

Prologue

Being a teenager with a driver's license is perhaps the most free one will ever feel in life. Hannelle often looked back on these years fondly, even though she had been in her fair share of fender benders (including on her first day of her senior year directly in front of the school when she rear-ended someone while applying mascara, much to her younger brother's embarrassment). She didn't feel nostalgic for who she was; she looked the same at 29 as she did at 16, save for a slimmer face as she approached 30. Her friends hadn't changed all that much either. She certainly didn't miss who she was in her formative years prior to attending university; it was actually quite embarrassing that she had ever held the political and religious views her parents passed down. No, she missed that feeling of pure possibility and whimsy that predates any police encounters and the never ending cycle of paying bills. She missed sneaking out and trying weed for the first time. She missed the tingling sensation of a new crush. She missed how easy everything came to her. She missed having misplaced confidence.

Over a decade later, getting out of bed felt like a battle that often wasn't worth fighting. She also felt nostalgia for her college years, but that reason was more obvious; she hadn't had an intellectually stimulating conversation in years. She also missed the naps. But mostly she missed the atmosphere of learning that naturally seeped into parties and relationships as a result of being surrounded by young adults paying tens of thousands of dollars to figure out who they are and should be.

She couldn't pinpoint when her youthful vibrance faded into cynical complacency, but it was sometime after those hazy years post-college, when she settled into the undervalued public service sector of capitalism, that she began feeling the doors of possibility close faster than they opened.

This isn't to say she was *unhappy*, but she wasn't exactly happy either. She often felt like part of her had faded with each passing year. Many days felt more like a dream where she was half-awake, as if her brain were on sabbatical while her body struggled through the motions. There was no evident reason for her discontent; She had a job that paid the bills, a healthy dog that had seen her through her roaring 20s and a recently developed knack for taking care of tropical plants. She even managed to get married and buy a house.

The American Dream had been achieved somewhere between bathroom remodels and car purchases, but with each improvement to her exterior life, it was as if she sacrificed a bit of her interior *joie de vivre*. (Using an occasional french phrase was one way she continued to make use of her otherwise useless French minor). If only she could find a profitable use for her triple major; Philosophy, English Literature and Religious Studies did not land her in a JD or even a PhD program as her once naive 20 year old self had imagined.

Instead, she found herself teaching special needs students for 5 years longer than she had planned and quickly settling into a routine rotation of work, house chores, sleep and the occasional social outing. She really liked her small three bedroom craftsman just inside the city

limits, and she had put a lot of work into making the recently remodeled historical home look sleek yet cozy.

She looked around her large bedroom and across at the empty side of the bed. She decided to call off work, again, and grabbed her laptop. She was finally going to write everything. She had always joked with her close college friend, Charlie, that one day she would write a book and never have to work again. At the very least, the experience could be therapeutic, she reasoned. After all, her therapist's list of grounding exercises to alleviate anxiety and PTSD weren't helping as much as she'd hoped. That is a story for later though; It may seem like the ending has already been spoiled, but a good story is never about the ending. This story is about a few unforeseen plot twists and (maybe a lack of) character development.

PART I

NATE

“I guess when I was 8, although I suppose I was turning 9 that day, that’s why I remember it. It isn’t even a clear memory really, just a feeling of sadness because I liked being 8. I’ve always liked nice, even numbers. I was 8 years old, I had 8 letters in my name, and I lived on 8 Carraway Way”, recounted Hannelle as she fidgeted with the split ends of her straightened blond hair and stared out the pick-up truck’s passenger window at the sun setting over a freshly harvested corn field.

Nate paused, looking quizzically at his girlfriend from the driver’s seat as he signaled a left turn down yet another country road. They were on their way to the weekly Friday night party that their friend Tay often hosted. It was at his grandmother’s house a few miles outside of their small town in an even smaller town. There were rumors that she was at the house sleeping soundly, thanks to several prescription sleep aids, but nobody had ever seen her, and it seemed absurd that anyone could sleep through dozens of drunk teenagers screaming the lyrics to “Dirt Road Anthem” as they streaked giddily around the rural property. At this point in time, all teenagers are immune to the worries of policing indecent exposure.

“I really don’t think that’s normal. I definitely remember being a little kid. I used to get ice cream with my dad and go play baseball with the weird kid down the street”, he replied with an earnest look on his face as he kept his eyes forward on the bumpy road.

