

The rain pelted the sidewalk like machine gun fire. Everything smelled like wet trash and piss. I emerged from the Myrtle Avenue subway station with my purse held over my head, desperately trying to keep my hair dry. The rain was a sign, a slap in the face. I should not be going out the night before the most important meeting of my career.

Goosebumps spread across my skin like an icy rash as I scampered down Bushwick's streets. The dive bar where I was meeting my Tinder date was six blocks away. I ducked under the bar's awning, took out my phone, and texted Pete telling him that I was walking in. Then I waited. This was a trick Ryanne taught me shortly after we became friends during my senior year of college. You always needed to make guys believe they're an afterthought.

Pete's profile were two badly lit selfies and the disclosure that he was only 5'8". I was going out with him because I needed a distraction. I'd spent the past three hours looking at engagement photos that people from my old high school posted on Instagram and Facebook. The women's rings glistened like water on a clear day. They made me feel like my lungs were filled with glue. There were clauses in the contract I was supposed to sign tomorrow that would prevent me from ever becoming one of these women who believed they'd found someone who fully accepted them.

The rain sounded like dozens of people were rapping their knuckles against a sheet of glass. Two minutes passed since I told Pete I arrived, so I opened the door and headed inside the bar.

The dive bar was a hipster's vision of Americana. There was a kitsch pinup of a big breasted, bikini-clad woman holding an American flag on the wall. The floor was covered with decaying oriental carpets and the furniture was a mishmash of leather and oaky wood.

Pete was sitting at a table in the middle of the room typing something on his phone.

The selfies on his profile made him look like a sloppy thirty-two year old who thought cryptocurrency would save him from his mounting student loan debt. In reality his hair was perfectly tousled and his chin was covered with just-the-right amount of scruff. He had the latest

version of the Apple watch on his wrist and Lanvin espadrilles on his feet. He looked like one of the guys who treated me like a blow-up doll back in college.

I was wearing a crop top and tight pants. I put a hand over my waist, hiding my exposed stomach. When Pete glanced up, a faint grimace passed over his face. I could sense him putting me in a category with all the platinum-haired, big-titted blonde girls he had slept with but never lowered himself to date.

“Wow, Sadie, I didn’t realize you were competing for Sunday night’s self-flagellation award,” Ryanne said.

She wasn’t actually in the bar, but sometimes I had conversations in my head with my best friend when she wasn’t around. Not full-on back-and-forths, but quick musings about how she’d react if she could hear my thoughts. I pictured how she’d smirk if she saw Pete’s of-the-moment shoes.

Pete looked too straight-edge to be at a dive bar in a neighborhood where people considered fire twirling an extracurricular activity. He was likely in the midst of a quarter-and-change life crisis and considered moving to Bushwick from Murray Hill a big disruption. Guys like him always thought they were better than me, but if I signed the contract tomorrow I’d probably be making three times as much as him a year. I squared my shoulders and walked over to the table, lips twisted in a casually amused smile.

“Thanks for waiting,” I said as I sat down. “There was a problem with the trains.”

“Oh, was there?” He raised his eyebrows.

“And, you know, it’s raining outside.”

“Yeah I noticed that.”

“Climate change in general, just making it harder to get from one place to the next. And the student loan crisis is really weighing me down. Like, I’m literally walking a lot slower down the block.”

Pete laughed and raised a hand to his mouth to cover his smile. The gesture was so innocent I reflexively grinned back.

I had a habit of assuming the worst about all guys I met. Ryanne always said that walking into every date prepared for a plethora of assholery was basic self-defense. That dating was a game, and the person who cared less won. But some mornings, when I woke up before the sun rose, when street sweepers were still whirling down the blocks around my home, I wondered if guys ever met a girl they liked and immediately fantasized about a future together. If they checked their phone constantly after sending a flirtatious text, waiting for a response. If they were just like us.

He'd purchased a pitcher before I'd arrived. I poured myself a drink, looked at him through lowered lashes, and asked, "So what do you do? Or are you living in your mother's basement right now?"

Pete's expression went tense. I felt like someone had stuck a needle through my tongue. I didn't know whether to tell him I'd been joking or if that'd sound too much like an apology. My glass sweated in my hands. I raised the beer to my lips and focused on its sour, yeasty taste.

