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Opening Extract from...

Canary

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I CAN FEEL THE HEAT CLOSING IN

November 27

Hi, Mom. Last night I got arrested. (Sort of.)

I'm writing this so I can sort out the details, just like Dad taught me. He always said things have a weird way of making sense once you write them down. Putting this on physical paper (and not the laptop) for a number of reasons:

1. These days you have to assume that anything you type on a computer or cell phone can be read by some random geek anywhere in the world
2. Nobody can ever see this, and I don't want some random geek trolling for revenge porn yanking it off my laptop
3. Paper burns

I'm addressing this to you because you always said I could tell you anything, no matter how awful. Which brings me back to the (sort of) arrest…

So last night I'm at an off-campus party where everybody's getting wasted because it's their last chance to get wasted before returning home for the long holiday weekend. Pretty much the kind of party you used to warn me about. But don't worry, there are no orgies, no needle-sharing, no Satan worship. Just a bunch of us freshman honors geeks blowing off steam before the last two grueling weeks of final papers (next week) and final

exams (the following). Beers and shots, loud rap music, that kind of thing. But I can't blow off anything because I have to go pick up Dad at this god-awful hour of the morning.

Fortunately, I know how to make a single beer stretch. You'd be proud of me. The past two months of college life have given me the chance to perfect my technique. You simply

1. Take shallow micro-sips
2. Opt for cans over see-through bottles
3. Occasionally fill can with tap water from bathroom sink

Nobody's ever given me shit about being a lightweight. Hey, I've always got a (nearly) full beer in my hand!

Anyway, I'm on a crowded couch when a glass bong starts making the rounds. The couch frame is broken and the cushions have sunk so deep that one good sneeze and I'd knee myself in the face. The dude sitting next to me takes the bong with his two hamburger-patty hands, huffs it, and immediately, chivalrously, offers it to me. He's pretty insistent, like take it, take it, take it. The only thing a happy, stoned drunk wants is to make sure everyone in the immediate vicinity is also happy and stoned and drunk. Nothing against the marah-ju-wanna politically, personally, medicinally. You know Dad's always saying: You want to try something, just bring it home and we'll try it together. (Like that will ever happen.) No, I just hate losing 20 to 30 IQ points in a single puff. Weed is not for me, and I'm not just saying that for your benefit.

Good thing I have strategies for pot, too:

1. Suck in your cheeks to feign inhalation
2. Seal off your windpipe at the same moment

3. Hack, hack, hack like a newbie, complete with slightly bulged eyes that indicate to those around you that you're doing it right/wrong, and you're well on your way to baked-land.

But the strangest thing happens. When the bong comes my way, and I take it in my hands, and all of these eyes are on me, I hear this voice in my head. It tells me that I'm wound up so tight all the gray matter's going to pop out of my skull. I'm supposed to be here partying, and what am I doing? Faking like I'm having a good time. Shit, I'm not even supposed to be here in Philadelphia. I should be fake-getting-high in California. So I press my lips to the opening and when I inhale, I do it for real.

Of course I cough like a newbie; got that part down right. Classmates who hardly ever look at me slap me on the back and shoulders, laughing and yelling their astonishment. I can almost hear them gossiping this coming Monday: Dude, she got sooooo high. And you know what, Mom? Maybe I am, just a little. My skin feels pleasantly warm. The tight little ball in the back of my brain seems to unclench a little. Even my internal give-a-shit-o-meter ticks down a few degrees.

I'm proud of myself. I even follow up with a congratulatory real sip of piss-warm beer.

That's when I notice D. staring at me.

(Not giving his full name here, for reasons that will soon become obvious. No, not because I'm afraid you're going to have him tracked down and killed, Mom. Though if anyone could make that happen, it'd be you.)

Apparently D. caught the whole thing. He nods and gives me a lazy, proud smile. I cough again and try to smile back.

D. weaves his way across the crowded living room, which is when I notice his pants: bright red chinos, topped off with a striped sweater that clings tight to his lanky torso. Few men can pull off red pants; D. is one of those men. Then there's the hat—a 1950s-style Stetson that he doffs as he crouches down. He presses two fingertips against the can like he's taking the beer's temperature and says,

—Sarie Holland, I had no idea you were a nursing major.

I stick out my tongue. But like a stupid schoolgirl I'm thinking, Wow, he actually knows my name. (He even pronounces it the right way.) I cough again.

D. smiles, leans into me.

—Let me get you a cold one. Beer this shitty has to be enjoyed at a certain temperature.

D. tries to grab the can but I lean back and move it just out of reach.

—No, I'm okay, seriously. My dad's plane gets in at 6:30 a.m., which means I have to leave pretty soon anyway.

—Text him now, have him call a car.

—What? No. I'm not making my dad take a cab on Thanksgiving.

—Not a taxi. One of those private cars. Plush leather, wet bar. Let your old man kick back with a bourbon highball!

—What exactly do you think my dad does for a living? Anyway, I've gotta pick up my brother, too.

We have one of those weird moments of silence where the person who breaks it first loses. Surprise, surprise, it's me.

