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Opening Extract from...

Tampa

Written by Alissa Nutting

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tampa

chapter one

I spent the night before my first day of teaching in an excited loop of hushed masturbation on my side of the mattress, never falling asleep. To bed I'd worn, in secret, a silk chemise and sheer panties, beneath my robe of course, so that my husband, Ford, wouldn't pillage me. He always wants to ruin the landscape. I find it hilarious that people think Ford and I are the perfect couple based solely on our looks. During his best man's speech at our wedding reception, Ford's brother said, "You two are like the his-and-hers winners of the genetic lottery." His voice slurring with noticeable envy, he then added that our faces looked Photoshopped. Rather than concluding with any sort of toast, he simply laid the microphone back down on the table after this last line and returned to his seat. His date had a lazy eye we all politely pretended not to notice.

I should find Ford needlessly attractive; everyone else does. "He's *too* good-looking," one of my sorority sisters groaned the night after our first double date back in college. "I can't even look at him without feeling like I'm being punched between my legs." My real problem with Ford is actually his age. Ford, like the husbands of most women who marry for money, is far too old. Since I'm twenty-six myself, it's true that he and I are close peers. But thirty-one is roughly seventeen years past my window of sexual interest.

I suppose in some ways marrying Ford was worth it for the ring alone—it slowed the frenetic pace at which idiot men would

hit on me during daily errands. And of course it was a very nice ring. Ford himself is a cop, though his family has a great deal of money. I hoped his wealth might provide me with a distraction, but this backfired—it left me with no unfulfilled urges except the sexual. Just weeks after our wedding, I could feel my screaming libido clawing at the ornately papered walls of our gated suburban home. At dinner I began to sit with my legs clenched painfully together for fear that if I opened them even the slightest bit, it might unleash a shrill wail that would shatter the crystal wineglasses. This didn't strike me as an irrational belief. The thrum of desire had indeed grown so loud inside me—its electric network toured a constant circuit between my temples, breasts, and thighs—that a moment when lust might be able to operate my labia as a ventriloquist's dummy and speak aloud seemed inevitable.

All I could think about were the boys I'd soon be teaching. Whether or not it's the cause, I blame my very first time at fourteen years old in Evan Keller's basement for imprinting me with a fixed map of arousal—my memory of the event still flows through my mind in animated Technicolor. I was slightly taller than Evan in a way that made me feel half-god to his mortal: every time we made out I had to bend down to reach his lips. Since he was smaller, he was on top, performing with the determined athleticism of a triple-crown jockey until his body was covered in sweat. Afterward I'd gone to the bathroom and then called him in; with an expression of melancholy curiosity, as though transfixed at an aquarium, he'd watched the ruins of my hymen drifting in the blue toilet bowl water like it was the last remaining survivor of a once-plentiful species. I'd felt only an elevating aliveness: it seemed like I'd just given birth to the first day of my actual life.

When Evan had a growth spurt a few months later our sexual dynamic changed—I broke up with him and embarked on a string of repulsive dates with older boys throughout high school before realizing my true attractions lagged several years behind. At university I began throwing myself into classics studies, finding brief solace from my sexual frustrations in texts depicting ancient battles of fervent bloodshed. But my junior year after meeting Ford, I switched my major to education, and now I was finally set with a job that would allow me to go back to eighth grade permanently.

No, it wouldn't do to have Ford dipping his fingers in the pie on the eve before my years of student and substitute teaching were about to pay off. That night I'd taken such pains to set myself up perfectly, inside and out, like a model home ready for viewing. My legs, underarms, and pubis had been shaved and then creamed; every lotion applied bore the scent of strawberries. I wanted my body to seem made of readily edible fruit. Instead of having the flavor of something nearly three decades aged, my goal was for the slippery organs of my sex to taste like the near-transparent pink shaving gelée applied to them, for the sandy rouge of my nipples to have the flavor of peach cream complexion scrub. In the hopes that the fragrance would absorb, I covered each of my breasts with a layer of whipped mask and let it sit for ten minutes as I shaved; it hardened like the frosting of a confection and cast my excitement beneath a crisp, thin shell. After I'd razored every inch of body hair, I marveled at the buoyant lake of foam and stubble left in the sink. It made me think of the ice cream punch served at junior high school dances.

