

Eighteen

You are eighteen and sitting in a Health class full of tenth grade boys who laugh at the word “vagina,” as if having one is the funniest thing in the world. Mr. Harrison has given the class a milk crate full of silicone tits. The assignment is to learn how to check for breast cancer. The instructions on the half-sheet of paper Mr. Harrison gave you are vague, and you start to wish it wasn’t September, but maybe March, when graduation would be a few quick months away. You want to be done with high school, even if it means leaving your father and mother behind.

Your usual partner for assignments, George Sanders, slams the milk crate on your desk, and grabs a D-cup. He gives you a Crest-white smile that would’ve been attractive, but somehow the tit in his hand makes his smile seem filmy.

“Is this what they feel like, Piper?” he asks. He’s a junior, but the year he has on the tenth-graders didn’t lend him any maturity, just more facial hair.

“Don’t be stupid,” you say. You keep your posture high, though, because you’re older, and experienced in matters of sex, even though you haven’t experienced anything in two months. Chris got bored with you, and the two of you “broke up,” even though you weren’t dating, just “hooking up.” It still stings to think about, but you’re doing well by ignoring him in the hallway.

“I’m curious,” says George, “You’ve got a pair.” You wonder if George could really be that curious about breasts because you’ve seen him going around with a couple girls in school, especially since you’ve been noticing him in the hallways. You can’t tell if you’ve started noticing him because you’ve gotten to know him better, or if the universe is flinging the two of you together. You have to admit that he does have the kind of gravity that makes you want to become part of his orbit.

But instead of telling him that you find him attractive enough to have had the opportunity to fondle a few girls, you sigh and say, “Turn around, George,” because you are too old for this. You should’ve taken Health two years ago, when you were a sophomore. That way you could’ve laughed at Richard Tek balancing the implants on his head.

“Piper, you know what I was thinking?” asks George, “You and I should hang out some time.”

“Does your thought have any correlation to the tit in your hand?” you ask. But you know George’s curiosity about you has more to do than with the silicone tit. George, just like everyone in high school, knows that you had sex with Chris because he told everyone about the way you dropped your virginity like a hot potato with a spider on it. You didn’t mind that everyone knew back then, because you walked down the hallway with Chris and somehow standing together as a unit made the glances hurt less. Now that you are alone, you look back on your decision, and it hurts your eyes. George has the right-wrong idea about you.

“What do you think?” asks George.

You shrug, because you feel indifferent about getting to know George that way. There is no special experience for you to lose, because you gave everything you had to Chris. He’s already explored his freedom with three girls; what have you been doing? Sitting on the couch in your flannels, watching sci-fi movies.

“Richard, take those breasts off your head!” says Mr. Harrison.

The laughter of the class gives you the perfect shade to hide behind.

“I’ll go out with you, I guess,” you say.

“Yeah?” George smiles at you. “Right on. Your place or mine?”

The laughter fades, and Mr. Harrison passes the milk crate around, lecturing the class about maturity and respect.

“I’ll text you,” you say.

Mr. Harrison flips on the projector and begins to show a slideshow of the human breast. George is finally forced to turn around. At the end of class, you slip out of the room with a quick wave, like the flick of a mermaid’s tail.

You don’t text George on Friday, and you spend most of Saturday morning thinking about the Windex-esque nature in which he asked you out, silicone tit in hand. It starts to occur to you that you’re not doing anything better this weekend, and even if you “hang out” with George, you have no obligation to do anything with him; there is expectation, but no obligation. But you almost want to, because you feel like you should. Chris is making you feel this way, even though he hasn’t talked to you in two months. It’s the rumors that really whisper, about how he fucked Christina Black on top of the high school’s practice field.

But logistically, how would the date work? The idea of going to dinner feels repulsive and extravagant. You would have to get dressed up, and because George doesn’t have his license yet, you’d be the one driving. There’s the factor of gas money, too, and you’re running low on funds because you bought teeth whitening strips a week ago. It is too much work to go to dinner you decide, especially since you’re 40% sure this meeting with George is shallow.

