

BROOKLINE, MA 02146

The school dismissal bell, an old-fashioned metal clanging, is loud enough that Emily can hear it all the way across the park, where she's standing at the T station, waiting. Teenagers begin streaming out of various entrances of the large, stately brick building, and she cranes her head, wondering which one Gabe will emerge from.

Will he look the same? Will he kiss her? Emily has fantasized about this moment for weeks — months really. He'll kiss her, then they'll walk hand in hand around Brookline, stopping whenever we run into one of his friends so he can introduce her. They'll look her up and down and say something like, "Finally! We've heard so much about you!" The girls will gaze at her admiringly, a little envious. The boys' eyes will rest approvingly, but not leeringly, on her body, and maybe they'll even be jealous that Gabe has a girlfriend who has traveled all the way from Pittsburgh to see him.

Groups of students, laughing and shouting, scatter into the park, onto the street. Emily wonders if they know Gabe. Two guys, one wearing a long-sleeved U2 "Joshua Tree" tour shirt, approach the T stop, which is above ground and more like a bus or trolley stop than the subway station Emily had envisioned when Gabe gave her directions. They glance disinterestedly at her as they hurry to catch the arriving train heading toward Boston.

Shifting from side to side she glances down at her legs to make sure she didn't miss a spot while shaving this morning — she's wearing a stiff new denim miniskirt that she hopes is sexy but not slutty. She runs her tongue over her teeth and gums, checking for stray bits of food that might be stuck. She wishes she had a mirror in her bag so she could make sure she looks

OK, but she doesn't, and anyway, how embarrassing would it be if his first glimpse of her after nine months was her primping like some airhead?

Two, three, four, five minutes go by, but still no Gabe. Emily examines the ads on the station wall: a Renaissance art exhibit at the Museum of Fine Arts, the movie “Roxanne” with Steve Martin, “The Untouchables.” A train arrives from Boston, doors opening and closing, then continuing out to the suburbs. The flow of students from the building becomes more of a trickle and then seems to dry up completely.

Emily met Gabe nine months ago, when his mother Susan, Emily's stepmother's best friend, invited her family to spend two weeks with them at their vacation home, an enormous wood frame lodge in the Adirondacks that Susan's great-grandparents had built almost 100 years earlier

The house was just up the hill from Lake Champlain, and the first morning after breakfast Gabe and his younger brother Jason led everyone down to the water for a swim. Gabe was a year younger than Emily and hadn't started high school yet, but he had already gone through puberty, and he carried himself with a confidence Emily lacked. He moved with ease down the rocky path, even though he was barefoot. Jason was clumsy and a little chubby, which made Gabe, who already looked muscular in his red swim trunks, seem even hotter by comparison.

While Gabe and Jason immediately threw down their towels on the slab of rock and dove into the lake, everyone else spread out on the rocks to sunbathe. Emily's older sister, who had just finished her freshman year of college, talked to the adults about Freud and anthropology while Emily wondered if her bathing suit made her look fat and watched Gabe and Jason splash around in the icy cold water.

That night, while the adults talked in the living room in front of the fireplace, Gabe invited Emily to his room. A stack of books was piled high on his bedside table, and a tennis racket, white athletic socks and black Adidas soccer shoes were strewn about the floor. Emily noticed he had a stud in his left ear, which she knew from reading Ann Landers was the ear that meant you weren't gay. Responding to a letter from parents worried their ear-pierced son was gay, Ann had summed it up in the easy-to-remember mantra, “right is wrong.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Gabe asked.

“No,” Emily said, flattered that he thought she might. She had only dated one boy before, for a few months of ninth grade, and although they'd had nightly phone calls and sat together at lunch every day, all they'd done physically was hold hands and have one embarrassingly awkward kiss.

“What about you?” she asked, terrified that he was going to say he had a girlfriend, terrified that she'd just been imagining that maybe, maybe she had a chance for something with him.

