something casually sexy, like the ME, YES, ME T-shirt Marcus gave me for graduation and a pair of shorts. In this daydream, I do not have a mental-patient haircut; it's still long enough for a swingy ponytail. I'm lounging on my bed, writing in my journal about how much I miss him, when he sneaks up behind me. He grabs my journal and chucks it across the room. We kiss.

In the R-rated version, the setup is the same, except I'm wearing a tank top and a pair of bikini-cut skivvies. He says something like, “I need you right now,” which doesn't sound all that sexy, but it's all in the sultry drawl of his delivery. My journal, chucked. My clothing, shucked. My body, (insert verb here).

In the X-rated version, there is no wardrobe or intelligible dialogue. The plot is best left to your (okay, *my*) prurient imagination.

As you can see, I like my daydreams to have an element of reality to them. (I even do my own nude scenes.) It makes them that much more interesting, like, *Ooooooh, this could actually happen*.

Which in this case it *almost* did. Except I never pictured a G-rated version, in which I was—from the neck down—dressed as a stuffed animal. (Although, for plushy-loving pervs, it could have been confused with the X-rated version.)

As always, Marcus had the perfect entrance line. He gently stroked my pink pelt (any plush pervs who weren't already turned on are definitely wanking it now) and said, “My, how you've changed, Jessica.” His surprise arrival proved that he hadn't changed at all. On the inside at least.

He definitely *looked* different since I'd last seen him. He gets so immersed in his studies that he forgets to eat, making him even leaner than he was before he left for school. He doesn't look gaunt and stricken; quite the opposite. The overall effect makes all that is Marcus even more so. His angular nose isn't merely dignified, but aristocratic. His eyes, more feral than feline. His cheekbones could slice through diamonds. He hasn't trimmed his hair since our good-bye, and it reminds me of fallen leaves, all burnt red and curling at the edges. His dusty jeans dipped down below his hips, and I could see the V-cut of his pelvis, pointing the way to happy territories below.

And he was wearing the summer version of the same outfit he was sporting the last time I saw him; that is, he'd removed the thermal from underneath his old COMINGHOME T-shirt. The iron-on letters I once wanted so desperately to stroke with my fingertips are faded beyond legibility and nearly translucent from so many sudsy tumbles through the washing machine. I once ached to touch those letters on his chest, to touch him. It was at the infamous high school Anti-Homecoming party at Sara's house, infamous not only because everyone who had ever attended Pineville High showed up for the beery lechery, but because it served as the backdrop for my first kiss with Len, not my first kiss with Marcus as it should have. (We wouldn't kiss until months later.) I compensated for that night's longing by wearing the COMINGHOME shirt after we made love for the first time, the second time, the third time. On those June nights, it smelled pungent yet sweet, like autumn decay. It still does.

Toward the end of last semester, I was dangerously close to running out of dining dollars, but I didn't want to replenish from my bank account because I was trying to save myself from financial ruin. So I went almost totally freegan: I limited my food budget to five dining dollars a day, and supplemented the rest of my meals with whatever I could get gratis at the various events thrown by any one of the bizillion campus organizations at Columbia. Bagels with Six Milks improv comedy group. Pizza with the Philolexian Society. Spicy chicken wings with Acción Boricua. No affiliation was too inappropriate for my hunger. (Actually, I did draw the line at the Columbia College Conservatives Club BBQ.) Sometimes the spread would already have been vultured by my fellow starving students by the time I got there, but most nights I'd be in for a feast. And no matter what was being served, it was always the most finger-licking deeeeeelicious meal I'd ever had in my life . . . not only because I needed it so badly, but because my nourishment was never guaranteed.

Seeing Marcus was like that. I wanted to devour him. Figuratively. Okay, more than a little bit literally, too.

So my initial response was: “MARCUS!”

Followed by: “I hate my hair! It's okay if *you* hate my hair!”

And: “Get me out of this poodle suit!”

However, stripping off the Pinky the Poodle costume was not something that could be done spontaneously or (let's face it) erotically. So I just went with my canine instincts. I leapt off the bed with surprising agility for someone weighed down by fifty pounds of fur and pounced on top of Marcus. I howled as we tussled on the floor.

“AHWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“Happy to see me?”

“BOW-WOW-WOW YIPPIE YO YIPPIE YAY!”

“I'm happy to see you, too. Happy anniversary!”

