

THE BUTTERFLY MIRACLE

Michelle Destiny Halliwell

About the Author

I am a Catholic writer who enjoys cooking and baking. My favorite food is pineapple. I am a devout catholic. My email address is me@michellehalliwell.com. My Twitter handle is @michelehaliwel because my name is too long to fit. If you want to correspond, Twitter is your best bet. Although I do my best to answer emails, no promises. I am also an amateur historian and a lover of children. My favorite Bible verse is Proverbs 31:25. “She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear for the future.”

Sincerely thank you for purchasing and taking the time to read my novel. I hope you like it.

Yours in Christ,

Michelle Halliwell

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I dedicate this novel to angels, babies, butterflies, and pineapples.

1

"Wanna know a secret?" the girl asks.

"Yeah," the other girl replies.

"Sorry. Like, promised not to tell anyone."

"No fair! You can't do that."

"Just did. Hey! Give me back my vape," Alice says. It's Alice Green. I can tell by her voice, as sharp as shards of glass.

Sitting unseen in the bathroom stall and overhearing them, I don't make a sound. The walls are cold metal on three sides with sloppily painted cinderblocks directly behind me, dirty tiles beneath my feet. It's all I can do to keep my white, fluffy boa constrictor of a dress clean.

"Promise you won't tell anybody," Alice says.

"I promise not to tell anybody."

"You know Michelle Halliwell?" Alice asks.

I tense at the mention of my name.

"Of course," Julia says.

"I heard Booker might be cheating on her."

"No way."

"Way, and I bet the stupid brat wins Queen of the Snowball Dance tonight. It's like, totally unfair. I hate this school," Alice says.

"Like, she doesn't deserve it," Julia Smith says.

"I know right? And it doesn't even snow in South Carolina."

"This school's stupid," Julia says.

"Can't believe Michelle is so popular. She looks like Princess Peach with Down syndrome," Alice says.

"And you look like the mushroom Mario stepped on," I say.

"What? Oh crap," Julia says.

"Hey look at me, I'm Michelle. I'm better than everyone. I date the

quarterback. I get straight As. Wait, is that a teacher? Better go kiss some butt, a French kiss right on the hole," Alice says with a smooching sound.

"Alice shut up," I say.

"You know it's true. You kiss so much butt you use poop for lipstick," Alice says.

"Shut up!" I say.

"I bet Booker's cheating on you, because you're like a Jesus freak, and you think like, your legs made of diamonds and gold or something," Alice says.

After fumbling with the latch, I throw open the stall door. Julia Smith gasps, her face bright red as she turns away. Alice Green glares at me and clenches her fists as I charge across the bathroom at her. When I'm in her face, I somehow resist the urge to slap her little pig head; that pug-nosed, freckle-infested mug, as plain as unleavened bread.

"Enough makeup on your face for three cheap whores, enough socks in your bra for three stinky feet; and you're still average," I say.

"So what?" Alice replies.

"You're only popular when you spread your ugly-little-pig legs," I say.

Then I pivot towards the door and march away. On my third step, I hit an invisible wall. Something tears and rips. The bottom half of my white, fluffy dress drops to the nasty bathroom floor. Suddenly, cold air chills my bare legs. Turning back, I see Alice grinning, her foot pinning my dress to the floor.

"Oh I'm so sorry. I accidentally stepped on it, and it broke," she says with a careless shrug.

The once clean dress lays directly on the bathroom floor, where generations of filth have accumulated into a brownish tint that might have once been green. Surely, it's contaminating my formerly lovely dress. As I bend over to pick it up, both girls scamper past me. "I'm sorry," Julia says.

Standing half-naked and alone in a public school bathroom, I hear the steady roar of many voices. The big group of children are just down the hall in the gym, waiting to judge me. The door slams like a judge's gavel crashing down. I cradle my torn dress against my chest as if soothing a crying baby. Unable to face the crowd and not get laughed at, I stand there in checkmate, contemplating an escape route, trying to reattach my dress, and ruining my makeup with streaking

tears.

Awhile later, my best friend Sandy enters wearing her simple black dress.

"Why'd you come all the way to this bathroom man? We were looking for you," Sandy says.

"The one by the gym was full. Tell Booker to come in here, then block the door so no one else can," I say.

She stares at me blankly.

"Just do it. Please!"

Sandy nods then leaves.

Eventually, Booker knocks on the door. "Michelle, you there?" Booker asks, his voice high and smooth like an angel that shoots amorous arrows.

"Booker! Hurry up and come in here. I need your help," I say.

"I can't go in the girl's room. You crazy?" he says.

"Yes, now come on or I'll miss the announcement," I say.

"Is anyone in there?" he asks.

"Yes, I'm in here. Come help before my fingernails grow longer than my fingers!"

"Oh my goodness," he says as he dries my tears. I give him the bottom half of my torn dress. His eyes caress my bare legs. He gazes into my eyes and slowly wraps the torn dress back around my waist. He spins it to where it should be, his hands touching me here and there.

"If you keep your hand there, can you hold it up through a dance?" I ask.

"Michelle are you nuts?" Booker says.

"Can you do it?"

He slowly nods his head.

Hundreds of voices haunt the gymnasium. As we stroll in, I notice for the first time that the wooden floor is hard enough to break bones, if I happen to fall... His steady hand never leaves my hip. All eyes target us as Mr. Murray ambles up to the microphone on stage and says, "In two minutes I will announce our Winter Formal King and Queen!" Everyone cheers. "Will the candidates please come forward?" Booker smiles, leads me through the dark gym with shimmering lights cascading off a disco ball, leads me through the sea of people.