He was fairly attractive in the summer with tanned skin and short black curls pushed back from his face, but in the winter months his skin resembled the dirty beige color of the unwashed wrestling singlets he donned for months traveling across the state to roll around on sweaty mats. Wrestling, as is the case with many sports, was not very interesting to Hannelle. She participated in track and cheer after quitting gymnastics to have a more social high school experience, and she only joined track because she was somewhat fast and enjoyed spending the daily after-school practices fraternizing with her friends (track was one of the few co-ed sports). There was one girl on their highschool wrestling team, but that didn’t quite count. Being football season, Nate still had most of his summer charm.

Hannelle casually dismissed his response and changed the subject to who would be at the night’s party. She was more interested in the potential of the night than connecting on a deeper level with Nate right now. She generally preferred abstract philosophy puzzles and political debates (fueled by passing a joint), and a trip down memory lane wasn’t exactly the ideal pre-game atmosphere to put her in a partying mood. She never felt comfortable broaching topics that required deeper personal reflection (unless she was sufficiently drunk), but she was particularly interested in a specific partygoer that had recently transferred to their school his senior year, Trenton. There was something innately mysterious about the new kid who nobody knew from

elementary school. Hannelle had, thankfully, quickly outgrew her awkward phase in 6th grade and deeply resented anyone who dared to bring up an old yearbook.

She and Nate had been dating for about a year now, and although there was nothing wrong, it didn't strike her that there was anything particularly right about the relationship either. They looked a bit like Sandy and Danny from Grease together, which was generally found to be sufficient enough reason to couple up amongst their peers. Other than them both being in the same graduating class in the same small town in the same circle of friends, there wasn't much they had in common. It shouldn't have been a surprise then when she was told at school a few months later that he had cheated on her, but that isn't a central point to this chapter. Breaking up with Nate was just the first step on her path towards The Roster.

The party began as usual with a few games of beer pong and then flip-cup. Hannelle preferred flip-cup because she almost always won, but tonight she opted for beer pong to partner up with Trenton, or as some of her googly-eyed classmates had taken to calling him, Trey. Hannelle hated shortened names. Having a unique two-syllable name that was often shortened to "Han" without her approval, she tried to apply the same courtesy to others' names that she wished for her own. She never understood the need to modify a perfectly good name to make it more common. "Han" was an entirely different name from "Hannelle", and although she wasn't entirely sure where her mother coined her name (something about the word grace in Hebrew), she appreciated the uniqueness of it and felt it adequately reflected her personality, unlike the nickname "Han", which half a dozen other girls in her graduating class also claimed and thus reduced her existence to that of a basic white girl.

While Nate was preoccupied by whatever drunk guys do at a party (probably something to do with fire), Trenton had seized the opportunity to ask Hannelle to be his teammate in beer pong. Hannelle accepted with feigned apprehension, capitalizing on the moment to taunt him about his capabilities. With a wager in place (something about a black and mild, which they all felt very cool and rebellious for smoking at the time), Hannelle joined him at the beer soaked table for what would be the first of many games played together. Although she enjoyed flirting with the line of morality, she eventually slipped outside after an hour or so of coy one-liners to join Nate in setting off cheap fireworks with Tay and some of the other guys from the football team.

The night faded into early morning and Hannelle woke up next to Nate on a half-deflated air mattress. There were few other bodies strewn about in drunkenness on the floor and sofa. They gathered their clothes and slumbered out to Nate's truck to drive back into town, groggily recounting the events from the night before. There was a certain thrill to having to retrieve memories through conversational anecdotes the morning after that Hannelle always enjoyed. She always wondered though, how much of the night was forever forgotten?

That night ended as usual with Nate getting her off without any reciprocation. Perhaps that is why he decided to cheat a few months later; the allure of sex is apparently irresistible to a teenage boy who isn't getting any from his current girlfriend. Hannelle wasn't particularly against having sex with Nate, moreover, it was that she had no reason to have sex with him. This

too may have been an early indication that they weren't going to last forever, but that was never her goal anyway.

Hannelle enjoyed the temporality of experiences. She loved being in the moment and not worrying about what was to come. Her best friend Kara found this to be a bit reckless but that was just because she was naturally prone to worrying and overthinking. This balance of whimsy and worry worked well for the pair throughout their teenage years. In her late twenties, worrying was no longer something one could reasonably opt out of, especially not after a pandemic full of political turmoil that upset the global economy, but we'll get to that in a later chapter.

A few months later, another Varsity cheerleader pulled her aside and whispered that she overheard a girl talking about hooking up with Nate in Sociology class; Hannelle was shocked. She wasn't shocked that she had to break up with him, she was shocked that he was even interested in other girls, especially that girl, Molly. Molly wasn't exactly in their friend group, which is maybe why he chose her. Hannelle used to be friends with Molly, before she gained her reputation for certain extracurricular activities, i.e. having sex with boys who already had girlfriends. When Hannelle joined the Varsity Cheer team as a freshman, Molly was still on the freshman only squad. Since then, they had an unspoken agreement to go their appropriately separate directions socially.

