

## February First

Finn thinks birthdays are terrible. It's not that he's some misanthrope you see in those indie movies—sitting on the roof outside his bedroom window, smoking a cigarette, thinking about how every birthday celebrates being one year closer to our inevitable deaths. He likes getting older, looking older, feeling older. He likes finally being twenty-one, because being the last of his friends with a fake ID is humiliating. And he appreciates his friends taking him out at the stroke of midnight to celebrate. (He doesn't comment on the fact that their "big night out" is a trip to O'Connor's, the bar they go to every other night of the week.)

Finn just doesn't see the big deal in celebrating the day you were born, or why he annually receives gifts and hugs and warm wishes on the first day of February. It's not like he's responsible for his birth. When he would present this issue to his mother as a kid, she would tell him that they were celebrating his life! Once a year, everyone thought, "What better way to let Finn know we appreciate him than by giving him a Lego set?" Finn hasn't accepted this as a suitable answer.

That is, up until a few months ago, when Finn's roommate Cliff brought home a stack of books from an obscure bookstore across town. Cliff tossed them onto the kitchen table, spouting off about how Finn was "too conventional" to discover them himself. Finn rummaged through the stack of books, not recognizing any of the titles.

"They're underrated classics, in my opinion," Cliff said. "Bought all six of them for twelve dollars."

"You win at life, Cliff."

"You should read one."

He did. Not because Cliff asked him to. It was a ninety-paged novella called *The Woes of Wisdom*, which followed the life of young Chauncey Oliver and the rigid separation of the upper and middle classes in Victorian England. The main conflict of the story: Chauncey's upset because people in the lower classes hate him just for being one of the elites. Finn read it in two and a half hours, then mentally beat himself up for having wasted the better part of a Saturday night. The author probably wrote it thinking it was the next great British novel, but his ego bled right through the pages. Figures Cliff would like it.

Yet, though he'd never admit it aloud, one sentence stuck with him: "The most tragic instance in a young man's existence is when naiveté and cynicism race in time throughout his veins." It was said in dialogue, because apparently people in Cliff's world say sentences like this in casual conversation. Pretentious as hell in context, but when taken out it wasn't half bad. Finn didn't consider himself a very naïve person, but the second he finished reading that sentence, he thought of Noelle Dunn. His impossible dream. In high school, she was pretty, popular, athletic. He was none of the above. She hardly glanced at him in those four years (and oh, did he know it), but when he let his mind drift off, he couldn't help the warm, tingly feeling in his stomach. Four long years he fought a pitiful battle between reality and his limitless imagination. He'd go to school with open arms every day, in case Noelle woke up and finally realized how incredibly handsome Finn was. He'd come home with his arms heavy against his sides in utter defeat.

It embarrasses him to think of it all, but it embarrasses him even more that every time he sees a girl with curly brown hair and a genuine smile, his heart rate spikes. It embarrasses him how he checks the doorway every time someone walks into O'Connor's because he thinks he saw a flash of her through several sweaty limbs a couple years back. It embarrasses him how sometimes in the shower or right before bed he envisions their happenstance reunion, practices

what he'd say, what parts of his life he would and should brag about, how he'd phrase his coffee date request.

So yes, he's still pretty naïve (and he's certainly cynical), and maybe he doesn't want to fit the description one of Cliff's snobbish books has about young men.

Today as a certified adult, Finn's going to start fresh. Screw his problem with birthdays. He's going to view life with an optimistic perspective. He's going to forget about how he doesn't believe in negative numbers, or how he doesn't think that selfless good deeds exist, or how he thinks Christmas is a gimmick. He's going to face the world head on, look on the bright side, and get up even though he might fall back down again. He's going to start embracing clichés, too.

O'Connor's is packed, but his friends reserved a booth in the back. Their goal is to get him drunk as hell. He usually limits himself to four beers (since four beers is how much he can stomach before his friends start noticing how disgusting Finn finds the taste), but he decides to embrace the bottle in front of him. It's legal now. Screw his apathy toward drinking.

Finn's friends spend the night regaling one another with tales from their own twenty-first birthdays, some of which were just a few months ago. Memory lane. Remember when Timmy returned home at nine a.m. and threw up on his dog. Remember when Ryan woke up alone in JFK with no memory of how or why he got there. Finn sits in a wooden chair pulled up to the side of the table, moves from side to side every few minutes, sips his dirty-water-flavored beer. He imagines telling the story of his twenty-first. Remember when everyone gloated about how much more exciting their lives were than his.