Our anniversary. He remembered that he had deflowered me one year ago. It's nice to know that my virginity stands out among all the many petals that had fallen before me.

I licked his laughing face.

“Down, girl, down!” he said, rolling out from under me.

“I'm just! So! So! So!”

Words failed me. I barked.

“Happy?” he offered.

“WOOF-WOOF! ARF-ARF!”

No surprise that all this commotion attracted the attention of my mother, even amid the deafening chaos of a one-year-old's birthday party.

“Jessie,” I heard her shrill voice coming up the stairs, “what are you doing—?” She stopped in my doorway midinquiry, stunned by the sight of her daughter dry-humping Marcus's leg.

“Oh,” she grumbled, tugging at the bow at the back of her halter top as if it were a silken noose. “It's you.”

She would have been happier if I'd been rutting bin Laden.

Marcus hopped to his feet. “Hi, Mrs. Darling. It's nice to see you again.”

Mom ignored him. “Jessie, we need you back downstairs. We want Pinky to bring out the birthday cake for Marin.” She turned on her high heels and went out the door.

Marcus waited a beat before whispering, “Did your mom get some work done?” He froze his face into a startled Halloween mask. It would have been funny if it weren't so true.

“Botox,” I replied. “She willingly injected a deadly toxin into her flesh.”

“She looks permanently pissed off.”

I patted his head with my paw. “No, honey,” I said. “That's only her expression when she sees you.”

Marcus was unfazed. “I've been hated by more fearsome moms,” he said. “Besides, your dad's not even feeling me, so I can settle.”

“My dad *tolerates* you,” I said. “There's a difference.”

“Well, we better get downstairs if we want our mediocre rapport to continue. . . .”

But I wasn't ready to face my family yet. I kissed him. And he kissed me back in his liquid-lipped way I had missed. I don't mean that in the sense that it was wet and sloppy, but that our mouths melted away. . . .

“Mmmmmmm,” I murmured. “I don't want this to end. . . .”

“We have all summer,” he said, nuzzling my furry shoulder.

“No, we don't,” I corrected him. “We've only got half of June and just weekends in July. At least we've got August before we go back to school. . . .”

“I just got here,” he said, reaching out to stroke my cheek. “Why are you saying good-bye to me?”

He was right. I was already feeling nostalgia for this moment.

“I'm sorry,” I replied. “Hello! Hello! Hello! Hello!”

“That's more like it,” he said, lifting my furry helmet onto my head.

Hours later, before we shared a legitimate good-bye, he told me he liked my hair.

He's a liar.

But I love him for it.

the fifteenth

Marcus has been home for a week.

AND WE HAVEN'T HAD SEX YET.

It's my hair. I just know it.

Let's look at the positives of this situation. If left up to our devilish devices, we could conceivably, have sex all day long. But since we've been deprived of these pleasures, we've been forced to come up with more ways of spending our time. So in the past week alone we have: kayaked on Cedar Creek, hiked in Double Trouble Park, surfed (well, he did—he picked it up in California—wiped out and nearly drowned), and done several other very physical activities that help sublimate our sexual urges.

It's not working.

Marcus is pure celibait. The longer we go without, the more difficult it is for me to stop myself from just ripping off his clothes. It's not my fault. I know from my Mind, Brain, and Behavior class that it's all biochemical. Blame the surge of serotonin in my ventral tegmental! Curse the dopamine in my caudate nucleus!

Men are much more affected by visual stimuli, so it's not Marcus's fault that he doesn't want to have sex with someone sporting mental-patient hair. Of course, he has assured me a billion times that my hair isn't the problem. It's a time and place problem. We are never totally alone.

In the past, this wasn't an issue. A lack of parental supervision is what allowed Marcus to lead his former life of drugging and male whoring. (The opposite situation in my household explains why I was 99.99% pure until I turned eighteen.) Mrs. Flutie has always worked at a day-care center, which is ironic and sad because it means she was too busy taking care of other children to keep watch over her own. And when he's not restoring historic vehicles, Mr. Flutie has always been out on land, air, and sea escapades. It's the elder Flutie's need for speed that has led to our sex-free predicament, as his broken leg suffered in a Jet Ski skirmish means he'll be couched for most of the summer.

Of course, there are other options. Like a motel room. We're both poor, though, and I can't get over the sleaze factor. And I just know that we would bump into one or both of our parents in the parking lot just like it always happens in bad movies.