“No one right now,” he said.

His ex was also named Emily, he said, adding that The Other Emily was pretty and funny, but a little crazy. The Other Emily was always threatening to kill herself, but never actually tried. Gabe said she was spoiled, like a lot of the girls from Newton – the suburb that was next to Brookline but wealthier. What would it be like to live in these foreign, glamorous-sounding Boston suburbs, Emily wondered, instead of being stuck in Pittsburgh with her mother and stepfather. She was instantly jealous of, but also intrigued by, the Other Emily, so much more dramatic and interesting than her, and she was impressed that Gabe had been cool enough in eighth grade to have a girlfriend. She imagined the Other Emily as looking like her, but better: taller, thinner, bigger boobs, name-brand clothes.

The next night the electricity went out for several hours, so everyone, except Emily’s little half sister who was already in bed, sat in the living room, in front of the fireplace, watching the hypnotic flickering of the flames. Gabe and Emily sat next to each other, a few feet away from the others. The grownups talked about whether the Democrats could retake the Senate in the midterm elections, whether Reagan would be able to get funding for his stupid Star Wars defense program. Jason circulated around the room offering his “famous” back rubs for \$1 to anyone interested.

“Don’t be taken in,” Gabe whispered to Emily in the darkness. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing. I’m much better at back rubs.”

Emily imagined what it would be like to have Gabe’s hands kneading her shoulders. She and Gabe sat quietly, staring forward at the flames, but their fingers and feet kept inching closer to each other, until she was touching his hand and he was touching hers, and then they were fully holding hands.

In the morning, Gabe kissed her in the rain, on the rocks by the lake. The families had all been swimming, and then when the rain started, everyone had packed up and headed up the hill, but Gabe and Emily said they were going to stay and swim because they were already wet. As the rain came down harder, though, they got out of the lake and started walking, dripping wet, toward the hill. “Look up,” Gabe said all of a sudden. Emily turned toward the sky, but didn’t see anything, partly because the rain was in her eyes. They seemed to stand there for a long time, and just when Emily was about to ask, “What are you talking about?” he kissed her. Quickly, firmly he leaned over and did it. It felt good to have his lips on hers, not like the awkward kiss months earlier when neither her boyfriend nor she knew what we were doing. Gabe turned to kiss her again, but he missed her mouth. She smiled, “You missed that time,”

and he kissed her again, but this time was a French kiss, his tongue gently probing inside her mouth.

“I’ve never done that before,” she said. They did it again, and Emily wasn’t sure if it felt good or just weird. It didn’t matter, because the important thing was having finally reached this new level of experience, being able to tell her friends she had French kissed.

For a few days, Emily was in heaven. They compared notes about our schools and their friends: His life seemed more sophisticated even though he was younger, going to parties with alcohol, taking the T into Boston. In the lake, he tried to teach her to improve her swimming form. They played word games – Perquackey, Boggle, Scrabble – and she was pleased that they were evenly matched. Gabe’s family was one of the few other families that knew about Perquackey, even though it was no longer manufactured; like Emily’s stepmother, Gabe’s mother had an old set. Emily and Gabe sat next to each other at meals and held hands under the table, and they French kissed whenever they managed to be alone together.

But then one night, about a week after their first kiss, he said, “I love you,” and Emily panicked. Did this mean he needed her? Had he told The Other Emily that he loved *her*? How could he possibly think, after just a week, that he knew her well enough to love her? Maybe he thought she was somebody she wasn’t. She began to feel hollow and lonely, unsure how she felt, what she wanted or who she was. She wanted to be a child, to be safe and secure, nestled in a parent’s unconditional love, but instead, she was trapped with Gabe. What if the fact that he liked her meant there was something wrong with him? What if he was weak and needy?

