

Excerpts from The Last Teenaged Summer

by Angela Smith – Fiction

It was my generation's war, but it seemed so slight compared to the wars of the generations before us. Not that I knew what the other generations had felt; I only knew what I'd read in books and seen in the movies, but I was almost certain that it had been worse for them. People weren't being drafted. The only way anyone my age felt connected to it was if they knew someone that was there, or someone that was going there.

I knew a man who was there—or maybe he was a boy? A boy who *thought* he was a man? Steve Carter was my first real boyfriend. He was the first boy to want me, and that was all that it took. We met down the shore the summer after freshman year of college. He lived in Allentown, and I lived in Philadelphia. Even though there was a 90-minute drive between us, and even though I didn't have a car, we somehow made it work. We'd talk on the phone or chat on the computer every night. He was a reserve Marine and worked part-time as an orderly at the same hospital where his mother was a nurse. He smoked a pack a day and wore too much cologne. But it didn't matter—I thought he was perfect. On the weekends he'd pick me up in his old white Trans Am and take me back to his house in Allentown (since we couldn't stay at my house). We'd sit on the couch and watch war movies. He slept on the couch; I'd sleep in his room. In the morning, his mother would make me breakfast, telling me that someday I'd be her daughter-in-law.

...

I went with his family to say goodbye to him on that cold February night. I stared at the filthy gray snow all over the ground, half melted, from a storm the week before. We stood gazing

at the silver bus that the government had sent to collect the Marines. It would take them from Allentown down to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. From there they would be sent to the Middle East. Carter hugged me goodbye and whispered in my ear that it would be okay; he'd call and write with every chance that he got. I quietly sobbed into his shoulder, his desert camouflage absorbing the tears. He kissed his parents and his sister goodbye and then he boarded the bus. We all stood by and waved at the Marines as they left. They seemed happy: reserve Marines that never thought they'd get a chance to be activated, their childhood *G.I. Joe* dreams finally coming true. Hoorahs and Sempì Fi all around.

We watched until we couldn't see the bus anymore, and then I got into the SUV with his family, sitting in the front passenger seat. Tears streaming down my face, I felt embarrassed for becoming so unhinged. These people were connected to Carter by blood; I was just the girlfriend. Shouldn't they be the ones weeping? Turning my face in an unnatural direction so that they could only see the back of my head, I stared hard out the window at nothing. As the glow from the streetlights bounced off my wet face, I told myself that I needed to be strong. When we got back to their house, I immediately went up to Carter's room to go to sleep. Soon, miles away, the part of me that had been surgically removed would be boarding a plane to the Middle East. It physically hurt.

...

The night that the invasion of Baghdad started, I watched CNN for hours. My mother and I argued when she told me that I needed to turn off the TV and eat something. As I was sitting on the floor in the middle of our walking path between the junk, I told her that she didn't understand what I was going through. I couldn't turn it off! I had to see what was happening, because he might be there, *right there*, among the air strikes and the darkness. "Don't be so dramatic! Go

say a rosary!” My mother believed that religion would solve everything. In a dramatic display of “this-is-my-house-not-yours,” she struggled to unplug the cable box, barely able to get to it due to the stacks of junk mail piled in front of the large wooden entertainment center. I watched her with a mixture of pity and loathing. Left staring at a blank screen, I reluctantly retreated to my bedroom. Minutes later I heard the television’s power spring back to life.

...

I called my best friend Lacey, who I hadn’t seen in months. She was home from college, so we made plans to go midnight bowling. She brought her friend Jack, who we’d gone to high school with. Jack and I had been on the newspaper staff together. We were never friends; he was an annoying know-it-all who constantly raised his hand to hear himself talk. He graduated in the top 5% of our class. I found him extremely irritating.

Lacey picked me up in her mother’s red minivan. I pulled open the sliding door, climbed over Lacey’s little brother’s car seat, and sat behind her. She had Beyoncé’s new solo album in the CD player and was singing along to *Crazy In Love*.