I squeeze his hand. He stands by my side, six inches taller, resplendent in his shiny black tuxedo. We peer into each other's eyes again.

The Butterfly Miracle

"We better not win. I can't dance now. Never mind. Let's leave," I say.

"You're the most beautiful woman in the school," Booker says.

"And the 2020 Snowball King and Queen are, Michelle Halliwell and Booker Price!"

2

Everyone is cheering as Booker flashes me with his brightest smile. I grin back, my eyes filling with tears, my heart filling with fear. "Most beautiful woman in the school," he whispers in my ear. Wayne Jones, our class president, suddenly erupts on the loud speaker, his unnaturally loud voice magnified to ear shattering volume, causing a collective cringe. He blabs on about our relationship while I drag Booker towards the exit.

Raucous cheers overwhelm the gym, as the sea of people parts. I feel six emotions each incomplete, conflicting, and simultaneous. The clapping and yelling subsidies into an electrified silence. Booker faces me, brushing a strand of hair from my face.

"I love you," he says, as Eric Clapton's *Wonderful Tonight* plays.

I relish his strong hand on my hip, pulling me close to him. I shake my head. "We have to go," I say.

"I won't let them laugh," he says, then he steps into me, compelling me to step back, and we're dancing.

His dreamy eyes sparkle and he leads me to the rhythm of the song, almost hypnotizing me; but I see them. Most of the girls gape at us the way they'd stare at a newborn baby. There's Alice scowling. In my mind's eye, my dress falls to the ground, while people I've seen everyday for more than three years cackle hysterically; a naked me scrambling for the exit, even though the faster I run the louder they laugh.

Booker pulls me closer, our hips squarely facing each other, pressing together, letting me discover all of him. "It's okay. Just follow my lead," he whispers in my ear. Then he squeezes me tighter than my boa constrictor dress had.

If a hurricane rages outside, I don't hear a single rain drop. I no longer fear all the eyes watching me and judging me. I no longer care. There is only his body and my body. There is only him moving me rhythmically. There is only me savoring being moved by him. The power of the entire universe flows through us, conspiring to make man woman whole again. As he guides me and I hide my head on his chest, as content as a swaddled baby, we glide across the dance floor. Our souls join. My rapidly weakening resolve to resist, my disappearing imperative to save myself for marriage, withers in the heat of his embrace.

Our dance ends with a chorus of cheers. His hand rests firmly on my hip but I'm a good christian girl. My face blushes with desire. I take over holding my torn dress. He leans into my space, whispering: "I want you" in my ear. I want you too, I think but don't say, because I'm a good catholic girl.

"You guys are so cute! What a wonderful dance," Sandy says, as she plops her hand on my shoulder.

"Thanks Sandy," Booker says.

"Sandy, I have to leave. Alice tore my dress. Can you find her and punch her in the face for me?" I ask.

"What are best friends for?" Sandy replies.

Two minutes later, Booker and I wait outside for the Cadillac Escalade limousine that he rented. Standing there in the frozen evening wind, his thick build appears as powerful as that of a gladiator, making me feel secure. He smiles with eyes as gentle as those of a puppy, making me feel safe. The SUV limo pulls up to the vanilla colored curb. A tall and thin chauffeur opens the backdoor for us.

The black leather interior shines slick, smart, and terrifying; like the uniform of an officer in Hitler's SS. Booker jumps in and sits down in the middle, leaving only a little room for me. He extends his hands, inviting me to sit into his clutches. I take half a step towards him, then hesitate, somehow managing to stop myself. My hand self-consciously grasps the gold cross around my neck. Booker inspects me for a moment, then scoots away to the opposite side of the backseat.

"You coming, baby?"

"Of course," I say, crossing the border into enemy territory.

3

I sit uncomfortably away from him, like a negative charge longing to collide with a positive charge.

"They're going to make us 'most likely to get married' in the yearbook," he says.

"Do you think we will, get married?" I ask.

"You're the only woman in the world who can satisfy me."

He scoots close to me. "Maybe you should sit over there," I say, my heartbeat accelerating. I remember us, our dance. My mind spins my soul dizzy. What bliss will his next touch be?

He caresses my face, looking into my eyes, not speaking. I let my eyes invite him. The first kiss arrives softly and confidently. The second kiss pushes my head back, transcending my infinite amount of restraint. With the third kiss, I taste his tongue as it invades my mouth. Each kiss lasts longer, and then another.

As we entangle, his fingertip caresses the top of my inner thigh, my velvet skin exposed, where my dress should be. I shut my eyes and swim in passionate touches. I shudder. I've never been more within or more without my body than in this instant. My racing blood heats up. Now in a blurry, berserk daze of desiring and of being desired; I lose my inhibitions. The leather of the seat sticks to my sweaty back. I'm pleasantly afraid of what he will do next.

"Give me your virginity," he says.

"Booker, stop. We have to stop."

He looks at me with an expression that is totally blank. Now, he descends on me, and I'm sure there is nothing I can do to stop him.

"Booker please? I don't want to."

His empty expression ignites with rage.

"Michelle Gosh darn it! Can't take me so close, then be like: stop! Do you have any idea what that does to a guy? I mean, come on Michelle."

"I'm sorry Booker, I didn't mean it."

"Then you should've left your dress on," Booker says.

"But you, I, believe in waiting for marriage."

"You weren't very holy just now," he says, his face so red it's turning purple, and he keeps clawing at his own hair, apparently trying to rip it out. I escape to the farthest corner, covering my body with my tattered dress.

"Michelle I'm sorry. I'm being a jerk, just overwhelmed with raging hormones. Let me hold you. You look so cold. Warm you up?"