Sometimes she wished he’d try to go farther than French kissing, so she could get more experienced, but other times just the French kissing seemed too intimate, too intrusive, too wet and sloppy. Once as they lay together outside on the rocks by the lake, his hand grazed her breasts and, horrified and revolted, she pushed it away even though just a few nights earlier as

she lay in bed I'd fantasized about him going up her shirt. What was wrong with her, why was she so cold and frigid?

By the time the two weeks in the Adirondacks were over, she was itching to leave. Even though she promised Gabe she would write to him, she wasn't so sure she really would.

But then, a few weeks later, back in Pittsburgh with her mother and stepfather, back at her school where none of the guys were interested in her, Gabe's love no longer seemed suffocating but romantic. Emily yearned to feel his lips on hers, and channeled that energy into a four-page letter, which she impulsively signed “love,” even though she'd never been able to bring herself to say the word in the Adirondacks. A few weeks later, he sent back a two-page one. “I wish I could have written sooner,” he wrote, “But the classes in high school are a lot more work than middle school, and my soccer coach is a psycho, he makes us practice two hours every day.”

Emily imagined Gabe running around in Adidas cleats, his strong muscular calves. Gabe, she decided, was better, smarter, more mature, than the boys she saw every day at her high school. Several times a week, she spent hours writing Gabe long, free-associating letters. The words poured out, like a faucet or tears. She couldn't stop, writing until her right hand ached, about her teachers, about her fear of standing up to her mother, about how annoying it was that she was the only one of her friends not in choir and how left out she felt when they talked incessantly about it during lunch. She wrote about how much she missed him. She wrote about being depressed and lonely, but then crossed that part out, because she didn't want to sound like The Other Emily.

She was hoping Gabe would open up too, that in the safety of writing, so much easier than talking, he would tell her about his parents' divorce or his deepest fears. She yearned for him to respond to her letters with empathy and understanding, to reassure her that she was

lovable and smart and pretty. She checked the mail every day as soon as she got home, but Gabe’s letters were infrequent, and mostly they weren’t about personal things like family, just about soccer and school and going to the U2 concert.

Gabe had loved Emily more than she loved him, and now they had traded places. She was being punished for having doubts while they were together. She reassured herself that if only they could see each other in person again, this time it would work. She excused his infrequent correspondence by telling herself he just wasn’t a good pen pal. And then finally in May an opportunity arose to see Gabe again. Emily’s stepbrother was graduating from Harvard, and she’d be traveling to Boston with her mother and stepfather. She could take the T out to Brookline to see Gabe, could even stay over at his house for a night.

Excited, she rushed to call Gabe long distance, her fingers dancing over the touch tone pad. His mother answered, and when Emily shared the good news, Gabe’s mother said of course she could stay with them and that she would get Gabe. When he came to the phone, he didn’t seem as excited about it as he should have been, but Emily decided he probably just wasn’t a phone person.

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Waiting at the T stop, jittery with anticipation and nervousness, Emily is struck by how different it looks from how she’d imagined it. She’d expected the T to be more like the New York City subway, which she’s ridden with her grandmother on family visits: noisy, underground, covered with graffiti. All year, Emily has been wondering about Brookline, a place made mysterious and enticing because of its connection to Gabe. How many times has she copied out the word “Brookline” onto an envelope before sending it, and the letter stuffed inside, to this unfamiliar place to be touched by Gabe’s fingers?

When Gabe finally arrives, he’s with a friend, and there’s no kiss, just a quick hug.

“Sorry we’re late,” he says, but it feels like he’s just being polite. “Our teacher dismissed us late, and now I have to go back and pick something up from the soccer coach.” Emily follows him and his friend Dan -- who is not bad looking but, with blond hair and blue eyes not her type -- back into the school, her heavy backpack banging against her. For the rest of the afternoon, it seems like she’s just following the two of them along on various errands, making small talk, and getting a cursory tour of Brookline with its tall, old trees and large turn-of-the-century houses.