Jack turned to look at me from the passenger seat, an obnoxious grin on his face. He had dark blonde hair that was already starting to recede slightly, a round face, and pale blue eyes. He was wearing a yellow and blue Abercrombie polo shirt and khaki shorts.

“Hey Annabelle, what’s new with you? Lacey said you’re dating a Marine? From fucking Amish country? How in the hell did that happen? I thought you were a pacifist?” He laughed and kept his head turned toward me, staring intently, the grin still on his face. I felt uncomfortable as I looked into his eyes. I broke eye contact and began rummaging around in my small black purse, as if I needed to find something important. I hadn’t seen this person in two years. He was being awfully familiar. Why was he calling me a pacifist? I couldn’t recall ever referring to myself as a

pacifist. Sure, I'd plastered my locker with peace signs, I made the peace sign in photographs, but everyone did that, didn't they? It had been the late nineties, we were imitating the Spice Girls, and there was never a whole lot of thought behind it. Was I a pacifist? Maybe Jack remembered the piece that I wrote on gun violence during the fall of our junior year? It was six months after Columbine, right around the same time that we had to get swipe-card access IDs.

"He's a Marine. He's from Allentown, not Lancaster."

"I didn't say he was from Lancas—"

"You said Amish Country! That's Lancaster! He's from Allentown!" I lowered my voice. "It's a completely different county." I added. Jack looked at me like I was nuts.

"Whoa, whoa, who the fuck cares? Whatever. It's just really weird. Pacifists don't date soldiers! Wasn't John Lennon, like, your hero? Make love not war and all that shit!" He laughed at me again. I glared at him in disbelief. Why was this so funny to him? After he composed himself, he asked "Are you still writing?"

I used to write constantly in high school. I stopped writing when I met Carter. One weekend when I was at his house, he went through my schoolbag and found my journal. Coming back from the bathroom, I found him lying on his bed reading it as if it were a magazine: flipping through it indifferently as if he was looking for the pictures. He laughed when I got upset. He thought writing was a waste of time since I'd never make any money from it. Insisting that I should trust him enough to let him read it, he got angry when I tried to explain that it was private. From that day on I stopped carrying a journal, afraid that he would find it again. I took all of my diaries and journals from my entire life, filled up a cardboard box, and hid it in plain sight in the corner of my mother's living room. It blended in with the rest of the décor. Journals abandoned,

the only writing that I ever did those days was being sent to Iraq. So, the answer to Jack's questions was no.

"Not really." I replied. "And he isn't a soldier, he is a Marine. There's a difference."

"Why not?"

"I haven't really had time."

"Why not?"

"I just haven't had any time; I've been busy with other things."

"I saw your away message the other night...quoting Casablanca? What, did you watch that in your Intro to Film class this semester? Are you a film expert now?" He was making fun of me. He was a film major at Temple University and clearly thought that my Community College film class was a joke.

Lacey reached out and hit him playfully with her right hand, keeping her eyes on the road. "Leave her alone Jack! We're taking her out to celebrate, Carter is coming home soon. Give her a break! You're always quoting dumb song lyrics on your away messages!" It was true. He was on my AIM buddy list and sometimes I'd look at his away messages. Always some random lyric from some band that I'd never heard of.

We met Jack's friend Sean at the bowling alley. The boys won. I had a good time, it was good to get out and catch up with Lacey. In the minivan on the way home, Jack told me that he was going to call me later.

"No, you're not. Why would you call me? You don't even have my number."

"I'll get it from Lacey. I want to talk to you." Lacey stayed silent, but I could see her smiling in the rearview mirror. I couldn't help myself...even coming from someone as irritating as Jack, this flirtation felt good. It had been a long time since a guy other than Carter had flirted

with me. Hell, it had been a long time since Carter had flirted with me. I didn't expect Jack to call, but ten minutes after I got in the door, my cell phone rang. I didn't answer. I retreated to my room, the only room in the house that didn't look like a bomb had gone off in it, and I went to sleep thinking about Carter.