—So are you going home?

—What?

—Are you going home. For Thanksgiving.

—I'm supposed to go upstate to see my mom, then over

to some gated fortress in Jersey to see my asshole dad, but whatever. I'll get there when I get there. Where's your dad flying back from?

—California. Business stuff.

Just speaking aloud the name of the state makes me think about how sunny and eye-poppingly gorgeous Southern California probably is right now, even in the depths of November. Dad has been there since Sunday, another consulting trip—third one this fall. (He's really trying, Mom.) Anyway, Dad traveling means I always have to be home for Marty. But tonight he was invited to a sleepover, leaving me free until the morning. Dad and I made a deal: I could go to the party as long as I didn't get drunk (ha-ha, he knows I've never been drunk) or high (ha-ha…oh shit) and was willing to pick him up from the airport at crazy o'clock in the morning.

—Well…I should go…

—Wait, are you okay to drive?

—I think I'm the only sober one here.

—Hah, you can't fool me, I saw you blowin' it up over there.

—I just did one hit! I'm totally fine. I look fine, right?

D. smiles wide. His eyes are kind of swimmy.

—I'm just fucking with you.

—Asshole.

But I'm smiling too. Like a dork. Another awkward moment of silence as D. seems to roll something over in his mind, rubbing his hands on his thighs.

—Hey.

—What?

—Can I ask you a favor?

Now it's been a long, stressful day in an even longer, stupid-stressful week. I've been up since 4:30 a.m. force-feeding

facts to my eyeballs, processing them, scribbling down neatly ordered sentences that may eventually turn into a coherent paper. (Even my eidetic memory only goes so far.) The half beer I've nursed along with that half-hearted puff from the bong have taken their toll. All I want now is sleep. Sweet, sweet sleep. Just a few hours before I'll have to shower and wash the smoke out of my hair and pull on some clean clothes, then make the drive to the airport.

D. senses none of this. Or if he does, he doesn't care.

—Well, here's the thing, I need to pick up a book from a friend of mine. He's just a couple of blocks from Pat's. Could I maybe get a lift? I'll buy you a cheesesteak for your trouble.

My mind unpacks this favor in pieces. He wants me to

1. Drive him (because I'm obviously sober, and no one else is, least of all D.)
2. Somewhere near Pat's Steaks (which is all the way down in South Philly, while we're currently standing in an off-campus house way up in North Philly)
3. To get a book (never mind that tomorrow's Thanksgiving break, and he'll have all weekend to pick up said book)
4. And my reward is a big greasy cheesesteak (even though I'm vegan)

All of it, I see now, through the golden glow of hindsight, is seven kinds of sketchy. Mom, I'll admit it: In the moment, all I can see is his strong, limber frame beneath his shirt and those goofy red pants.

—Okay, sure, I'll drive you.

Before I know it we're both in the Civic hugging a tight curve on the Schuylkill Expressway as the twinkling skyscrap-

ers of Center City emerge on the horizon. So beautiful this late at night. So weird, having D. in my car. Philly may always be Hostile City to me, but downtown isn't so bad, to be honest. I should hang out down here more. The first month of school it seemed like every other day someone in my nerd herd was making an excuse to take the subway down to Old City or South Street—even though everyone told us that South Street's heyday had come and gone before we were all born. I guess if I'm stuck in this city I might as well make the most of it.

(Sorry, Mom. I swear, I'm over it.)

D. opens my glove box, starts rummaging through the cassette tapes.

—Holy shit, I can't believe you have these! You're into the Clash?

—Uh, yeah.

—That's so fucking cool. Hey, you've even got *Sandinista!* Tell me you have a tape deck in your car…

—Right there.

—Fuck yeah motherfucker!

D. slams in reel one and after a few seconds of awkward tape hiss, "Magnificent Seven" comes on.

Of course the cassette tapes are Dad's. I found them in a plastic container of his old crap and have been listening to them all semester. The Clash, Talking Heads, Television, Lou Reed, the Velvet Underground, the Cure (all of the stuff you used to hate!), and a whole bunch of mix tapes with no liners, so I have no idea what's on them. Some of it I like, some of it sucks. But if D. here wants to mistake me for cool, who am I to stop him? And huge props to you, Mom, for ordering the last Honda Civic that ever came with a cassette player.

—So who do you have for the triple? The three Cs or KGB?

—The three Cs.

The three Cs of the honors freshman triple: Calkins (history), Curnow (philosophy), and Chaykin (lit). The first C is friendly but a tough grader; the second C is incomprehensible but an easy grader; the third C is cryptic and fast-talking and funny and a sadistic grader. I might be looking at my first B. Ever.

—That's really funny you have Chaykin. Is he doing the Lost Generation or the Beats this semester?

—The Beats.

—Have fun with *Naked Lunch*.

—I'm supposed to start reading it over the weekend.

—Ha-ha, you're fuckin' doooooomed.

(D. curses a lot, if you haven't noticed, Mom. With the cute ones, you tend to forgive a foul mouth.)

