Part-time.

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Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/4259

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PART-TIME

By

Anthony Mark Piedmonte
B.A & B.S. Western Kentucky University, 2017

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

December 2021
PART-TIME

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A Thesis Approved on

November 9th, 2021

by the following Thesis Committee:

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Thesis Chair – Paul Griner (UofL English)

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Deborah Lutz (UofL English)

______________________________
John Gibson (UofL Philosophy)
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my partner

Alexander Geiman

and my friend

Kassidy Price

who have shown me what it means to be loved and accepted while struggling through part-time success and failure.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my teacher, Professor Paul Griner, for his support and confident guidance while completing this project. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Deborah Lutz, who graciously saved the day, and Dr. John Gibson, who faithfully jumped aboard. I express thanks to Dr. Ian Stansel who originally helped guide this project and who advised on my writing during my time in the program. I’m grateful to my partner, Alex, and oldest friend, Kassidy, for supporting this work as readers and for creating its happy ending. Finally, I thank my parents for allowing me to live in their basement while suffering through ever-changing part-time jobs and for bringing me up to pursue my happiness with creative writing.
ABSTRACT

PART-TIME

Anthony M. Piedmonte

November 9th, 2021

This thesis is a creative writing project in prose covering the first 70 pages of a novel manuscript titled *Part-time*. *Part-time* will center around a 25-year-old medical school dropout starting a new job at a neighborhood golf clubhouse and gym. This coming-of-age narrative follows Danny as he struggles with his sexual identity, student debt, and job outlook after returning to the privileged community he grew up in. This sample will introduce the major characters, the clubhouse setting, and the forming relationship dynamics. By the end of these pages, readers will gain insight into how the part-time employees of the Longwood Clubhouse move through the entitled community and about Danny’s mental health while struggling to find love. Readers will leave Danny after he begins to recognize his queer sexuality and the dire financial situation he finds himself in while at home with his parents. *Part-time*’s comedic voice allows glimpses of suffering by exposing amused readers to the heavy existential questions of early adulthood.
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CHAPTER 1

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!” I repeated as I ran around my room getting ready. Stopping only when I tripped over one of the many boxes scattered along the floor and stacked in leaning towers.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” I ran up the stairs. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.” I grabbed my lunch from the fridge, passing my dad sitting at the kitchen table silently enjoying his morning coffee. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I flew out the front door struggling with my car keys, which I immediately dropped. “FUCK!” I screamed in an exaggerated burst of frustration. Three bicycles circling the cul-de-sac came to a screeching stop but I paid them no attention and quickly crouched to retrieve my keys. To my horror, the door wouldn’t budge after I tried my keys in the lock in several different positions. Luckily, the passenger side window had gotten stuck in the door a few days earlier and I had sealed the window with a plastic bag and duct tape. I ran around to the passenger side door, throwing a brief wave to a shocked parent calling to one of the kids on a bike. I sent my fist through the plastic and ripped it clear in a series of struggling yanks and crawled inside.

Then I was cruising down the highway as fast as my 2001 Altima could go. I had gotten ready in record time and the clubhouse was just ten minutes away from my house. I knew a shortcut that would make it five, so I was actually on track to make it to work in an ‘Acceptably’-late window and not a ‘Why even show up?’-late window. I started
singing aloud to the music blaring from the speakers and enjoying the warm early-summer breeze coming in through the open windows. I turned on to a dirt road that led up to the clubhouse, cutting through an unkempt field and behind the surrounding neighborhood. A horrible lurch suddenly cut off the radio, smoke started to appear in front of the windshield, and my faithful Altima stopped accelerating.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” the fucks returned at full volume, while I guided the car into the grass off the side of the dirt tracks of the makeshift road. I got out and slammed the door. I was at the top of a low hill and could see the roof of the clubhouse further down the road. The grassy field my car was currently smoldering in sat next to a horse farm, which surrounded a high-class, large neighborhood full of big houses and an even bigger clubhouse. The horse farm and fields hid both the neighborhood and clubhouse from the view of the highway, keeping it uber private which increased the property value and the snobbiness index of its residents.

“Fuck!” I shouted.

*Neigh,* not expecting a response, I was startled to see a trio of horses had gathered to observe my tragic predicament.

“What are you looking at?” I asked the horses, turning away to survey the car. A responding snort made me throw a dirty look back.

Looking at my car it was obvious it would never run again... It was smoking quite a lot. I ripped the license plate off the back and took the registration out of the glove compartment, and tossed them into the grassy field behind the car, which hadn’t been mowed in a long time and was clearly out of use by the owner. I would come back later when I could afford to hire a tow truck but figured for the time being it would be best to
dispose of any information linking to me in case the car was discovered. I was still late so I immediately started walking off in the direction of the clubhouse. But I soon turned around and took a last look at my car and sighed.

“Fuck.” Walking past the horses I could feel their judging, watchful eyes following me. “Don’t you dare say anything.” I said to them as I passed.

Another responding *neigh* made me stop and look at them suspiciously. That’s when my car’s hood erupted in flames, and I started running.

“FUCKING HELL!” I shouted as I ran down the hill while the horses scattered in surprise.
CHAPTER 2

I arrived at the Longwood Quarry Clubhouse sweaty and out of breath. I was quite possibly singed as well, but it was hard to tell because my white uniform was covered in dust from the road. The clubhouse looked like a large ski lodge despite it being located in central Kentucky.

On one side of the clubhouse sat six tennis courts, which were currently occupied by a senior exercise class. On the other side, a large glass enclosure housed a greenhouse complete with several sitting spaces under a giant, constantly rotating fan. The doors lead out onto a small and neglected garden, but I doubted anyone ever opened them. The small hedges didn’t block the street from sight nor did the property carry on much further before the first neighboring house ruined any chance of a view. The inside of the greenhouse was equally disappointing, it was mostly ferns, and no one ever sat in it because of the humidity and smell of fertilizer, or so I heard since I had only been at the clubhouse a few times before.

I was amusing myself thinking of a large carnivorous plant stalking unsuspecting guests when a voice intercepted my daydream.

"What happened to you?" A head appeared from behind a shrub by the front door.

"I fell," I replied dumbly, "What are you doing in a bush?"

Clearly underwhelmed by my question, the girl rolled her eyes. "I'm trying to water the plants and the hose knob is stuck".
“I can help!” I jumped forward and struggled through the bushes more than I would have liked and blushed after fighting my way to the ground at the girl's feet.

When I got to my feet, my heart jumped for the shock of finding a pair of golden, amber eyes staring back at me. Even though I was taller, she towered over me. Her eyebrows knit together in a disdainful scowl, and her mouth stayed fixed and unmoving like it was carved out of stone, yet lines around her eyes suggested she frequently laughed. Her white uniform shirt hung loosely around her but was tucked into her shorts stylishly. Her hair was tied up in a knot that poked out of a matching white, uniform baseball cap, a flair of honey brown highlights circled through the dark brown curly hair in never-ending spirals.

I smiled brightly, indicating my wild success at making it through such heavy foliage. Her expression continued to show that she was less impressed and more annoyed. With one hand holding the hose nozzle, she used the other to gesture towards the knob before returning it to her hip.

"Be my guest," she challenged.

I reached down and attempted to turn the knob to the right, but it didn't budge. Trying the other direction, the knob turned with ease, but no water came.

"Hmm", I said aloud, turning the knob back in the direction it had been before and watched as the end of the hose that was attached to the valve jumped.

"Aha!" I exclaimed, reaching for a kink I spied coiled in its snaky body.

I moved quicker than I could think. A burst of water punched me in the face and, alarmed by the sudden attack, I stumbled backward over the hose and fell with a thud.
"Oh my God!" the unnamed girl shouted with a poorly hidden rush of giggles which grew in volume once she turned off the water and saw I was getting to my feet. “Looks like you fixed it,” she said, bending over with laughter. "Wait till Lisa sees you" she commented, looking at my uniform.

"What? It'll dry," I said doing a spin, which revealed my rear end was covered in mud. My series of falls, the incident with the hose, and the dusty jog left me covered head to toe in dirt and mud. There wasn’t much difference between my butt and the rest of my ruined white uniform. This prompted such an explosion of rapturous laughter from my companion that I couldn't help but join her. Even remnants of the shrubbery were attached to me in odd places. I looked like a castaway washed up on the Longwood Quarry shore.

"I'm Avery," the bush girl said, stretching out a hand.

"I'm Danny,” I responded, shaking her hand. We stood awkwardly in momentary silence. It was a beautiful early-summer day and a light breeze fluttered through the bushes and despite the warm sun, I shivered as my wet clothes chilled.

"We should probably get you a change of clothes. Let's try and sneak you in the back to avoid any members.”

Avery turned and led me along behind the shrubs bordering the clubhouse. The garden met a small path that led around the building. We walked through an iron gate and passed the tennis courts to the back patio. Small gardens and lounge chairs arranged themselves in the sun and sat taking in the view of the lake and rolling golf course hills beyond. A large pool pavilion sat to the right and inside an indoor swimming pool was walled in with repeating glass doors which could all be opened on warm days like today.
Two hot tubs were located on the opposite end of the clubhouse, shaded under a two-level porch leading to the first floor of the clubhouse, closer to a wide-spanning deck that hung over the quarry. The quarry’s lake looked even larger up close, and the dark, deep blue of its endless depths looked eerily cool in the hot sun. The story I had heard was that the rock quarry had been used for mining stone. When a bulldozer struck an underground spring, it flooded and became the attraction of the neighborhood. Apparently, the construction equipment was abandoned to sit at the bottom because the water came up too fast for any of it to be recovered. I always found that idea weirdly unsettling, and I only felt this more standing on the overhanging deck looking down into the depths. Like an isolated glacier lake, there was something very remote about the quarry’s water. I didn’t dwell on this long because my eyes were drawn to a well-toned man stretched on a towel in a sunny lounge chair.

"Clark, don't you do any work?"

“How am I supposed to guard lives when no one is here, Ava?"

“You could swim some laps. A flabby, lazy lifeguard isn't good for anything."

Avery replied, with a hint of flirtation.

Clark stood up and walked with us over to the pool, "You really think I look flabby?" he said, addressing Avery and ignoring me. My face reddened as I realized this wasn’t a stranger and I tried to pretend to be looking around the pool as Clark flexed his stomach. His body was lean and strong, but having known Clark in high school, he had actually lost some of his former glory. His muscles looked smooth but in a becoming way that showed he was human and capable of obtaining love handles. However, his straight teeth and clear skin, combined with a sharp jawline covered with stubble reminded me
we were still in different species based on human attractiveness. His hair, which was once cut into a crude buzzcut, now hung over his forehead with waves that reminded me of grass fields in the wind. What an asshole.

Clark allowed Avery to push him in the pool and I tried to not look too visibly annoyed but my face would have given me up if she had turned to look at me. When Clark’s head emerged Avery introduced me.

"This is Danny, he's going to be working with us upstairs."

"Danny… hey weren't you in the class ahead of me at North Cardinal?" he climbed out of the pool right neck to me, splashing some drops of water across my face and chest.

“Yeah and at Hamley Elementary,” I replied awkwardly.

“Oh yeah, how are you, man?” Clark replied by swinging a hand out to do some slapping secret handshake I had often seen guys do, but I had never learned what it was and ended up accidentally grabbing Clark’s hand and holding it like I was greeting a princess.