That left your place, or his. Because you hate the idea of being on unfamiliar turf, you send him a text asking, My house? At eight? Then you go to find your mother.

Outside, it is raining the kind of rain that makes the roof rumble. You know she will be in the living room, watching the Hallmark channel, because today is her day off. During the week, she’s the head baker at Icing on Top. She gets up at three in the morning for work, and leaves

before you're awake, and she falls asleep at seven-thirty every night, without fail. You find her on the couch, like you expected, curled up under a blanket.

"Is this the one where the neighbors fall in love with each other during the holidays?" you ask. It is the plot of every Hallmark movie. Almost.

Mom smiles at you, but it looks more like a grimace, because she can't seem to raise the corners of her mouth today.

"Your father hates these movies," she says. "I can only watch them when he's not here."

Both of you know that he's not here a lot. He owns a pretty successful Italian restaurant called Ti Amo down on 9W. Dad doesn't get home until eleven o'clock most nights, and you only really see him in the mornings, because you're up early for school.

On the weekends, you don't see him at all. The only thing in the house that's left of him is the scent of his tomato sauce, that he insists on cooking at the house because he claims the weak flames of the stove make the sauce cook slower, and allow all the spices, garlic and tomato to mature together.

You haven't had a real conversation with your father in weeks, and you're just realizing it now. He doesn't even know that Chris has stopped seeing you. Guilt wrings your heart, and you almost don't ask Mom if George can come over tonight. But your phone rings, and you see that he's agreed to come over.

"Hey, is it cool if my friend comes over tonight?" you ask.

"Who is it?"

You shrug. "George Sanders."

"He's younger than you, isn't he?" Mom has a catalogue of my yearbooks stored in her head for just this occasion. She knew that Chris was on the soccer team before she even met him.

“Just by a year.”

“Are you ready to start dating again?”

Your tongue swells until it hits the ribbed roof of your mouth. Mom doesn't know that you and Chris were never dating, but she knows you had sex, because she picked up your birth control prescription from CVS before you got your license. Again, you feel guilty, and you start to wonder if you're a terrible person for continuing this lie. But you're in too deep now. George is coming over.

“It's not really a date, mom,” you say. People your age don't date anymore. Your generation is afraid of commitment, and you blame Apple for coming out with iPhones too fast.

“What kind of meeting is this then?” asks Mom.

“Just two friends getting together,” you say.

“All right,” Mom says. “But I'm not going to leave you two alone. What time is he coming over?”

“Eight-thirty.”

Mom yawns, and pulls the blanket over her shoulder. You settle deeper into the couch, and try to enjoy watching people falling in love, even though the entire prospect of falling in love seems out of reach, something that people only do in movies.

The movie keeps running, and the sequel is up next. You can't believe any producer would be crazy enough to invest in another romance movie, and yet you can't help but watch. It is seven forty-five before Hallmark releases you from its roses-are-red trance. Mom's soft snores become apparent during the credits. You shake her shoulder. She wakes up, looks at you, but doesn't really see you.

“Go to bed, Mom.” She either forgets George is coming over, or she is too tired to care. Bless her naive soul.

You shut the television and see your reflection. Maybe it’s the dark glass, or maybe it’s the lens of paranoia that comes with a “date,” but you decide George can’t see you this way. You run to the bathroom, and fuss with your hair, scrunching it with mousse until the ends stick to your head. It won’t do. You’ll have to put your hair into a bun and put on more makeup to accentuate your eyes and hide that zit on your temple.

This “date” is exhausting, and it hasn’t even started yet. When George does ring the doorbell at 8:25, you are irritated and sweating from too much hairdressing effort. The sight of George standing on the porch, wrist-deep in his pockets, barely even thrills you. You’re almost blinded by his raincoat, slick and shining from precipitation.

“Come in,” you say. You look into the driveway, but don’t see any lingering car. The first time Chris came over, his mother’s bug-green van sat in the driveway for a minute and a half after he came inside.

“How’d you get here?”

“I rode my bike,” says George. He points to a black Schwinn at the side of the house, glowing with neon racing stripes.