"I won't be able to handle it. I want you too much," I say.

"You won't give me a hug because you want me? Yeah that makes sense."

"Because, I'll lose control."

"You'll lose control when Antarctica boils. I mean, we're only young once. Let's lose control, before we get old. You know you want to."

Blush pours over my face. I shrug. "You are hot," I say.

"Please come here. I promise, I'll go slow. I'll stop when you tell me. Swear to God."

"Booker, don't swear to God, and you know I can't, not until we're married."

"What does God care? I mean, God gives a care if you satisfy me? I don't buy it."

"My mom told me," I say.

"I'll wear a rubber, no risk, best feeling ever, no consequences, except for falling deeper in love. Sex is a woman showing her man love. Don't you love me?"

"Yes, but I can't sleep with you, not even if you wear protection," I say.

"I'm suffering."

"I'm very sorry."

"Yeah right. You like watching me hurt."

"Do not. I'm sorry you feel that way," I say.

"Obviously you don't care how I feel," he says.

I take the first step in the hard and complicated ordeal of putting my broken dress back on in such a confined space. How did I even take it off? Now I find out that the back zipper is torn.

"Do you have any idea how much I put into tonight?"

"Thank you," I say.

"Do you know how much I put into this relationship?"

"I didn't turn you down because you don't put enough in."

"I didn't say that."

"Take me home please," I say.

"What? Seriously? What about the afterparty?"

"My dress is ripped, and I'm not feeling well. I wanna go home," I say.

"Oh come on! You're so darn sensitive, so ungrateful, so impossible to satisfy. Not even winning the Snowball Queen is enough for you. Unbelievable!"

"Enough for me to what? Booker!"

"Hey, don't yell at me," he says.

"Sorry for yelling," I say, pounding on the window. It slides open.

"Can you please take me home, sir?" I say, conscious that my dress isn't quite all the way on.

"So you really not gonna go to the afterparty?"

"Really not going," I say.

"You did this on purpose, didn't you," he says.

"What?"

"You teased me on purpose, didn't you."

"Why would I do that?" I ask.

"To control me."

"That makes no sense."

"My dad says teasing is how women get control over a man. The more they make us want them, the more money we'll spend on her."

"I'll pay you back every dime. Please take me home now," I say.

"I can have any girl in the school."

"So go spend daddy's money on one that satisfies you," I say.

"Why you gotta be like that?"

"You're right. I'm sorry. You're attacking me, and I'm tired. It's been a long day."

"Stop crying Michelle. It's just that, it's hard to date a prude. Like you have cold shower flowing through your veins. Oh come on Michelle, stop crying."

"We're here," the chauffeur says. I rush to finish getting dressed.

"Thanks. I'll let myself out," I say but I can't. The door is locked from the inside, so the polite man in the dark suit gets to witness me crying.

"Come back. Give me another chance. Let me explain," Booker calls after me.

The Butterfly Miracle

I keep walking.

“Thanks for a memorable night!” Booker yells out the window as the limo pulls away.

I watch him go, my tears turning the brake lights into red streaks across my vision. They disappear around the corner. I feel the silk of my dress slipping from my tired, cramped hand. A crying girl with her dress in tatters, I really hope I can sneak past mom.

4

My feet scraping against the rough driveway can only mean that I left my shoes in the limo. I love those shoes. I don't care. Let the shoes go. Let this night be as forgotten as those shoes. In the fading light of dusk, I stop by the side of the driveway to count the thorns on a rose bush that Booker and I planted last summer. I'll never water it again. Let it wither and die.

My parents will be sitting in their recliners, staring at a blaring television, the louder the better. I grab the cold brass doorknob, squeeze, and turn. My hand slides but the knob doesn't turn. Sneaking around to the back, I cringe at the noise that it costs me to open the annoying gate. When taking the wet and cold spare key from the pool filter, I drop the bottom section of my dress.

The side door looks sorry, with paint peeling from the wood, and paint streaked around the borders of the window.

Slowly, I insert the key into the lock, pausing no less than three times before it's in all the way in. I unlock the door, sighing, taking a deep breath. The door swings open with an eerie squeak. I jump back, almost dropping my dress again. Daddy stands there smiling, sees my face, then frowns.

"Michelle? Are you alright?" daddy asks.

"Yes," I stammer then his arms envelope me.

Sobbing, I lay my head against his shoulder, inhaling his Old Spice deodorant. His hand patting my back gently, my heavy body begins to gradually lighten. He leads me into the house, up the short flight into the kitchen. Mom puts her carton of unsweetened soy milk back in the refrigerator then approaches.

"What happened?" she asks.

"Hold on a minute honey," daddy says.

"Mike, don't you see? Michelle? What did he do to you?" mom asks.

"Honey let her calm down," daddy says.

"Let her go for a moment, and just look at her, will you?"

My parents inspect me unhappily.

"Call the police," mom says.

"Wait a minute honey," daddy says.

"Call the police now," mom says.

"Let's first find out what happened," daddy says.

"Did he rape you? He did. Didn't he? Oh my God, he raped our daughter," mom says.

"Uh?" is all I can say but I manage to shake my head.

"Then he sexually assaulted her," mom says.

My heart falls cold with fear as my parents stare at me. I try shaking my head but I'm paralyzed. I follow them into the living room. Daddy staggers over to the little table next to his arm chair and picks up his cell phone. Before dialing, he stops to mute the blaring television.

"Daddy no. Don't call the police," I say.

"Honey why not?" mom asks.

"Just wait," I say.

"Let's calm down a minute," daddy says, a big vein pulsing in the middle of his reddened forehead.