Or outside somewhere. But I have this irrational fear of insects crawling up inside places they should never be.

Or the Caddie. It's a '76 with a ginormous backseat designed for consequence-free couplings. But I don't have an autoerotic fixation, I guess. I simply can't let myself go in his car.

These are my hang-ups. Ultimately, our extended celibacy is mostly my fault.

It doesn't seem to faze Marcus. "We've got all summer," he said again tonight, after we had exhausted all the sweaty, partially clothed Cadillaction.

I was still breathing heavily and had trouble getting the words out. "How can you be so calm? Don't you want to have sex with me?"

He reared back, hitting his head on the fogged-up window, surprised by what, to me, was an obvious accusation. “Of course I do. But if this isn't the way you want to have sex with me, then you must accept that we aren't going to have sex. I have to let go of that desire.”

“So you *don't* want to have sex with me!”

“I won't if you insist on keeping up this conversation!”

But he was smiling as he said it, and I obliged with a laugh, though right now I don't think it was that humorous.

the eighteenth

In our relentless pursuit of things to do instead of having sex, today Marcus and I visited an outdoor exhibition held at Allaire State Park by the New Jersey chapter of the Church of Creativity and Song. Their creed: “Finding spiritual enlightenment through fine arts inspired by music.” Um, okay.

With its forest of pine and oak trees, wildflower-tangled meadows, and cool, rushing waters of the Manasquan River, it would be hard to find a freak show with a more lovely setting. Among the more interesting installments were a series of pipe cleaner depictions of Michael Jackson's nose through the years, lanyards (allegedly) made from locks of Jim Morrison's hair, and a portrait of Bob Dylan painted entirely with breast milk. Yum. As we passed from one insane stall to the next, I heard the strains of a nasally, Brooklyn vibrato, wringing every ounce of melodramatic emotion from each syllable . . .

“I've been up, down, tryin' to get the feeling again / All around . . .”

“Barry Manilow!” I shouted, running toward the music.

I have a soft spot for the Copacabana Man now, but it wasn't always that way. For years I complained about my mother's embarrassing habit of blasting Barry on the stereo whenever she did her down-and-dirtiest housework. But that was before Barry crooned with cheesy gusto at two key points in my relationship with Marcus: on our first nondate, when Marcus tauntingly nipped my lip instead of kissing it (*When will our eyes meet / When can I touch yoooooooouuu?*), and later, at Gladdie's retirement home, when Marcus assured me that my failed relationship with Len was for the best, as it would help prepare me for the true love I deserved (*I'm ready to take a chance again / Ready to put my love on the line with yoooooooouuu . . .*).

Here was an entire tentful of decoupage objects devoted to none other than the Showman of Old Time. Plant holders. Vases. Cutting boards. Tissue boxes. And . . . a toilet-seat cover!

I grabbed it off the rickety folding table.

“I must have this!”

Barry was resplendent in an electric blue, bedazzled jumpsuit, unbuttoned to midchest. His head was thrown back, legs spread wide, arms outstretched, making a perfectly symmetrical X. A triumphant celebration of song by the man who writes them.

“I must have this,” I repeated, trying to get Marcus's attention, which had wandered somewhere behind my shoulder.

“It's not for sale,” wheezed an emphysemal voice from the back of the tent. It came from a lumpy-faced woman with cheap platinum extensions that looked more like pull cords on a windbreaker than genuine human hair. She was dressed in red stretch pants and a BARRY FANILOW t-shirt.

“Excuse me,” I said, in my sweetest voice. “What's your name?”

“Lorna.”

“Surely, Lorna, you can part with this one.”

“Nope.”

I groaned. “Then why do you have it on display?”

“To share my love for the Showman of Our Time,” she said, taking a cancerous drag on her cigarette.

“Hey, Jessica,” Marcus said, sidling up to me. “Why don't we get going?” There was a hint of urgency to his voice, one I'm unaccustomed to hearing. I thought I was embarrassing him.

“I'm not leaving without this toilet-seat cover!” I shouted, clutching the most kick-ass, most absurd thing *ever*. “Name your price!”

“It's not for sale,” Lorna and Marcus replied simultaneously.

And that's when it finally happened, the realization of my darkest fears about being Marcus's girlfriend. An inevitability that has been stalled for so long that I had fooled myself into thinking it would never come to pass.