The next morning, while checking my email, I noticed an instant message on my monitor.

JACKKUBRICK13: you're a nerd. try answering your phone.

I didn't answer the phone the next time that he called. Or the time after that. He left me annoying voicemails. He'd say "Listen to this!" and put the phone up to his stereo...the rest of the message would be some generic punk pop song. Curious, I'd always listen until the end of the message to see if he was going to say anything after the song was over. He'd say "Call me back nerd!" and then he'd hang up. But I never called him back.

...

The next day at work I found myself thinking about Jack. Somewhere deep inside myself I felt very guilty. I tried to make myself feel better with silly rationalizations. I was allowed to have male friends, wasn't I?

Jack took me to see *Finding Nemo*. I insisted on paying for my own ticket, even though he protested. "This isn't a date, I have a boyfriend. We're just friends." During the movie I felt a nervous sort of excitement. I *wanted* it to be a date. He drove me home after the movie, and we listened to one of his CDs, another whiny emo song. The lyrics were making me uneasy.

"Don't say goodnight and walk away without that kiss that you owe me..."

I felt like the song choice wasn't a coincidence. When we got to my house, I said goodnight and quickly ran out of the car.

Carter came home the next day. My parents drove me up to Allentown so that I could be there. I wore a little black sundress with a sage green cardigan and I waited for him to get off the bus. It was a beautiful sunny day in mid June, the birds chirping. I'd been waiting for this day for only four months, but it had felt like four years. And then there he was. Thinner, so tan. His auburn hair looked kind of blonde. When I went to hug him, it felt different. A local news crew was there, filming all of the reunions. When they interviewed me, I felt compelled to exaggerate my happiness for the camera.

Back at his house, he played Xbox and barely looked at me. My parents stayed for lunch and then they went back to Philly, leaving me at Carter's house for the weekend. I sat next to him and tried to talk to him, but he told me that I should have gone home with my parents, because he was going to the bar later with his friends. I felt a crushing sense of disappointment—this was the grand reunion I had waited for?

“What's wrong with you?”

“Nothing is wrong. I want to go out and drink. It's not my fault that you aren't 21 yet. I turned 21 when I was in Iraq, I want to celebrate my 21st birthday! I think I deserve that!” He was practically yelling.

“Okay. You should be able to do that, I understand. I just thought that we'd do something together. We haven't seen each other in months.” Without fully understanding why, I already had the feeling that I needed to walk on eggshells around him. My tone was gentle and calm, as if I was explaining something to a child.

He laughed in a sarcastic way and turned to look at me with scathing eyes.

“If you had really cared about me you would have come to North Carolina last week.”

His mother told me that families were not allowed to greet the plane at Camp Lejeune. None of the other families or girlfriends had gone; everyone had greeted them at the reserve unit in Allentown that morning.

“They told everyone to wait until you were back at the reserve unit here. No one went.”

“Well, I needed to see you. You weren’t there. Your fault.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that if you had been so concerned about my needs you would have made sure you were there for me.”

“Wait...your *needs*? What does that mean?”

He sighed in an exasperated way, rolling his eyes. His voice was cold, uncaring. “It means that there were girls in North Carolina, and those girls weren’t you. I took what I could get. You should have been there if you cared so much.”

What?

Suddenly, hot tears poured down my face. Without thinking, I left his house. I started walking. He was still sitting in front of the TV playing Xbox like nothing had happened.

Where I was going, I didn’t know. I left my purse with my cell phone in his house, so I couldn’t call my parents. I thought about finding a pay phone and calling my father, and he could turn around on the turnpike and come back to get me. I’d walked for about a half mile when Carter pulled up next to me in that white Trans Am.

“Baby, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean it. Please get in the car.”