It was often difficult for anyone outside of Cardinal County to understand, but the people here don’t subscribe to the realities of regular life. The county is young and formed when wealthy, predominantly white, families fled further east into the rural counties to build bigger houses and distinguish themselves further from the poverty of the city. I never saw it clearly until I left for college, but a lot of kids here grew up with unlimited resources and opportunities. The troupes of high school didn’t apply here, it wasn’t uncommon for the jock, the straight-A student, the art kid, and the rich kid to all be the same person. The cool kids went on to attend the most expensive and academically
challenging colleges after years of being tutored and groomed to follow in their parent’s footsteps as CEOs, doctors, lawyers, engineers, and anything else that earned them their fortunes. Most North Cardinal County students had straight teeth, tans from their family’s beach vacations, and could easily afford skincare treatments that made them look like they just stepped on a movie set. They filled their empty schedules with extracurriculars and sports to build their resumes and drove to school games in their new BMWs and Landrovers. Meanwhile, a small majority of the rest of the students carpooled or prayed their shitty car could make it down the street to their part-time job. I was closer to the second group; I had a part-time job as a busboy where I earned money for my own savings and I was lucky to have a shitty car which was a hand-me-down from my siblings. These privileges were more than a lot of people ever got outside of Cardinal County, and it sadly took me a long time to recognize this. You’d find that in Cardinal County, those who don’t have the most, still have a lot. But standing in between Clark and Avery reminded me that I was not quite in the league.

It was annoying to find Clark here and to have him witness this embarrassing career turn years after high school. I always imagined I'd leave school and go on to live a successful life while all the ‘dumb jocks’, who didn’t really exist, would get someone pregnant or hang around in dead-end jobs. Unfortunately, at least here, most of the time winners keep winning, and losers keep losing. A breeze blew smoothly across my face and brought me out of my suddenly sulky ‘mood. After fakely catching up with Clark, with the ‘I’m figuring it out’s and the ‘I’m hoping to’s, we left Clark to lay in the sun and entered the pool pavilion, heading to the clubhouse.
Inside there were ‘NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY’ signs all over the walls and painted on the floor.

“No lifeguard on duty? Does that mean Clark only works in the summer or something?” I asked a little too excitedly.

“Uh, I’m not sure what he will do. He just started as our primary lifeguard and only works Fridays and the weekends. We hired him to help with our busier season and parties if he’s available,” Avery said with a pause and continued. “But I guess in the Fall he might take some shifts upstairs when we slow down. I’ve helped as a lifeguard for parties, so we’ve had people do both.”

It was disappointing to learn I wouldn’t be free of Clark anytime soon. Learning Avery was a lifeguard unintentionally drew my eyes to her muscular legs as she walked ahead. I became more aware of my stomach bouncing and pushing along the buttons of my shorts which hugged my thighs tightly. I pulled at my wet shirt hoping to hide any unflattering contours and felt more urgency for dry clothes. I couldn’t take my eyes off Avery’s body and my heart continued to sink as I found where I failed in comparison and grew more embarrassed of my intrusive inspection. Avery, noticing my lack of response turned her eyes on me and caught me staring. Her amber eyes flickered with heat and her mouth tightened with a building response, but suddenly her look softened and changed to something else and she turned away without saying anything. In one millisecond the red flush caused by recognizing Clark turned pale with the chill of scolded embarrassment. We passed through an identical set of transparent doors leading into the clubhouse leaving the experience behind to not be mentioned again.
"First things first, let's get you some new clothes." Avery opened a door immediately on the left after the turn of the hallway with "Employees Only" engraved in a gold plated sign.

"Here is the laundry room slash supply roo--" Avery stopped realizing the lights were already on and a tall pale white woman in a sequin gown was talking animatedly on the phone. As she rotated to face us, the angular contours of her thin face could be seen sharply. Her straight-backed posture and furrowed brow commanded respect, yet a spark in the depths of her eyes communicated a warmth and trust that was difficult to explain. I knew that she always saw the truth, which was as unnerving as it was comforting.

"I'm telling you right now Christian, if those lilies aren't at the venue in 15 minutes, I will personally shove a bouquet down your throat and use you as a centerpiece!" While screaming on the phone the woman saw us come in and smiled with a little wave in greeting. As the voice of Christian started to respond, she hung up and greeted us.

"Hi, Avery, who's this?" The woman asked with interest looking over my dirty uniform.

“Lisa, you know who this is, you hired him last week!"

I wasn’t sure if she was pretending to not recognize me due to the circumstances of our first meeting or because she hadn’t looked at me once during my interview. She had been playing racquetball in neon workout clothes, complete with a matching headband and goggles, and fired off questions about my strengths and weaknesses while relentlessly crushing an elderly opponent.
"Oh of course! You look very different in mud." Lisa said, turning to rummage through a bin behind her.

"Erh, thank you," I said stupidly. Lisa looked over her shoulder and made eye contact with me, then Avery, smirking slightly. Avery stifled a laugh.

"Why are you so dressed up?" Avery asked.

"I'm leaving soon for a friend’s wedding. I was actually just on the phone with the groom," She spun around and handed me a new uniform she pulled from the box.

'You'll want to change in here. There's an old man who loiters naked in the men's locker room. I actually jumped in here when I saw him come in because he doesn’t shut up either," she said.

"I thought we told him not to come back. What's he doing here?" Avery asked.

"He's loitering in the bathroom," she replied simply. "Didn't I just say that?" ' she asked, turning to me.

“Avery, did you finish watering the plants?”

Avery began to respond but whatever she said was cut off by the door closing behind them.

I sighed and went to work changing out of my ruined uniform, which I tossed in a bin of dirty towels sitting by the washer. Ever since walking into the clubhouse, the smell of sweat, talcum powder, and Febreze polluted the air, but here it smelled mostly of clean laundry and disinfectant. I took a moment of quiet to think about my current situation. I caught sight of my warped white-uniformed reflection in the dial of the washing machine. I frowned and went back into the hall.
"Well don't you look better? Have you had a tour around the building yet?" Lisa said with a clap.

“Well, Avery showed me the pool and back patio.”

"Oh alright. Well, come this way," she said without asking why I had come in the back or why I had shown up covered in mud.

"I'll head back upstairs!" Avery blurted out, turning to leave.

"Nonsense, stay with us. There's nothing to do upstairs and Brian is up there. You can help me explain some of the receptionist duties, especially since you’ll be training him." Lisa said with a swish turning down the hallway in her beautiful tailored dress. We followed behind her, cautious of stepping on her train which dragged after her. I was surprised she was okay with dragging it around the clubhouse’ brown, maybe gray—it was unclear—carpet.

Her dress swished around the corner at the end of the hall and Avery and I followed our guide back out onto the patio. We were under the deck and the two hot tubs bubbled playfully.

"Our receptionists are responsible for a wide variety of jobs here. We have no laundry or regular janitorial staff, and you will have to service the pools and hot tubs. However, it’s a pretty low amount of work. There are a handful of trash cans and laundry baskets to check every evening. There are rotating cleaning duties that Avery will show you, but even on busy days you will likely have downtime."

To my surprise, while she was talking, Mrs. Cameron kicked off her shoes and dropped down to sit with her feet in the water. "You're welcome to read, work on
homework, or watch TV at the front desk as long as it doesn't disrupt guests or become a problem with getting your daily tasks done."

Mrs. Cameron grinned after seeing my reaction. "Not too bad, huh? All staff members also have a free membership, so you can enjoy the clubhouse in your free time, although I doubt you will use it," she said with a shrug. "Avery, do you want to show him the pump room?" she said and gestured to a door behind me which was painted the same shade of gray as the concrete wall.

Avery opened the door by pulling it hard after it got stuck and it jolted open. Inside large machines and pumps buzzed loudly, dating themselves as ancient.

"Don't worry about the pumps or the heater, we don't touch them unless they alarm or shut down." Avery walked me through the protocol for calling a repair service should one or both of these things were to happen. Then she showed me how to test the water for the PH levels, adding a few drops of chemicals to a beaker with a color-guided key. The water turned the perfect shade of blue and she dumped it in an open bucket dedicated as the toxic waste disposal container, not saying anything as to if an uncovered bucket was the best practice for discarding various chemicals.

"You typically don't have any problems with the left hot tub," Avery instructed, gesturing to the tub where Mrs. Cameron was sitting. "The right one gets a little scummy and weird because of Alan."

"Who's Alan?" I asked.

"He's our Alligator," Mrs. Cameron said matter-of-factly without looking away from scrolling through her phone.

"Our Alligator?!" I questioned looking between Mrs. Cameron and Avery.
"Yeah, we think someone illegally released him in the quarry because he's very pet-like.” she continued in the same casual tone. “He comes up for late-night soaks in the tub. You shouldn't typically run across him.”

I stared back open-mouthed and looked to Avery for an explanation who only gave a shrug. “I’ve never seen him, but Lisa showed me security footage once.” She pointed toward the camera in the corner.

“Oh yes, we have security cameras all over the place,” Mrs. Cameron said. “There’s a monitor at the front desk we can show you. We have them in here because people often try to sneak in for the hot tubs. We also only have one lifeguard on duty at a time and he’s only here for events and the weekends. During the rest of the week, it’s good practice to watch the cameras and make sure no one is obviously drowning.”

“Is that normal? For receptionists to act as lifeguards?” I asked genuinely curious.

“Oh no. You have no responsibility to save anyone, there are signs posted everywhere.” Mrs. Cameron gestured toward a metal sign hanging on the wall by the door. ‘NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY’ stood out in big red letters and matched the one in the pool pavilion. “We only recently hired Clark to appease some neighborhood moms. Have you met Clark?”

Before I could respond, Mrs. Cameron continued.

“TO be clear, you’re not expected to act as a lifeguard but if you see someone trip and fall, there’s a first aid kit at the desk if you feel like helping them. If you really see someone eat the concrete you should call emergency services or there’s also a Life Alert upstairs that you can use.” Mrs. Cameron had leaned back and closed her eyes while talking to catch some sun that was now shining under the porch. The breeze was blowing
through her golden hair and she was slowly moving her feet back and forth in the water. If I didn’t know she was the clubhouse manager, or if she wasn’t wearing a sequin gown, I would have thought she was simply a member giving us instructions while trying to fill an unscheduled day of relaxation. “Except technically…” she said sitting up briefly to give air quotes, “we aren’t supposed to have staff wear the Life Alert anymore”

“Alright,” I responded, my eyebrows wrinkled together with confusion.

“You can wear it at night while closing up. Sometimes you have to do it alone and some of our older receptionists like to wear it while they’re here,” Avery interjected with a sharp emphasis on “older”.

“Don’t wear it if you don’t have to.” Mrs. Cameron corrected squinting one eye open to check Avery. “The only two who wear it are Ms. Nancy and Jeanie. They are two ancient ladies of the neighborhood who only work two mornings a week and somehow manage to accidentally press the button at least once a month. We now have to pay a three hundred dollar fine every time the police arrive with no emergency.”

“Alright, gotcha, no Life Alert. How many receptionists are there?” I asked Avery, who was leaning up against the wall behind me. I was feeling increasingly uncomfortable by Mrs. Cameron’s casual instruction and manner as a boss. Neither Avery nor Mrs. Cameron seemed in a particular rush to get back upstairs.

“There’s Brian who is currently upstairs. He’s a senior in high school and works evenings and during the weekdays. Ms. Nancy and Jeanie work together for two-morning shifts during the week.

Mrs. Cameron jumped in, “I’ll probably schedule you mostly in the mornings since you have nothing else going on during the days. I wish you could just replace those
old bats for every morning shift. I am here during regular business hours and I barely get anything done on the days they’re here because they are constantly coming to me with questions or gossip.”

“Thanks,” I said a little too curtly, annoyed by the accurate depiction of my availability. Mrs. Cameron smiled lightly and gave me a barely detectable wink.

“Then there’s me,” Avery carried on. “I typically work the evenings and weekends with Sam. We are a little short-staffed because we have no backup and Sam calls in sick a lot, so it’ll be nice to have you around now.”