Imagine the fun I could soon have chaperoning one! Perhaps I'd even get to waltz with one or two of the more outgoing male

students under the guise of fun and frivolity—the boys who would confidently grab my hand and lead me to the center of the floor, not realizing until our bodies were pressed that they could smell the pulsing, fragrant wetness just one layer of fabric away beneath my dress. I could subtly push against them, blow their circuitry with the confusion of blithe laughter and small talk funneled into their ear by my moist lips. Of course before I'd say it, I'd look off to the side with an idle stare that suggested nothing was happening, that I hadn't noticed my pelvic bone ironing across the erect heat inside their rented tuxedo pants. It would require the boy to be an upstanding sort—the type who wouldn't be able to convey such a sentence to his mother or father, who would second-guess and recall the moment only in the dark, liquored sleep of his loneliest adult moments: post–business dinner while traveling at some Midwestern Comfort Inn, after he'd called his wife and spoken to his children on the phone and then unwrapped the plastic skin of three or four airplane bottles of bourbon, set his alarm, and allowed himself to sit upright in bed with one hand squeezing against the growing thickness of his organ and the memory haunting him—had I really said what he thought he heard? Inside the school's walls no less, amidst the thundering electronic notes of that year's favorite pop song, a song he'd listened to at his very first job in the mall as he folded display shirts and greeted mothers and children who entered the store—had I really breathed that sentence into his ear? *But I felt it,* he'd remind himself, felt my words form in warm air, one sentence whose breathy shape dissipated in seconds, prior to the arrival of understanding or memory. For the rest of his life, part of him would always be on that dance floor, unsure and hungry for clarity. So much so that as an adult in that hotel, he might likely be willing to

give up a great deal in exchange for the sense of order that I'd stolen from him, or even to have someone to say to him, *It did happen*. And I would always know, and he would always be sure, but not certain, that I had drawn the ledge of my pubic bone against the head of his penis, pressed it there like a photograph beneath the plastic velum of an album page cover and whispered that phrase: *I want to smell you come in your pants*.

The early start time of Jefferson Junior High was one of its main allures: seven thirty A.M. The boys would practically be asleep, their bodies still in various stages of lingering nocturnal arousal. From my desk, I'd be able to watch their exposed hands rubbing across their pants beneath the tables, their shame and their half-inflated genitals arm-wrestling for control.

A second boon was that I was able to get an extension classroom. These were basically trailers behind the school, but they had doors that locked, and, particularly if the loud window AC unit was running, it was impossible to hear what was going on inside. At our July faculty meeting in the cafeteria, none of the teachers had wanted to volunteer to take a mobile unit—it meant a farther walk each morning, having to trek inside the school to use the bathroom, running beneath an umbrella to go unlock the door in the rain. But I'd raised my hand, playing star pupil myself, and requested one. "I'm happy to be a team player," I'd announced, flashing my teeth in a wide grin. A red flush had covered Assistant Principal Rosen's neck; I'd lowered my face so that the trajectory of my eyes was unmistakably upon his crotch, then I pressed my lips together, met his gaze, and smiled a knowing smile. *Of course the phrase "team player"*

made you imagine me having group sex, my eyes tried to tell him reassuringly. *That isn't your fault.*

"Very kind of you, Celeste," he'd said, nodding, attempting to write and then dropping his pen, picking it up and nervously clearing his throat.