It's approaching two-thirty when he realizes that "quitting Finn" cold turkey isn't going to work. Seems he's not up to getting shitfaced the night his childhood is being lowered into the ground. He's still sober compared to his friends (despite that annoying flush of redness in his

cheeks from all the alcohol), and he's checked the doorway more times than he's spoken. He figures he should leave. Being around drunk people and not being one of them makes for a pretty bleak night. Amid his friends' futile flirting attempts and intense moves on the dance floor, he says his goodbyes and heads toward the exit. He tries not to feel dejected about no one saying goodbye back.

He is seconds away from calling a cab when he sees the blur of the M15 drive past the window. He pockets his phone and sprints toward the bus stop, accidentally knocking into a young guy at the bar and spilling his beer. He splutters a gruff "sorry, man" before the kid can fully turn around and hustles out into the below-freezing night. The bus driver must see him running like a lunatic because he waits for him to step aboard. Finn thanks him profusely. The driver answers with a swipe of his hand and zero eye contact.

He takes a seat at the front of the bus, waiting for the waves of *You're a loser, Finn* to wash over him like they usually do. He should've known going out with his alcoholic friends at O'Connor's wasn't the best way to start shedding his layers of naiveté and cynicism. He should've known his twenty-first birthday was going to be a bust.

Finn glances around at the people on the M15 to distract himself. There's an old man hobbling over to the front, preparing to get off. There's a hooded man sleeping in the back who doesn't make him nervous. There's a young woman sitting in the single seat by the side exit, quietly talking on the phone.

He gets caught on her, on the subtle smile on her lips as she talks to the person on the other end. She laughs, twirling her finger around a dark lock of hair. He almost gets up to flirt with her, win her over with his lack of charm like he normally would, but he hesitates. He's

caught on the genuine smile. He can tell she doesn't want to be bothered by anyone other than her person on the phone.

He thinks about Noelle. He pictures her in the girl's seat, talking on the phone with one of her boyfriends. He thinks about his lame night at the bar, sitting in silence as the rest of his friends enjoy their livelihood. It's as if something snaps into place in his chest. A click. If Noelle were sitting there, he knows he'd get up. *It's our chance meeting, our inevitable reunion*, he'd say to himself. But she's as interested in him as this girl on the bus.

He rests his hands on his lap, turns away, closes his eyes, inhales, exhales. He tries to focus on his breathing as he imagines driving away from the night. Further and further away from O'Connor's and his friends and every molecule of disappointment he's ever felt in his twenty-one years. He leaves behind his embarrassment about Noelle. He leaves behind his anxiety about relating to Chauncey Oliver. He leaves behind his apathy toward birthdays, clichés, beer. Screw it all.

Fifteen minutes later, the girl gets off the bus. As the bus drives on, he becomes hyperaware of the distance between that girl and himself. Onto the next twenty-one years, he thinks, and the twenty-one more after that. The bus drives on. Finn eyes his reflection in the window across the aisle. He nods, impressed, looking a layer of naiveté thinner.

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Landon hasn't cried in five years. Last time it happened, he was fourteen and his father had died. Car accident. He was on his way to pick Landon up from baseball practice. Landon always remembers how livid he was, the last kid to sit around with the coach waiting for his ride. He had an elaborate speech prepared, ready to burst out of his mouth the second he saw the car pull up. The tongue lashing of his father's life. When it was his mother's car that arrived,

producing a dumbstruck, dead-eyed version of his mother, his tongue fell heavy and unmoving to the bottom of his mouth—the weight of it felt down to his stomach.

Landon didn't cry that night, nor did he shed a single tear during the funeral. It shocked his little sister, who one time got so overwhelmed by his borderline sociopathic lack of emotions that she physically attacked him, hysterical, begging him to show something, anything, resembling grief. Their mother always tried to reason with her, claiming he was still in the denial stage. For a while, Landon thought maybe that was true.

It wasn't until one night a few months later that the reality of his situation dawned on him, that the sobs racked his body. His father taught him everything. How to steal second base, how to become unstoppable at FIFA 10, how to properly flirt with girls. Landon went on to become the captain of his high school baseball team, and to this day he's never been defeated in a FIFA match against his friends. The flirting with girls thing, though? While he was pretty decent at it, it wasn't something he would ever be good at. Truly good at. There was no heart behind it, no genuine desire. Truth is, he'd have much rather learned how to flirt with his neighbor, Jason, who lived down the street. That was another elaborate speech for his father he'd drafted in his head. Filed away in the early stages folder, something to revisit down the road. Something, when finished, would now fall on dead ears. His father would never know the Truth. It made his insides feel as if they were being ripped to shreds and burned to ashes.

