

Erika Brown and the Year that Never Happened

What Erika hadn't gotten in the whole four years of high school was a relationship which made her feel encouraged about boys. There'd been one or two she'd liked for a while. John Wu had been alright until she realized he was never going to stop with his jokes that sucked big time and there's been that thing with Jared who okay, was smart, but immaturity wouldn't begin to describe it. While everyone was anguishing about where they'd gotten in or hadn't all she'd had to say was "When I get there can I meet a grown up? No freshmen. At least a junior, someone who's got it together? And please, God, a guy who isn't a bro!"

But now she was here, two months later and it would have been a whole lot better if Lizette was somehow there--and/or Brittany and/or Meredith even had road tripped over, up, or down, depending on the geography. It was her birthday weekend after all. Saturday, October 26, just a night away from turning 18. But not only was it impossible for the old crowd to come, her new friends at college were either sick, road tripping themselves, or cramming for a last midterm. So instead, she was at a party Friday, the night before her birthday, with Jolay, a girl from her dorm suite who didn't seem to understand some pretty basic stuff.

Within twenty minutes Jolay had entirely deserted her to be all 'wow, man' with some complete jerk, even though Erika had been mouthing 'aspirin!' to Jolay to no avail. *Aspirin* was for 'lose this one,' *That Bio Test is going to be a snap* meant 'let's stay a little longer,' and '**Two Aspirin**' meant 'Help!' Jolay sure couldn't stick to a plan and plans were how you got what you wanted to happen.

She certainly wasn't going to be shown down by any of the men in her family. She'd studied until her high school average had clocked in at a 97—just as high as her genius eldest

brother. Likewise, she'd racked up major points in community service for her killer college application. But she did truly believe in service, making things better for society. She already decided after her undergrad, she'd apply for a master's in public health. Eventually she'd run a hospital if things worked out. In the meantime, she'd had to do a lot of navigating around all the aggressive burping, damp towels, and boys' clubbing that living with three brothers entailed, loving family or not.

"When I come over I feel like I'm visiting the zoo. Especially at feeding time," Lizette used to say.

"Try living it!"

"But as the only girl, don't you get to lay down the rules?"

Erika was no cupcake. For one thing, she alone had gotten a bat mitzvah--at her own insistence. "You really want one?" her mother queried, since the family had only haphazardly attended services at either the Episcopalian church or the Reform synagogue and not in a while at either. "You know your father and I don't want you to feel obliged to choose one side over the other. We want all you kids to come by your spiritual decisions naturally, when you're ready." Like their parents, neither Horatio nor Julius nor Terrence were interested in organized religion, but Erika wasn't going to miss out on anything, past or future.

"I *am* ready, a bat mitzvah is how you become an adult, Mom. There's no point in doing it when you're *older!*" Erika had answered in that voice of unassailable authority that only a 6th grade girl can pull off. Her mother, after getting over the shock of having a child mature way ahead of schedule, admitted to being quite moved, even impressed. She wasn't worried one bit about Erika and said so. As for Erika herself, proof of spiritual gravitas was an advantage she wasn't passing up.

Meanwhile, Jolay was clutching a red Solo cup of piss beer while she smiled at everything this square-jawed guy was going on about. Bungee jumping. *Who did that anymore?* How he'd had his stomach pumped for alcohol poisoning when he was a freshman. Like it was an adventure instead of him being rescued from accidental suicide.

"You're not one of those boring girls that don't know how to party, are you?" he asked Jolay as he maneuvered vodka into two shot glasses he had in one hand while just managing to pin his beer bottle to his stomach with an elbow.

"Oh, no. Hell, no!" Jolay said, flicking her hair back practically into Erika's eyeball. She didn't seem to notice that the guy's eyes didn't even meet her face, but angled straight down at her chest while he thrust the shot glass right to her breastbone instead of into her hand.

"Jolaaay," Erika repeated, with gritted teeth, into her ear, 'asp—"

"Oh, Kevin? This is my friend? Erika? We're suitemates."