I didn’t say anything in response. I couldn’t talk through the sobs. I wanted to believe him. I wanted to know that the last year of my life hadn’t been wasted. But at the same time, I wanted desperately to go home. For the first time ever, I would have rather been in my messy

house, hidden between my mother's junk. I continued to walk, and he drove slowly along the road, yelling out the window.

“Please come back to the house and we can talk about it. I love you. I'm sorry.”

I stopped. I was just standing there, sobbing on the sidewalk, looking like a fool. *Is this what my life is now?* I didn't know what to do. A man at a nearby house was pretending to water the lawn but I could tell he was eavesdropping, watching us out of the corner of his eye. At another house across the street I could see a woman watching us from her front door. I turned to look at Carter, I looked at his face. He wasn't crying. He didn't even look upset. His parents probably told him to come after me.

“I'm so sorry. Nothing really happened. Please come back to the house and I can explain. What are you going to do out here anyway? Walk to Philadelphia?” He laughed.

I thought about my friends. I thought about my family, about Carter's family. How everyone had been so proud and impressed that Annabelle's boyfriend, *my boyfriend*, was serving our country. I thought about how my girlfriends all envied our “perfect” relationship. Lacey had always said that it was like something from a movie: Girl meets boy at the beach, boy and girl fall in love, boy leaves for war, girl waits for him, boy comes home a hero, they live happily ever after. I wasn't dating some asshole like some of my other friends were. I had a good guy, a Marine, a *hero*. That was what everyone thought. That was what I had thought. Was it all fake? I wasn't prepared to let go of it all, not yet. I got in the car.

Carter took me back to his house, where he sat me down on his mother's pink and white floral sofa, the same sofa where we'd happily watched terrible movies months before. He told me that he felt *so guilty* for what he had done. He claimed that it wasn't his fault, he went with some of his fellow Marines to what he thought was a strip club, but it turned out

being...something else. He only did it because he *just couldn't wait* any longer because he missed me *so much*. I gave him a hesitant hug, feigning forgiveness. He told me that he was so relieved that I knew; it was a weight off his shoulders. That night he stayed at the house with me instead of going to the bar, although more than once he told me that he wished I was 21 so that we could go out drinking.

We stopped by CVS to get his disposable camera developed. Full of pride, he couldn't wait to show me the photos. I flipped through the stack of glossy 4 x 6 prints, unnerved by snapshots of lifeless ragdolls, the size of full-grown men, sunbathing on pink-stained ground, facial features obscured.

...

In the weeks that followed, Carter would pick me up and take me up to Allentown for our usual weekend visits. We'd rent DVDs from Blockbuster, be about a half hour into the first one, when he'd get restless and go to the bars. I'd be left at his house with his little sister, Julie. It happened almost every weekend that summer. His familiar fragrance of cigarettes and cologne started to become contaminated with the scent of whiskey. He'd crawl into bed, expecting me to jump all over him. When I'd tell him that I was tired, he'd push me from the bed. I'd go to sleep on the couch, freezing in the over air-conditioned house—the Carters apparently didn't believe in throw blankets.

...

The first weekend of August, I made up an excuse to stay home from Carter's. I needed a break from watching *The Princess Diaries* and *Spongebob* with Carter's sister. I could only handle so much tween entertainment. That weekend I watched movies with my mother in our disastrous living room, and every few minutes my eyes would drift over to my box of journals in

the corner. As I was getting ready to go to bed, my AOL Instant Messenger made the familiar alert sound. It was Jack.

JACKKUBRICK13: Hey stranger. u there?

ANNABELLE1983: Yes, I'm here. What's up?

JACKKUBRICK13: I want to go out. playground?

ANNABELLE1983: It's late. I'm in my pajamas. I really shouldn't.

JACKKUBRICK13: Why, because of GOMER PYLE? Fuck him. come out in your PJs. i don't care. I really miss u and i want to see u. I'm not drunk, I promise. I'll pick you up in 15 minutes.