“We might hire someone else as well,” Mrs. Cameron interjected. “I don’t like everyone to be stretched too thin.”

Avery laughed, “What are you talking about? With Danny, as long as Sam stops calling in sick, everyone should be able to get just enough hours.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right but I want you all to have a good experience while you’re here. I don’t like everyone working alone. Maybe I’ll make Clark take some shifts with reception”

At this Avery shrugged and shook her head with a grin. I was just beginning to like Mrs. Cameron before she mentioned Clark. She didn’t seem too strict like some managers I had while working part-time jobs in high school and college.

“To be quite honest the most difficult thing about this job are the clients.” Mrs. Cameron said, sitting up to make eye contact. “To put it simply, there a few members who don’t give a shit about you and want you to drop everything to help them with whatever incredibly stupid need they have,” Mrs. Cameron said plainly without a hint of sarcasm. “You’re also not paid very well, but because of that, I don’t expect much from
you. Like I said, at the front desk you can do homework, watch movies, play video
games, talk, and whatever else, as long as you keep up with your tasks, like folding
towels and doing laundry. It’s also best to give all your attention to some of the guests
when they need it, it’s just easier. But Avery can explain more about your job duties as
she walks you around. I think I’ll stay put here.”

We turned to leave.

“Oh, one more thing. If anyone ever gives you trouble, doesn’t listen to you, or
tries to take advantage of the clubhouse services, please call me directly. Avery will give
you my number. I live in the neighborhood, like most of our workers, and can be up here
pretty quickly. I enjoy putting people in their place, so please just call me if you have any
trouble.”

“Sounds good Mrs. Cameron,” I said smiling while turning again to leave.

“Call me Lisa, Danny,” she said, dropping back to lay in the sun.

I stepped into the hallway with Avery and we both paused for a second to look
back at Lisa resting peacefully and swishing her feet in the water.

“She seems cool,” I said as we both stared through the glass door.

“Yeah, she’s really down-to-earth and laid back, literally in this case. She’s only
been the manager for a year but she really watches out for us and—” Avery trailed off as
an extremely old man in nothing but a towel rounded the corner and walked through our
conversation without an apology. Avery and I quickly hugged the wall to avoid being
brushed by the man’s hairy shoulders which matched the gray hair jutting out from his
nose and ears. He made a distinct “Hmph” as he passed by us and stopped at the door
seeing Mrs. Cameron outside. Avery and I exchanged glances as the man flattened the
few hairs on his head, stepped outside, and promptly dropped his towel revealing a tight speedo that was barely visible underneath his large, sagging stomach and backside.

Lisa’s eyes snapped open as the man tiptoed into the same tub as her and she immediately shot out the door. When she discovered us waiting in the hall she simply said “I’ll be in my office if you need me,” and rounded the corner while whispering a barely intelligible “God, I hate this place”.

“And she seems to really like her job,” Avery finished.
CHAPTER 3

The rest of the clubhouse looked identical to the rooms in the basement and smelled the same too. Even in the large upstairs dining room a light fragrance of sweat covered with Febreze seemed to be soaked in the faded and outdated wallpaper and carpet. Each room must have been constructed with the intention of appearing as wealthy as possible while spending the least amount of money. The browning wallpaper was installed years ago and grew uglier with the neglectful upkeep. The dark brown wood molding and brass doorknobs had long fallen out of style. While many clients looked at the clubhouse’s surroundings with the esteem of a scholar in an exclusive explorers lunch club, anyone with realistic taste, or finer taste for that matter, would see through the facade and growing grime to understand there was no elegance to explain the stately airs of the clubhouse clients.

After we finished the tour, it was four, and Avery’s shift was over. When Mrs. Cameron saw Avery packing up to leave she looked at me and said, “You can go home too. Brian just got here and he’s covering the evening shift and you’ll be working most of next week with Avery to train.” I stared at her blankly as my internal consciousness rejoiced at the idea of going home early, but also shuddered thinking of my unpaid student loans that were about to get called on. Avery was standing by the door waiting for me and Mrs. Cameron was texting on her phone but looked up sensing I was still there,
“Go on, shoo. Enjoy the sunny day.” With a piercing glare and wave of her hand, she spun around and went back into her office.

“Sorry Brian,” Avery said to a skinny kid with a haircut that bordered dangerously close to a bowl-cut. He was bent down playing a video game on his laptop and I hadn’t noticed him sitting behind the desk.

“It’s cool, she’s leaving soon so it’ll be an easy night,” he said gesturing his head toward Lisa’s office.

“I can hear you,” Lisa called from the other room.

“Nice to meet you,” Brian said with a brief glance at me, he didn’t seem worried about Lisa.

“You too,” I said, throwing out a wave as Avery pulled me out the door.

Avery released me and started digging in her bag for her keys, “Do you need a ride?”

“Uh, ya. That would be nice, thanks!”

“Sure thing, as long as you promise not to judge me for the mess.”

We rounded on an old green Volvo and Avery climbed in and unlocked the passenger door for me. Usually, when someone says ‘excuse the mess’, it’s because they themself are hyper-vigilant against ‘the mess’, and when you climb in it’s actually spotless, or just an empty can in a cup holder. This was not Avery’s case. She fell more into the ‘I recognize I have a problem and I genuinely want you to excuse the mess’ place. I stepped into a pile of discarded takeout menus and fast food trash. The back seats were covered in clothes and I recognized pieces of the clubhouse uniform among the fragrant, and possibly life-growing, trash.
Avery watched me carefully as I took in the surroundings. I opened my mouth to say something, but when I caught her eyes, I exhaled the breath I was pulling in and grinned.

“It’s nice.”

“I told you not to judge me,” she said curtly thrusting her car key threateningly at my face. Before I could worry that I had offended her, she cracked a smile, started the engine, and sped out of the parking lot, narrowly missing an old woman carrying a tennis racket.

“So why is your car so--?” she shot a look out of the corner of her eye that told me to choose my next words carefully. “Full of trash” I finished with another grin. “You seem like a neat person”.

“Well, you seem like a messy person.”

I was about to argue but remembered how I was covered head to toe in dirt when we met earlier that day, so I once again closed my mouth.

Avery shrugged, “I have a pretty busy schedule.” She started digging something from out behind her seat. “Although I should probably take some time to clean up a bit,” she said, moving to dig in the middle compartment. She pulled out a chapstick and quickly applied it in the rearview mirror before dropping it back into the garbage she had just rescued it from. With a flourish, she retrieved a pair of sunglasses from where the chapstick had disappeared and threw them on, swerving a bit across the road.

*I’m in love,* I immediately thought. I had never really been in love with someone, so I constantly fell in love with everyone. It usually hits me during a completely unromantic moment. For example, one time I fell in love with a girl in my high school
geometry class after she accidentally hit me with a rubber band from her braces while taking them out to eat a snack. That wet rubberband hitting me between the eyes might as well have been a blown kiss. It happened again in a college biology class when my lab partner took a dissecting knife from me because I was too scared to cut open a fetal pig specimen. Watching her extract the dead piglet’s heart won mine over. However, none of the many girls I fell in love with seemed interested in me.

The closest I ever got to a relationship was with the biology lab partner, Jessie. After several months of study sessions and late-night pizza orders, I finally came clean that I liked her—in a text message, of course. I wasn’t prepared to be rejected face-to-face. She admitted she liked me too, which I celebrated briefly as she explained that she had a boyfriend at another school. After that Jessie and I didn’t study together anymore. The only later interaction we had was on my birthday. Filing into class behind me she whispered, ‘Happy Birthday, Danny,’ and quickly went to her seat before I could respond. I decided then and there that I would love her forever, which was not true.

Through high school and college, I regularly found myself inspecting my reflection in the mirror, looking for the reasons girls didn’t like me. It’s a weird problem to not know if you’re ugly. I had rich brown eyes and clear skin, I was pale but I had straight teeth. I kept my face shaved and even tweezed between my eyebrows. My cheeks were a little too big, but my jaw cut my face in a pleasing way. I decided my worst traits were my crooked nose—thanks to the unfortunate combination as a baby of a training walker and an unguarded set of stairs—and my fine brown hair, which never laid in a stylish way but either laid flat against my head or exploded into cotton candy in the wind. I constantly searched my appearance for an explanation for why no one seemed to fall in
love with me, I found nothing displeasing enough to warrant such a reaction. I searched my personality for an explanation but also came up empty-handed. I was smart but relaxed when it came to school, I wasn’t particular when it came to school projects and I was talkative when the situation demanded it, yet I didn’t make many friends. With girls, I was always respectful and I didn’t talk about them with guys. I didn’t think about them in the shower as some other guys bragged, but I did think about them when I was alone on the weekends with no plans. Many weekends were spent thinking about how a joke I tried to tell a girl in a class two years before landed flat into an awkward silence, or how embarrassed I was after telling a girl named Kimmy that I liked her in a high school history class and she laughed.

All considered together, I came to understand I was a loser, but it wasn’t as dramatic as I thought when I was a kid. I simply held no unique abilities or specific interests that made me stand out, I was awkward, but followed the rules so I never made any waves. I got good grades, but not great ones. I was good at everything, but not amazing at one thing. Winners have people fall in love with them; losers are the ones who fall in love. I suspected Avery was a winner.

“So, are you in school?” she asked me, changing the subject.

“Urgh, I recently dropped out of medical school.”

Her head snapped to the side so she could look at me directly, ignoring the road.

“What? Are you serious?”

“Yeah, turns out dissecting humans is a lot harder than TV makes it look.”

“So what do you plan to do now?”
“I’m not sure. I just got a new job, so that’s good,” I replied with a cringe. Silence fell for a moment as Avery contemplated this new information, which seemed to happen whenever I informed anyone that I gave up the only profession capable of saving me from my student debt.

“Turn up here,” I said, pointing to the approaching neighborhood. “Well, what about you?” I asked. “Are you in school?”

“I sure am,” Avery replied simply.

I told her which house to stop at and got out. She waited as I struggled to climb out, trash went spilling out into the street and she watched over the bridge of her sunglasses as I scrambled to toss it all back into the car. When I was done she pushed up her glasses, offered a, “Ta”, then stomped on the gas pedal. Her car disappeared over the hill from my cul-de-sac leaving me alone, squinting in the late afternoon summer sun.

My parent’s house was a large, one-level, brick house that they built from an empty lot, achieving one of their life-long dreams. From the backyard, I could see the looming visage of my old high school and the football stadium that backed up to our neighborhood. My parents often sat on the porch to listen to the stadium announcer giving commentary on the school’s soccer games, something they still enjoyed even after my brothers graduated.

I let myself in the front door and my cat hopped down from a couch in the living room and greeted me with a loud meow. The living room in the front was a fancy lounge area right off an open dining room. The walls were painted a maroon red and the couches were upholstered in an ornate royal blue and dark hardwood floors spread out into the hall and kitchen. The cherry end tables and coffee table had glass surfaces that held piles
of photo albums like they were suspended in the air. A grandfather clock stood in the corner by the doorway and on my other side a large glass cabinet waited to greet visitors and show them the golden trophies and medals my brothers had earned through their years in school.

A guest in the house might think the academic certificates of achievement, the debate team statues, or even the 2008 North Cardinal County Talent Show 1st Place trophy, belonged to me in an understandable estimate of my strengths being in anything other than physical achievement. I clearly wasn’t pictured in a jersey in any of the photos around the room or in the albums. But these scholarly awards also were won by my two older brothers. Kent was a surprisingly good country singer, and Jake was an excellent arguer and supreme political bigot. Both excelled in the classroom, making sure to keep their grades up so they could continue to play for the soccer team or run track. But I still had a place in the cabinet. A certificate for completing middle school with the A/B Honor Roll poked out between my brother's summa cum laude medallions, which were laid in black velvet boxes, their open lids covering my name from sight. To my parent’s credit, my acceptance letter to the University of Kentucky Medical School was proudly presented at eye level in the spot of the highest honor for all to see. I felt a pang of renewed disappointment and turned away.