"It's like I said," Janet Feinlog had piped up behind me. Janet, a world history teacher, was balding prematurely; the dark home-dye job she gave her thinning locks only served to more starkly contrast the white expanses of scalp that shone through. Like most pronounced physical flaws, it did not live in isolation. The compression hose she wore for edema gave her calves and ankles the rippled texture of warped cardboard. "Classrooms should be assigned based on seniority."

"I agree," I'd said. "I'm the new kid on the block. It's only fair." Then I'd given Janet a practiced smile that she hadn't returned. Instead she'd taken a yellowed handkerchief out of her purse and coughed in it while looking at me, as though I were a nightmarish figment that would go away if she could simply expel enough phlegm from her lungs.

Having a mobile classroom meant that I could truly make it my own. I'd put up opaque curtains, brought in my favorite perfume and spritzed it onto them, as well as onto the cloth seat of my rolling desk chair. Though I didn't yet know which of my male eighth-grade English students would be my favorites, I guessed based on name and performed a small act of voodoo, reaching up my dress to the clear ink pad between my legs, wetting my fingertip, and writing their names upon the desks in the first row, hoping by some magic they'd be conjured directly to those seats, their hormones reading the invisible script their eyes couldn't see. I played

with myself behind the desk until I was sore, the chair moistened, hoping the air had been painted with pheromones that would tell the right pupils everything I wasn't allowed to verbalize. Straddling the desk's edge, I allowed my outer lips to hover dangerously close to the sharp wooden corner of its surface before sliding forward and sitting down, the hot bareness between my legs pressing against its cold layer of varnish. Those corners. If I wasn't careful getting up, they would easily scratch into the flesh of my thigh.

The rectangular desk, which was a heartland expanse of flat wood long enough for me to lie down on, felt somehow symbolic, being entirely smooth yet framed within four sharp points of danger—a reminder not to go out of bounds. Each time I'd visited the classroom in the days preceding the school's start, I'd lain down upon it and pressed my spine into its wood as I stared up at the unfinished fabrication of the ceiling and opened and closed my legs; from the waist down I moved like I was making a snow angel. When I finally sat up, I intentionally scooted off the edge at an angle so the corner would knick my asshole and give me just a little pain to carry around like a consolation prize as I waited for classes to begin. Each time I'd shut down the chugging window AC unit and go to leave, it felt like I was unplugging the engine powering my fantasies. In the silence that followed, the room reconfigured itself: The imagined tang of pubescent sweat became engulfed by the laminate odor of faux-wood walls. The chalk dust floating inside a beam of sun fell stagnant, its particles petrified bugs in the amber of the light. With the air conditioner on, these flecks had been frantic with motion, racing against the vent like lost cells of skin scouring the room for a host—before leaving I'd always stuck my wet tongue out into that light's honey, fishing it around in cir-

cles, hoping to feel satisfied I'd caught something upon it, even if it was too small to feel.

By five A.M. the morning of our first day at school, anticipation was making me feverish. Running the water for a shower, I lifted one foot up onto the countertop to look between my legs, inspecting my sex until the mirror fogged up and censored it from view. My nails, painted cherry squares that gleamed like red vinyl, scratched one last glimpse from the condensation, five thin streaks I could gaze into like open blinds that gave me a final vista on the damage I'd done throughout the night; my genitals were puffy and swollen. Spread open between my fingers, my labia looked like a splitting heart. I tilted my pelvis and hoisted up on the grounded foot's tiptoes to get a better view. It was impossible not to feel a sullen panic as their folds closed and tasted only themselves—no fresh, squirming insect of thin adolescent fingers against their cheek. I tried to take relief in the shower's warm surge of water. Thinking about the boys I was hours away from meeting, the fruity syrup of body wash I slathered across my breasts seemed to ferment to an intoxicating alcohol in the air. I smiled imagining them breathing the fragrance of the green apple shampoo I worked into my blond locks; despite the chemical bitters its scented foam belied, when one frothing swath of hair slid down against my face I had to force it into my mouth and suck. Soon I felt so dizzy that I had to kneel down on the shower floor; I clumsily extracted the showerhead from its holder and guided it between my legs, the same way one would put on an oxygen mask that dropped from the plane's ceil-

ing due to an ominous change in cabin pressure, feeling nothing but a frightened hope for survival.