“You rode through the rain just to see me?” you ask. George blushes. Chris never blushed, and you like the way it looks on George. The extra color on his cheeks makes him look angelic, and for a moment you feel like kissing George on his cheek.

You pull him inside. George smells like fresh laundry, and the calm scent cools your nerves. George slides his feet out of his shoes and looks around at the living room to the left and then the kitchen to the right.

“Nice house,” he says. “Thanks for having me over.” You smile and try to lower your eyelids, even though you can feel them widening, because George said the same thing Chris said the first time you “hung out.”

“Do you want to see the living room?” you ask. There is nothing special about the living room; there’s a television, a couch and a loveseat wrapped in battered brown leather, and an armchair whose fabric is pulled from a cat you no longer have. This is where it started with Chris, but you try not to think about it. George is a different person; this night could have many endings, although you’re pretty sure where it’s going to wind up.

He follows you into the living room, nodding as you point out the owl sculpture on the windowsill. You like the way he listens to you, especially since you know that none of these things are why he’s here. You decide to throw him a bone.

“Aside from titty implants, what are you interested in, George?” You plop down on the couch as you ask this, and George sits down next to you, like you planned.

“I’m actually interested in dentistry,” he says.

“Yeah? Tell me about it.” You’ve heard women in your mother’s movies say this, and it sounds right. George thinks it’s funny though, because he laughs, and gives you a look that asks, “Are you serious?” You’re glad when he goes on a rant about the importance of flossing, because you’re sure if you spoke now, you’d tell him to leave.

Your cheeks are still burning, and George is still talking about floss when headlights flood the kitchen. Dad couldn’t be home so soon, could he? You think about Dad walking in on you and George in the dark, on a Saturday night, and the idea humiliates you enough to spring out of the couch cushions and run to the door.

“What’s wrong?” asks George.

You expect to see the headlights switch off and your father get out of the car, but they don't. The car starts backing out of the driveway, headlights still on, and starts down the right side of the road.

"Someone was just turning around," you say. You turn to George, who is standing close enough to give you the sense that you're in the washing machine, getting tossed around by wonderful smelling soap.

"What were you saying about floss?" you ask. George shrugs.

"Nothing important."

He doesn't ask if he can kiss you, like Chris did, but he moves in slowly, giving you plenty of time to ask him to stop, if you want to. You don't. George is sweet, and cute, and knows a lot about floss. You let him kiss you. For a while it feels all right. It isn't the best kiss in the world, but it's familiar enough to make you feel like you have a handle on the situation. George moves his hands up your body, and they work their way onto your breast. He squeezes the right one hard, and if your breast were an implant, it would explode. You don't say anything, because you're afraid it would ruin the moment, and George would leave. You take his hand and move it to the small of your back. He reaches down, and grabs your ass. This is fine, and it hurts less, but it's still not pleasant. He's fondling you mechanically, as if you are nothing but a diagram that has to be touched to fill in the spots. You try to stop thinking about the way he's touching you, and focus on kissing him. It's a fine kiss, nothing wrong with it, but George moves his hand back to your breasts, starts mashing his mouth against yours, and you start to falter because you never kissed this way with Chris. This is new, and the panic makes you sloppy. You try to find footing on his mouth, but your lips keep slipping, colliding with the corner of his

mouth. He starts to bite your lips, which is fine, but his teeth land too hard on your bottom lip, and you taste wet copper.

You pull away. You run into the kitchen and pull off a sheet of paper towel. The paper immediately sticks to the throbbing area, and when you pull the paper towel away, there's a bead of red. George comes into the kitchen, and sees the paper towel.

"Maybe I was a little too rough," says George. "I thought I'd try to be rough about it."

You take a moment to formulate the question in your mind, because you're wondering why George would try something that he's not used to on you.

"What gave you the impression that you have to be rough?" you ask.

"I just thought you'd like that," says George.

Maybe it is the same paranoia that made you think you had to fix your hair, or maybe it is because you know Chris talked about the things you did with him. Either way, you know that George heard that you like it "rough." Either way, you are done with this "date." Your lip and breasts are throbbing.