"I mean, let's not call them at all," I say.

"But look at you! Your dress has been torn apart. You have a hicky right on your chest! You're weeping, and you don't have any shoes!" mom says.

"Yeah but," I say.

"Mike call the police," mom says.

"Wait," daddy says. "Let's hear the whole story first."

"She obviously has Stockholm Syndrome! He assaulted our daughter! And I want him arrested today. No. Right now!" mom says snatching the phone right out of daddy's hand. She immediately dials.

I dart across the room to press the red button, hanging up her call, and dropping my broken dress. Standing there waving my hands in front of my legs as if they can block my nudity from plain sight, I stagger backwards, almost tripping over the white fluffy hoops. Mom glares at me, but then she softens. She helps me to pick up the broken dress.

"Look honey. You might think you love him, but what he did tonight, that's a serious crime. We can't let him get away with it. Trust

me. He'll do it again. He's a sinner and a criminal, and needs to be stopped," mom says.

"Yeah but mom?" I say.

"But what?"

"Booker didn't do anything against my will," I say.

Mom's eyes narrow under furrowed brows. She scans the room from left to right, then from right to left. She blinks six times in the space of one second. As she inspects my appearance again, a light of understanding kindles in her eyes and she clenches her fists.

"No daughter of mine would let some boy do that to her," mom says.

5

"Honey calm down, we don't even know," daddy says.

"Calm down? Calm down. You want me to calm down?" mom asks.

"Let's just get to the bottom of it, before we rush to judgment," daddy replies.

"Okay. Fine. Michelle. You're standing here with your dress torn apart. You have a love bite on your titty. So, did you fornicate with that boy?" mom asks.

"Mom it's not like that," I say.

"Oh really? Then what's it like?"

"We just kissed a little," I say.

"Were you naked with him?" she asks.

"Honey stop," daddy says.

"You were. Weren't you. I mean, you're practically naked right now!" mom says.

I shake my head, biting my lip.

"So if I inspect the small part of you that's actually still covered, will we see more hickies?" mom asks.

I say nothing.

"Answer me!"

"I don't know!"

"Ladies calm down," daddy says.

"Are you okay with your daughter becoming a slut?" mom asks.

"I am not a slut!" I reply.

"Watch your mouth little girl," mom yells.

"Calm down," daddy says.

"Stop telling me to calm down! Michelle I'm only going to ask you once. Did you have sex with him?"

"No."

"Oh thank God," mom says.

I sigh.

"Oh you're not out of the woods yet, young lady."

"Michelle go to your room," daddy says.

I flee the room.

"Stop right there, young lady. You will not harlot around with boys. Do you understand me?" mom says.

"Mom! I did not harlot around!"

"Then what do you call getting your dress torn off in the backseat of a car? If that's not whoring around, what is it?" mom asks.

"Just let her go," daddy says.

"After she sees the error of her ways. So what do you call what you did?" mom asks.

"You want the truth?" I ask.

"The truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth," mom says.

"Booker didn't tear my dress. Alice Green."

"She was in the backseat too?" mom interrupts.

"No, she tore it at the dance mom! Then Booker upheld my dignity by holding up my torn dress, okay? We almost had sex, and I wanted to."

"You have sinned in your heart!" mom yells.

"But I told him to stop because I'm saving myself for marriage. He was mad, but he listened to me, but we had a fight over it, so I came home crying," I say.

"So you were naked with him," mom asks.

"Only for a moment and nothing happened," I say.

"No daughter of mine is allowed to whore around like that," mom says.

"I thought you'd understand, be proud of me even," I say.

"You've got a pretty low bar, if that's what you thought," mom yells.

"Honey let it go," daddy says.

"I should just let him do it! Then I'd be lying comfortably in his arms, instead of getting screamed at by you!" I yell back.

"Then why don't you go screw him!" mom yells as she slaps me across the face.

I wail as I run up the tan carpeted stairs. Annoying creaking sounds mark every other step.

"You went too far!" daddy is saying.

"No thanks to you! If you let her think she can get away with stuff like that, pretty soon she'll be coming home pregnant, or diseased!" mom yells back at him.

I slam my door, lock it, and burrow my face into my pillow.

My room is split into three sections. Next to my bed, there's a rocking chair covered with a mountain of furry stuffed animals. There's a mirror sitting on the long dresser, surrounded by a battalion of cosmetics. The place where I spend most of my time is the well-ordered desk, with books stacked at the back against the wall, and my Macbook sleeping in the middle of the desktop. Now I am pacing back and forth furiously.

What's the point of following her rules? My mom will find a reason to scream at me no matter what I do. What if I'm not perfect? What if I make mistakes? I am sorry that I cannot be the angel that you wish I am, but I have tried my best. I did my best, and you know what? It wasn't good enough. I guess if it is impossible to live up to your ideal version of me, all I can really do is be myself, and hope for the coincidence that you might love me, mom.

But was I wrong, really? All that happened seemed so completely natural. I love him because he deserves to be loved. I am attracted to him so that must mean that he is attractive. When I was little, when there was a jar of cookies in the kitchen, I was never able to avoid wanting them. I want Booker too and I can't help that either; therefore, you should feel proud that I resisted him. But you aren't. You don't care. You just want to lock me away in a monastery until my boobs deflate into wrinkled bags of skin, or until I marry a rich doctor; whichever comes first.

I mean, I wanted him so desperately but I still refused to make love. Then you smack me in the face? You don't understand. You just want to control me. But I can't even control myself. I did want him. I still want him. I want to let him. Let him love me, hold me, hug me, kiss me; I'll let him...