Landon woke the following morning, with his eyes crusted over and his face as puffy as ever. He rolled around in bed for hours, drifting in and out of sleep, gazing at the ceiling, futilely wondering about his father's hopes for him. He wondered what his father's last impression of his son was before that car smashed into him. A baseball prodigy with some solid morals, decent friends, more potential than he knew what to do with.

He remembers, once when he was ten and couldn't sleep, overhearing his parents talking downstairs about where they thought he and his sister were headed. In Landon, his father saw a Family Man: settling down with a wife, having a few kids and a couple retrievers, teaching his own sons how to play ball, inviting the two of them over for dinner every Sunday. That morning, the thought of shattering his father's expectations was so excruciating, Landon decided right then that he'd make his father's truth his own. He'd scrap that rough draft of the Truth and never revisit.

The rest of high school for Landon was rough, to say the least, but his rap sheet was impressive enough. He dated Rebecca, then Veronica, then Rachel, then Taylor, (then hooked up with Jason every other weekend for a year), then Rachel again, and finally arrived at Lindsay in freshman year of college. Lindsay was great. Really, she was. She and Landon had a whole lot in common. Two peas in a fucking pod. Her friends always said they had so much chemistry, that they just *clicked!* His friends always asked for Lindsay any time Landon would hang out with them, sometimes joking that she was more of a "bro" than he was—a joke that never sat right with him. They all believed him, though. Even Lindsay. That's what mattered, since believability was his biggest hurdle, and was what ended all his other relationships. No matter how much he went out of his way to spoil them, they could all tell. There was no heart behind it, no genuine desire.

He and Lindsay dated up until three hours ago, when Lindsay confessed to sleeping with Nick from her chemistry class. Three times. Truth is, Landon's seen Nick-from-Chemistry, and he can't blame her. But in the moment of her confession, Landon couldn't tell her that. He couldn't confess his relief that they finally had a reason to call it quits, that he was never fully

into her, that she wasted nearly two years of her life on him. So instead, he stormed out of her apartment and sat himself down on a stool in the first bar he could find.

O'Connor's. It's crowded. People are constantly bumping into Landon's back as they walk past. It makes the beer in his hands splash around inside the bottle. Landon spins it around for a while, watches the liquid make a tiny whirlpool through the glass, then chugs it back in one go.

He thinks about Lindsay with Nick-from-Chemistry, and his stomach turns. He thinks about what he may have said or done that could've pushed her into that asshole's arms. Three times. When he can't think of anything besides the whole *not loving her* part, Landon orders another beer. It hurts when he thinks about it. When he pictures her with someone else, he aches. He feels as if she's slapping him across the face over and over again. Landon likes that it hurts. He likes how it kills him to picture her with someone else. Maybe, after years of little success, he's starting to change the Truth.

Just then, something shoves into his back, pushing Landon forward and spilling the beer all over the bar and into his lap. Landon turns around to yell at the source of the mess, but he pauses when he catches a glimpse of the culprit. The guy looks maybe a year or two older than Landon, and he's running toward the exit as if he's late for something. He only catches the stranger's profile and a halfhearted "sorry, man" before he slips out the door. Sharp nose, dark hair, red cheeks from the alcohol. Landon's stomach turns. Flutters, really.

"Shit," he mumbles, rubbing each of his temples with two fingers. He fixates on the broken glass in front of him. Of course it hurts when someone who's supposed to love you cheats on you with Nick-from-Chemistry. Three times. But the Truth isn't changing. Landon presses his palms into his eye sockets, then into his forehead. After five years, he was hoping for at least a



hint of progress. But the flutter in his stomach (the one he got every time he talked to Jason at all those house parties, or the first time he met Nick-from-Chemistry, or again, just now) always proves him wrong.

Landon feels the lump in his throat and the sting behind his eyes, sensations he's grown accustomed to shoving back down time after time. Tonight, he doesn't fight them. For the first time in five years, in the middle of a crowded bar at two-thirty in the morning, Landon cries.