I steer the Civic to 676, cutting through the guts of the city, whiz under the Ben Franklin Bridge and ride I-95 for literally ten seconds before exiting on Columbus Boulevard, then hang a right on Christian Street. Welcome to South Philly. The streets down here still confuse me, especially the streets around Pat's. D. tells me to just keep going until Ninth. Then a right turn. Then he looks at me. My eyes are focused on the street, but I can feel his stare. I turn down the Clash.

—Well, here's Ninth…

—Hey, look, thanks so much for this, Sarie. I really, really appreciate it. I'll be, like, two seconds.

—Good, because I'll be timing you.

(This is my version of flirting. I flirt about as well as I drink and smoke.)

D. points to a row house that looks way too nice to be a

South Philly crash pad for a bunch of college guys. Maybe they're Penn students or something, with rich parents. Either way, cars are jammed up and down the block, with no visible spaces.

—Where should I park?

—See that valet? Just pull up there and tell him you're waiting for a friend of Chuckie. He'll let you sit, no worries.

At first I think D. is making a reference to some mob movie I've never seen, *The Friends of Chuckie* or some such shit. Takes me a full second before I realize he's serious.

—Wait . . . who?

—That's my buddy. Chuckie. He's worked out a deal with the guy. You can sit there and not have to pay anything. Two seconds! I swear!

D. jumps out of the car and slams the door so hard it makes me flinch. Hate that. After a moment of stunned silence, I steer the Civic a quarter block up and pull over into the valet line, which is busy. A second later I realize I am accidentally cutting into the line. The valet guy in the bow tie and vest sweeps his arm in a sarcastic "after you, ma'am" gesture. I lower my window and feel the tiniest bit absurd asking:

—My friend's a friend of Chuckie?

Astonishingly, dude loses the attitude instantly. He nods and moves on to the next car.

The digital clock on the dash says ten past midnight. It's freezing and crazy windy. At this moment Dad's red-eye has already lifted off, slinging him from lush California back to the grisly East Coast. I have to be at Terminal C in less than six hours. And D. is definitely taking longer than two seconds.

The valet guy, although busy with customers, finds the time to gawk at me, giving me an oh-so-charming smile that show-

cases the shiny black tooth in his upper jaw. (I know how to attract the lookers, right, Mom?) I turn my head and watch customers drift in and out of an old-school Italian restaurant on the corner, which apparently is the reason for all of this traffic. Now, mixed breeds such as myself should not cast ethnic aspersions, but damn, it's like Goombah Fest up in here. Gold chains, blown-dry 'dos, older dudes with dates who could be their granddaughters, town cars and Caddies, the whole nine. Tammy would appreciate this. We should come back sometime just to people watch. (Who I really need to call this weekend. It's getting ridiculous already. I haven't talked to her since Halloween.)

The minutes tick by and, yes, Mom, I know I'm screwed. Another hour for the sandwiches; another thirty minutes back north to campus. I'm not getting home until 2:00 a.m. at least. All for a boy.

I met D. the first week of school, at some honors program social in some pseudo-nightclub on the first floor of the union building. Later I heard that the social was referred to as "Trader Ho's" by the upperclassmen. All of us fresh young geeks on display, ripe for the picking. Turnout for the social was predictably huge. D. was different, though; he kind of just joked around, inviting a group of us over to his off-campus house for some beer—my first ever, by the way. (Dad would be proud.) Some of the other girls from my honors triple, who bragged about drinking beer since sophomore year of high school, were more into the shots of Jack.

D. just smiled at them all, flirted with them equally, including me. Apparently he liked to date freshman girls who had their own cars. To D., the ability to go off campus at will was a magical thing. Word around the honors nerds was that he'd

gotten in some serious DUI trouble in high school and pretty much wouldn't be driving until the end of the second Obama administration.

Not that a carless D. is a bad thing. The dude clearly drinks a lot and smoked his fair share of the wacky weed. The idea of him behind a 2,700-pound motor vehicle frightens me.

After a few more minutes of awkward waiting with the Valet to the Friend of Chuckie, watching sketchy-ass characters come and go, along with the Goodfellas parade up the street, my mind goes back to D., and cars, and weed. Wait wait. What if he's not here picking up a book? Of course he's not here for a book.

This is probably the place where D. scores his weed.

Party's running low, so they ask D. to conjure up some more. He doesn't have a car of his own (and shouldn't be driving anyway) so he finds the only sober person with a car in the general vicinity.

Me.

I feel like a world-class idiot.

So Thanksgiving Eve, as my drug counselor Dad is boarding a plane in California, I'm in South Philly on a drug run.

Happy Thanksgiving, right?

Undercover narcotics officer Benjamin F. Wildey, 32, seated behind the wheel of his unmarked car, maintains a laserlike focus on the front door of the row house. Feels like the city's one big freezer tonight. Not much warmer in this piece of junk hooptie, either. The whole day's been an icy raw mess with rain and sleet and Wildey out on the street for most of it. He glances at his watch. Look at that. Thanksgiving, as of three minutes ago. Time flies when you're posted in your car doing surveillance based on a tip from a couple of desperate snitches.