I want to see Booker's face in the dark. When I'm cold and shivering, you can be my blanket. When it's pitch black and I'm afraid, you can make me feel safe.

Now, I close my eyes and I see your face. I can almost feel your strong hand on my hip. When you kissed my belly button and my world was spinning out of control, you warmed me like a winter campfire.

What will it be like to let you? Is it going to hurt? You will put me

under a spell of bliss and I will fade away, like a child discovering sugar. We have been living this life for so long and yet we are so incomplete, but will you join me tonight my love?

The green, digital numbers on the alarm clock say 11:34. My parents have been quiet for hours. They confiscated my smartphone but they can't take my feet. Stop! Mom's stern face threatens me. What if she catches me sneaking out in the middle of the night? Laying in Booker's bed with no clothes and no excuse to say no, the fantasy speeds up my blood. It's wrong. It's right.

If someone is shooting at me and I dive to the ground to take cover, mom will nag me for getting my Sunday dress dirty. I choose you Booker.

I sneak down the dark and silent hallway. As I slowly put my feet down with each step, the soft carpet sinks beneath my weight. The floor squeaks loudly, sending my heart into my throat, so I stop and stay totally still. Why am I being so careful? If I get caught here, I'll just say I am going downstairs for a drink of water. I tiptoe a little faster.

6

Descending the soft carpeted stairs one at a time, I minimize the creaking. Now, I am standing at the side door. I stand there for five minutes, just making sure that they're asleep. Finally, I slowly unlock the door and carefully open it. I turn around. My bed is soft, warm, and safe. Mom's voice yells: "You snuck out to fornicate with that boy. You're grounded to hell for eternity!" Flinching away from invisible slaps in the darkness, I walk out the door.

Although the night is a bit chillier than I had expected, the cold air is crisp and refreshing. At the end of the driveway, I stop again to face my house. Now I'm walking briskly down the empty street.

Freshly cut grass mingles with the aroma of rose bushes hiding in the shadows. A few doors down, toys scattered about suggest all of the laughing children that play there by day. The sidewalk under my feet carries me closer to my destiny. Will he be able to sneak me up to his room? Our love will be quiet, secret, and only ours. The sweetness will burn us up like shooting stars crossing our galaxy. I'm shivering but I'm almost there.

His car is in the driveway. The kind of old, and slightly beat up Chevy Camaro that only Booker can be so proud of. My hand floats to my lips to blow a kiss to it, but I laugh at myself instead. Don't waste kisses on the car. Save them for the boy. The house looks slumbering. I touch the pocket where my phone usually is.

When approaching headlights come at me from up the street, I freeze then sprint up to his front porch as if it was base in a game of tag. The car passes. The doorbell, the horseshoe shaped brass knocker are both there. I can't wake up his dad or his stepmother.

Don't tell me I came all this way, all for nothing. Come on Michelle,

don't be a coward. I creep down his driveway, passing his Camaro, his dad's brand new SUV. The chainlink gate that blocks the backyard is closed so I open it, scowling because I'm sure that everyone in the world hears the clicks, jingles, and rattles. I hunt around for a small rock.

Hiding in the backyard, I look up. His room is the top window on the left. No lights are on. I wind up to throw the rock but I hesitate. What if I break a window? I'll just have to run away. No one will ever know. What if the rock breaks the window and the police identify my finger prints? What if I can't wake him up? Oh stop stalling and hurl the stupid rock! I throw.

I miss his window so badly that I feel fortunate to have even hit the house. The clank sounds like a gunshot, much louder than expected, inspiring equal hope that Booker heard it and equal fear that his parents did. Come on. Look down here. See me.

I've come for you. Come get me, take me upstairs. Take me, I think with as much mental force as I can muster, trying to transmit my fantasy to him, a Cupid's arrow made of soul. Maybe his heart can hear my heart and he will come, and take me.

The light turns on. He heard my heart! I woke him up. Was it the rock or was it my heart? The light turns off again. Butterflies in my belly all take flight like a flock of spooked doves. Am I really going to do this?

Two minutes go by, but nothing happens. He doesn't open the window. Perhaps he just had to use the bathroom and I should find another rock. Now, light shines out from the window of the side door. He's coming to get me. I run to the chainlink gate as the side door opens.

"That was wonderful. We should totally do it again," a girl says.

"Yeah," Booker says, laughing.

Booker leads a girl out. They are holding hands. Her face is glowing. So is his. They don't see me yet. It's Sandy, my best friend.

"We definitely need to do it again," Booker says.

She swoons as he looks her in the eye. He wraps her in his arms and French kisses her. Their hips press into each other.

"Booker?" I say.

Their heads turn. Their eyes widen. They disentangle.

"Michelle? Oh my God. Is that you?" Booker asks.

I open my mouth to speak but no words can escape. Booker wears a smirk that's grotesque enough to be painted on with clown makeup.

"We have been dating since eighth grade," I say.

"I'm so sorry," he says.

My eyes lock on to Sandy.

"We've been best friends since kindergarten," I say.

Sandy averts her gaze, staring at the ground, just standing there stupidly, as if I don't even exist.

"We've been friends since kindergarten," I say again, hearing my voice crack. Sandy continues to stare at the ground, her lips curled in a silent 'oo'. My hands tremble as tears roll down my cheeks.

"The part of me that loves you both, you strangle me to death. I hope you two live happily ever after," I say.

Booker tries to stop me from leaving. I smack his hand away as I storm past them.

7

"Booker is like such a dirt bag. Don't even worry about him. He's such a loser, like so not worth it," Audrey says.

"I thought we were going to get married. I had the whole entire wedding planned out in my head. I've known Sandy for so long. How can she do this to me?"