Hard, ugly cries. Loud sobs that make everyone around him stare in wonder and pity. A few people offer a comforting slap on the shoulder in passing, a few toss out a "you okay, man?" as Landon whisks them away with his hand. He continues to cry. Jesus, he enjoys it. Everything stifled up in his chest and throat slips out with each whimper. The tears cleanse his eyes, the snot drips down his nose. He smiles. He must look like a lunatic. He wonders what his father would say. He pictures him in the stool next to him. Out of place, thirty years too old for this crowd. He stares blankly as Landon coughs and splutters out the Truth. When he tries to imagine an expression on his father's face, he remembers this moment: the eighth-grade championship game, immediately after he smacks the ball into the outfield. Walk off. The crowd roars around him, his teammates urge him to run to first, but all he can focus on is his father's prideful grin.

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Samuel wonders, for what feels like the seven-thousandth time, why he's here. He hates how damn loud it is, how every night as he tries to sleep the ringing in his ears reminds him that yes, Samuel, you were there again. It's so loud he can't think straight, which in many ways is exactly what he wants. He likes (needs) to be distracted from his thoughts, though as his sense of sound slowly and painfully depletes a little more each time he returns, he figures maybe there are other ways to distract the mind. He figures, and he returns.

The strobe lights make everyone look as if they're moving in slow motion. People are ten feet away from him one second and right up in his face the next. Then, with the blink of an eye, they're gone and lost within the sea of movement. Samuel's been trying to convince himself that this is the reason he has trust and intimacy issues.

"Sam!" someone calls from behind him. Samuel recognizes the voice, the glass-shattering squeal with undertones of intoxication and brazenness. He grinds his teeth together for a millisecond before turning around.

"Samuel," he corrects, his eyes meeting Zoe's bloodshot ones.

"You lied to us." Her hand is on her hip, and she makes an expression Samuel thinks is meant to be anger. "You said you weren't coming out tonight."

"I say a lot of things." He walks over to the bar area, where the lights aren't as likely to induce seizures, but the noise is just as likely to make him deaf by morning. "Do you want anything?"

"No." She looks around the room, both hands on her hips now, and gives every man under thirty a once-over. "I'll get a drink from someone else."

Samuel rolls his eyes and throws back a shot of whatever the bartender just placed in front of him. Tequila again. "Suit yourself."

She starts reprimanding him for lying about not coming, because half the friend group didn't want to come out if they all weren't coming out, so now half the friend group's not out. And now he seems unreliable and flaky. *How is it flaky if I showed up*, he wonders, but that's about all the thought he gives this conversation. She must realize a few minutes in that he's only half-listening, as she scoffs overdramatically and signs off with, "I'll see you later, Sam." He winces and watches her head zigzag through the crowd until it disappears into the sea.

Samuel takes another shot. He hates being called Sam. As a kid he was always Sam, until one day he decided that the Sam I Am jokes are not as funny as his parents and friends and ex-girlfriends made them out to be. He hates eggs, he hates ham, and he really hates being called Sam. Samuel is more sophisticated, more professional. Introducing himself as Samuel and intentionally leaving out the “But you can call me Sam!” gives him a little more control over his first impression, he thinks.

Samuel slips the bartender a twenty and rolls back his shoulders. He glances at the time on his phone, then sees the date accompanied along with it. February first. A chill of pure dread crawls through his body at the sight of it. He’d meant to avoid looking at it, thinking about it, but what did he expect after the fifth tequila shot. He gets sloppy. *Tonight was a bad idea*, he thinks, he regrets. *I should’ve stayed home.*

He feels another wave of dread, then nausea, then pain. Pain in his head, his chest, his throat. Fuck. He charges into the crowd of people on the dance floor, intending to make his way to the front door. He notices Zoe looking at him, confused, and he can imagine her asking tomorrow, “How come you left alone last night?” because he usually has someone on his arm, someone talkative, distracting like the deafening techno music and blinding strobe lights. Now, as he walks past her and exits the club, he tries to come up with a better excuse than, “Because it’s February first.”

Samuel lets out a breath as he leans up against the building and slides down to the cement, the white snow from the building latching onto the back of his black trench coat. The cold air pinches and claws at his nose and cheeks, and he really hates February, but he feels okay. His ears are ringing, and his mind feels lopsided inside his skull, but he feels okay. It’s a

quarter to three in the morning and he has to walk twenty long blocks to get home. Still, he decides, he feels okay.