"I don't feel like having sex tonight," you say.

A knot appears between George's eyebrows. "Did you think we were going to have sex tonight?"

"You didn't think we would?"

George shoves his hands in his pockets. "I didn't come over here to have sex with you, Piper. I just wanted to hang out. Maybe hook up a little bit."

"Hook up," "hang out," and "date" are the three phrases that keep tripping you up.

Hooking up could mean having sex or an innocent kiss. Hanging out might mean meeting with a

group of people or harboring in your parent's basement and fondling each other. And "date"-- you don't even know what that means. You've never been on a real date.

You're feeling stupid, and that is why you ask George to leave. You guess George feels like a piece of meat, and that is why there are no objections. He gets his coat and puts on his shoes.

"I hope your lip feels better."

He shuts the door. You collapse against the cabinet, and sink low, down to the floor. Tears are starting to sting your eyes, but you won't let them out. This night is a stupid thing to cry over, you tell yourself. But in a few minutes, you are crying anyway, because this night isn't about George; it's about Chris. You cry because there is part of you that hurts so much from being "dumped" when you weren't with Chris in the first place. You're ashamed that Chris had as much hold over you as he did. Was there something about you that made him hesitate in beginning a relationship with you? No, that isn't it. You know Chris wants to fuck around; he's fucked around with three people already. Here you are, crying on the kitchen floor. Over what? A relationship that wasn't even real.

You drag yourself off the floor because you start to think you're a little pathetic. The idea of going to sleep doesn't suit you, so you make popcorn and turn on the SciFi channel. By the time the aliens have invaded the White House, you're ready for bed. You've flipped off all the lights in the house when headlights invade the kitchen windows, bright as anything. Dad opens the door a minute later.

"Hey, Piper," he said. "What are you doing up this late?"

Your dad is short, but he's built like a bullet: compact and full of steely muscle. He drops his roll-up canvas of knives on the kitchen table and hugs you. You breathe him in. You can

almost taste the tomato sauce on your tongue, hot and acidic, with full-bodied spices. He strokes your hair the way Chris and then Greg did. Before you're ready to let go, he pulls away from you.

"When did you get to be so big?" he asks.

"While you were working."

His eyes fly over your face, lingering over each feature before moving on to the next. He frowns when he looks at your lip.

"What happened here?" he asks.

"Nothing," you say. It is too late to dwell on things, and you are already moving on from the night; the pain in your lip is already dulling, even though the rose-petal flesh is swollen and bruised.

"Doesn't look like nothing."

"Please, dad. Don't." You're angry with him, because he didn't come home early enough to interrupt tonight's "date." Now he's home, and it's too late for him to do anything. He doesn't even know that George was here. You must look as angry as you feel, because he drops his eyes, and rubs the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry about Chris."

"It's okay." Dad met Chris three times, once the day before Christmas Eve and the other two times on Halloween. You don't remember telling him that your "relationship" ended. Mom must have. Maybe they talked more than you thought.

"Go to sleep, Piper," he says.

You nod and give him another hug, this time catching the raw scent of garlic coming from his neck. The smell was transferred from his hands a second ago, but you imagine he'd

been chopping a clove at Ti Amo and had to scratch an itch on the back of his neck, because you saw him do it a lot when you were young; he was trying to perfect his sauce recipe to open the restaurant. It turned out the ingredients and proportions were always right, but the stove had to be set on low and left to simmer for four hours.

“Good night, dad.” You start for your bedroom, but Dad stops you before you get there.

“What do you want for breakfast tomorrow?” he asks.

“Don’t you have to work?”

“Tony can handle lunch.”

“Pancakes.” Because you can’t remember the last time you had them.

“You got it.”

You start for your bedroom, and this time you make it. The walls are still painted pink, but they’re covered with posters of famous actors and actresses, different pieces of poems that you ripped out of books and pasted on the walls to make new, mutant poems. Your lip throbs, but for the most part, you go to bed feeling better knowing that tomorrow there would be a plate full of buttermilk pancakes, slippery with butter, made by the only man who ever made sense.