It honestly grossed her out that Nate had hooked up with Molly just the night before. He had been texting Hannelle almost all night; she had no clue that he was even capable of such duplicity. He had seemed to be so obsessed with her. Hadn't he been trying to date her for years before she agreed? How does someone have so little regard for decency? She wondered if she would feel less shitty if the girl he chose had been more attractive, at least it would make a little more sense.

She quickly thanked the acquaintance for telling her, all the while trying to seem unphased emotionally. She was genuinely grateful that Simone felt the need to tell her. After all, they may have cheered together for years, but they weren't exactly close friends, so it was a kind and genuine gesture to risk getting involved in another clique's drama. Hannelle prided herself on getting along with most of the cliques, but she kept most of those relationships strictly to school grounds. After school, she either hung out with friends from her AP classes or went to parties with Kara and the older crowd. In this moment, she was eternally thankful for all the years she spent trying to be amiable, even with the weird kids. She liked being liked, but never foresaw it paying off this way. Nate didn't know she knew yet, so she had some time to figure out a plan without the whole school inevitably weighing in.

It wasn't until she got to her car after practice ended that she let herself cry. She never cried in public, but she hoped the privacy of her blue Ford Focus would prevent prying eyes. She was hurt, but mostly she was really embarrassed. How did it make sense? Who would she go to homecoming with now? She quickly texted Trenton. They had been casually chatting for a few weeks, using any excuse to start a conversation without appearing too calculating. Maybe Nate had gone through her phone and seen the texts, but she doubted it given she had downloaded a locked app for hiding messages and pictures.

Her green LG enV buzzed. *“You should come over to Malik’s tonight. We are gonna drink and chill”*, Trenton quickly typed back to her hopefully nonchalant *“what’s up”*.

“Sure, pick me up?” she texted back after waiting a few minutes. She didn’t want him to think she was staring at her phone waiting.

Another buzz. *“Be ready at 9 ;)”*. Hannelle wiped her tears and fixed her mascara in her rearview mirror.

A dinosaur-esque screeching sound escaped from her lips as she stretched her cramping arms up towards the refurbished headboard of her bed. She glanced at the time on her laptop - 12:10. She had been writing without pause for the past three hours; she should probably get up and use the bathroom... and make some coffee. She really hadn’t planned to become so engrossed in writing, but it was helping. She already had a prologue, most of a first chapter and some ideas for cover art for this secret book that would never be published. She felt focused, which was better than her previous state of lethargy and apathy. She couldn’t quite decide if hyper-focusing on writing about her past was a healthy coping mechanism or a new mode of escapism, but for now, it was sufficiently occupying her otherwise racing mind.

“Babe, want some coffee? Espresso or latte?” her husband shouted up from the kitchen. His ability to read her mind was almost as remarkable as his skill for crafting the perfect cup of coffee; he was at home in the kitchen, something she couldn’t relate to at all as someone who had spent her single years surviving on takeout and leftovers from dates.

“Latte, please!” She padded downstairs in her worn out slippers and oversized sweatshirt to claim her oat milk latte, which probably contained at least twice the amount of sugar she would use.

“Hi honey, are you feeling better?” he asked while finishing frothing her oat milk. He knew she had been having a hard time at work and took the day off, but he didn’t know that she had been writing about her ex for the past few hours. She didn’t have anything to hide; he knew all about her past, but she felt sheepish admitting what she was doing, which was something she would have to think about later. Instead, she thanked him for the coffee and said she was going back to bed. She did walk back into the bedroom, to grab her laptop, and then slipped into the office to settle in for a few more hours of writing.

TRENTON

He showed up a little after 9, which gave Hannelle just enough time to finish curling her hair. Her hair was naturally curly, but she preferred the look of perfected ringlets over her untouched

frizz and flyaways. She also never really learned how to style her natural curls without overusing mousse and making her hair look crunchy.

He texted, “*here*”, and she slipped out the side door, grateful that she was the only one home and didn’t have to make up a lie to tell her mom. Hannelle was a pretty good liar. It’s not like she intentionally practiced, but she was often intentionally vague. She didn’t like sharing personal details and considered herself to be a private person. She also liked to avoid lectures on propriety and purity that included cherry picked verses from the bible.