With my iPhone pressed tightly to my ear, I pace back and forth from my dresser to my desk and back again.

"Sandy can't be trusted. Like everyone knows that. You should be totally glad. You like know that he's total scum now, and not like, after you get married," Audrey says.

"He broke my heart," I say.

"Yeah but like, you're gonna see him in fifteen years. He'll probably have a fat beer belly, seven kids with different chicks, living in a trailer. If he's even alive by then. And you'll be like, thanks for letting know in advance, that you're like, such a loser," she says.

"But we dated for four years. I want revenge. I want him to suffer."

"You could always like, dump ice water over his head, then shock him with a taser until he pisses himself. I'd pay to see that."

I pick up a light brown teddy bear, Booker's gift to me last Valentines Day. I slam him on the ground and stomp on him.

"Sounds great. Couldn't I get arrested doing something like that?"

"Yeah, like totally, but it'd totally be worth it. Or you can like, tell everyone he has AIDs. I know what you could do. Like come to the university with us tonight. We're gonna be drinking but like, you don't have to. Just like, find a hot college guy. Take some pics, and like post them on Instagram," Audrey says.

"Great idea, but my mom will never let me go," I say.

"Figured. You can like, tell her you're staying the night at my house," Audrey says.

"Difficult, but not impossible," I say.

"Like, go ask your parents, and call me back."

My parents sit in tan armchairs, facing the television, their faces stupefied in blank concentration. The commercials scream. I step directly between them and the television to rob their attention.

"Can I spend the night at Audrey's?" I ask.

"You're not going anywhere. Not after the other night," mom says.

"But mom?"

"I said no."

"It's so unfair," I say.

"Life's not fair," mom replies.

"I get good grades. I'm at the top of my class. I got a 1580 on the SAT. That's almost a perfect score. After last night, I decided to break up with Booker. So will you please just let me go?" I ask.

"Sorry but no. You know I don't trust that Audrey girl. Go hang out with Sandy," mom says.

"Mom, come on. Please? I'll do the dishes, and clean the bathroom," I say.

"Oh come on honey. Let her go," daddy says.

"Maybe, but I want to talk with Audrey's mom," mom says.

"Yo," Audrey says.

"She says yes, but she wants to talk with your mom about it first," I say.

"Crap," Audrey says.

"What's wrong?"

"Like, my mom thinks I'm staying the night at Julia's house. Hold up. I'll just have my sister pretend to be my mom. Hold on," Audrey says.

A moment later, mom is pacing back and forth, grasping my phone.

"Are you a Catholic? Then are you at least a Christian?" Mom asks, leaving the room. Ten minutes later, she returns.

"Fine you can go," she says, handing my phone back to me.

"Thanks mom. I'll get ready now," I say.

"Sick. I'm like, so glad your mom bought that," Audrey says.

While I am getting ready to go, my phone rings. It's Booker.

"What do you want?" I say as I close my bedroom door.

"Look I screwed up, but I'll work it out."

"There's nothing to work out," I say.

"Oh come on. One mistake. I admit that."

"You are nothing to me now," I say.

"Can I explain?" he asks.

"Do you think there's an explanation that'll change how I feel?"

"Let me try," he says.

"Listen to me. Last night I snuck over to give myself to you, but you made your choice. Go be with Sandy."

"I don't love Sandy. I love you."

"Then you should've waited. Anyway, I have to go. I have a date with a college guy. Maybe I'll give myself to him instead."

"Come on. You're, don't do nothing stupid. Please. Still care about you."

"Your voice sounds recorded and sped up, like a chipmunk, so, the more you talk the dumber you sound."

I hang up the phone. He calls back immediately. I block his number. Picturing his face when he sees my picture with a cute college guy, I call Audrey back.

8

The three story, red-brick house looks exactly like all the others on this street. Three windows stretch across each floor, one on the left and two on the right. The only special thing about this house is the strange looking greek symbols on it. Low music and high voices waft from open windows, harmonizing with the sweet and sour stench of beer. Audrey, Julia, I, and three guys climb the stairs.

On the third floor, two guys wearing t-shirts with greek symbols stand outside a door. Music blasts from inside. They slap hands with one of the guys.

"Sup bro. That's six of you, sixty bucks. Plus the price of admission," the guy holding the funnel says.

Audrey's guy friend forks over three twenty dollar bills and takes the hose attached to the bottom of the funnel. The frat guy pours a can of Natural Ice into the funnel as Audrey's guy friend keeps the hose elevated.

"Knock it down bro," the frat guy says.

Audrey's guy friend bites down on the funnel hose. Once he raises the funnel higher than the hose, the beer disappears with astonishing alacrity. He clears his throat then steps aside. "Next man up," he says.

"I don't, um, want to," I whisper to Audrey.

"You like, have to. It's the price of admission," she replies.

"I've never drank alcohol before," I say, blushing.

"Oh. Well you're gonna love it," Julia says.

"Like, hand her the funnel. She never drank before," Audrey says.

"Betrayed again," I mumble.

"Whoa. We got a beer virgin," one of the frat boys muses with an eyebrow-raised grin.

Blushing is a low grade fever.

"Nothing to it. Just put it in your mouth and relax your throat, ecstasy," one of the frat boys says.

The frat boys giggle.

"I can't," I say.

"Why not?"

"I feel so stupid, but I'm Catholic, so I'm not allowed to drink," I say.

"I thought being Catholic was like, the perfect excuse to drink," Audrey says.

"Yeah. Just pretend it's communion wine," one of the frat boys says.

"Yeah but no. I can't. Sorry."