My heart sank when I checked the weather channel before leaving the house: we were due for record-high humidity. I cringed thinking of my makeup feathered and my hair frizzed by the end of the day. As I cursed, Ford sauntered out of the bedroom with a half erection and gave a large, stretching yawn in front of the window facing the sunrise. "Good luck, babe," he called. "What a beautiful morning!" I slammed the front door on my way out.

Not surprisingly, the temperature inside the faculty lounge was nearly unbearable. We'd gathered at the behest of Principal Deegan, who wasted no time launching into a tepid pep talk. Like all of his public speeches, it heavily relied on the rhetorical device of repeatedly asking *Am I right?* after every sentence. "Gosh," Mr. Sellers, the wiry chemistry teacher next to me, muttered, fanning himself. "Like the kids don't have enough ammo already. Now I have to walk into class with wet armpits." Janet continued making loud crunching noises; I assumed she kept eating handfuls of granola, but after a few investigative glances I realized it was actually aspirin.

I wanted to run from the room to my class; the earliest pupils would be gathering there now. There was a vague burning at the spot where my spine connected my neck and head; my whole body yearned with the tincture of possibility. I felt like an optimistic bride the morning of her arranged marriage: I was feasibly about to meet someone who would come to know me in every intimate way. "They are not the enemy," Principal Deegan stressed; the rest of the teachers erupted in pithy laughter.

"Could've fooled me," Janet barked. A knowing nod of sympa-

thy made Mr. Sellers's hunched neck begin a series of short, conciliatory parakeet head bobs.

Suddenly, Janet's eyes were pinning me to the wall. The polite laughter of agreement in the room had softened to background static between Janet's ears and she'd heard my silence in response to her joke echo forth like a scream; worse yet, she'd picked up my expression—a snide look of unmistakable contempt. Years of teaching junior high had likely bestowed the derision sensor in her hearing with supernatural powers. Upon seeing her stare at me I immediately melted my face into a grin, but she didn't return it. "Bathroom cigarette monitoring cannot just be an occasional afterthought," Deegan continued. I watched the clock and pretended to think on his words with contemplation. After thirty seconds I looked back and Janet was still staring at me. When the bell rang she dropped several more aspirins into her mouth like cocktail peanuts but didn't blink.

"Go Stallions!" Principal Deegan finally called out, his well-formed words brimming with manufactured passion. With the sound of hundreds of students pouring through the hallways just beyond the door, for a moment it seemed as though his call had actually summoned a livestock stampede. I gazed back at his smiling face, his hands enthusiastically raised above his head. "Go Stallions!" He repeated this a few times with a near-animatronic flair.

I was the first faculty member out the door. In the hallway, the air had taken on the pungent weight of teenage sweat. Loud peals of laughter and shrieks, the type associated with forced tickling, came from every direction. As I made my way to the exit doors, foggy pockets of overzealous cologne hung low amidst herds of swaggering friends; the startling aluminum bangs of lockers being

opened and closed and reopened caused me to occasionally flinch. Soon the hallway population formed into a moving herd. A competitive speed was set as students headed to outdoor extension classrooms like mine moved toward the door in a rushing swell; it seemed as though a popular band was about to go onstage. I took the opportunity to pin myself against the back of a male student whose ankles revealed a tan line from athletic socks—likely a cross-country team member. "I'm sorry," I whispered hopefully into his ear, "I'm being pushed." Was it fate; was he the one? But the face that turned to greet mine was acneic; I quickly extricated my chest from his warm back.