“Hey babe”, Trenton cockily greeted her with a smirk on his face as she tried to gracefully step into the truck in her miniskirt. *What was with dudes in small towns and trucks?* She was taken aback by his direct approach, but she had to admit it excited her and made her want to hear him say it again. She hadn’t broken up with Nate yet, so being called “babe” by someone else felt scandalous. She decided that a bit of revenge would help her take back control and feel less shitty about being cheated on by an ugly whore. (Author’s Note: Hannelle wasn’t much of a feminist in her teen years).

They pulled up to Malik’s place. There was only one other car in the drive since his parents were at some charity dinner for the evening. They found Malik playing a violent zombie video game. Hannelle was about as much of a fan of video games as she was of sports, but she could fake it for the night. Besides, video games were just the decoy activity to give them something to do with their bodies without feeling awkward.

Another girl a year older showed up a few minutes later. Hannelle had never hung out with Cayla before even though they had some mutual friends, including Kara. She pulled out a case of cheap beer and Malik brought down a bottle of whiskey from his parents bar cart. Hannelle was used to drinking beer and occasionally flavored vodka, but most high school parties didn’t have high end whiskey. Her body buzzed with nervous excitement as Trenton grabbed her waist and pulled her down on his lap. He was so confident and comfortable being physical with her. She felt exhilarated and leaned back into his chest.

Malik took a big swig from the dark liquor and passed the bottle to Cayla, who followed suit and passed it to Trenton. When it was Hannelle’s turn, she was surprised at the warm burn that followed the liquid down her throat. They passed the bottle around again and each cracked open a beer, taking turns killing zombies.

Hannelle woke up in Trenton’s basement, wedged between his large, shirtless body and Malik’s equally large, shirtless body. *Fuck*. She recognized the room from a party he hosted a few weeks back. A party she had attended with Nate. She pushed the image of her putative boyfriend out of her mind and focused her thoughts on the current situation.

She rolled over to see that she had only her underwear and bra on. *Please dear God do not let this be how I lose my virginity*, she thought to herself. Her first kiss had been quite a bit short of

romantic her freshman year (an older guy she thought was hot turned out to be a major loser who spread rumors about fucking her despite getting no action due to her period saving the day) so she was really hoping for more out of the next milestone. In an attempt to seem unfettered and nonchalant, she turned over towards Trenton's hard abdomen and said "Hey".

He turned and laughed at her, which caused her worry to grow. *Fuck fuck fuck*. Why did she not remember anything?

"So how did we get back here?", she asked, trying to appear lighthearted and not totally panicked.

"I drove. You got real fucked up last night. Do you remember what you said?". Trenton looked down at her amused. His short blond hair was tousled and he looked really sexy. Malik was still passed out on the other side of her. He was also a good looking guy, but his reputation preceded him and Hannelle would never even consider hooking up with him and risk getting an STD.

Hannelle turned back to Trenton and slowly shook her head. He glanced at Malik laying next to her and continued, "You tried to have a threesome with me and Malik".

She was shocked. She was shocked by both his lack of grammar and the words that just came out of his mouth. She had never even had sex, or even given oral, so it seemed completely implausible that she would even consider a threesome, especially with two guys she didn't know very well. But then again, she couldn't exactly rely on her memory right now.

"Don't worry. You took your own clothes off and passed out", Trenton added after a pause, seeming to read her racing mind, as he stood up to tug on a pair of gray sweatpants over his rather revealing skin tight briefs. He really did have an amazing body. Nate was always slim but he didn't have as defined muscles as Trenton. She wanted to touch his abs. *God, maybe she really did try to have a threesome last night*.

Malik rolled over and overtly ogled Hannelle's nearly naked body. Feeling self-conscious, she quickly slid off the pull-out sofa bed and looked around for her skirt and tank top. She immediately regretted her seductive late night outfit choice in the morning light. Seeming to read her mind again, Trenton graciously tossed her his t-shirt, and she quickly slid it over her head, fully aware of both boys' eyes on her ass. Her eyes remained on Trenton's shirtless abs. If they could stare, so could she.

"You're lucky we knew you were too fucked up because that body is irresistible", Malik quipped, interrupting her racing thoughts. He propped himself up on his elbows, not even trying to hide his gaze.

"Fuck off, Malik. Get outta here", Trenton shot in his direction. Hannelle couldn't tell if he was joking or being serious, but Malik laughed coolly and trudged out of the room looking for his keys. Hannelle was glad to be alone with Trenton; she wanted to know what all had happened while she was blacked out.