"Hi." Erika happened to know that Jolay had never done shots in her life, nor weed, nor gotten seriously naked with anyone. Prior to September she'd been practically Amish. "Can you help me find some *aspirin*?"

"oh sure, give me a sec," and rummaged in her purse, retrieving a foil-backed mini pack of tablets up and into Erika's unwilling fingers. How dense could you be? There were more promising prospects in the next room over--right where the music was.

"Don't you move an inch now, you hear—I'm grabbing us some more," Kevin said, eyeing the backwash in his bottle.

"I can come with—" Jolay offered.

“No, no. Right there, stay there. Just. Like. That,” he said, cupping his hands right at the level of Jolay’s breasts as though he were already going to give them a honk, then strode off to the garbage can loaded with ice and beers.

“Are you serious? *This* guy?”

“I’m just trying to have fun. I think he likes me. He plays first string. You can tell.” Jolay was turning out to be an idiot. “Don’t worry, Er. I *got* this,” and extended her hand and her attention towards a new red cup coming her way. *Great, what am I supposed to do with the freakin’ aspirin?*

Erika walked over to the guy who was deejaying in the next room. It was good stuff, his own playlist. He even slid in a heavy bass, vintage blues track amidst the smorgasbord of electronica, grunge bands, and hip hop. His name was Lucas. “Erika, you said? With a ‘k’ or a ‘c’?” *That was a good sign.* They were talking in snatches between tracks. At one point, over a long fade out she told him about her pack of brothers, whom she felt lashed to on the family ship mast.

“Hey, I’ve got you beat. Four sisters!” he shouted as the music launched into a grunge flare.

“All in the same house?” Erika shouted back.

“Yup. Two are my blood--”

“What?” the music was even louder. Lucas mouthed “Wait—two minutes. Stay here,” and held up two fingers in confirmation. Okay, she nodded. He grinned. Definitely not ugly. Not at *all*, if a little short. Thoughtful looking. She stayed by the speakers, wondering how smart he might be. And no bro vibe at all!

When her eldest brother Horatio started working on his geology PhD at Stanford, this had included fact-finding field trips to incredibly uncomfortable places. Deserts and swamps. Last winter he'd gone off to Antarctica with a bunch of other rock star nerds—exclusively boys—measuring ice core samples for prehistoric plankton. Geologic time. Climate shift. Horatio himself tilted towards the idea that men were naturally dominant in the field, that women weren't usually cut out for “real” science.

“How's it discrimination if they don't even want to get in the game? I'll bet you can't name even one of your friends that wants to do what I do. Are they really even trying?”

“Horatio! If you were honest or informed you'd know men rig the system so women are automatically screened out and discouraged—there's a hundred proven studies on this. Science is even worse than Hollywood, playing boys club against women!”

And then youngest brother Terrence jumped in, gleeful-eyed, chanting “Feminazi, Erika's a feminazi!”

She had perfected the Withering Stare, which had been effective so far at school, but when that failed to make Terrence shut up and she was feeling particularly disgusted, she'd trip the power switch on the PlayStation so he'd lose his latest progress in his game.

It was Julius, a year older, whom she was closest to. Everyone called him *The Beast*. He was born weighing an inexplicable twelve pounds and continued until he ended up a mini King Kong. He could eat four full-size hamburgers, with all the fries, and feel fine. He landed on the football team in only tenth grade, made All Star. Not much of a talker, Julius would sometimes pick Erika up and wing her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. He would do that to their mother as well, laughing at her shrieks of “Put me down this minute!” Just a couple months earlier Julius had sprinted into the middle of the family end-of-summer barbeque and grabbed

their mother in one arm and his sister in the other, hoisting them up with a huge, exuberant grin. Their feet hadn't even trailed the ground. *I only don't mind this because it's Julius. It just doesn't occur to him to say he loves us*, the realization occurring in that strange, disembodied way when it seems as though you're watching a movie of your own life while it's happening.