"Yo. Jesus turned water not into ginger ale, but wine man. Know what I'm saying?" one of the frat boys says.

I shrug, feeling like I'd be less embarrassed naked in public.

"It's alright. I'll pay her price of admission," Audrey's guy friend says.

"Can he do that?" one of the frat boys asks the other.

"Nope," the other says.

"It's okay guys. Just go without me. I'll call an Uber," I say.

"Imagine what kind of sausage fest ya'll are gonna have, if you turn away beautiful women," another of Audrey's guy friends says.

"Good point," the frat guy says and hands him the hose.

"Thanks," I say as we enter a big room.

Young adults stand around chatting, holding red plastic cups with white rims. Some congregate around open windows where they smoke cigarettes. How will I explain coming back stinking of cigarettes to mom? Can I buy the exact same outfit that I'm wearing now and donate this one to Goodwill? I shrug.

"Hey. I know this is a stupid question, but, want me to get you a beer?" Audrey's other guy friend asks.

I shake my head slowly. He shrugs. "That's what I figured. Won't ask you again, but if you change your mind, let me know."

"Okay. What's your name again? Sorry I forgot it earlier."

"Chris, and you are Michelle, are you not?"

"I am."

"So what brings you to a place like this on a day like today, Michelle?"

"I'd tell you but, it's a sad story, and you probably don't want to hear it," I say.

"There's nothing about you I don't want to hear," Chris says.

"Okay well, my boyfriend, I mean ex-boyfriend, slept with my best friend after Winter Formal, because I told him I am saving myself for marriage," I say.

"Hold up. Don't say it like it's your fault, He cheated on you because he's a jerk, and I think it's Uber cool that you got values. Don't ever feel guilty about that," Chris says.

"True, but anyways. I, don't know what to say."

My eyes runneth over. Chris pulls me into a tight embrace. I surrender to it and let the tears fall until my nose clogs up and I drench his shoulder with my lacrimation.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"No, no. Don't say sorry," he says.

"I'm sure you came out on a Saturday night, to have some little girl cry all over you," I say.

"It's all I can do to even get the attention of a pretty lady," he says.

"Oh yeah right, a guy as handsome as you," I say, swallowing awkwardly.

"I only wish it were so," he says.

"Anyways?" I say.

"Let me get another beer, and some tissue," Chris says.

Chris disappears into the sea of people. On the far end of the room, there's a ping pong table with plastic cups set up on each end like bowling pins. A girl holds a ping pong ball between her thumb and pointer finger, her hand outstretched. She squints with intense concentration, appears to give up, lowers the ball as if it has suddenly become extremely heavy, raises the ball again. Holding it up to her right eye, closes her left eye like a sniper aiming a pistol. As a high tower swaying back and forth in the wind, she throws the ping pong ball and it soars over the cups. She shouts something that is probably not a real word.

"Sup?" Audrey says, tapping me on the shoulder and spilling beer on her own hand.

"Chris is smoking hot. You should totally date him," Julia says.

I grin. Audrey laughs.

"You're so going to drink," she says.

"No."

"Yes."

"Why should I?" I ask.

"Because it's like, the only way to stand all these drunk people," she

says.

"Yeah dude. Why don't you like, get crunked with us?" Julia asks.

"Maybe I will, but not yet," I say.

"When?" Audrey asks.

"Oh no," Julia says, her eyes suddenly wide.

Police officers storm the room. The music cuts off. Suddenly no one is holding a red plastic cup with a white rim. No one is standing by the window smoking cigarettes. The police force everyone to line up.

9

"We're like, totally about to get arrested," Audrey says.

"Darn it. Then I'm finishing my beer," Julia says then picks it up from the ground and chugs it.

The police officer sends Chris over to the group of unhappy looking kids. His shoulders slump as he waddles over to line up. He almost glances over at me.

"He like, wasn't twenty-one after all," Audrey says.

"Am I going to get in trouble?" I ask.

"Maybe. Don't tell them you're a high school student, or they'll definitely like, take you into custody. Tell them you like, you totally go here. You're not twenty-one but you don't drink. Maybe they'll let you go. I don't know. It depends," Julia says.

Awhile later, a police officer frowns down at me, with powdered sugar sprinkled around his stubble of dark whiskers. His stern glare has nothing on my mom's judgmental scowl, a scowl I expect to see again very soon.

"Let me see some ID."

"Left it in my dorm," I say.

"Go over with them," he says.

"But I haven't had any alcohol. Not one drop," I say.

"So what."

"How can you arrest me for drinking if I haven't?"

He scratches his chin, moving some of the powdered sugar around. "You better be telling the truth, because if I go through all the trouble of giving you a breathalyzer and it comes up positive, you're gonna be in a world of hurt," he says.

"I truly haven't had anything," I say.

"Let me smell your breath, kid," he says.

I breath heavily into his face.

"Get outta here before I change my mind," he says.

"Thank you so much!" I say and leave immediately.

Standing on the porch and shivering in the cold, I scroll over to my Uber app.

"Hey girl? Can I walk with you?"

The guy speaking isn't big or small, neither old or young, not familiar but not a stranger. His face is as pale as curdled milk.

"Do I know you?" I ask.

"Nope, but I saw you upstairs. I was there, hanging out with my friends, but they all just got arrested, so I'm like, okay, what the heck do I do now?"

"I see. Me too," I say.

"Well hey, look, I don't drink alcohol, but I love coffee. What do you say I buy you a cup?" he asks.

"I'd love to, but I don't know you. So sorry," I say.

"Momma told you not to talk to strangers. I get it. I'm Bill. Nice to meet you," he says, holding out his hand.

"Nice to meet you too," I say and shake his hand.