I was typing a response telling him not to come when I got a notification that he had signed off. Shit. Was he really going to be outside of my house in fifteen minutes? He didn't have a cell phone so I couldn't call him. My heart rate increased steadily for a few moments until I realized that I should probably put on some real clothes. I put on a pair of jeans and a black tank top...I slipped into a pair of Old Navy flip flops and quickly put on some mascara. My long blonde hair was a mess so I pulled it back into a ponytail. I waited anxiously by the mauve horizontal mini blinds in my bedroom, peaking out every few seconds. Was he really coming? It was a warm August night, and the street in front of my house was quiet and still, the only exception being the sound of the crickets and a cat running across the street. Suddenly I saw the gold Chevy Cavalier turn the corner and come to a slow stop in front of my house.

Shit.

I could just stay in my house—eventually he would drive away. Or, he'd come to knock on the door and I'd have to hope I could get out without him getting a glimpse of the messy

living room. I deliberated in my head for what seemed like a very long time, but it was only a few moments.

After my hesitation passed, I grabbed my handbag and darted out of my room...down the steps, past my mother (“I’m going to the diner with Lacey, I’ll be back in an hour or two!”) who was sorting through a pile of junk mail while watching the news, out the front door, into the car. Some alternative rock band that I didn’t recognize was on the stereo. He turned and looked at me, a huge grin on his face.

“Hey nerd.”

“Hey.”

“So this is what I have to do to get you to see me. Just show up and sit in my car outside of your house. I should have thought of it sooner. Let’s go for a ride.”

“You did think of it sooner. 4th of July!”

“Oh yeah...Let’s not talk about that!” Laughing, he put his foot on the gas and drove away. We sat in silence for a few minutes until he asked me if I liked the band that was playing.

“Who is it?”

“It’s brand new.”

“Oh, you just bought it?”

“No! The band’s name is Brand New.”

“Oh, okay! I’ve never heard of them.” We both laughed. At the next red light, he changed the CD. The Starting Line was the name of the band. I had never heard of them either. Jack flipped through the tracks until he came to the one that he wanted on. He had a true gift for finding the perfect song for every situation.

“Stop expecting change...he’s just a lost cause that you’re waiting on...take a look around...you could have anyone, so leave undeserving him. It only hurts at first but then you’ll find someone to give you everything you want, try not to go running back to him...”

As I listened to the lyrics I fought back tears. When we came to a red light he turned to smile at me and grabbed my left hand with his right. As he interlocked our fingers, I felt butterflies in my stomach and I wondered what the hell I was doing. The light turned green and in a few minutes we were at the playground. It was deserted and dark, the only light coming from the streetlights in the distance. He let go of my hand and we got out of the car. Nervous about him taking my hand again, of what it would mean, I walked ahead to the swings and sat down. He followed closely behind me and then sat on the swing next to me. We talked about people that we knew from high school, who was doing what, the mean chicks that had gotten fat, and the asshole jocks who had knocked girls up. We talked about classes starting again in a couple of weeks, and about the movie that he’d be working on in the fall. Just then, he got up and started walking over to the baby section of the playground. There was an abandoned box of small wooden craft sticks at the bottom of the red plastic kiddie slide. He picked them up. “Whoa, check this out!” he yelled.

“Popsicle sticks? So what?”

“I love finding random shit!”

“What are you going to do with them? Just leave them there; they probably belong to the children’s day camp. If you want Popsicle sticks I can give you a bunch, my mother has an entire drawer of them in our kitchen.” I laughed.

He turned to look at me with a puzzled expression on his face. “Why does your mother have an entire drawer of Popsicle sticks?”

“Oh...she keeps shit. Has trouble throwing things away.”

“Oh, she’s a hoarder.” He said it with certainty and confidence. I had never heard the term before.

“A what?”

“A hoarder. My aunt is one too. It’s an OCD thing. Totally treatable. Take her to a shrink.”