After gathering all of her discarded garments, Trenton drove Hannelle home and filled in the gaps from the night before. Apparently Malik's parents came home earlier than planned so they had moved the party to Trenton's since he lived at his aunt's (she didn't care what he did as long as he stayed out of trouble). Cayla had gone home at some point, but Malik claimed he was too drunk to drive home and had to stay the night. Hannelle decided that Trenton had no reason to lie to her and accepted his retelling of the night without too many investigative questions. She felt a bit smug that she'd had a successfully scandalous night without actually cheating (she did have some moral qualms about infidelity at the time despite how the situation looked).

The rumor mill would be abuzz with her spending the night at Trenton's in no time. Malik had probably already bragged about seeing her in a bra to half the football team. Nate would be shocked; Hannelle imagined the face he often made when he was confused. He had a way of furrowing his brow together that was endearing yet stern. She couldn't think about that right now though.

She shimmied down out of Trenton's truck as he parked up the street from her driveway, just as she had instructed. She didn't want to risk her parents seeing the unfamiliar truck and asking questions. At this point, her mom just assumed she spent most nights at Kara's. Their parents worked together at the hospital, so they always had to coordinate stories to avoid getting caught. She quickly shot Kara a text to fill her in on the shocking night.

"Why is the entire football team saying you slept with Malik and Trenton last night?"

"Damn it, Hannelle, answer me"

"What the fuck is going on"

"Hello??"

Hannelle's phone was vibrating repeatedly, waking her up from a nap. Nate was blowing up her phone. Clearly Malik had showed up to their morning football practice eager to run his mouth. *Good, now you can feel just as embarrassed and shocked as I did*, she thought to herself.

"Crashed there after a party. No big deal. Chill", she typed back coolly. She was still shaking off the hangover headache, but her body was full of adrenaline as she awaited his reply.

"I'm picking you up. Now", he hastily texted back. Damn, she didn't see that coming. She glanced in the mirror to see last night's mascara smudged down her cheek. She jumped in the shower, stashing Trenton's gray t-shirt in a drawer, and quickly tried to pull herself together.

Nate's truck was in front of her house within 15 minutes. She quickly scooted past her mom saying she was grabbing lunch with Nate as she ran out the door.

“Okay, be safe. Love you”, her mom answered automatically while attempting to clean an over packed fridge.

Taking a deep breath, Hannelle walked down the driveway towards Nate’s truck and tried to appear as normal as possible. Why did she feel so guilty even though she hadn’t *actually* cheated? After all, Nate was the one who had been disloyal first. She felt queasy thinking of him and Molly and tried to regain her composure and she opened the passenger door.

“So do you want to tell me what actually happened last night and why the fuck you were with other dudes?”, he demanded as soon as she slammed the car door. He pulled off her street and into an abandoned lot. She braced herself for the forthcoming fight. They never fought, so she wasn’t sure what to expect. She had never even heard him raise his voice before. It was weirdly turning her on. *What the fuck was wrong with her today?* She turned towards him and looked him square in the eye. Her body went cold as she took in his face and immediately imagined him with Molly, losing all sexual desire. He looked at her, confused. He still had no idea she knew.

“Why do you care?”, she calmly retorted. She was trying not to fidget with her hands, so she interlocked her fingers in her lap, gripping her silenced cell phone between her folded legs.

“Are you fucking with me? Hannelle, we are dating in case you forgot. You shouldn’t be sleeping at another dude’s house. Do you know how stupid I felt hearing all about your drunk ass at practice today?”. He was ramping up now. *How dare he act outraged? What a hypocrite.*

“Oh I didn’t know we were still dating. I assumed you had moved on with Molly”, Hannelle locked eyes with him to study his expression. His body went still. She could see that he was trying to figure out what to say next. She felt a rush of adrenaline and her heart raced. She tried not to move as she waited for him to respond before adding, “What, nothing to say now?”.

She turned away from him and sat silently, staring intently at the leaves falling from a nearby tree. She could hear him quietly crying and took a bit of satisfaction in the fact that she didn’t shed a tear.

After another loud stretch of cracking knuckles, she glanced out the window at the quickly setting sun slipping behind the evergreens that shielded her backyard from prying neighborly eyes. Winter was so depressing; it was barely 5 pm and already the sky was darkening. Her empty coffee mug and rumbling stomach urged her to stand and head back downstairs in hopes of finding a delicious pasta dinner waiting for her - another perk of her marriage of reversed gender roles.

As she descended the stairs, careful to watch her step in her fuzzy socks and slippers which were in fact very slippery on carpeted stairs, the smell of pesto greeted her acutely sensitive nose.

“Thought I’d make your favorite!” He greeted her as she entered the kitchen. “What have you been up to? Reading? Anything good?”