"There's a coffee shop two blocks that way. It's a public place. Best coffee in the city," he says.

"I really shouldn't."

"Alright. I completely understand," he says, the energy drains from his eyes, like a lost puppy's melancholy gaze, when it realizes it's not getting adopted. He stumbles down the stairs, poking out his bottom lip, which is unusually red. If he becomes a she, she will never have to spend a dime on lipstick. A gust of wind threatens to turn my bone marrow to ice.

"Wait. A warm coffee shop is probably a better place to wait for an Uber," I say.

His face lightens with a smile.

"Thought I was getting rejected again," he says.

"You get rejected a lot?" I ask.

"My last girlfriend cheated on me with my best friend," he says.

"You're kidding me," I say.

He shakes his head then stares at the ground, clenching his fists.

"I just broke up with my boyfriend for the same reason."

"Wow. What a coincidence," he says.

10

The coffee shop is dim as a bat cave. An old black cash register dominates the glass case filled with pastries. A short woman lurks behind the counter, seeming to do something unspeakable with a tall stainless steel cup.

"What would you like?" she asks.

"Hazelnut latte and a cinnamon roll?" I ask.

"Excellent choices. You've been here before, I take it," he says.

I shake my head. "Excuse me," I say then escape to the bathroom.

When I come out, he is already sitting in a miniature armchair. Across from him, there is an empty chair. A cinnamon roll on a plate and a steaming coffee mug sit on a little glass table. I actually wanted an iced latte but I do not say anything because I do not want to seem ungrateful.

In the darkness, his sickly pale face has dark circles puffing out under his eyes like bruises. The cavities sinking into his cheeks conjure images of famished concentration camp prisoners. I give up on posting pictures on Instagram to make Booker jealous.

We sit with the glass table comfortably between us. His eyes boring into me, he doesn't say a word. He doesn't even blink. I glance at my phone as if I need it to save me. I pick it up. I retreat into the touch screen. Right before I finish ordering an Uber, he says: "What's your major?"

"I'm in high school."

"Wonderful. So what do you want to be when you grow up?" he asks.

"An OB-GYN," I say.

"That's pretty specific. Why?"

"Challenging, money, status. I like babies."

"Interesting. Can you please put your phone down while we talk? It distracts me," he says.

"Fine. What is your major?" I ask.

"Oh I don't go here."

"I see. How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight," he says.

"Oh that's interesting," I say.

"Does my age bother you?"

"No, no. Not at all," I say, picking up my phone.

"It's okay. Just one friend hanging out with another. I bet if you order your Uber now, the driver will be here by the time we finish our coffee," he says.

I sip my coffee. "It's delicious. The hazelnut goes perfectly with the cinnamon roll."

"Nice cross around your neck. Are you religious?" he asks.

"Catholic. What about you?"

"No. I think religion is stupid. There's no invisible man watching you from the clouds. And you and I, we're not special beings. We piss and defecate just like all the other primates," he says.

He studies my reaction with a grin.

"Don't like the truth?" he asks.

"I. I'd like you to leave me alone," I say.

"Whoa. Sorry. Didn't mean for you to get all offended. If you're planning to go to college though, you better learn how to tolerate alternative perspectives, but if you're not intellectually ready for a debate, then," he says.

"There is a God, so you're wrong," I say.

"I say maybe, but where's your proof? I don't see any more evidence for God than I see unicorn tracks in the mud," he says.

"The grace of God is not in what you see out in the world, it is in that power which allows you to see in the first place," I say.

"Bravo. A girl was totally shaped by her upbringing," he says, clapping, "Impressive statement, but it doesn't mean anything."

My head has gained twenty pounds and my eyes are closing without my permission. I inhale a mouthful of coffee.

"I feel bad for you," I say.

"Why is that?" he asks.

"When you see a rainbow, all you see is an optical illusion," I say.

"And what do you see?" he asks.

"The beauty of God's creation," I say.

"We have a theologian on our hands," he says.

"Well now you know. Look, I have to go," I say.

He smiles and nods.

Yawning, I plant my elbow on the hard table, rest my head on my hand. All the dark shapes in the coffee shop melt together and swirling.

"Darling, are you okay?" he asks.

"Did you, you, you just, call me darling?" I ask.

He looks alarmed. Reaching across the table, his cold hand molesting across my face, he grabs the inside of my wrist.

"I think you might be having a stroke. Your pulse is irregular," he says.

"Irregular?" I slur. My lips are so heavy. Trying to talk is chewing words. Just want to sleep. Am I dying?

He pulls me up. Forces my arm over his shoulder, and walks; my legs cumbersome, treading through quick sand. I can't leave with him!

"Where?" I say.

"I'm taking you to the emergency room."

"Need, call, mom."

The cold night air chills my bones but doesn't wake me up at all. My legs are so tired and heavy is my head. He picks me up. I reach for the rusty fire hydrant but it is shrinking. I am being carried away by him. I am being pulled down by gravity with all of its irresistible power. I open my mouth to scream but can only make a quiet moaning sound. White lines on old pavement are faded almost to invisibility. A car door opens. Oh no. Please no. I am dropped on a black leather backseat by him. A car door shuts. It smells like air freshener.

I grit my teeth and force myself to sit up. Feeling the almost insurmountable weight of each individual finger, I can barely lift them, but I grab the door handle and pull it down. My fingers slip off the smooth plastic. A car door opens nearby.

"Ha. Child locks," he says.

I fall into the door, smacking my face against the snakeskin upholstery. My head so heavy, heavier, and sleepy.

"Are you kill me?" I ask.

"No. Of course not. Just want to play for awhile."

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