He coughed. "Yeah well, nothing at the moment. I mean, workwise. I just quit my job."

That was the new trend these days, people quitting work because they were desperate for a sense of agency. They'd celebrate and tell their friends that now they were free to live the life they always wanted. In four months they'd be cradling themselves in bed, fighting off panic attacks and boredom so consuming it made you choke.

"I was a lawyer. Not like one of the ones you see on T.V. shows battling it out in court. I did M&A stuff, so a lot of conference rooms, very slow moving. It's what my dad wanted me to do, and well, the hours were crazy. So I quit."

Ryanne would have rolled her eyes at his explanation. I pictured her saying, in a tone so acidic it made anyone who heard it feel like they drank a cup full of Febreze, "To summarize,

this dude didn't have what it takes, and because he has a trust fund he gets to walk away from secure employment without any repercussions?"

Ryanne always talked about rich people like this, even though she herself had come from money. Her closet was full of Prada loafers and her haircuts cost \$250 before tip.

"Why did you become a lawyer if you didn't want to work long hours?" I asked.

Pete coughed again. "So do you work, or live in your mom's basement, or what?"

His failed attempt at a callback should have turned me off, but I smiled softly again.

"My mom's in Virginia," I said.

"Like D.C.?"

"No," I shook my head to emphasize the word. "Like, Roanoke. It's nice there now, but back in the day there was only one dingy bar in town that let girls in when they were fourteen."

"So it was a pretty classy town?" He grinned.

"City, people there consider it a city. It's the type of place where hunting season is really big."

He raised his eyebrows. "Do you hunt?"

"Only former lawyers who get on my nerves."

He smiled and covered his mouth just like he had done when I made the joke about the student loan crisis. My body felt loose and warm. I took a long sip of my drink.

"You don't have a southern accent though."

"I went to school in Pennsylvania, I lost it there."

That was technically the truth. I forced myself to lose it freshman year after I heard some girls in my hall mimicking it and howling with laughter in the common area. Those girls wore pearls to class every day and their hair was a practical, muted shade of blonde. Mine was the yellow of a Crayola crayon, of a playboy bunny, of trash.

"I went to school in Pennsylvania too, I went to Dickinson."

“Oh, cool.” I tried to make my voice sound breezy, like I didn’t care if he knew people from my school. Like it didn’t matter to me if he had heard about my reputation. None of this should bother me anymore, but whenever people from college said, “oh you’re *that* Sadie Jones,” I felt like someone I loved had slapped me in the face.

“Where did you go?” Pete asked.

“Lafayette.”

“Ah, I don’t know anyone from there.”

Relief tasted like the center of a warm chocolate chip cookie. I poured some more beer from the pitcher in my cup, but there was mostly foam left. Pete started to get up, but I stopped him.

“You got the first one, I’ll get the next,” I said, and carried the pitcher away.

The bartender had a man bun and forearms covered with tattoos. He winked at me before taking the empty pitcher. I leaned against the bar and took out my phone while I waited for him to fill up the pitcher. I wanted to seem casual, but I knew if Pete looked in my direction he would see my butt straining against the fabric of my pants like a ripe peach.

I hadn’t looked Pete up before going on the date, but I Googled him now, typing in “Pete” and “Dickinson.” I found his LinkedIn that still said he worked at Cravath, one of the top law firms in the country. I’d assumed the job he quit was at a small law firm his dad owned, but it looked like he actually had brains. I wanted to click on his LinkedIn profile to find out where he went to law school and what he studied in college, anything that’d give me insight into who he was. But if I did that he would get a notification informing him that I stalked him online. I scrolled further down the Google search instead. He didn’t have an Instagram, which explained the badly lit selfies. When I found his Facebook I clicked on the link.

He was standing in front of the Brooklyn Bridge at night in his profile picture. The sky looked like someone had mixed ink and cobalt blue paint. The cars on the bridge looked like a

smudged horizon. Pete was smiling a private smile at the camera like the picture was an inside joke. I wondered if its intimacy was why he always hid his grin behind his hand.

I scrolled down to his wall and started reading the comments. They made me feel like I'd jumped off a two-story building and landed flat on my chest.