My heart sank as I watched two goofy girls entwine hands and run up to the door of my classroom. From the roster, I knew I had ten boys in the first period, twelve girls. I tried to steel myself—even if there weren't any suitable options in the first period, I had four other classes, and each one brought more opportunities. That was not to say that it would be easy: my ideal partner, I realized, embodied a very specific intersection of traits that would exclude most of the junior high's male population. Extreme growth spurts or pronounced muscles were immediate grounds for disqualification. They also needed to have decent skin, be somewhat thin, and have either the shame or the preternatural discipline required to keep a secret.

The door to my classroom took a great deal of force to pull open—the suck of cold air from the window AC unit formed a resisting vacuum. Inside it was dark and cold. Two boys, prankster types, were standing in front of the air conditioner; they immediately ran to their seats with smiles, expecting some kind of chastising line (*You two know you're not allowed to touch that!*) that would

set them apart and declare them more audacious than their peers. I didn't get a good look at their faces, but from what I'd spied of their bodies already I knew I wasn't interested: they were a hodgepodge of pre- and post-puberty. The silhouette of one's biceps was visible from several feet away. The other had mannish curls of dark arm hair. But the room held others.

I walked straight to the AC unit and stood there, feeling my nipples harden to visibility. For a moment I closed my eyes. I had to stay calm; I had to regard the students like a delicate art exhibit and stay six feet away at all times, lest I be tempted to touch.

"Are you the teacher?" This voice was also male but slightly too deep. I turned, letting the AC cool the back of my neck.

"I am." I smiled. "It is really hot out there." I fingered the pencil inside the twisted bun of my hair, but scanning the room I knew it wasn't yet time to let it down—he wasn't present, he wasn't in this class. Yet there was eye candy aplenty. I managed to hold it together during my opening spiel until a young man in the second row who figured no one was looking reached down between his legs and spent a generous amount of time adjusting himself. This caused a brisk tightening in my lungs and chest; I gripped the side of my desk for support, working hard to speak just a few more words to the students without sounding like a labored asthmatic. "Introduce yourselves," I managed to say, "go around the room. State your hobbies, your darkest and most primitive fears, whatever you want." But as my arousal slowly came back down to a controllable level, a new sort of panic gripped me. All the alluring males in my class seemed unusable—too boisterous, overly confident.

By the end of the second period, when it became clear that class held no winners either, I found myself wondering whether or not

to bail entirely over the lunch break. Had I simply thrown myself deeper into torture with no hope of release? Now I'd have to interact with them, see them daily, yet none of them seemed promising enough to attempt anything further with. Perhaps I'd be better off substituting during the fall and trying my luck again in the spring elsewhere. "So we don't have any homework?" one student asked as the bell rang. Due to the sallow smallness of her eyes and nose, her retainer was her most prominent feature. I wanted to forcibly hold her in front of a mirror and question the image: *Can faces actually look like yours?*

"Why would you ask that?" I said. "Do you want homework or something?" She gave me a helpless blink; I'd spat blood upon her face amidst the sharks. The other students immediately began launching insults at her during the group exit from the classroom in a way that pleased me. I knew I'd find it hard to cut the girls in my classes any slack at all, knowing the great generosity life had already gifted them. They were at the very beginning of their sexual lives with no need to hurry—whenever they were ready, a great range of attractions would be waiting for them, easy and disposable. Their urges would grow up right alongside them like a shadow. They'd never feel their libido a deformed thing to be kept chained up in the attic of their mind and to only be fed in secret after dark.

Finally a last group of three male stragglers, whispering and laughing, passed my desk.

"See you all tomorrow," I said. This direct address gave the loudest one the final hint of courage he'd been looking for.

"Kyle thinks you're hot," he rattled off, quick words immediately followed by laughter and Kyle aggressively pushing the speaker. Kyle himself managed only the gruff confessional phrase

"Shut up." While he might've been suitable physically—he wasn't yet too tall or muscularly thickened—he was far too self-assured and aggressive; the most willing boys were off-limits. They'd also be the most willing to talk.