He said it as if it was the most normal thing in the world. I’d never heard anyone who was “in” on the family secret take it so well, let alone understand it.

Jack brought the sticks back over to the big kid swings. He sat on the ground next to my swing with his back toward me and spilled the sticks out onto the black top. He began arranging them into something. After a few minutes, he moved out of the way so I could see what he had done. “You’ll like this!” he said. It was a peace sign. The images from Carter’s disposable camera flashed into my mind. Underneath of Jack’s peace sign, written out in sticks, was the word “NERD.” Out of nowhere, for reasons that I cannot explain, I began to cry. Jack’s triumphant smile slowly turned to a stare of bewilderment. “Hey hey, what’s the matter?” he asked.

I stood up from my swing. “I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be here with you. This isn’t right. I have a boyfriend.” He came closer to me.

“Whoa, calm down. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No, not yet. But...”

He inched closer to me. “But what? You did nothing wrong.”

“But...”

Before I could finish my thought, before I could articulate what I knew was about to happen, his lips were on mine, his arms were around me. I wasn't crying anymore. In that moment I didn't care about Carter. I didn't even think about Carter. Carter didn't exist.

We stayed at the playground for a little while longer. Jack wiped my tears away and didn't ask any questions. When he dropped me off at home, I kissed him goodnight, no prompt from a song needed.

I stayed up late downloading music from bands that were signed to labels that I'd never heard of. When Carter called at 3 am, I didn't answer. Staring at the call, I hit the ignore button just as JACKKUBRICK13 sent me an emoticon on AIM. Eventually I'd have to talk to Carter, I'd have to somehow let him know that it was over. But for now, all I cared about was Jack.

I couldn't do it.

I wanted to end it so badly, but I felt responsible for him. What would happen if I left him? I continued to see Jack but kept it very innocent. Raspberry cheesecake and waffles at the diner, a surprise Justin Timberlake concert at The Electric Factory in downtown Philly. We watched *Old School* at his house, but with other people present.

...

I emptied my Corona out onto the lawn and threw the empty bottle into a recycling bin. I made my way through the chain link fence out onto the sidewalk. It was getting dark out, and with each passing house I heard the sounds of parties. Happy crowds, people having fun. I smelled hot dogs, I heard children laughing.

I wasn't entirely sure that I knew where I was going. But I kept walking. Eventually I'd find a street that I recognized, and I'd find my way back to Carter's house. Needing to hear his voice, I called Jack's house. His mother answered the phone.

"Hi is Jack there? It's Annabelle."

"Sure sweetie, hang on."

I could hear a lot of noise in the background. They must have been having a party. After a few moments, Jack picked up.

"Hey, what's up? I haven't heard from you in a few days."

"Hey. I'm walking through the streets of Allentown, with no idea where I am going. I just left Carter at a party."

"What? Are you okay?" He sounded concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine. A little drunk. I had to get out of there. I'm walking back to his house."

"Do you need me to come and get you?"

I hadn't thought about asking Jack to come and get me. But after hearing him say it, it made perfect sense.

"That would be great. But I don't know where I am."

I told Jack the street signs that I was near, and I told him Carter's address. He went on his computer and did some searches on MapQuest. He was able to tell me how to get to a street that I was familiar with, and he kept talking to me until I made it safely back to Carter's house. He said he would be there as soon as he could—MapQuest said an hour and 20 minutes.

I was sitting in Carter's living room, on the pink and white floral sofa, when Mrs. Carter came in from the kitchen.

"Hey, I thought I heard someone come in. Where's Steve?"

“He wasn’t ready to leave. So I walked.” Normally I would have teared up, but I was angry, not sad.

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry. You know that he hasn’t been himself lately.”

“Yeah. But that isn’t my fault, is it? I’m sick of him having a pass to treat me this way.”