Lucas reappeared, with bottles of Corona, lime slices tucked into their necks. "Time for a switch off anyway," he said as he slipped his iPad into a slim backpack and nodded goodbye to the new DJ. Erika and Lucas wandered out to a back porch, a dilapidated bench or two, and a dim exterior light.

"So, four sisters?"

"Yeah, two blood, two step, me in the middle just trying to my head above water," Lucas leaned back against the porch rail. He sure wasn't like her brothers, nor other guys she could think of. He was open. Calm. Erika sat up on top of the wide flat porch railing, swinging her legs idly. He took a long pull on his beer. Erika did the same. They both paused at the exact same time, which was funny. They laughed, but neither of them said anything right away. She was having a really nice time. Special even. She thought about what kissing him would be like, his tongue in her mouth, taking their clothes off... Somewhere into this sudden, 15-second blurry fantasy, around the point she was imagining his penis inside of her as they moseyed into discussing movies, a little about his own movie short he'd shot over the summer. From there the conversation migrated towards what was home, what was adventure, what did they expect from their futures.

"I mean, any day could turn out shitty, but every day *can* be a great day. You just don't know what's going to happen tomorrow or what you're going to feel about what happens." He squinted into the darkness past the tree trunks. "You think you're going to know how you'll feel,

but you just don't. You don't know how you'll feel until you get there. That's what's interesting. I think, anyway. You?"

"I know what's going to happen tomorrow," she cut in playfully.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Uh, huh!" She pushed back a curl of hair behind her ear. He reached forward and pulled it out again, lightly but meaningfully. The outline of his lips was distinct. She was about to tell him that tomorrow was going to be a great, wonderful, get-on-with-my-future, turn-18 kind of day, when his phone buzzed.

"Shit!" He tensed up, walked to the end of the porch, curled into his phone. She could hear fragments. *"Talk to me, talk...No, really...don't do anything. Promise...no...wait till I get there.. you'll be okay...wait...I'm coming."*

"Hey, I've got to check in on a friend. They've got problems. Won't be too long. We could meet up in a bit." He looked shy suddenly. "You want to?" When she nodded he passed his phone to her so she could key in her number, his hand grazing hers, warm. Natural. She leaned forward to pass the phone back, he leaned forward to take it, their mouths meeting close enough to just touch, like a promise for the real kiss that seemed sure to be coming later. Right now he had to go. "Text you soon, ok?"

"Sure. I should really check on *my* friend anyway," Erika told him. Lucas vaulted over the porch rail in one lithe move, smiled back at her and melted into the rustling darkness. It took her a while to find Jolay. She was still with that same dude who had his arm hooked over her shoulder while she just stood there, smiling like she was gonna get a gold star for it.

"Hey, it's the roomie!" and he laid his other arm heavily across the back of Erika's neck. "Yo!" he shouted out into the room. "Look! I got two! I got me two of 'em!"

“No, you don’t!” Erika pulled his arm off and put her own around Jolay to break up the assumption. “You don’t *have* either of us. Come on, Jolay.”

"Sounds to me like you girls need something," he said, meaningfully.

"Actually, we don't need you at all." The dude narrowed his eyes, stepped back.

“You two got some *girlfriend* game going on?” he shouted this even louder than his first announcement. A couple of heads swiveled. “That's ok as a warmup, but this ain’t the lesbo house, ladies. The real thing is getting it on with a man!”

“Thanks a lot, Erika. This is super embarrassing,” Jolay hissed, clearing a distance.

“Listen, little dick,” said Erika. People paused in their conversations at that, but all Erika was aware of was the three of them and an ancient poster of Pulp Fiction taped to the wall by the front door, the one with Uma Thurman staring out with a challenging eye. Someone with a magic marker had drawn strategic arrows and predictable comments all over it. “The only beef you have, *Kevin*, is in your head. Bet you can’t even deliver. Here’s some Cialis for whenever you find someone that desperate,” and she took the aluminum foil-backed tab of aspirin out of her jeans pocket and flicked it at him. There were murmurs, gasps, laughs. “She got you, dude!”