In the minutes before third period, each time the door opened to reveal a new student the outside noise and sunlight poured in and anticipation closed my throat. Because they were coming from the bright outdoors, upon entering the darkened classroom their bodies were backlit, their faces featureless and shadowy, and their outlines seemed angelic—every tiny wisp of hair illuminated—in a way that made each one appear to be materializing from a dream. But when they came into focus, most were disappointments. I actually didn't catch Jack's entrance; some terrible creature whose chin and feet were elephantine in comparison to the rest of his body had approached my desk to talk at me about the books he'd read that summer. But I saw Jack soon after the bell rang, already seated. He seemed to be a larger, stretch-limbed version of a younger boy—chin-length light hair, unimposing features and a mouth that was devilishly wholesome. He was looking in my direction, though not in an overt way. Occasionally a friend would whisper something to him, make a comment, and he'd turn his head and nod or laugh. But then he'd shyly glance back up front. There was a hesitant politeness to his movements; he started to grab a notebook from his bag, second-guessed himself, looked around to see if others had taken out notebooks and only then bent over to unzip his backpack. I could imagine him pausing with the same demure reluctance as he took down the side zipper of my skirt, his alert brown eyes frequently returning to my face to check for a contradictory expression that might indicate he should stop, at which point I would

have to goad him on, say, *It's okay, please continue what you're doing.*

I realized with a bit of embarrassment that it was the first time I'd remembered to take roll all day. Suddenly I was actually curious about who someone was. His name was ordinary yet peculiar—two first names.

"Jack Patrick?"

He gave a timid smile, more polite confidence than self-awareness. "Here," he said.

Rapunzel, Rapunzel, I thought. Reaching up to the nape of my neck, I shook out my hair and brought the pencil's lead tip to my tongue.

When I stepped outside after my last class, the unfiltered afternoon sun was blinding. The bedlam atmosphere of the day's end made the stoic brick walls of the junior high and all its false markers of imposed order—the perfect geometry of the landscaping, its immaculate semicircles of wood chips bordered with green hedges and palm trees—seem like relics of a recently invaded and devoured civilization. Youths walking home screamed jungle cries and sprinted past one another like feral carnivores, running together toward some invisible, felled big-game carcass just outside the boundaries of school property. I squinted against the bleached-out concrete walkway that served as an umbilical path to the school; it contained some type of mineralized rock that made it glitter in the light. Holding a stack of manila folders against my chest—student informational surveys, including all of Jack's emergency contact information—my eyes narrowed against the reflective flash of the ground and my pumps made scratching steps across its granular surface. It felt like

a daydream, like I was walking to my car across a trail of luminous sugar.

"Every summer gets shorter," a throaty voice called.

No sooner had I heard the words than I smelled the cigarette. Turning, I straightened the fingers of my right hand and raised them to my forehead, half visor and half salute. In the faculty parking lot, Janet Feinlog was sitting down on the foot ledge of her blue conversion van's opened door. She was looking straight ahead; a small stump of burning cigarette served as a gravity-defying bridge between her fingers and two inches of suspended ash. Unsure if she'd been speaking to me or to herself, I pressed the remote in my hand and disabled my car alarm with a pronounced beep.

"Do you know what I'd give for one more week of summer?" she asked. There was a shake in her voice that told of inner conflict in full motion: I pictured all her internal organs bouncing as they tried to keep the unfulfilled rage beneath her floppy stomach pinned down. Hers was an anger steel-strengthened against the stone of joyless decades. She coughed and let out a low, round fart that she didn't acknowledge. "Just one more goddamn week of being teenager free." Though the rest of her body stayed hunched in place, I watched the balls of her eyes shift in my direction: two exploratory rovers sent out to appraise if I was worth the exertion of turning her neck. I felt sorry for the young men fate had assigned to her course rosters. I couldn't imagine being at an age where I was trying to grapple with the difference of the female body and having to somehow work Janet Feinlog into the matrix.