He can't decide whether it's funny or lazy that this is what it all comes down to. All his misery, his distractions, his visceral hatred of an otherwise innocent month. This: his mother spent January thirty-first acting normal when she was already an imposter. Cooking dinner, catching *The Bachelor* on TV, washing dishes, tucking Sam in with her usual "see you in the morning" only for him and his father to wake up the next day to her absence and her note. This: *I love you, Sam* was all the note said. This: his father (not named Sam) couldn't look at him for months. When he eventually did, it was only ever to accuse him of knowing why she was gone. This: his friends tiptoed around him as if he were a land mine that would implode from the smallest shred of affection. They never once broached the subject. They wouldn't even say the word "mom" around him. This: Sam became an object of pity. Samuel hated it.

He often thinks about how time passes but nothing changes. Not really. Every February, there's a day to pretend you love your partner more than you do, and there's a remembrance of Lincoln's birthday even though he's been dead for a hundred and fifty years, and nothing changes. Samuel's still bitter beyond belief. He's left without satisfaction, without closure. Even now, on the tenth anniversary of his mother's betrayal, he still can't comprehend how she thought he'd appreciate being lied to in her final words to him. *I love you, Sam*. Bullshit.

He holds his face in his hands for a while, trying, as he often does, not to imagine what she's doing right now. If she's in LA, pursuing her acting dreams, or if she's run off with another man and popped out a replacement son, or if she's working three jobs all day every day to one day come back and retroactively pay for Samuel's college. But he decided early on. None of

them would matter. He can't fathom one scenario that would deserve forgiveness. *I love you, Sam.* Bullshit.

Minutes later he picks himself up off the ground and heads home. He passes a few other clubs. He passes a man who looks like his high school math tutor. He wonders what he might be up to right now instead. He stops in a ninety-nine-cent store to buy a bag of chips and a pack of watermelon gum. He really hates February. He passes a few clothing stores. A few buses and cabs pass him. He stops walking in front of some pub, when, through a sea of faces, he spots some guy crying at the bar.

Samuel peers in, his hand on the window. The kid's got a beer in his hand. He's pressing his knuckles up to his mouth and staring at the wall in front of him. It looks as if he's just been sobbing for the last half-hour, but it's wrapping up. He neglects to wipe away stray tears streaming down his blotchy cheeks. He's smiling, chuckling, shaking his head.

Samuel smiles himself, feeling only semi-guilty that this kid's misery comforts him, and perhaps a bit envious that he's releasing all his internal noise out in the open. He wonders if the crier's world feels as if it's moving in slow motion. Maybe he's got a distraction, too, and he's starting to realize it only works for a little while. Maybe this ache from constantly reaching for satisfaction, the one that just won't dull, resides in the teenager on the other side of the glass as well.

Samuel walks the rest of the way home, thinks of nothing except the crier, and goes to sleep. His ears don't ring.

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Lena knows going out after the play with a cast of no designated drivers isn't one of her better ideas. Her fallback is always the bus, the good ole M15 she takes to and from the rehearsal

studio every day, but that's during the day. Lena hates taking the bus at night. It only comes once an hour. Plus, there's the whole *it's really terrifying* thing. The last time she rode the bus at night, she was meant to travel home by herself, but the man in the seat next to her, with whiskey breath and restless hands, had other ideas. When she got off the bus, she cried with relief that the man hadn't gotten off with her. Tonight, she tries to convince Amy to split a cab with her home because she really can't afford the ride from the restaurant to her apartment with the whopping twenty-five dollars in her pocket. Amy chooses white wine spritzers over her friend.

Lena only just reaches her stop when the bus pulls up. She boards the bus, drops a handful of change (nine quarters, three dimes, three nickels, and five pennies [she should really get another MetroCard]) into the slot, and walks on ahead to her usual spot. She likes to sit in the single seat closest to the rear door. Every day, Lena crams her headphones into her ears (though she could do without the fact that the left one never seems to sit right, which makes her question whether the inside of her left ear is slightly deformed) and observes the lives of the people on the other side of the glass.

Lena people-watches. She picked up the hobby back in high school, when she'd hang with her friends at the mall after school. They'd single out the middle-aged man in a business suit and neon green Sketchers or the twelve-year-old boy riding his skateboard with basketball shorts and sandals in twenty-degree weather. Where were they going? Who were they going to see? What were they thinking?