I couldn’t believe that I’d said it out loud, and said it in front of his mother. Her eyes began to fill with water, and she came over to hug me. I hugged her back, but I was slightly resentful that it took her this long to acknowledge his behavior toward me. Mr. & Mrs. Carter had been acting like his behavior was normal all summer long. But it wasn’t normal—and they were smart people—but the power of denial is strong when you love someone.

I broke the hug and pulled away from her.

“I don’t need to be comforted. I need to leave. I can’t be here anymore. I called a friend to come and get me. I’m going home.” *Back to my messy house.* “I’d rather be there than here.” I kept my voice steady and even because I didn’t want to upset her, but it was difficult.

His mother went to the kitchen and picked up the phone on the wall and dialed. I couldn’t make out what she was saying, but she came back in after a few minutes. “I just called him. He is coming home now. He’s sorry that he upset you.” Laughing incredulously, I shook my head, and went up the steps to his room to get my things. “Sure. He’s sorry. He’s always sorry. He can say sorry. I don’t care. It’s over.” Mrs. Carter’s emotions collapsed slightly more when she heard me say it was over.

Julie was crying in her room. “You’re leaving?” She looked at me as if I just told her Al-Qaida bombed Disney World. “You need to stay; you’re the only thing that makes him happy.”

“I can’t stay just because he wants me to stay. You’re too little to understand Julie, but someday a guy might be mean to you. If he is, don’t let him. Don’t hang around and waste your time the way that I did. I’ve been so stupid! I’m sorry Julie.”

She continued to cry as I walked down the steps with my bags. At this point Mr. Carter had joined the action, and he was pacing the living room nervously, not knowing how to handle the situation. Mr. Carter had been a hippie when he was young. He was incredibly smart, liberal, and never allowed his son to play with toy guns as a child. To this day I have no idea how Carter ended up the way that he did. The only thing I could ever come up with was that they wanted to please Carter and didn’t like telling him no. So when he started showing interest in the military, they must have felt it was best to support him. Mr. Carter started to speak to me.

“Annabelle...you seem like you’re a little out of it. Why don’t you go upstairs and go to bed? We’ll talk to Carter when he gets home. We know he hasn’t been very nice to you this summer, and we’re sorry. We kept telling him that something like this was bound to happen if he didn’t start treating you better. Please. Just go upstairs. If you still want to leave in the morning, I can drive you home.”

“Mr. Carter, thanks, but I already have a ride coming.”

“Your dad?”

“No...my friend.” *Should I tell them? Why not?* “A guy...A guy.” Tentatively the first time, with more confidence the second time.

Mr. Carter’s eyes widened. “Annabelle, you can’t get into a car with another guy in sight of Carter...you know how he gets!” Headlights from outside streamed through the curtains. Carter was home. He walked in the door and was instantly surprised to find his parents looking so anxious.

“Jesus, calm the fuck down. She isn’t going anywhere.” He looked at me. “I’m sorry baby. I was having a good time, and I didn’t want to leave right then. I’m sorry. Really.”

His mother smiled hopefully and looked at me for my reaction. For Julie’s sake, I kept my voice down, kept calm, and I tried not to sound angry.

“I can’t do this anymore Carter. I’m going home, okay? This is over.”

He stared at me without any emotion. I started to walk out the door past him. I’d wait on the porch until Jack pulled up. Carter wasn’t moving out of my way.

“Carter, I’m leaving. Get out of the way.” I lowered my voice so his family wouldn’t hear what I was about to say. “Look on the bright side, the next time you are in North Carolina you can be with as many girls as you want without feeling guilty about it.” I smiled at him.

Carter ran his hands through his hair and widened his eyes. “You’re not fucking leaving! You think you can make a fucking fool out of me in front of my family? You’re not going anywhere. Fucking piece of shit bitch that probably cheated on me while I was gone. You’re not leaving!” He grabbed my arm and held onto it so tight that it began to throb with pain.

I was starting to get scared now, and I was sobering up. Maybe talking back to him hadn’t been such a great idea after all. His parents were yelling at him, telling him to calm down. Julie was yelling at her brother from the top of the steps, begging him not to hurt me.