When they get to Gabe’s building, a brick house that’s been divided into apartments, Gabe leads Emily to the porch and Dan continues down the road to wherever he lives. Finally, it’s just the two of them. Now things can go back to the way they were in the Adirondacks. She glance at the mail slot on Gabe’s door and imagines her many letters sliding through, arriving here ahead of her.

Inside, she brushes against Gabe as puts her backpack on the floor, but he doesn’t seem to get the hint. His mother and Jason come out of the kitchen to greet them and then, at his mother’s suggestion, Gabe gives Emily a tour of their apartment. The floors are hardwood, and the furniture is comfortably shabby. The living room has floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with many of the same books Emily’s parents have and that she’s never read – 1960s paperback editions of 19th-century British novels, newer hardcovers and paperbacks by John Updike, Philip Roth, Nadine Gordimer, C.P. Snow. Next to the VCR is a stack of tapes labeled “Masterpiece Theater.” On the floor lies an enormous dog the size of a bear. “That’s Chekhov,” Gabe says.

Normally Emily is scared of big dogs, but she can sense that Chekhov is gentle, so she kneels down and strokes him. She’s hoping Gabe will kneel down and join her and that maybe their fingers will casually touch as they pet the dog, but he just leans against the wall. She

follows Gabe down the long hallway, covered with a worn but expensive-looking Oriental rug. The walls are decorated with framed photos of Gabe and Jason as little kids.

Down the hall is the bathroom, then Gabe’s parents’ room, Jason’s room, then Gabe’s. When Gabe shows Emily his room he doesn’t invite her in; they stand in the doorway as if it were one of those historic houses where a velvet rope blocks some of the rooms’ entryways. Vintage Beatles posters on the wall, a stereo with a turntable and double tape deck. On his desk is a stack of textbooks, a framed picture of him and a group of friends. Peering inside the room Emily wonder if he’s saved her letters, and if they are in there somewhere.

At dinner, Gabe’s mother, stepfather, and brother pepper her with questions about her plans for the summer.

“What are you guys doing this summer?” she asks.

“Gabe and Jason will spend a few weeks with their father in Wisconsin, and then we’ll probably head up to the Adirondacks again in August,” Gabe’s mom says.

“Nice,” Emily says, a little wistfully, wishing they’d invite her to join them. If only they would invite her family back; there, in that wood-frame house, amid the tall trees, on the rocks overlooking Lake Champlain, Gabe would remember his love for her.

After dinner, Gabe and Emily are supposed to meet up with his friends, and once they’re outside and on the sidewalk, he says, “I have to tell you something,” and for a moment she dares to think he’s going to open up and go back to being the old Gabe, the one from the Adirondacks, and say he loves her or that he’s sorry he kept her waiting at the T station.

“What?” she asks eagerly.

“One of my friends managed to get some pot for tonight,” he says. “It’s kind of a big deal, because we’ve all been wanting to try it. Is that OK with you?”

“Sure,” she says. She’s never been offered pot before, and she’s curious to try, but mostly just excited to have another thing to add to her list of experiences, like French kissing. Maybe if they get stoned it will be easier to talk to each other and to fool around.

By the time they meet his friends at a playground, it is almost dark. Two girls and two guys are waiting; one of the guys is Dan and the other is Kyle, their drug supplier, who is short and stocky, but kind of cute. The girls are Jen and Rachel, and Emily tries to remember if she’s seen any of their names in Gabe’s letters. They’re pretty, and they’re both wearing jeans, which makes Emily feel too dressed up in my miniskirt, my legs too exposed.

“Emily is visiting from Pittsburgh,” Gabe announces. “She’s my mom’s best friend’s stepdaughter. She’s a sophomore.”

Shouldn’t they already know who she is? Shouldn’t he be referencing their time together in the Adirondacks, instead of just referring to her as his mom’s best friend’s stepdaughter?

“So, have you tried pot before?” Rachel asks eagerly.