Though she'll people-watch at any hour, Lena doesn't listen to her headphones at night. Sometimes she'll put them in to pretend she's listening to music, but really she's listening to every single sound made inside the M15. And Lena isn't drunk. She's seen the men that come on the bus drunk. They stumble on, they pester and touch other passengers, they get kicked off a

few stops short of wherever they intend on heading—if they intend on heading anywhere. Lena’s biggest fear is missing her stop and having to navigate her way back home from an unfamiliar place. She’s got a nearly perfect sense of direction and a shrewd awareness of her surroundings. She still has nightmares.

Her phone vibrates in her purse. She doesn’t have to look at the name. “Hey.”

“Are you on the bus?” Eli huffs.

“Yes.” She glances around at the two other passengers, both of whom look as though they’re asleep. She never falls asleep on the bus. “Thank you for checking.”

“How did the play go?” Eli’s been apologizing all day about not being there due to his father’s sixtieth birthday party in Port Washington, even though he came to the show last night and the night before. Lena doesn’t understand the appeal of seeing her as the Cowardly Lion in an Off-Off-Broadway production of *The Wizard of Oz* three nights in a row, but she doesn’t mention it. Eli is too good to her.

“The same as it did last night.” The doors to the bus open to let someone on, but Lena neglects to glance up. “Oh, except Dorothy said, ‘Lions and bigers and tears,’ which made me happy.” Dorothy is a bitch.

Eli rambles on about how his girlfriend Andie almost didn’t show up to the party tonight, and his father half-believed that he was making her up. Lena zones out after he mentions Andie’s name and starts picking at the skin around her fingernails. Andie strolled up to Eli after class one day and asked him out (just like *that!*) without a tremor in her voice or a twitch in her fingers. Lena didn’t understand how she could do it, how she could be so fearless in the face of a man. Granted, the man in question is Eli, her best friend (her only friend), but even Lena is sometimes

nervous in his presence. Amy says it's because she's got a crush on him. Lena thinks it's because men terrify her.

“Listen, Eli, I should get going. My stop's coming up. I'll text you when I get home, okay? Thank you again for checking up on me.” She hangs up and slides her phone back in her purse. Eli is too good to her.

The bus pulls up to the next stop, and Lena leans the side of her head against the window. The suffocating traffic of the night adds at least five extra minutes of waiting around at each stop. An older man gets off, and her eyes follow him as he hobbles down the street. What is an old man doing on a bus at nearly three in the morning? Lena prepares to compose his life story, but her attention is diverted as he passes someone leaning against the side of a building, his head in his hands and his feet tapping unrhythmically against the sidewalk.

The first thing she notices is that he's around her age and absolutely plastered. Then she notices the faraway look in his eyes, the way he's curved against the marble wall behind him, the way he can't seem to look up from the concrete without shrinking further into his trench coat. She studies the lines in his forehead, the crease in his brow, the teeth tearing at his lower lip. He's held in this pain for a while. She begins her narration.

*He's just come out of a nightclub. She takes note of the flashing lights creating shadows on the sidewalk in front of the entrance. He feels detached from everyone inside. He keeps slipping his hands in and out of his pockets. He doesn't look up at anyone walking past him. He might still have friends in there, but they hardly notice he's missing. His left foot taps three times, then his right taps six times, and then they tap together eight times. He doesn't want them to come out and look for him anyway. He wants to be alone. He pulls himself off the ground and uses the side of the building to maintain his balance.*



For the first time, Lena feels an ice-cold chill run through her body as she's ruminating. She fears she's right on target with this man. She ends her dissection of his life as the bus pulls away.

Lena lifts her head off the glass, pulls out her headphones, and thinks of Eli. Eli is a good person. She knows this, and the more she recognizes that she knows this, the more guilt piles upon her. Because Lena thinks all men have this goal, dormant or not, wedged in the back of their minds: they want to conquer her. She's dated a few men, all of whom were pretty decent, but she knows the reason behind each breakup. When they rest their hands on her thigh for a second too long, when they bring her home dinner without her asking, when they call her out of nowhere, just wanting to talk, she feels uneasy. She looks behind their eyes, at the tugs in the corners of their mouths, at the shuffling of their feet, and she searches for ulterior motives. She's been doing it since she can remember. Her mother's endless string of fiancés made for great practice.

But the man outside the nightclub, he looks conquered himself. She thinks if she saw him walking past her on the street, she wouldn't lower her eyes to the ground and pretend the gum spot on the sidewalk is the most interesting thing she's ever seen. She wonders if maybe there are other men out there like the one outside the nightclub.

Lena sighs, rests her head against the glass again, and closes her eyes.