I found a note sitting on the kitchen table and read it as I kicked off my shoes, Ed jumped up to rub his face on the corner of the paper. The note simply read, "Went with the Walkers to the lake! Here's $20 for pizza. Have a good weekend! Love, Mom and Dad."
As usual, both my parents had signed 'Mom' and "Dad" respectively. I touched their signatures feeling suddenly lonely. The sun filtered in and lined the bare kitchen table cutting across the $20 dollar bill that was left under the nose. A dull thud came through the wall preceding the hum of the AC kicking on. I picked up Ed and gave him a squeeze before carrying him downstairs and dropping him on my bed. The room was gloomy and dark. The one window looked out onto the patio under the porch where an old boat my dad was fixing up sat blocking out the little light that did come in. I clicked on a lamp next to my bed, preferring its soft light over the harsh, low-hanging, overhead light from the ceiling fan. Harry Potter posters pulled from a magazine were taped in a collage on the walls surrounding my room. Most old kids' rooms in their parents' homes stayed the same after graduating high school. After suitcases lifted from the ground and lights turned out, before the doors shut on the settling dust, the rooms were expected to stay the same until the adult versions of their residents returned for holidays or long weekends. They’d sleep in the creepy shrines of a childhood sealed away by the harsh line of adulthood and vow to never come back, except for the holidays.

But my room stayed my room. After a fun freshman year at college, most of my new friends changed schools to pursue new majors or just dropped out. I came home most weekends, unlike my brothers who never came to visit and whose rooms were quickly transformed into an office and gym. My room survived and changed, reflecting my college years back at me. A whiteboard I installed by my desk had been used for late Sunday night study sessions and my university pennants were nailed to the wall above my bed. Piles of books read over the years were crammed into two short bookcases and stacked on almost every available surface. Pictures of a cross country trip I took during a
gap year after not getting into med school on my first try hung above my desk next to a picture of my Dad and me standing on a ridge overlooking the Grand Canyon. Now, boxes of lightly used apartment accessories, supplies, and utilities sat around the room, confirming my return to my constantly evolving bedroom. I had always come back home and been glad to do so.

I made a motion to pick up one of the closest boxes to start unpacking it, but pulled back with a second thought and instead stripped off my clothes and tiptoed through the stacked boxes to my closet. I selected a pair of pink running shorts and an old dark blue shirt from college that advertised the campus clinic, which I used to work at, “Don’t Put the STD in Stupid” was printed above a cartoon of a nervous condom taking a quiz. It was still early in the afternoon and the weather was perfect for a run. The shirt was tighter than I remembered but I figured it wouldn’t be noticeable while running. Plus I didn’t want to dig through my suitcases and laundry baskets for something better and, eager to enjoy the day, took off out the basement’s back door just outside my room,

I jogged down the hill leading down behind my house and through my neighbors’ backyards. A local nature preserve wasn’t too far away and it was quicker to cut through the neighborhood. Crossing over a small bridge covering a creek bed, the owner caught sight of me from his porch and gave me a familiar wave which I returned with a smile. I picked up the pace with a happy spring in my step. It was nice to be home and I was heading to one of my favorite places on earth, an odd thought for a park mostly made up of soccer fields and a few acres of forest. But it was true, and I felt a wave of joy as I caught sight of my destination. Again, I picked up the pace, and when the passing houses
were replaced by passing wildflowers reaching out from an overgrown grassy field, I felt a weight release from my shoulders.

The nature preserve was fenced in by a thin tree line where the soccer fields and wildflowers had carved out the woods. A large, maintained forest with running and walking trails loomed in the distance overlooking its old land massacred by human development. The sky stretched out with frozen thin clouds high up in the atmosphere and was only obstructed by the tops of trees, creating an effect similar to a private courtyard where one felt safe and unbothered by the outside world. Fluffy clouds drifted slowly into view like sailing ships and the long grass in the field next to me crashed in the wind like slow motion waves. A baseball diamond stood guard against one end of the nature preserve and a rough building that looked like a campsite gift shop marked the other end. The building was the park’s nature center and a notice board stood between the center, a butterfly garden, and a small playground with metal swing sets and a slide. Around the entire complex, old and faded picnic tables sat under the trees that were spared when the soccer fields went in. The old trees had watched me through the years play T-Ball in elementary school, try to fit in with a crowd of smoking teenagers in high school, and study in their shade on the weekends while home from college.

I never really felt truly home until I paid a visit to Mayhem Nature Preserve. I stopped to rest under one of my particularly favorite trees, feeling the wind drying the sweat on my forehead. The large oak tree had been damaged during a windstorm while I was in college and half of the oval canopy was lost, and a lone low branch stretched out outlining the spacer where the chuck of its canopy used to occupy. The hollowed portion
I climbed onto the top of the picnic table that sat there and stretched out my legs while taking in the surrounding scene. The only other people in the park were a mother and child playing on the playground. The grassy wildflower field roared softly behind me with its insects dancing in the warm sunlight. I took a deep, gratifying breath.

*I'm happy to be home*, I thought, but a quiet echo of doubt whispered in its wake.

I stayed there stretching until I was tired of brushing ants off my legs and resumed my run. I made my way through the wooded trails. The Mayhem caretakers had made several new improvements. Just inside the entrance to the woods, there was a cleared-out section that made a natural-looking arboretum, the vines and weeds which had slowly been taking it over were ripped out and gone. It became clear that the nature preserve must have had an infusion of cash, volunteers, or both. The paths were in excellent shape, a botanical garden and large campfire pit had been added, and further in I found a rental campsite. New signage had been placed on all the trails and a gazebo and benches had been added around a frog pond which used to be surrounded by brush and was difficult to get to. These changes were horrible.

I was relieved to make my way further into the woods where the paths were a little greener and seemed how I remembered the rest of the park to be. For close to an hour I ducked and dodged low hanging branches and thorny bushes, looping up and down winding trails that connected to each other in seemingly infinite combinations of paths that I had gone down a million times, over and over again. My phone's workout tracker read six miles, further than I had run since I trained for a half-marathon in college. I
collapsed in a large clearing that led off in several directions. The wind licked my skin with a cold chill as my sweat evaporated. I removed my headphones which had muted the woods under the electronic beats of my running playlist and the world came to life. I closed my eyes and listened to the creaking sway of the trees and the chattering of the birds protesting the movements. The clouds zoomed by, unable to stop and pause as I could. The cooled grass from a recent rain felt like running a hand through a soft carpet. I felt completely relaxed, for a moment.

My eyes flew open when I heard a muffled footstep land near my feet. Tilting my head up I found a group of deer staring at me with curious alarm; the doe in the front sniffed cautiously at my shoes. But a jump from a deer in the back sent them all running down an alternate path, their white tails signaling for their friends as they jumped into the brush and out of sight. I laid there stunned for a moment and then decided to get up in case a buck was nearby. I found the break had restored my energy and decided to run the rest of the way home.

I made my way back through a different path and came out of the woods near the playground. The mother and child had left. I quickly rounded the corner of the nature center and slammed directly into a hard body, knocking it over and falling with it.

“WA-OOF” gasped the unknown barrier as they were sent to the ground with the wind knocked out of them.

My momentum sent me flying over top of them where I face planted in the grass. When I pulled mud out of my eyes—and recovered from the fear of thinking I had suddenly gone blind—the man was already climbing to his feet. He was a tall, sandy-
haired, narrow-faced man, and his tan skin and khaki pants immediately told me he was a worker at the nature center.

“I’m so sorry,” I said sheepishly as I pulled myself up to a sitting position.

To my horror, I realized when he held up a finger to pause my speech that he was leaning over trying to recover from taking a direct hit to the crouch.

I waited without saying more and looked anywhere else up at him. I started getting bored and inspecting a scrape on my knee when he finally replied.

“It’s okay, serves me right for trying to trim my bushes in peace. Here,” he said, holding out his hand. I took it and he pulled me to my feet. His eyes fell onto my shirt causing an amused smile to stretch across his face. “Nice shirt.”

“Oh thank you, they were giving them out for free,” I said stupidly. I looked down and, to my horror, realized the shirt was stuck tight against me and soaked with sweat. It had also crept up exposing my stomach and now looked more like a crop-top.

“Oh, nice. Well take it slow before you kill someone,” he said, turning away and throwing up a hand in farewell. “And make sure you always use a condom!”

“You too!” I shouted thinking he was going to wish me a good day. I took off running along the road with a rush of embarrassment. I would need to avoid the nature center for a while. I winced immediately replaying that I had shouted ‘You too!’ not only too loudly but to use a condom. I mumbled to myself about being awkward and weird as I jogged home, likely making the people I passed think the same thing.

*He smelled good,* the thought drifted through my brain like the sound of another voice. A pang of fear hammered my heart with each beat driving my thoughts down a road I wouldn’t think of.
CHAPTER 4

Coming home to a silent house is a sad luxury. Most of the time, I enjoy silence and consider myself an introvert, but after showering, making grilled cheese, and cleaning up the dishes, the evening laid ahead as a lonely, unscheduled void. Three weeks ago I had been spending every evening studying or laughing with my two roommates, Jamie and Austin. Since they were both medical students, we spent hours studying together or taking weekend breaks, sharing drinks and pizza while playing video games. In fact, I realized that this was one of the first times I had found myself truly alone in the two years I spent away. I wandered around the house and inspected it thinking about how to spend my weekend. I wasn’t working at the Clubhouse till Monday morning and I’d have three days alone.

Since I was a kid, whenever I was bored and alone at home I had a habit of visiting my parents’ room. My mom’s dresser has a locked drawer she keeps her high school ring, an old night light, keepsakes from us growing up, and—my most favorite thing—a small music box that plays Camelot. The afternoon sun was beginning to dip and the light through the trees sent green and gold tones out into the hall and around my parent’s room. I walked through their door as I had a million times before. To the left was the long dresser with its locked drawer. The lock always added to the mystery since the drawer had no knob, you had to use the key to pull open the secret hiding place. As a child, this was as amazing as finding a secret passageway, a hidden treasure laid within
our own home. My mom never had the heart to hide the key from us and instead left it in her jewelry box, which sat on the long dresser amongst family photos, an old gilded mirror, musical figures that could be wound up to play different lullabies, perfume, and a tray to catch her rings. All of these beautiful things were doubled by their reflections in the large mirror built into the dresser. A bountiful display I could never see enough of.

I followed an old ritual of examining the items in the jewelry box. I always loved looking at the sparkling and rare accessories and pairs of assorted earrings. I caught sight of a set of pearl earrings that my mom told me were given to her by my grandparents when she graduated from nursing school. They sat next to a pair of diamond studs which came from my dad on their ten-year anniversary. There were goofy holiday-themed earrings, bracelets, and necklaces, mixed in with more expensive trinkets marking anniversaries, losses, birthdays, and holidays. Every item was attached to a special memory or person and then carried around whenever needed.

I lifted up a beaded necklace that was made by a younger me. ‘Danny’ was spelled out with lettered beads but spaced out oddly because I added too many or too few beads between some of the letters. Most of the beads were purple, my favorite color, and cut like gems, they were my most prized possession at the time. It was rare for me to have such beautiful and sparkly things, so to give them away was a mark of extreme love. I don't remember giving it to her, but I knew she purposely kept it with the key to her secret drawer knowing I'd see it securely kept in her jewelry box with all her other expensive jewelry. I ran the necklace through my fingers and tried to remember stringing the thread through the beads. What did the plastic gems reflect when they had first seen me? Were they now surprised to find me so much older? Looking back at me in the
mirror was a face different from the one I held in my head. The permanently young face had lost its roundness and color. The hollow cheeks and dark circles below my eyes painted the story of the last two years of sleepless nights and afternoons spent pouring over textbooks. I had grown ugly and the endorphins of my run could never hide it. I returned the necklace to its resting place and turned from the mirror disgusted.