The moment I let out a nervous laugh, the long worm of ash from her cigarette fell to the ground. "Maybe you'll have a better group this year?" I asked. The thought that her classes might

be filled row to row with boyish, shy young men was unbearable. During her career, how many perfect specimens must have passed through her room without notice? Ogre linebackers and delicate-boned waifs would all register as the same unwanted note to her sexually deaf ears. From the looks of her glasses, she was so blind she likely wouldn't notice if all her students were replaced with crash-test dummies except to note that their classroom behavior had improved.

When her head swiveled my way, I could almost hear the grinding sound of a long-standing boulder being moved. Her asymmetrical eyes locked onto my body in a laser stare of appraisal that began at my feet. This diagnostic continued so slowly, with such methodical rigor, that my skin began to itch.

"How old are you anyway?" she finally croaked. My head kept unconsciously turning toward the queue of packed buses; it was hard not to hear the students' excited, youthful screams as an invitation to come join them. She inhaled a long suck from her cigarette and blew out more smoke than seemed possible; it hovered all around her and drifted along the van's body, appearing to be a cloud of exhaust. "You definitely haven't given birth yet."

"No." I smiled, perhaps with too much pride. "I don't think I'm going down that road."

"You old enough to drink?"

"Of course." I cleared my throat. "I'm twenty-six."

She nodded. "That's the best way to get through the year." Janet stood and began a wide navigation of turning one hundred and eighty degrees to enter her vehicle, her slow toddles calling to mind a sleepwalking badger. Her weak forearms often came alive to shoo away invisible hindrances, pawing the air with disgruntled

choler. Before beginning the climb up the van's two carpeted steps, the most athletic portion of her adieu, she unceremoniously dropped her cigarette butt to the ground without extinguishing it. I got the feeling she hoped it might roll beneath the vehicle's gas tank and give her a true Viking burial.

She gave the long grunt of a walrus bearing a load of breech pups and ascended one stair deeper into the van, then sharply called out, "Hey!" It seemed like she was yelling at someone inside the vehicle since I could no longer see her face; perhaps she had a trespasser aboard. Hoping this was the case and she was now distracted, I turned toward my car with a rush of adrenaline but I didn't manage to get to the door fast enough. "Why are you teaching middle school anyway?" she called out.

I looked over my shoulder. The side door to the van was still open, but Janet had now lodged herself at the helm, behind the wheel. She was gazing at me through the windshield. I had no doubt that if I gave the wrong answer, the van's engine would immediately roar to life as her cankle, currently resting atop the gas pedal, pressed fully downward.

The question was normally easy enough to dodge—*I just want to make a difference,* I might say, or *It's so great to watch a child learn, to actually look into his eyes the moment the lightbulb comes on,* but these canned responses would neither appease Janet nor dampen her suspicions. They could, however, get me killed in a hit-and-run.

Shrugging, I scanned the main road behind us for passing cars. Would there be any witnesses when the bottom of her rusted muffler scalped me of my blond bouquet of hair?

"Summers off and everything," I said, trying to sound casual. The heat above the parking lot's asphalt radiated up all around us

like a calf-high field of quivering wheat. How horrible if instead of killing me her van merely laid me out on the tar facedown, scarring my skin forever with a series of third-degree burns. I looked back up but she was no longer behind the windshield. Rising onto my toes, I realized she'd reclined the driver's seat to lie back.

"Me too," she bellowed out. The sweat from my fingers was warping the crisp manila folders in my hands; I began fanning my face and chest with them. "Seems like a real good idea, huh?" she continued. "Work nine months, get three off. What they don't tell you is that you spend all summer waiting for the hammer to drop come August. Have you read that story 'The Pit and the Pendulum'? Me either, but I teach it every year with the Spanish Inquisition. It's like that. Here I am on my back, staring down another year of teaching." I thought about Janet lying in bed, her wiry upper lip twitching as she sensed a metaphorical blade inches above her face and smelled the imagined stink of its metal.