Emily is pleased that she looks more experienced, that she could pass for someone who’s tried pot. She’s tempted to lie and say yes, but she’s a bad liar and besides, what if she said yes and then when they saw she didn’t know how to roll a joint, she’d look stupid?

“No,” she says, “but I’ve always wanted to try.”

“You probably would have written to me about it if you had,” Gabe says, in a tone that almost feels a little mean, and is Emily imagining him and Dan sharing amused looks?

She blushes. “I’m a compulsive letter writer,” she announces to the group. “It’s kind of like an addiction. When my friend Karen was at camp for a month, I sent her like six letters.”

Actually, she only wrote Karen two letters, but Gabe doesn’t need to know that, and she don’t want everyone here to think she’s some crazy stalker girl.

“Better that than being addicted to drugs,” Kyle says.

“Yeah, maybe I should do a 12-Step Program, Letter Writers Anonymous,” she say.

“You could get a chip for each week you go without writing a letter,” Jen laughs. Emily smiles at her, grateful that she thinks she’s funny. Would the two of them be friends if Emily lived here? Would she be cool enough to be part of this group?

“Well, don’t write to anyone about tonight,” says Kyle, the drug supplier. “I just got this stuff from my older brother, and I don’t want to get arrested.”

“Yeah, like the police have nothing better to do than intercept the mail to catch some teenagers smoking pot,” Gabe says.

“Shh,” Rachel says. “Do you want the whole neighborhood to hear you?”

They sit down at a picnic bench, Emily between Gabe and Jen, and she feels a delicious thrill of excitement as Kyle takes out a small blue ceramic pipe and a plastic baggie filled with what looks like oregano.

After carefully arranging the pot in the pipe, Kyle lights it with a Bic lighter and takes the first hit, inhaling deeply then passing it to Dan, who coughs on his hit and then passes it to Jen. “Am I holding it right?” she asks Kyle. “Is it still lit?”

Emily is glad she’s not the only one who’s doing this for the first time and that no one expects her to know how to hold the pipe. Jen takes two gulps – Kyle admonishes her for not holding it in long enough – and then she passes it to Emily. The red embers burning at the end of the pipe remind Emily of the flickering fireplace flames in the Adirondacks. She cautiously breathes in, and the fragrant smoke tickles her throat. She holds her breath, trying not to exhale too soon, wondering how long it will take to feel any effect.

Off in the distance, there’s the faint sound of a siren.

“Oh my god!” Rachel shrieks. “It’s the cops!”

“It’s nowhere near us,” Gabe says. “Don’t be such a spaz! It’s probably just an ambulance or fire engine.”

Emily hopes Gabe notices how calm and mature she is being by contrast. But Dan looks uneasy, and says. “Just to be safe, let’s go to the Cypress Street Playground.”

They take off through the darkness, half-walking half-jogging, Emily the only one who has no idea where they’re going or how far it is. What would happen if the cops caught them, she wonders. Would everyone make a run for it, and she’d just have to stay close to Gabe so as not to get lost? Or would they all get hauled into the police station? Would her parents find out? She feels strangely calm at the prospect. Is the pot already kicking in, or is it just because she doesn’t live here and doesn’t really know anyone here except Gabe, so it all feels kind of surreal?

At Cypress Street, Kyle sits at the bottom of a slide and takes out the pipe and lighter, and everyone gathers at his feet, sitting cross-legged on the wood chips, which is tricky in a miniskirt. It’s odd to be at a playground in the dark, with no children around, the equipment still and quiet. After everyone takes two more hits, Jen says, “I think I’m feeling it,” and everyone else murmurs in agreement. Emily can’t tell if she feels anything or not and is not sure if she inhaled properly.

Gabe and Rachel get up to ride the swings, and Emily wonders if something is going on between them. Kyle lies on his back, saying something about looking at the stars, and Dan lights a cigarette. Emily suddenly feels very lonely and wishes she were in Pittsburgh with her own friends.