The first one was from a guy who said that he had such fond memories going over Pete's house after school when they were kids and eating his mom's chocolate cookies. The second was from a woman reminiscing about the trips she took to the Hamptons with Pete's family recalling how his mom taught her how to swim. The comments went on, memories interspersed with remarks like "we lost a good woman" and "God works in mysterious ways." All the comments were written three months ago, likely around when Pete decided to quit his job.

"You're that girl, right?"

My head snapped up. The bartender was staring at me as he filled up the pitcher.

"That one from that podcast, 'Sluts in the City'?"

I used to like it when people recognized me. When girls came up to me saying that the podcast Ryanne and I hosted convinced them to dump their loser boyfriend, or taught them how to orgasm. When guys snapped photos with us in bars and bragged to their friends that they met "those hot chicks from the Sluts podcast." But that was three years ago when the podcast first started gaining a following and everything was new and exciting. Before I realized that if you hosted a sex and dating podcast that meant you had to constantly be doing both. If you found a boyfriend, your fans weren't happy for you. They left.

The bartender sat down the half-full pitcher on the counter and dug around the pocket of his jeans for his phone. He tapped on the screen a couple times before thrusting it forward into my face. He pulled up a photo from Ryanne's Instagram of the two of us in Vegas at a rooftop pool party wearing sparkly bikinis.

"Yeah, that's me and Ryanne," I said weakly.

“I have such a crush on her,” the bartender told me. He tapped a couple more buttons on his screen. “With all that dark hair? She’s basically perfect. Hey, can you take a selfie with me?”

He leaned toward me before I had a chance to respond. He held his phone in the air with the camera flipped around so we could see flatter, brighter versions of ourselves on the screen. When he put an arm around my shoulder I felt like I was going to vomit. But instead I parted my lips, stuck out my chest, and thought about food. Of warm flat crust pizza with dripping cheese right when it came out of a brick oven, of ice cream smothered in melted chocolate and whipped cream. I imagined dabbing my finger into the dessert, bringing it to my mouth, and licking it clean. When you want a sultry pout don’t think of sex, picture a meal so good you felt it in your toenails.

Right before the camera flashed, the bartender kissed my cheek.

Every muscle in my body tightened. I forced myself to remain completely still. The bartender pulled back and studied the picture. He kept tapping the screen, likely sending the photo to a bunch of his guy friends with the message, *Look! I met one of the sluts!* I felt like I’d just had an ice-water enema. I turned toward Pete like a character in a horror film. He was half-in half-out of his chair like he was still deciding whether to walk over and intervene. He reminded me of a lion waiting to pounce.

“Here’s your beer.” The bartender passed me the now-full pitcher. He winked at me again and said, “It’s on the house.”

I forced the muscles in my face to relax as I made my way back to the table. The beer sloshed in the pitcher. It was the color of a dehydrated person’s piss.

Pete was still crouched over the chair, hands gripping its back so hard his knuckles protruded bony and sharp underneath his skin. I set the pitcher down on the table and sat down. Pete was watching me like I was some unfamiliar animal. His gaze made me feel like I was moving through jelly. I wanted to rub my cheek against his scruff, but instead I raised the pitcher and began topping off his beer.

“Do you know him?” Pete nodded at the bartender.

I waited for some of the foam in Pete’s glass to dissipate before I continued pouring. “No. He recognized me.”

“So he knows you?”

“From online.” The foam had settled so I filled up the rest of Pete’s drink. “I host a podcast with my best friend.”

“And it’s popular?”

Our podcast has nine hundred thousand monthly downloads. Instead of making me happy, that number made me feel like my lungs were filled with cement.

“It’s very popular.”

“Do you talk about politics and stuff? Movies?”

“We talk about dating.”

Pete nodded, at first reflexively, and then with understanding. On the podcast Ryanne and I didn’t simply dole out dating advice. We shared everything about our personal lives. We told stories about dates like the one Pete and I were currently on.

“Men get to talk about their private lives all the time and people think it’s art. People treat Phillip Roth like he’s a god, but criticize women for mining their personal lives for truth and meaning. Like doing so makes them less creative or less intelligent.”