Before Erika could beat an exit, a bunch of guys swarmed up the steps and into the door where they were standing.

“Yo, Kevin!” said one of the tallest.

“Yo, wassup?”

“Yeah, Peter said you guys would be here,” said another, looking around at the scene.

There were nearly as many newcomers as there were already in the house, wedging Erika, Jolay and another girl as tight as packing material.

“Where’s the beer at?”

“Looks pretty lame here,” someone shouted. “Beer’s nearly out.”

“Hey Robbie—you’ve got a car—supposed to be a helluva good kegger up at Coster.”

“I’m down!” The music had disappeared and now it was just voices, and doors opening or closing. The party split like an amoeba into twos and threes and fours of deserters, dispersing so quickly that the girls hadn’t been able to fold in with any group.

“Well,” Jolay said brightly when they were out on the sidewalk, “we can go find another party, too.” There was no message yet on Erika’s phone from Lucas, but it had only been an hour.

Erika wished Lizette had magically shown up--she had a talent for always figuring out where the best events were happening, but a lot of help that was, with her being over in France, for what two months already? This was some flaky version of a gap year. Fine, let her go wear a beret under the Eiffel Tower and act like she wasn’t a tourist.

The trees were rustling again. Erika felt her skin pick up, just a little. The party house they had been at was the farthest point from the main campus. Not *that* far, and only dark because the last two street lamps had been on flickering off. Finally they passed the maple trees whose heavy leaves had shrouded out the moon. The emergency call box at the intersection had a curling *Out of Order* sign taped to it.

Their dorm was on the west side of the quadrangle, past the science complex. It was 1:20. Erika texted Lucas to say that she was heading back to her room, hoped everything was all right with his friend. She did not suggest meeting up Saturday because that sounded too interested and Erika didn’t do needy, even when it was going to be her birthday. It sucked if you had to go around dropping big hints. Birthdays were one of the few things other people should plan for you.

A car slowed, its beams lopsided, one bright, one dim.

“Hey, it’s them! It’s those guys, those friends of Kevin’s,” said Jolay, looking relieved, “Now the night won’t be a waste.” Robbie was at the wheel, urging them to pile into the packed car. Jolay just barely squeezed herself next to the one other girl inside, shrugged when Erika didn’t follow her. “See you later, Er.” The dented Corolla lumbered off. It had been Erika’s idea to find a party in the first place, and even if it hadn’t been a wretchedly stupid idea to go off with a bunch of guys you didn’t know, there hadn’t been one smidge of room for Erika in that beater car.

She kept walking in the direction of her dorm, part of a triad of residences that fanned out in a semicircle, creating a common lawn. There were speakers blaring and people about, but at this distance they were small silhouettes against the light of the walkway lamps. Hard to tell if she even knew them.

Something like loneliness seeped in. She was only four hours from home, only nine weeks into the semester, she’d spent just as long at summer camp and never had a twinge. But she sure wasn’t having a good time at all in these first new hours of October 27th that, technically constituted her birthday already. What a freakin’ difference a day did make. A couple of hours ago she had someone she wanted to kiss more than anyone she’d ever met. Within minutes of meeting Lucas she knew he was exactly the kind of person she’d been waiting for. Now all that seemed to hinge on a text that still wasn’t coming. She wedged her phone more securely into her back pocket, fished her key out and headed for home. Well, not home, but you could call the dorm base. All she had to do was cross over the big lawn, pass the people goofing around, open the front door. But suddenly she found herself face to face with Kevin. What on earth was he doing there?

“Ho, ho, ho! It’s Little Lezzie.”

“Oh, please! You wish. Get over yourself.” He reached his hand out tentatively, touched her shoulder, kept her from leaving.

“Say, where’s your friend?”

“Not here. Duh.”

“Ditched you, huh?”