“Do you know the Other Emily?” she asks Jen. “The one Gabe dated in eighth grade?”

“Emily Shteyner? No, she goes to a different high school,” Jen says. “But I’ve heard she’s a bitch.”

Emily wonders if Jen has heard anything about *her*.

“Let’s go to 7-11,” Kyle says. “I think I have the munchies.”

On the way there, Emily watches Gabe and Rachel, trying to determine if they are just friends or if it’s something more. She wants to ask Jen, but she’s not sure if she can trust her or not. The 7-11 is startlingly bright, and they spend a long time walking up and down the aisles, trying to decide what snacks to buy, finally settling on a big bag of pretzels and a bag of M&Ms, which they take to yet another playground. Gabe sits down on a bench, and Rachel plunks down next to him before Emily can. Emily sits on her other side, and Jen squeezes in next to her.

“Do you think the clerk suspected anything?” she asks, giggling.

“You’re so paranoid!” Dan says, and Kyle points out that paranoia is a sign of being stoned. Is that why Emily is worried about Gabe and Rachel, is she just being paranoid? Does she still have a chance of fooling around with Gabe? Maybe he is just shy about acting like a couple in front of his friends.

A little after midnight, the group disbands, and Gabe and Emily walk back, finally just the two of them, to his apartment. It’s dark and quiet inside, everyone has gone to bed, except for Chekhov, who jumps up on them as they open the door.

Gabe leads Emily to his room and turns on the light, and for a minute she thinks it is because he wants to hang out with her, but he says, “I’m sharing with Jason tonight so you can have my room. My mom made it up with new sheets for you.”

“Oh, thanks,” she says, and sit down on the edge of his bed, hoping he’ll sit down next to her. “Sorry you have to give up your bed for me.”

“It’s not a big deal,” he says. He walks over to his dresser and takes out some clothes. Emily fiddles with her hair, taking it out of the ponytail and then putting it back in. Emboldened

by the pot, or at least the knowledge that anything she does can later be blamed on the pot, she joins him at his dresser and stands close enough so that her bare legs can feel the denim of his jeans. She lifts her head up slightly, like that day in the rain by Lake Champlain, and closes her eyes, hoping he will kiss her. But he doesn't. She blushes, wondering how pathetic she looked with her eyes closed.

“You don't like me anymore, do you,” she says, looking at the floor, spotting a small dustball under his desk chair.

“Not like *that*,” he says. “I've got to go to bed.”

But you said you loved me, she wants to say. He leaves the room, and she wonders, Is it because of Rachel? Is it because she's too similar to The Other Emily? Is it because she wrote too many letters? Was it something she wrote? She looks around the room, tempted to snoop. Her fingers itch to open his desk drawers, his dresser drawers, to rifle through his closet. Is there a diary somewhere? Are there love notes from Rachel? But mostly what she wants is to find her own sent letters and take them back, to smuggle them out in her backpack. They're so close, she can almost feel their presence. If she goes through them, maybe she'll find the thing that she shouldn't have said, the thing that made him stop loving her.

She looks under the bed, but all she sees are some old soccer shoes and a lone white sock. She opens the top desk drawer, but there's nothing there except some receipts, coins and a pen. How is she going to get through the rest of the night, and then how will she face Gabe in the morning over breakfast? Maybe she should sneak out, take the T back to her mother and stepfather's hotel in Cambridge, but that would be too humiliating having to explain to them what happened.

Part of her yearns to start another letter now: She longs for the familiar comfort of the pen between her fingers, of writing “Dear Gabe” at the top, and then filling the page with

whatever pops into her head. But she can't write to him again. Ever. She tiptoes out in the darkness to the living room, where Chekhov is sleeping on the sofa. She curls up next to him, rubs her face against his fur, and lets the rhythmic up-and-down of his breathing put her to sleep.