These weren’t my own words, but a mishmash of things I’d read on Twitter whenever Taylor Swift got blasted for releasing a new single about an ex. The way Pete was looking at me reminded me of a curtain dropping on an empty stage.

“So guys you go out with don’t mind that you talk about them on a public podcast?” he asked.

“They’re happy for me, they think it’s cool that I’m verified on Instagram.”

They also never bothered to listen to my weekly podcast. They made excuses about the length or how they wanted to listen to it when they were less stressed about their own jobs. But

the truth was that they wanted to date a hot girl people recognized on the street, they didn't care what I actually did.

"Well, congratulations for getting verified on Instagram."

"It's hard to get verified, celebrities get verified," I shot back.

"I wasn't being sarcastic, I'm just trying to wrap my head around this whole thing. Having to share every detail of your life, doesn't it make you feel like you always have to come up with a story?"

"Everyone's life is a series of stories."

Pete sighed and leaned back in his chair. I didn't know what he wanted from me. To confess that I hate my job? That I hadn't had a genuine relationship with a man in years? That my life was always about the next party or the next date? That sharing my sexual misadventures was starting to make me feel like a particularly promiscuous cartoon?

I shouldn't have come out tonight. I'd just want to stop myself from thinking about the clause in the contract Ryanne and I were going to sign tomorrow. If we wanted a deal with our company guaranteeing us a base salary of \$500,000 for five years before bonuses, we also needed to agree to be single for that length of time. Ryanne was twenty-eight and leaped on the opportunity instantly. I was thirty-two, meaning that when this contract was over I'd be almost forty.

I'd never been one of those girls who planned her perfect wedding on Pinterest or dreamed of becoming a soccer mom. But knowing I couldn't have a serious boyfriend until I was thirty-seven made me feel like a tree as thin as a candlestick standing alone in a dry field.

I drained the rest of my beer. "Look, this has been fun."

"I didn't mean to offend you."

"It's fine." I gave him a tight smile and started putting my coat back on.

Pete looked like I'd spit in his face instead of telling him that I merely wanted to leave. He shot up from his chair, causing it to scrape the floor. I wondered if he'd grab my arm like the

male lead in a bad romantic comedy as he begged the girl he lost to give him another chance. But Pete didn't do anything. He closed his eyes for a brief second before carefully lowering himself down to his seat.

Outside the rain had abated and the streets were covered in a thin layer of mist. It tasted like sewage and grit. Ryanne would take one look at my face tomorrow and know that I went out tonight. My only saving grace was that we had to record before our contract meeting and our docket was thin. I started rewriting the date in my mind. I'd begin the story discussing how I was lying around bored in my home exhausted of all the shows on Netflix. I decided to swipe on Tinder on a whim, messaging every guy I matched with, "Hey, want to go on an adventure?" If they asked what type of adventure I'd tell them it was meeting me out for a drink in thirty minutes. Pete, a loser – no, a short loser who I'd never deign to otherwise go out with – agreed.

The cars passing by flashed red and yellow lights across the sidewalk. I dug my hands into the pockets of my coat trying to keep warm. Ryanne usually broke in after I described the guy I was going out with, asking questions listeners would ask like, "Was he really as bad as he seemed?"

"No," I would tell her. "He was worse."

Then I'd launch into a description of his unnecessarily expensive shoes and how he was trying to change his life by moving to a neighborhood that stopped being cool in 2017. I'd linger over his unemployment so it would receive the full brunt of Ryanne's mockery. As I discussed Pete tomorrow on the podcast I'd push out any thoughts of him hiding his smile behind his hands, his deceased mother, or how at the end of the date he tried to apologize. I'd never see him again, he wasn't a real person to me. He was just another story.

I reached the Myrtle Avenue subway station and paused at the entryway. The station's bright fluorescent lights made everyone inside look dry and old. I took out my phone and opened my Uber app. It would cost thirty dollars to get a cab to Williamsburg. I bit down on my bottom lip debating whether the price was worth it before I remembered that after tomorrow I'd

be rich. I ordered the Uber and watched a stream of people head into the subway station with their heads bowed. I wouldn't be able to have a boyfriend or a family for five years, but I'd gain other things. New Yorkers would give anything to take cabs anywhere. They'd give everything to be me.