“I saw them open letters from their girls back home over and over again telling them that they were breaking up with them. I kept waiting for your letter to come and when it didn’t, I knew it would just be a matter of time.”

“Carter—you’re hurting my arm! Let go!” I was yelling now. “I never cheated on you. Stay focused and faithful? I did! It’s not my fault and it’s not my responsibility to fix you! Let me leave, Carter!” He threw me down to the ground and ran up to his room. “Julie, go to your

room, you don't need to see this." She stayed where she was, lip quivering, looking frightened. He came downstairs with his gun, the handgun that he had been so eager to purchase after his 21st birthday. He wasn't pointing it at anything, but there it was, gunmetal grey glistening in his right hand.

His father ran to the kitchen and got on the phone. His mother fell down to the ground, propped up against the floral sofa, and told him to put the gun down in a voice that was barely legible.

"I'm not going to hurt myself, mom. Jesus. I just need her to stay and this will make her stay."

"I'm not going to stay Carter. I'm leaving." My voice and my hands were shaking.

"If you leave, I'll shoot myself." He smiled. It was a nervous and deranged smile, and it frightened me. He put the gun to his head. I put my bags down immediately, tears filling my eyes. *Damn, I hadn't wanted to cry this time.*

"Carter...you aren't going to hurt yourself, okay? Please. Just put the gun down. Your sister is right there. She doesn't need to see this." His parents were now both in a ball on the living room floor, arms wrapped around each other in grief, floral sofa supporting them.

"I'll put the gun down if you stay."

"Okay...okay." I wiped the tears away from my cheek and took a deep breath. "I'll stay. But you need to give me the gun, okay?" Eggshells.

"Promise me that you'll stay. You can't leave me."

"I promise, okay? Just give me the gun."

He finally put the gun down on the floor. I didn't touch it. His father ran to get it and disappeared into the kitchen with it. Carter came up to me and wrapped his arms around me. "I love you so much, I don't know what I'd do without you."

I told him that I loved him too...it was true. I did. I was still hugging him when the lights of the police car invaded the moment. He kissed my forehead and then went over to his mother and gave her a hug. Julie, still sobbing, inched her way down the steps slowly. Carter went over and picked her up, whispered something in her ear, and then put her down again. There was a knock at the door.

He went away willingly. His father followed in the truck, his mother locked herself in her room. I sat at the bottom of the staircase, my arm around Julie. We sat that way for a long time, until I could sense that she was drifting off to sleep. After I was done carrying her to bed, I collected my bags and waited on the front porch. When the gold Chevy showed up, I got in.

"Hey nerd." He looked at me understandingly, knowing that I was upset. He didn't ask any questions. There was some punk song on that I didn't recognize. I was glad to be with him, to see his face, but I wasn't in the mood for the music. At that moment I didn't think I'd ever be in the mood to listen to music again. I turned the stereo off.

We drove back to Philadelphia in silence.

You'll never know it when you see them. Looking back, there are a lot of things that I would do differently. There are a lot of things that I've learned. But the one thing that still boggles my mind is how well they all blend in. They look normal on the surface. Only when you love them will you realize that something is off. Only when you've already invested your time

will you realize: *these men are broken*. After you understand this, you might let it bother you for a little while. But then you'll move on with your life. You'll listen to song lyrics and you'll watch pretentious movies. You'll marry the boy with the college education, the boy who makes you laugh, the boy who tells you that you're a nerd, the boy who wouldn't dream of reading your journal. You'll forget about the boy who spent time in the VA hospital. You'll go to bars with your friends, you'll forget about how much you used to hate those people who drank. You'll only remember him when you see a bumper sticker telling you to support the troops, or you see a man in uniform—or on the Fourth of July, when the fireworks are in the sky. When you have times like that, you'll remember. When you have times like that, you'll feel guilty for moving on.