“You’re not with *your* pals, are you?” He looked stung, stunned even, as though he hadn’t quite realized that his friends had abandoned him. Erika felt an odd ping of compassion for him, that he was lonesome—clueless, swaggering *boor* that he was. Maybe if he could just get himself educated? But he was still holding onto her shoulder. She pushed away. Every time she tried to get past he loomed again. “Very funny, now quit blocking me, this isn’t football.”

“No, but we can still play a game.” Kevin whisked her off the ground in a sideways sort of hug as if she were in fact a football, her right hand which was holding the dorm key was pinned against his ribs. She tried to slog him with her free arm but he closed his sizable fingers over that one too. In the near distance the lawn people were still falling down and laughing.

Now that he had Erika by both hands, he started to swing her in a big fast circle the way you do with little kids so their legs fly out. “Put me down, you moron!” She tried to kick him, but even drunk he was too quick for her. And still they were in circles, and still she was airborne. He was squeezing her hands so hard they turned into fists. “You’re hurting me! Let go!” It was unbearable. Erika finally landed a kick on his kneecap with enough vigor to make him lose his grip on one of her hands. Bad luck for him—that was the one with her house key in it—she raked his arm with the serrated edge of the key with all the force she could muster.

“Mother *Fucker!*” and she was let go in a tumble but not before he’d chucked her hard under her chin, kind of how you’d serve a volley ball, her tongue getting viciously caught between her teeth. “Goddam crazy bitch!” Erika pushed herself up onto her hands and knees from where she’d been dumped onto the asphalt. Blood and saliva pooled out of her mouth onto the pavement. One of her lower teeth felt loose. Her tongue was a sear of deep fire. Kevin was clutching the edges of the jagged cut on his forearm together in disbelief. He looked down at her, his face screwed up hard.

“Nobody’s *ever* going to fuck you—you’re not even hot.”

Sometime later she was on the floor leaning back against her bedframe, holding a bag of ice on her face. Her tongue felt like a harpooned whale. By midday her parents would be calling her, expecting bubbly: what were her celebration plans? Had their present arrived? If Lizette was finished being mad at her, she was sure to call when Erika would be asleep, never registering that Paris was fully six hours ahead.

Horatio was still in the South Pole but Terrence would text her a big handful of ironic emojis if their mother reminded him. Julius would undoubtedly send her an e-Card with a lame joke that would make her laugh despite herself. But that was all a basket full of cozy that wasn’t going to do shit. They’d failed her, all of them! The phone rang. It was Lucas. She didn’t answer it. She’d sound like an idiot, like a stroke victim, if she tried to form any words and she didn’t want him to hear her like that. It would send him running.

Later, still some hours before the sun rose, Jolay would stumble in, step out of her shoes and then lurch to the bathroom to go heave the entire contents of her stomach. “I am never, ever going to do that again.” Actually, Jolay would end up doing exactly that again, drinking too much and throwing up for several parties to come.

Whereas Erika, well, she *recused* herself from everyone in her suite, on her floor, all of Saturday. She texted those friends elsewhere on campus who had hinted at making her a late birthday celebration that she'd gone home for the weekend. She sucked on large cups of crushed ice snagged from the dining hall. She didn't unwrap the box her parents sent, even though she knew it would be something thoughtful and desirable. She saw but did not open the e-Card from Julius. She faked herself into sleep until it was no longer her birthday, but Sunday. Homework. Sucked on more ice crush. Headed out to class on Monday as usual. By the time she had crossed the quadrangle and gotten halfway into her sociology classroom she passed out from low blood sugar but she still wouldn't talk, not even to the guys on the EMS team.