I dropped into a chair at the kitchen table and stretched my arms out across the clean, cold surface. The screams of playing kids outside muffled the punching tick of the kitchen clock and tapping of my fingers. The orange and pink sunset offered a sweet haven to the kids who had been hiding out from the heat of the day, but the kitchen chilled in the encroaching shadows. I stayed there an hour as a line of magenta light crept across the table working its way up my arms until it glistened duly in my eyes before disappearing. The laughing and excited chatter had stayed as long as the light did, but soon the ticking clock and the chirp of crickets outside was the only sound to be heard. The day was over. I reached for a bottle of allergy medicine on the counter and swallowed two capsules. After a quick shower, I fell heavily onto my bed, disturbing Ed who had been snoozing peacefully. I rolled over and scooped him up like a stuffed animal and waited for the drowsiness to drop me off to sleep.

I woke up from a dreamless night when Ed ran across my face, punching his feet into my cheek and mouth. Blinking slowly and struggling against my heavy eyelids, I came to slowly. It was seven in the morning and dim light was growing behind the blinds of my basement room’s dark window. Ed zig-zagged between my steps as I got his meal ready. Once that was complete, the same problem that faced me the night before loomed ahead with the new day. What was I going to do with the day? The empty house sat
quietly and a deep pang of loneliness forced me to reach for the allergy medicine and drop out to two more pills. This happened again when I woke up in the afternoon, then again when I woke up in the middle of the night, and again after eating a bagel and a trip to get coffee the next morning, which I didn’t drink. I took another when I wandered back to my parent’s room to look at my reflection and again when I woke up in the night and found I couldn’t sleep anymore. I was listening to the ‘Camelot ‘music box playing its song when the footsteps and muffled voices of my parents returned home. I slipped quickly down the hall and downstairs while my parents’ low voices were in the kitchen. My phone’s clock read one in the morning and, finally not wanting to sleep anymore, I laid in bed and stared ahead at the ceiling until my alarm went off at six to get up for work.

“Fuck,” I said to myself. At least I was well-rested for the week.
CHAPTER 5

The day was gray and the basement was, as always, dim. I got up before my alarm, completely alert from my weekend sleep binge. There was no way I'd be late today. Ed hopped off the bed and began meowing loudly.

“Good morning to you, I guess,” I replied, scratching him behind his ears.

After feeding Ed, a quick shower, and grabbing a granola bar, I stepped outside into the humid, misty June day twirling my car keys in my hand. Only I had forgotten one thing. I stopped short of the vacant parking spot under the porch and remembered my car was smoldering in a field 4 miles up the road. Chirping birds mocked me and called that the morning was passing by with each second. I stood frozen until a possible solution came to mind. My parents had some old bicycles from a short but intense cycling phase, and luckily my mom kept everything our family ever owned in our extremely organized garage.

I found my new ride leaning against the garage wall, its hot pink, holographic paint still sparkled dully under the brown dust that had settled over the years. Above it hung my Dad's road bikes, which I knew I wouldn't be welcome to use even though their owner hadn't taken them down in years. I tapped my finger on my chin surveying my options knowing which bike I'd have to choose. When I saw my dad’s bikes required special shoes to clip in, I sighed, accepting my fate, and rolled out my new sparkily vehicle. I pumped air into the tires and wiped down the seat. I briefly wondered if I still
knew how to ride a bike before pushing off and soaring down the street toward the main road.

The ride to work was harrowing and I barely survived a near-death experience after a dusty sneeze sent me out into the highway in front of a passing car. The ringing of car horns still screamed in my head as I rolled the bike behind the bushes in front of the clubhouse.

I paused for a moment to calm my trembling hands, still shaking from the traumatic experience of seeing my life flash before my eyes, a very boring presentation full of books, notes, and video games. I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

The familiar smell of air freshener and sweat mixed with a stale presence of moisture and carpet shampoo greeted me. Tracks in the brown carpet indicated the cleaning service had done a deep clean over the weekend. The paths dug by the wheels lead to the circular front desk where the top of a purple ponytail peaked out above the counter.

"Hi, I'm sorry I'm la—" I started before realizing Avery wasn't at the front desk. "Who are you?"

"I'm Sam, who the hell are you?" the pale girl responded, sitting up with a scowl. I had interrupted her while reading a graphic novel. I couldn't see the title, but the cover had a sinister-looking, and heavily endowed, cartoon female vampire who was ripping open the throat of some guy whose sharp-edged haircut and scarred face identified him as a supervillain.

"I'm Danny," The name seemed to spark nothing but another furrow of Sam's eyebrows.
“Okay... oh! Yes! You're the new guy!” A smile, not too different from the vampires’, spread across her face and she tossed the book aside.

“Yes, I’m the new guy!” I said with a little more volume than I intended. My words fell into an awkward silence. I stood waiting for Sam to say something to indicate what I should do, she stayed with her feet up on the counter, her eyes darting between me and anything else in the room. Finally, she broke the silence just as I was admiring the cherry-stained crown molding bordering the ceiling and thinking Sam was pretty weird.

“Are you going to clock in?”

“How do I do that?”

“Wait!,” Sam’s boots hit the floor after a momentary pause. “Is today your first day?” Her scowl had returned and she leaned forward waiting for a response.

“Uh, yeah... technically no... But pretty much. I was here for like two hours with Lisa and Avery.”

Sam’s frown deepened before a mischievous smile appeared, again making me think of the vampire. “Alright then! I guess I get to train you. They haven’t let me do it since I trained Derek.”

“Who’s Derek?” I asked.

“Who?” She responded. We stood in momentary silence again before she waved me on to follow her. “Come on. I’ll show you how to punch in at the time clock. You have to be mindful of your fingers.

“Where’s Avery? Wasn’t she scheduled today?” I asked, jogging around the desk to follow her.
“I don’t know, something came up I guess. She sounded pretty frantic on the phone but that’s kind of normal. That girl really needs to cut down on the caffeine,” she answered as she pushed hard against a door in the back and forced it open. Several brooms and mops fell out on top of her, knocking half a dozen cans of Febreze to the floor with them.

“God damnit, I hate this closet. The door sticks so sometimes you really have to force it open.” She said while throwing the broom and mop handles back through the door. She gave a swift kick to one unfortunate, very dented aerosol can and it clanged against the wall. She pulled on a chain light and I could see a stained, dry basin for filling up mop buckets, which one bucket sat in still half-full of brown water.

“Don’t worry about mopping, the maid service that comes each Tuesday and Thursday takes care of all the scrubbing and sweeping and stuff. We only have to worry about spot cleaning like dusting and sanitizing. There’s a chart here with rotating chores you can do if you have free time. It needs some updating.”

I looked at the chart taped at eye level above the basin. It hung in a plastic binder film and had smudged check marks and initials from two years ago. I raised my eyebrows and Sam shrugged, “We still do them, we just don’t come in here to check it off.”

She stepped forward and pulled a blank time card from a wooden set of inboxes hanging to the right of a rickety shelving unit. She stepped to the side and pulled me in next to her. “All you have to do is line your “IN” column with this red line and push it hard against the back of the machine. You’ll want to hold the ends of the card and not near the middle so you don’t get a crushed fingernail.”
I took the card from her and stamped it. The punch sounded and vibrated like a sledgehammer had hit the paper, I gulped and dropped it into an inbox. The punch card showed I was twenty minutes late and a part of me wished she could have moved a little faster with the demonstration.

“Isn’t that cool? I think when the managers in the 90s saw these things going downhill they must have ordered hundreds of boxes of time cards because we are still working through them,” she slapped a large box above her and the shelf wiggled back and forth under the weight. “We have more stacked up in a back room, but this box alone should cover us for the next 5 years or something crazy like that.” She gave me a push out the door, bent down and grabbed the remaining cleaning products, and tossed them in the closet behind her before slamming the door.

“Well that’s probably the most exciting thing we do each day,” she said dryly. She walked back to her chair and plopped down.

“Really?”

“Well, we get to set mouse traps in the women’s sauna.”

I wrinkled my nose imagining the smell of a dead mouse in a sauna. One summer we found a dead mouse in our garage behind a stack of perfectly organized boxes. The smell was so strong it seeped into all the boxes full of childhood clothes and old toys. To this day, if we stayed in the garage too long, we’d start to catch the smell of rot from the boxes Mom had refused to get rid of.

“That sounds delightful,” I answered while dropping down in the second office chair behind the desk. Sam didn’t pick up her book again but watched me carefully while lazily rotating her chair.
“How old are you?”

I stiffened momentarily while looking for a place to put my granola bar I brought for lunch. I had hoped being slightly older than a typical part-time employee my age would go unquestioned, but clearly, that had been an unrealistic expectation.

“How old are you?” I said, internally cursing my newly receding hairline for giving me away.

“Oh okay,” She replied, picking up her magazine again and flipped a page without asking another question or glancing in my direction.

I felt relief and then a sinking feeling when I realized if it was common for twenty-five-year-olds to be working the same jobs as high schoolers, that may not be a good indicator for my future.

“How old are you?” I returned to hopefully keep the conversation going as I did not have a graphic novel of a well-endowed male vampire to entertain me.

“I’m nineteen,” she said, not making an effort to add anything more.

“Oh nice, nineteen is a fun year,” I said casually enough, but a weight of jealousy hit me. I was once six years younger with older twenty-five-year-olds people feeling jealous of me.

“Not really,” she said sarcastically, she threw her graphic novel back over her head making me jump when I crashed into a sitting area table full of magazines.

“Do you want a tour grandpa?”

“Avery already gave me a tour.”

“Well, my tours are more interesting and not as perfectly splendid as hers. Come on, I’ll show you the important stuff,” she offered with a surprisingly warm wink as she
stepped out from behind the desk, one that fits a fun aunt suggesting an activity your parents said was against the rules.

“What about the front desk?”

“What about it? There are towels laid out for guests to grab, we don’t always have to sit there. I have never seen anyone try to sneak in and even if they did we have cameras that we never check.”

I shrugged and followed Sam downstairs. The ugly brown-gray wallpaper followed alongside us to the basement hall leading to the pool and hot tub. The carpet too stayed the same and the faded specks of color woven into the gray carpeting reminded me of an old video rental store I went to as a kid. Again, I began to wonder why the clubhouse was so dated for such an expensive neighborhood. Sam turned down the hall heading toward the gym. We could hear the echoing of slamming equipment and a loud male voice talking to someone. Sam hopped to a stop at the glass doors and waved her arms like a gameshow host revealing a prize.

“This is Harry and Heather Ryder,” she said waving with an overgenerous smile at a tall, skinny man with salt and pepper hair in a pair of very tiny running shorts that barely covered his thin, insect-like legs. He was arguing with someone on the phone but smiled and waved when he saw Sam and I peek in. His wife was cycling at what can only be described as the fastest speed capable for a human body and didn’t seem to notice us.

“Harry is pretty nice, but he’ll probably be especially nice to you. Heather is one to watch out for though, it’s best to just make sure there is a set of clean towels for her when she walks in, and then usually she just checks in and heads down here without saying much.”
She turned and walked further down the hall and whispered, “It’s rumored that she’s started exercising more in the last year because she’s been sleeping around the neighborhood. I’ve heard some other clients, including Lisa, refer to her as “Husband Ryder” but I’m starting to think it was used initially to talk about him. I think people just subscribe it to her because she’s a successful, generally angry, woman living in this fucked up misogynistic world.”