My phone came alive with a text summons from Ford. *Gift for you at home!* it announced. I suppose he could sense the wane of my pretended attentions now that the job was finally starting; he was so desperate not to get left behind.

"Really nice chatting!" I called to Janet. "Gotta get home, duty calls." I waited a few seconds for a good-bye to emanate from the blue van, but none came.

I put the convertible's top down and sat upon the stack of manila folders so they wouldn't blow away. My peel-out from the parking lot was a bit louder and more theatrical than I'd planned, but so be it; I had to let off a little steam before seeing Ford. I drunkenly careened through the long semicircle drive for student drop-offs and pickups, clipped a curb and a bit of the hedge as I rounded

past the entrance lane with its large sign: a digital clock and thermometer served as subtext for a scrolling marquee declaring student vaccination requirements; next to these was a large illustration of a stallion, the school mascot, kicking up on its hind two legs. STALLION POWER! it declared. I revved the engine but it was hard to speed away. My eyes kept returning to my rearview mirror, hoping the figure of Jack Patrick might somehow materialize in the middle of the road. I glanced back several times just to make sure he wasn't in the distance chasing after my car and flagging me down, inexplicably barefoot with the fly of his jeans unzipped, calling out my first name in a desperate whimper.

That evening Ford sat my present at the dinner table, in its own chair, as though a guest who'd been wearing it while eating had spontaneously disappeared: a bulky bulletproof vest.

"It's huge," I said. Ford smiled a grin of goofy pride, assuming I meant this as some sort of masculine compliment.

"Kevlar." He chewed and the word seemed a judgment on his pork chop's texture. "Beautiful protection. Armor plated inside. Some little punk comes up to you, puts a gun against your spine and says he'll kill you if you don't give him an A? Tell him to pull the trigger until his finger falls off. You won't even get a bruise."

"That is peace of mind," I said. Had my little bump against the desk yesterday made a bruise on my asshole? I sent a finger down beneath the tablecloth to inspect for tenderness. The vest would transform my body into an asexual cylinder and visibly add fifteen pounds. The only way I'd wear that vest in front of the class is if I was otherwise completely naked and accessorized it with riding

boots and a leather crop. I began to imagine presenting my bare legs to the male students as I rubbed the flesh beneath my tailbone.

Ford caught my pleased expression and winked at me, masticating with wide, flapping jaws that engaged his entire face. His eyes were glazed over and tinged the slight color of yellow onion; he'd been drinking wine. The thought of his tongue leaving a sour film upon my skin was enough to make me stand and intervene. "Let me freshen that for you," I said with a smile, grabbing his empty glass. I kept a series of pre-crushed Ambien pills inside emptied tea bags at the back of the pantry where he'd never look. Ford loathed tea; it just wasn't American.

"Thank you, babe." He took a long sip that left a purple shadow on his teeth and spoke for a while about guns. "Another big day tomorrow, huh?" he finally conceded. I guided him toward bed, playing zookeeper to his tranquilized bear. His unconsciousness afforded me the luxury of getting to watch a boy-band music video on the bedroom television with my vibrator on its highest setting roaring like a speedboat.

Every one of the young singers' mouths was open in a wide O of reception as they harmonized. Due to the oily lubricants of puberty's machinery, their skin looked nearly wet in the stage lighting. It was the boxy flatness of their chests that made my wrist quicken its tempo, the effortless feather of their side-swept bangs that were just slightly too long and in their eyes. To make eye contact with the camera, the teens had to brush their bangs back by running their fingers through their hair during a close-up shot; when they did, various paths of shining forehead were exposed. These glimpses of previously hidden flesh lasted only a second but made my heart quicken just as much as if they'd collectively dropped their pants.