Her mother was beside herself with concern. "Daddy and I are going to drive up to the college tomorrow if you don't tell us what's going on with you," after Erika had declined the fifth parental call with the same explanatory text "*still cramming for an exam, will call later.*" Then Erika watched her own fingers, as though they belonged to someone else, typing the response to Lucas's two messages. The one thing she could still feel from the inside of herself was when he'd pulled that lock of hair forward so delicately. She didn't want to lose that too. But instead of keying in "sure, I could meet you today" or even "something bizarro happened after you left and I don't know what to do" like she wanted to say, instead her fingers were typing "*great to meet u. It's like u r the brother I actually wanted.*" Her fingers pushed 'send,' while her heart panged. A small lie compared to how she was lying to everyone else. Now he'd never call her, not romantically, but at least she'd never have to wonder if it was just her liking him so much *and* Lucas just being comfortable talking to girls rather than actually wanting her like she wanted him *and* she certainly didn't want to be Lucas's rescue project, *and* how could she even describe the whole Kevin thing anyway when she had no words for what happened *and Oh, God!*

When her mouth hurt less, she called her parents and told them she'd had a little freak accident on the gym equipment. Sorry she'd been kind of weird, but she was fine. She loved what they sent her (*she still couldn't bring herself to open the package*) Despite her text, Lucas did actually call a couple of times but they couldn't find their footing, not like that lovely in-sync hour on the back porch. Once they even coincided in the dining hall, sharing a table for the length of a coffee and a perfectly friendly chat that was a thin ghost of the one they'd had at the party. She continued to earn A's the rest of the semester, notwithstanding how off her game she was the day she caught sight of Lucas right before finals. He'd been all arm in arm with another girl.

Slowly that whole year she started to get thicker, rounder, more substantial. It started with eating nothing but ice cream for two weeks, craving the cold and then craving the sweet. Then other things, especially at night, when she was studying. In spring semester, around the week Erika hit 25 pounds, Lizette finally video-ed in from somewhere on location with some French film director and his arthouse bullshit movie. It wasn't like Lizette had the patience to become an actress. The connection was glitchy but Lizette still came down hard.

“Okay, what's happening, Erika? This can't be good. You're piling it on.”

“Freshman fifteen, I guess.” She could just as well ask what was going on with *her*, bagging out on her admission to Brown, zinging between Florida and France like a ping pong ball, never standing still long enough to make much sense. Erika could have been turning this kind of conversation on her. That, or she'd have stuck her elbow in L's ribs until she fessed up what she was being weird about. Or L would have turned her laser beams on her. Tit for tat. They'd always been a pair. Hell, they'd been a corporation.

“Er! I know you and I know what I’m looking at. This isn’t the freshman 15 pizza party pounds we’re talking about. You’re the one majoring in Health Sciences. You’re scaring me. What are you depressed about?”

“I’m fine. Don’t have time to be depressed, L!” And then the connection froze and it took several minutes for Lizette to change phones and the wifi to come back on. But just like what happened with Lucas, here was another person she *really* wanted to tell and she *really* couldn’t even begin. She wished like fuck that Lizette could just be there, hanging out in her room, so they could argue and paint their nails and talk about the various ways they were going to take over the world, just like old times. She wished like fuck she could even get the words out. Maybe her being there would be even worse though. She was dimly aware of the sensation, but not the actual thoughts, of having multitudinous layers of gauze draped around and around her whole body, like in a dream sequence--and all the sound was muffled by the cloth.

Anyway, like she told Lizette, she was had a lot of shit to take care of. Soon enough by mid March she was co-chairing one, then two student clubs, putting out applications for summer internships before anyone else did. She may have had to buy looser clothes, but she’d gotten everything so pre-loaded and on-track it was like she was a sophomore already.

Because when you got down to it, just like the floors of certain tall buildings that go directly from 12 to 14, bypassing the jinx number in between, Erika did skip a grade that fall. Long after her birthday weekend she told anyone who asked that she was nineteen, a year older than she actually was. Her eighteenth year had simply never occurred. Collapsed into a single freeze frame, then erased. Everyone knew how motivated she was, so they weren’t too surprised that she planned a way to graduate an entire year ahead of schedule. By then, Erika thought, everything would have evened out, right? And then it wouldn’t really be that much of a lie.