I chuckled uncomfortably, not sure if it was a joke, but Sam looked back at me with raised eyebrows and I realized she wasn’t joking.

“Personally, I think it’s just him sleeping around. I’ve never seen her so much as talk to anyone, but he’s always taking his time in the locker rooms and saunas if you catch my drift. I hope she is getting hers somewhere though.” She came to stop at the door leading outside to the hot tubs and patio and pointed to a tan woman laying out in the sun on a patio lounge chair. She was far away but I could see a tangle of dark brown hair and large expensive-looking sunglasses.

“That one is Ms. Yolee. She’s amazing and is everything I want to be when I’m older. She’s very, very happy and energetic,” she said gravely like she had just explained that Ms. Yolee had some rare terminal disease. “She comes in every morning to swim and if she’s off work she’ll layout for part of the morning. She really likes to talk to the receptionists at the front, I think it’s something to do with mentorship and influencing the younger generation and junk like that. She was pretty horrified when I told her I was taking a gap year and tried to get me to come work in her office. One time I hid in the bathroom when I saw her coming back up on the cameras.” She lowered her voice and widened her eyes with mock fear, “She came and found me and talked to me through the
stall door. I faked fart noises trying to get her to go away but it didn’t work. That woman is unstoppable.”

The next stop was the pool where Sam tried to introduce me to a very bald and very pale man taking a break between swimming laps, but he waved us off because he was talking on a small earpiece. We walked out a set of open glass sliding doors.

“No one really comes back here, there’s a service gate over here that you should be aware of and check to make sure is locked before leaving each night,” she pointed to the left where the landscaping was more overgrown and the trees hung down hiding the path. The stone path changed to a wooden deck, and we stepped down a set of creaking steps and came to a small floating dock with two covered pedal boats.

“Both of these pedal boats are locked to the dock and the key is at the reception desk. When opening and closing you need to come check the boats to make sure they are locked in and covered. A lot of times people will tie them to the dock without securing the lock so we have to check it so kids don’t take the boats out, drown, and their parents sue us.”

“Alright, seems easy enough,” I said cheerily, enjoying the sunshine. Sam looked on, uncharacteristically serious.

“It does, but this is probably the most important part of the job. One time I forgot to check the boats while opening and the next thing I know I’m looking at a toddler and puppy in the middle of the quarry drifting away in one of these very sinkable death traps.”

“Oh shit, what did you do?”
“I ran and jumped in the quarry to swim them back. Their parents were playing a game of racquetball and didn’t notice their five-year-old daughter, who they somehow expected to watch their two-year-old and puppy, had sent the two off on a sea adventure.

“Wow, thank goodness you caught them.”

“You’re telling me. I couldn’t have a puppy’s death on my hands.”

Sam marched back up the steps to the clubhouse while I paused considering this.

“Just the puppy?” I called after her before jogging to catch up.

We stopped at the locker rooms on our way back up to reception. The women’s locker room was a bright pink and smelled like new candles and had bright, warm lights above the mirrors. Sam went in without knocking and I stayed behind as the door swung shut. A moment later, Sam’s face popped out from behind the door.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I can’t go in there.” I reposed, but Sam continued to stare like this was an unsatisfactory answer. “It’s the women’s locker room,” I added.

“Oh right, just knock and call out that you’re coming in. Then you can prop the door open so guests coming in know you’re in here.”

Sam threw the door open and shouted, “Coming in for towels, cover your titties!”

I looked at her horrified.

“There’s no one here, genius. You sure are scared of everything aren’t you?”

“I’m not, you just actually might be insane,” I snapped back.

“Maybe there is a bit of truth in both these things. Well, if you’re not too scared, you can help me set the mousetrap in the sauna,” Sam said, shoving a set mouse trap into my hands which triggered, narrowly missed my finger, before flying out of my hands and
smacking me in the face. I jumped and let out a scream like a final girl in a horror movie and some startled guest far off in the clubhouse screamed in response. Sam cackled with laughter and I flipped her my middle finger which was almost just broken.

Retrieving a week-old mouse trap covered in hardened peanut butter from a sweaty, ancient clubhouse sauna sounds almost as bad as it smelled. The smell seemed familiar and I realized I had slowly been growing accustomed to it throughout the whole clubhouse. Walking down the hallway after the deed was done, the smell smoothly transitioned into the faint odor of sweat and Febreze I had learned to expect everywhere.

We were surprised to find Ms. Yolee upstairs standing at the front desk signing out. She had put on a pair of loose, flowy cotton pants and a large white shirt to cover her swimsuits. Up close I could see her skin was wrinkled and bronzed from many years of tanning.

“Hi, Miss Sam, who is this with you?” She said smiling directly at me, revealing a set of perfectly white and straight teeth sported by most of the clients I had seen.

“Hi Ms. Yolee, this is Danny, he’s going to be the new me.”

“You’re not leaving are you?” Ms. Yolee asked, grabbing Sam’s arm with some urgency.

“No, I could never leave you here alone with these people, Sam responded with such warmth and affection I almost thought someone else was speaking.

“Good girl,” Ms. Yolee said, releasing Sam’s arm and turning to me. “Hello, my name is Yolee.”

“Danny,” I said, taking her hand in a firm handshake.

“And what are you doing here Danny?”
I paused not knowing how to respond. Sam had just told her I was a new receptionist.

“Are you passionate about gym management?” she asked with a smirk and glanced over to Sam who rolled her eyes.

“Uh, not that I know of yet.”

Ms. Yolee chuckled. “What do you want to do? Are you a student?”

“I was.”

“What did you study?”

“I was a med student for a while. I actually just dropped out.”


“Well, it wasn’t really my thing.” My mind drifted back to a day in class when a cadaver was wheeled in and my professor, perfectly named Dr. Slaughter, pulled out a large bone saw and went to town. I immediately felt faint and the next thing I knew my head smacked flat against my desk and I vomited all over my partner’s trapper keeper.

“Hmm, pity. I’m a doctor myself and love my job. It’s a good path to go down.” She poked Sam’s shoulder and gestured towards me. “You should follow his lead, you’d be a great doctor.”

“Well he dropped out, soo…” Sam said, smacking away Dr. Yolee’s hand. I gave Sam a smoldering glare.

“True. But I’m sure you’ll find something right for you, although maybe not here…” Dr. Yolee continued, turning back to address me. “For me, medicine was the best choice I ever made. I love my job.”

“What do you do as a doctor?” I asked.
“I’m an Endodontist.” She looked between Sam and I’s faces and saw that we didn’t know what that meant. “I perform root canals,” she added.

Sam, stepping behind Dr. Yolee’s line of sight let her jaw drop with a grinning display of admiring awe. I could tell she was at the top of Sam’s favorite people list. Dr. Yolee was digging in her purse and didn’t notice Sam’s exuberance nor my confusion at her exuberance.

“That seems like a very calming vocation,” I blurted out stupidly, not knowing what else to say.

“For me it is,” she said simply as she dropped her sunglasses over her eyes. “You guys have a good night, okay?” She smiled at us over her shoulder and strutted out the front door.

“She’s kind of intense—”

“But she’s fabulous,” Sam ended with a hair flick, her purple hair flashed like the feathers of a very edgy tropical bird.

Before I could say anything else the front door flew open again and in shuffled a short and incredibly old man. The only hair on his head was two fluffy, white sideburns that stuck out like he had just been electrocuted. Despite it being a hot summer day, he was sporting a brown argyle sweater.

“Aw, shit it’s Mr. Zweiner” Sam whispered at me with a hiss as a sudden need to be in the bathroom sent her running away, leaving me alone.

“How are you doing sir?” I offered politely as I walked behind the desk to at least have a barrier to hide behind. The smell of baby powder had suddenly wafted into the room. Mr. Zweiner scoffed at me and didn’t offer any response. I stood there quietly
trying not to look at his scalp while his head was turned down to focus on scribbling on the sign-in sheet. He shuffled away and I heard him answer his phone and start yelling at some poor person on the other line before it was cut off by the downstairs door swinging shut.

I let out a deep sigh, realizing I had been holding my breath but sucked it all back in when I turned and found Sam standing right behind me.

“What the hell! You just scared the shit out of me. How are you so quiet?”

“How are you so deaf?” Sam retorted.

Right then a ringing in my ear started buzzing, “Do you hear that?” I asked with some sudden alarm.

“Are you insane?”

“I hear a ringing.”

“It’s the phone genius. It rings in long drones like that when it’s a call within the building. Pick it up.”

One of the lights on the receiver was flashing next to a label reading, “Men’s Locker Room.” I groaned and picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

“Yes, do you have towels up there?”

“Uhhhh…” I looked at the three towel sets stacked laid out on the counter. “Yes.”

“Okay, you guys really need to start putting those out more frequently, I didn’t see any while I was up there. Can you bring me down a set?”

“Yeah, of course,” the receiver clicked off on the other end before I even spoke.
Ten seconds later I pushed on the locker room door and stepped in. It smelled of anti-fungal cream and something wet, probably fungus. A short hallway blocked the locker area from view but I could hear drips echoing from the showers and someone coughed in some unseen toilet stall. “Mr. Zweiner? I got your towels.”

“Bring them here.”

I rounded the corner only to find myself face to face with a completely naked Mr. Zweiner. I jumped and threw my head up to look at the ceiling but it was too late, I now knew he was a naturally white-haired man. He reached out and gestured for me to hand him the towels, not seeming to care that he was creating a scene right out of The Shining. I handed off the towels and practically ran out into the hall where I crashed straight into a hard, warm surface. Two hands grabbed my shoulders as the man tried to stabilize himself from falling over when I realized my fist had gone right between his legs.

“Oh gosh, I’m so--” To my horror, I discovered I had just crushed the testicles of the same man I met in the park. He seemed to recognize me at the same moment and whimpered “Why don’t you ever look where you’re going?” I stood there awkwardly while he caught his breath. Part of me thought I should just walk away, but I figured that would be weirder than just standing there. When he finally recovered and let out a long sigh, I felt safe to speak.

“Sorry about that. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine, but my nuts may never be the same.”

“Yeah, mine either,” I said thinking about the image of Mr. Zweiner naked—which was now permanently burned in my brain—and the sagging damage old age inflicts on us all.
“Huh? What does that mean?”

“What did I say?” I asked blushing feeling flustered and stupid.

“Oh, what’s your name? I’m Teddy,” he said and held out a hand. I took it feeling relieved he hadn’t swung out his hand for a “bro” handshake.

“D-Danny.” He had a strong grip and I could feel the roughness of his skin from working outside. His well-styled ash brown hair and mature-looking face suddenly made me feel so ugly and sweaty that I could barely make direct eye contact with his hazel stare.

“Well it’s nice to meet you again,” he said with a smile that immediately made me want to go drown myself in the hot tub to cool off. He reached up and for an insane second I thought he was going to brush my hair back, but he was trying to push on the door to the locker room. I flinched and grabbed his arm to pull it away.

“You don’t want to go in there.”

“Why?” Teddy asked before his face changed into disgust. “Oh, is that old naked guy in there?”

I nodded my head and grimaced.

“Ugh, of course.” He lowered his voice, which gave me the excuse to lean in. He smelled like teakwood and lavender. “One time I was in there changing and he took a phone call while fully naked and made no attempt to get dressed while he yelled for the entire time I was in there. It was pretty disturbing.”

I suddenly felt better knowing I was not the only one who had been exposed to Mr. Zweiner’s… well… weiner.
“Do you mind guarding the door while I change in there?” he pointed to the supply closet.