“Holy fuck! It *is* you,” exclaimed a scratchy female voice approaching the tent from behind me.

“Hey, Sierra,” Marcus said, his dark eyes casting me an apologetic glance.

And with that look, one I'd never seen before, I knew: Sierra was one of the forty-something girls Marcus had sexed before me.

If I had opened my mouth, it would have elicited a leonine roar, so completely overcome was by primal, territorial jealousy. ~~And it's not like she made a compelling nemesis. Sierra was shorter than I was, and scrawnier, with thinning hair that she pulled into a malnourished braid running down her back. The small, sporadic patches of skin not covered in freckles were as white as milk. She would probably object to this comparison, as she was clearly of the vegan variety in her cruelty-free plastic shoes, hemp shorts, and I THINK THEREFORE I'M RAW T-shirt.~~

“How the fuck are you?” Sierra asked.

“Oh, you know . . . ,” Marcus said vaguely.

Sierra burped. Loudly. And didn't excuse herself. Ack.

A top-heavy nymphomaniac with limited intellectual capabilities? Okay. That I could understand. But a vulgar raw-food freak? What had he seen in her?

Sierra launched into an expletive-riddled monologue about how much she loves Reed College and how she took his advice and has been putting her poetry to music and how she's been clean for three years now. Meanwhile, my insides threw furniture off balconies and crashed cars into trees and set buildings on fire.

“This is my girlfriend, Jessica,” he said, pulling me closer and closer until I was actually in front of him, acting as a human shield.

“Well, fucking A,” she said. “You're the girl Marcus is with now.” She emphasized the word *now*. My anger burned hotter than the asphalt beneath my feet. But I felt oddly cold, like when you've got a 104-degree fever but can't stop shivering. I almost couldn't blame her for being blatantly unimpressed. After all, why should she think that he'd be more serious with me than with her? Than with any of them?

“We've been together for a year,” Marcus said.

“Well, fuck me,” she said, jumping up to playfully ruffle his hair.

And there was an excruciating fraction of a second in which I could feel Marcus physically shrink at her words, knowing that I would respond in the obvious way. I lunged at the opportunity, like a cornered animal.

“He already did,” I spat before shaking off his arm and darting for the Caddie.

I would have loved to have made a dramatic getaway. To instinctively know how to hot-wire a car, or even better, for my female fury to fuel a paranormal event that would spontaneously turn on the ignition without a key. But, alas, I couldn't even open the door, and I burned my hand on the sizzling metal handle in my attempt.

“FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!”

“Are you okay?” asked Marcus, coming up behind me and reaching for my hand.

“I'm fine.”

Marcus stretched out his white T-shirt with his fist and used it as a buffer between his skin and the hot handle, opening my door. He walked around the front of the car and did the same on his side and adjusted the Holiday Inn towels meant to prevent our asses from blistering on the leather interior. He slid inside and cranked up the air-conditioning.

I was still standing, the rubber soles of my flip-flops melting and melding with the parking lot.

“Jessica,” he sighed.

I got in the car and slammed the door so hard that the plastic pink flower tied to the radio antenna quivered as if in fear.

“Jessica,” he said again, only this time with his hand on my knee. “I hope you understand . . .”

“Oh, I understand!” I said, with sarcastic venom. “I understand that we live in a very small town and that you slept with a good percentage of the female population before you met me. And I understand that it was a statistical inevitability for us to bump into one of your former conquests. I understand that this is a consequence of dating someone like you . . .”

“Do you understand that she meant nothing to me? Do you understand that?”

Of course I understood that. This understanding is what makes it possible for me to be with Marcus at all. Outside of the awkward but necessary STD-clearance conversation we had prior to our first time, Marcus and I have barely acknowledged his industrious, illustrious sexual history. I accepted his past under the premise that he was “a different person” then. After all, he was largely under the influence of various mind-altering chemicals during his prime fuck years. (Ages thirteen to eighteen. Forty girls over five years. An average of .666 girls a month.) It was a necessary conceit for our survival.

But Sierra made Marcus's past seem all too present. He did it with her, he did it with all of them, and now he's doing it with me. Or *not* doing it with me. Which makes it even worse.

“Jessica?” he asked, squeezing my knee with calloused fingers.

“I understand,” I said, arching away from him so I could rest my head on the window. “I just don't feel like talking right now.”

And then he drove me home with nothing but the blast of the air conditioner to drown out the din of our silence.

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