“Sure thing,” I said.

“Thanks, buddy,” he replied while squeezing past me into the supply closet.

The door swung shut but the carpet always made it stay slightly ajar. I stood with my back to the door but could feel a slight draft brushing past my ear. The sound of rustling fabrics as Teddy undressed whispered to me details of each article of clothing that was being taken off. Shirt, jeans, underwear. I closed my eyes and tried not to think about what little space was separating me from him. I suddenly felt sick to my stomach and wondered how I would make it past Mr. Zweiner if I needed to throw up. I had just decided that I would just throw up on Mr. Zweiner when Teddy came out in a short swimsuit and bare chest. I made sure to hold my hands together in front to hide anything he might see.

“Alright, thanks man. I left my bag and clothes in there, I hope that’s okay.”

“Sure thing, no one but Sam and I go in there.”

“Okay, cool.” There was a brief awkward pause where he looked down the hall and back at me. “Well thanks again, I guess I better go get started.” He offered a wink and lightly punched my chest before turning the corner to the pool. When he was out of sight, I went straight into the supply closet. His clothes were stuffed in his bag on top of the washer. I stared at it for a minute before slipping back upstairs. His underwear was purple.
Back upstairs, I told Sam about how Mr. Zweiner somehow managed to strip completely naked in the thirty seconds it took him to get to the locker room, call me, and have me walk in on him.

“Ugh, people are freaks, now you know why I said only go in the locker rooms when you know no one is in there.”

“You didn’t tell me to not go in the locker rooms.”

“Oh… don’t go into the locker rooms unless you know no one is in there.”

“Gee thanks,” I replied sarcastically.

“What do you want me to say? We can’t tell people to not get naked in the locker rooms.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I let out a sigh and dropped into the seat next to Sam who was resting her head on her hand next to the security camera monitor.

_Did she see me talking to Teddy?_ I felt blotchy heat sprinkle across my cheeks as I thought about how solid his body felt crashing into him. I tried to push the thought away, I was just being embarrassed and socially awkward, nothing more.

Men were always difficult to talk to for me, unlike women. I loved women with all my heart from as early as I could remember, staying with my mom and her friends when my brothers went to play outside and getting in dramatic romances with various girlfriends on the playground stuck out in my mind. I always knew how to talk to women, how to laugh with them, but men always stayed clear of me and me from them. I didn’t know how to talk to them and had no interest in any of the aggressive games they played at recess. I didn’t find male friends in middle school either when they all played video games and basketball, and I couldn’t connect with them in high school when they
mellowed out a bit but still seemed as boring as ever. As a result, I got flushed and nervous around them, never really knowing what to say. It always provoked cruel reactions from the boys at school, even into college. My male classmates stayed away from me, assuming I was in love with them, but I hated them. I loved women.

My roommates Jamie and Austin were the first guys in my life that seemed to care about me in the same way the women I grew up with did. They were like me in that they liked books, enjoyed romantic comedies, and listened to all the popular music without worrying if it hurt their masculinity. They were cool, but they sometimes seemed like they were the only ones who were. I wondered if Teddy was kind, even though I didn’t want to. I wanted to hide under the table when I remembered I had hit him in the crotch, twice. Would he always associate me with a pain in his balls? What a strange, mortifying thought.

“But, I can do this,” Sam said.

“Hm?” I had drifted away into thoughts I couldn’t recognize out loud and forgot what Sam and I were just talking about. So when she threw open a drawer and pulled out an air horn, which was used for emergencies, I had no context for what she was doing. She picked up and dialed the phone to the men’s locker room. She waited for a moment to hear the humming of Mr. Zweiner and let the airhorn loose right into the mic of the phone. I jumped and fell back over my chair in alarm. Sam threw down the phone and dropped the airhorn back into the drawer. She could barely contain her laughter and hissed, “Quick get up and act bored, he’s… coming…” she barely got the last word trying to stifle her laughter and pointing at the monitor. Mr. Zweier was running down the hallway on the monitor in a speedo with a crooked swim cap on his head. The door to
the basement slammed open and we heard his wheezing, angry huffs as he climb the stairs as fast as he could.

I corrected myself in my seat with just enough time to glance at Sam. Her stifled smile was completely gone from her face and she looked so bored that I almost questioned if I had imagined the whole thing. She was a professional.

Mr. Zweiner's cherry-red face popped up from the stairs. His red swim cap blended in with an angry flush that made him look like a cartoon of a mad tomato. Sam glanced at him but didn’t move her head from her hand, “Hello Mr. Zweiner, what’s up?”

“Did you hear that?”

Sam turned to me and I shrugged, trying not to look scared.

“Hear what?” Sam responded.

“A loud blaring noise just sounded from the phone downstairs after you called me!”

“What? We didn’t call you.”

“Yes, you did.” Mr. Zweiner shot back, clearly getting angrier by the denial. Sam kept the bored look on her face.

“If you say so. The phones here are really shoddy and sometimes the system glitches.”

“So you’re trying to tell me that your phone called me on its own and almost gave me a heart attack?” He looked at me with a suspicious scowl and I just shrugged, relying on the ‘I’m new and confused’ look.

“We have an alarm system through the phones and it must be glitching out,” she paused trying to control a fake yawn and my appreciation for her acting skills was greater
than any award-winning actor I had seen on the screen. “I’ll write a note for Lisa to check it out.” Sam pulled out a post-it note and stood up and lazily looked for a pen before carefully writing a note down.

“We’ll check it out, thanks for letting us know,” she said finally after slapping the note on a pile of mail we kept in an inbox.

Mr. Zweiner stood there saying nothing as she did this and when she looked back at him with bored eyes, he panned over to me. I picked up a towel to fold from a basket of clean laundry and avoided looking at him.

“Is there anything else we can do for you, Mr. Weiner?” Sam asked plainly.

“It’s Zweiner,” he said, turning away and mumbling to himself.

We heard him pause by the door and wait to see if we’d start laughing but we stayed silent till we saw his red face appear on the cameras by the pool before erupting in laughter. Both of us had tears welling in our eyes as we watched Mr. Zweiner animatedly talking to Teddy, interrupting his laps in the pool. We saw Teddy gesture a shrug with his arms and laughed even harder. When we caught our breath, we looked at each other and started laughing again.

“Calling him Weiner was genius,” I gasped between laughs.
Avery didn’t show for the rest of my training week. Each day I came in expecting to see her sitting behind the desk, but when I walked through the door I saw Sam’s bored stare swing into view before brightening with a grin. Lisa continued to schedule me for the shifts with Sam I guess because she preferred her chaotic training curriculum to that of Ms. Nancy and Jeanie. The two women’s proclivity for drama had already reached me through several of the clients who came in and quickly whispered the rumors while signing in.

Apparently, the two had an explosive falling out when Jeanie told Ms. Nancy to fold the towels in a different way. Ms. Nancy responded by immediately walking into Lisa’s office and complaining about how Jeanie had left the hot tub cover off the night before and requested that she be fired. The resulting argument in Lisa’s office was so loud that both Mrs. Cooper and Mrs. Jacobson heard it in the basement gym. It was clearly the most exciting thing that happened there in recent memory.

Since Ms. Nancy and Jeanie’s argument, the morning shift was now staffed by one or the other and so it was no longer necessary for me to help support the morning schedule, except on the weekends when either Ms. Nancy or Jeanie wanted to be off.

Sam rocked back and forth in her chair and watched me while I clocked in and threw my stuff under the desk. She didn’t say a word, even after I dropped down in the seat next to me.
“What? Why are you staring at me?” I asked after she continued to say nothing.

“Are you ready?”

I groaned, "What is it?"

It’s funny how quickly two strangers become friends when they’re required to sit next to each other for hours at a time with nothing else to do but talk. I learned a lot about Sam in the short time we had known each other.

She always brought a ham and cheese sandwich but never ate it and instead would get a bag of chips and a candy bar from the vending machine in the kitchen, which a past manager bought to replace the chef and kitchen staff. She spent the majority of the day trying her best to frown at passing-by clients, but when she was out watering flowers, she’d smile until she saw me grinning back at her from upstairs. She also folded the towels into animals when she was in a good mood, which brought mixed reactions from the clients. When she was anxious about something she’d chew on her thumb nail and stare off into space. I observed all this in my first week with her but I had a nagging feeling she picked up more about me.

Sam was more observant than most gave her credit for. She knew every guest who was coming up the stairs by the sound of their footsteps and which families were coming in based on what minivan was pulling into the parking lot, mainly so she could hide from the ones she didn’t like. Sam could catch three words of gossip while changing the trash can bag in the gym and piece it together with a few other caught sentences to know a complete ongoing neighborhood drama, rivaling Lisa's knowledge to the point where Lisa would whisper something over the desk and wait for Sam's confirming head nod.
She had different ways of sharing news. If it was something funny or positive she would turn around or run up with a ‘Guess what?’ and 'Are you ready' meant some bad news was coming.

"Lisa just called, she found out an unscheduled pool party is going to descend at 0900 hours,” Sam reported.

"I don't know what that means? Nine o'clock? Why are you talking like that?"

"Seven o'clock. God, it's military time. I'm just trying to make this more fun?"

"Why?"

There was an awkward pause as she considered this.

"I don't know," she concluded flatly. “Anyway, Lisa called in Avery and Clark to help, so it shouldn't be bad. Usually, with unscheduled parties, we never get a heads up until they're filing in right before close and unpacking party balloons and a melting ice cream cake.

“So why don't we just kick them out?"

“Because we are a service to the neighborhood,"" she responded with an exaggerated smile. "We’re clubhouse receptionists and towel cleaners, not neurosurgeons," she added when I frowned back at her.

I was about to reply saying that I had partially completed a medical degree when the quiet roar of a band of children faintly grew on the other side of the front door. Sam and I froze and locked eyes.

“They’re here early,” she said fatefully. The screaming sound of children grew and their shadows flitted past the front windows. The door burst open in an implosion of elementary school students, pool noodles, towels, and frazzled parents being dragged by
the hand. Some were clients of the clubhouse and they quickly signed themselves in and chased after their kids, who were already downstairs on the security camera jumping into the pool headfirst. Others were non-member guests, and I shouted over the chaos and noise for them to wait and pay for a day pass.

“What? They don’t have to pay, they’re here for a party.” A woman with highlighted brown hair pulled off her sunglasses as she came through the door. “I called Lisa and she said we wouldn’t have to pay the guest fees since Jason’s on the home owner’s board.”

The woman spoke like Sam or I should know exactly who she and Jason were, but I didn’t know who the hell she was. Judging by Sam’s raised eyes and a surprising level of attentive interest, she had no idea either.

“I’m sorry, Lisa hasn’t talked to us. We are just following policy. We were only told a party would be here at seven and it’s four-thirty. You have to pay the day pass fees,” Sam said with a calm dissociative authority.

“This is just perfect! Go, on ahead, I’ve got this.” She waved off the group parents who had started reaching in their bags and for their wallets, unbothered. A woman with an inviting smile shrugged at Sam and me sympathetically before turning and whispering something to a tall man with graying sideburns who looked back over his shoulder at me before rounding the corner to the basement. I looked away but not before catching his eye. I was as distracted by the performance for the perpetually frowning woman in front of us. She dramatically dropped her purse on the counter of the receptionist’s desk and started texting on her phone.
“I told Lisa we were coming and she didn’t say anything about a guest charge,” she said as she shook her head and tapped on her phone as an awkward silence settled since Sam and I refrained from saying anything that might be perceived as sympathetic or understanding. Sam was staring over the women’s head drifting into a daydream, selfishly leaving me to handle the drama which I could tell was just gearing up. A swooshing sound signaled a message to Lisa had been sent off.

“Well, I don’t know how you expect me to pay this without knowing about it. I didn’t bring cash,” the women continued.

“I’m sorry about the confusion. It’s ten dollars, do you think someone downstairs might have some cash you can borrow?” I asked.

“I’m not asking my guests to pay anything, this is your all’s problem for not telling me,” she snapped.

“We take checks,” Sam added without looking away from wherever she was staring off to.

“There’s not even signage to tell us it’s a fee for guests. I’ve brought in guests before and haven’t had to sign them in or pay, why’s that?”

Sam lifted up her hand to point at a sign over her shoulder that said, ‘NON-MEMBER MUST PAY FOR A VISIT PASS’, in large, bold red letters. I was struggling to find the right response when the front door opened and Clark and Avery walked in.

“Oh, Avery! Thank god!” The woman spun around and wrapped Avery in an aggressively snug hug.

“Jackie, it’s so good to see you! I thought this party might have been your doing,” Avery replied cheerfully.
“You know me, too busy to plan ahead,” Jackie replied shaking her head with an exasperated eye roll, her demeanor had completely changed, “I swear if it wasn’t for this place we would have had to go to the park to celebrate Charlie’s birthday. I’m the worst mom in the world.”

“Don’t say that. You know at his age all they need is a pool and cake and they'll have a good time,” Avery said, putting her hand on Jackie’s shoulder.

“I hope you're right. I’m sure his father will have something to say about it though.”

There was a brief, almost unintelligible pause that followed before Avery carried on. She was caught off guard, a slight failure of a picture-perfect life.

“Well, is there anything you need from us to get the show on the road?” Avery recovered.

“I'm actually about to go out and get some decorations from my car. I was actually hoping I’d catch you because I need someone to write on his cake and I know you like to do that sort of thing from your Mom’s Instagram posts.”

Avery’s smile dropped and she bristled like she had just been slapped in the face. Jackie was smiling over at Sam and didn’t notice Avery’s expression. When she turned back to continue Avery’s expression was back to the perfectly content customer service face.

“But! You two—” Jackie shouted commandingly to the receptionist desk. “I’m going to go out and get Charlie’s cake,” she said, gesturing over her shoulder and enunciating the words clearly like we hadn’t been listening before. “You two can come
with me and get the tablecloths and gift bags set up downstairs. There’s also some balloons you can manage as well.”

Sam shuffled around the desk, not smiling but also not daring to look too miserable. Jackie stopped in the door when she saw I wasn’t following, “Well come on, we have more guests coming soon.” She was ignoring a young couple who were trying to come inside and waiting for her to move.

“You still need to pay the guest fee,” I surprised myself by how polite the words came out. Jackie straightened her back and said, “Oh Jesus Christ. Okay, how am I supposed to pay that with no cash on me, huh?

“We can just charge it to her membership bill, it’s no big deal, we do it all the time,” Avery said and came behind the desk. She added a note on the sign-in sheet, I stepped aside as she passed by noticing some frustration coming off her. I looked over at Sam who was staring off in space and realized she may have not been the best to train me after all. Guest fees were a small thing to overlook, but something told me Avery would have gone over it with me had she been the one training me. Lisa called Avery for a reason, she had all the answers and knew how to talk with the guests. She replaced the sign-in sheet after blocking off several columns for Jackie’s guests. Her handwriting was neat and perfectly straight like it was done by a computer.

In every part-time job, there are those employees who you know won’t be there for very long, yet seem like they’ve been there forever. I could already tell Avery was going on to do more than any of us, knowing this as a fact from her response about guest fees seemed silly, but it was sad as well.

“Lisa will invoice for the guests based on the sign-in sheet,” Avery said.
“Thanks, hun!” Jackie said with a grin, “Glad to see someone here knows what they’re doing” Her eyes turned on me as she said this, “Alright you, come along we got to unload this stuff. Hi Clark!” she added.

Clark had dropped himself in a chair by the door as soon as he came in and was scrolling through his phone when she spotted him. She squeezed his arm, gesturing like an affectionate mother, but it didn’t seem so innocent seeing as Clark was wearing a tank top that exposed his muscular arms.

Sam and I followed Jackie out to her car where she left us with her keys as she scuttled away to retrieve the cake from her friend Kristin’s car.

“Fuck,” Sam said as the trunk door flew smoothly open. The van was packed full of decorations, colorfully wrapped presents, and balloons. We exchanged a tired look and began unloading.

There’s something very depressing about laying creased, plastic tablecloths over rusted, metal patio tables for a birthday party. After Sam and I finished setting up the decorations in the pool pavilion, all the sparkling balloons and piles of presents couldn’t hide the leaning slant of the tables nor the indentations where the thin plastic table cloths dipped between the holes in the mesh metal tables. The tinsel centerpieces kept falling over from the wind coming through the open doors. The inflated floats Sam and I tossed into the pool kept smacking into a swimmer doing laps. The kids were running around outside on the patio spraying each other, and their unsuspecting loitering parents, with water guns that still had the tags on them. No amount of presents or generic party favors could hide the fact this kid’s birthday was an afterthought. My train of thought was broken when Sam honked a paper kazoo in my face.
“This looks like it’ll be a fun party, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m jealous,” I said as convincingly as I could.

Sam dropped the kazoo back on the table, which disgusted me, but instead of saying anything, I followed her back upstairs. The overzealous voice of Jackie was banging around the kitchen with monotone responses from Avery tempering the chaos. Sam dropped herself behind the reception desk and picked up her phone without a look toward the kitchen. Clark was standing by the back doors leading to the porch watching the kids running around with a suppressed smile that looked out of place in the bleak brown room. The quiet tap of Sam’s fingers on her phone’s screen and Clark’s distant gaze made me feel lonely, so I wandered over to the kitchen door and watched Avery helping Jackie with a large sheet cake. Avery was holding a knife and delicately prying up some icing-piped letters.

“I think it’ll look just fine if we can get the name off. I can’t believe I told them ‘James’ instead of ‘Charles’. How did Kristin not even notice when she picked it up? That’s so stupid of her,” Jackie said hovering behind Avery.

“Stop shaking the table Jackie,” Avery said flatly as she worked on prying up the last two letters, the ‘a’ seemed to be giving her trouble and I could see her tongue sticking out slightly between her lips as she focused.

“Oh sorry,” Jackie said before leaning in closer and whispering, “Do you think he’ll notice?”

Avery sighed and pulled free the ‘a’, barely leaving any trace of green food coloring on the white icing. “I don’t think so Jackie, he’ll just be excited to have cake. We can dig up some candles somewhere and pile them—”
“CANDLES! I FORGOT CANDLES! OH, I’M HORRIBLE! I’M SO—” Jackie screamed so suddenly in Avery’s ear that she jerked the knife up throwing the “J” straight to the ceiling. It hit with a wet slap and stuck above them. I burst into laughter and immediately shut my mouth at Avery’s glare.

“JACKIE, ARE YOU CRAZY? I COULD HAVE STABBED YOU!” Avery screamed, throwing the knife into the sink with a clang. When she turned back in anger to Jackie, she softened. Jackie’s lips were trembling and pushed tightly together, and fresh tears were trailing down her cheeks carrying down blush and foundation like a mudslide.

“Things have just been slipping my mind since you know…” She trailed off catching me watching in the doorway. “Can I help you?” she asked, crossing her arms and pushing out her hip, which had the opposite effect of making her look more fearsome and instead made her look like a child on the playground about to stomp their feet in a tantrum.

“Oh, I was just checking to see if Avery needed any help in here,” I appealed to Avery who briefly closed her eyes and quickly shook her head before Jackie could turn and catch it.

“What’s your name?” Jackie said rounding on her.

“No, not—”

“Great! Is downstairs all set up?” She snapped her figures and pointed at me.

“What’s your name?”

“It’s Danny, and yes, Sam and I got everything set up downstairs. We couldn’t stop the kids from taking the squirt guns though.”
She perked up at the mention of the squirt guns. “Oh, oh good! I’m glad they’re having fun… Thank you.”

I walked away hoping I was out of danger. She seemed genuinely thankful, but also sad. I felt more depressed than I did before.

Clark had disappeared from the patio doors and Sam had not moved from scrolling on her phone.

“What happened to him?” I asked gesturing to the door.

Without looking up from her phone Sam replied, “Hmm, I think he went downstairs to guard the kids’ lives or something. Maybe someone fell, he rushed out the door pretty quick.”

I stood there staring at Sam for a moment to see if she would look away from her phone or add anything more, but she seemed completely unaware that I was standing there. I walked over to the door to look outside and jumped suddenly when a water balloon hit the glass on the door as I looked out. Down below Clark was pointing and laughing up at the door while holding a squirt gun. After a surprisingly exciting wave at me, he ran after one of the passing kids and sprayed them mercilessly. I had never figured out how to be good with kids, but Clark was accepted immediately, making them laugh and scream as he dramatically dodged their shots. He even gave a stunning death performance when he was finally ambushed and cornered by eight kids who all released all their water ammunition on him at once.

Something about jocks and being good with kids always seem to go hand in hand with one another. It's almost like they never lost the ability to play. Athletes were lucky; play came naturally enough for most kids but they got to carry it on, after the end of
recess time and into high school, college, intramurals as adults. They folded play into their lives and it brought them friends, scholarships, maybe even money. But for the rest of us, the kids like me who shied away from competition or got the wind knocked out of them too many times with a whispered insult crashing behind it, life was suddenly funneled into a never-ending gray tunnel of classroom walls.

The rest of us became academics, having to make up our physical weaknesses with our brains. Some would be thrown a lifeline in middle school art classes, sweeping them out of the monochromatic purgatory of mediocrity. We academics carried on in a heap, leaving any weak, unpromising poor test taker behind in the era of ‘No Child Left Behind’.

“How did I get left behind?” I whispered to myself lost in thought.

"Hmm?” Sam replied looking up from her phone with a bored look.

“What?”

"You said something."

"No, I didn't," I replied quickly, thinking how miraculous it was that Sam could hear a whisper across the room but couldn't manage to pay attention to me when I was right next to her.

"Alright," she said while giving me a prolonged stare. Her eyes darted to the window but quickly found her phone again.

"You truly are a lifesaver, all of you are so——", Jackie started. She and Avery had just walked out of the kitchen chatting when a large BMW screeched to a break-neck halt right outside the front doors, cutting off whatever Jackie was going to say.
Part of a floral dress caught in the wind briefly swished past the window before Lisa threw open the door.

"I swear to god I told that bitch Jackie Carpenter she had to call me before —" Lisa stopped sensing the room had gone still. With only a barely perceptible pause, Lisa spun toward Jackie and continued, "— coming over so I could see her. Hello lovely, you're looking well-rested."

Jackie smiled and offered her cheek for Lisa to kiss, "Well-rested? What do you mean by that? Is that an insult or a compliment?" she replied.

The two careened into an appropriate amount of laughter before falling into standard small talk.

Sam shuffled her feet, slowly spinning her chair around so I could see her face, which was frozen in an expression mixing shock, awe, and joy. Lisa's backhanded compliment had caught all the focus of Jackie and saved Lisa from suspicion of any real negativity. The ease at which Lisa was now gushing over Jackie's family vacation pictures convinced me that Lisa would be able to get away with murder or something worse.

"Well, I better get down there. Thank you so much, Lisa, for helping me out with this, and Avery, I don't know what I would have done without you."

"It's our pleasure, you go have fun celebrating," Lisa responded while Avery gave Jackie one last hug. Jackie passed by the desk without a look at Sam or me.

“Nice,” I said to Sam who was now leaning back in the reception chair with her feet on the counter still poring over her phone.

“Trust me, the best guests are the ones that don’t acknowledge your existence.”
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