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That Kind of Thing Happens All the Time

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English –concentration in Writing and Literature

Professor Oseye

English

Introduction

My original mission for this project was to write several short stories which would revolve around different types of young characters living in New York and focus on the types of struggles and moments of weakness that people face day to day that can frequently, go overlooked or remain under the radar. Originally I had titled this, Different Kinds of Dirty because of the shame and humiliation these characters constantly face, however after I was finished I realized that my true focus wasn't to highlight their pain, but rather, how often these things happen, and despite how detrimental these experiences can be to a young adults development and growth into an adult, these incidences frequently go unspoken of unless it's between close and friends and family; which is why I gave my characters colloquial voices. I want the reader to feel as though they are the friend my character is turning to in search of someone to absolve them of their pain just by listening.

Once my project began, I quickly realized this was no task to be squeezed into as many stories as possible -these are stories where a sufficient amount of time and dedication would need to go into each character in order to shed a significant light on their struggle and why it's important. In result, I ended up with only two stories; but they are both stories with real characters and elements that would not have been nearly as powerful without the knowledge I know now. Successful story telling isn't just about plot and developing complex characters; these are things that happen throughout the writing process. What I've learned is that story telling is creating characters and scenes that are authentic through the power of adding the science and life into a story.

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The Promotion

Even though he was my boss, having him tail me into the bar didn't make me feel any more comfortable than if he were stalking me my entire walk home. The streets were quiet. Nothing was to be heard except the sound of his footsteps shadowing mine and the wind hitting the sides of the tall buildings which shadowed the streets and pedestrians below. This was the same bleak and abundant wind that pushed and lifted my body through the swinging door of the happy-hour hotspot for young professionals, Tri Tavern. Making my way into the busy bar I walked confidently through the crowded sea of the usual suit and tie workers. Despite its location in the ever-so-trendy down town part of Manhattan, the stale smell of beer in the air and classic rock that was the back-beat of the atmosphere told everyone there to loosen up their ties, and shake off the monotonous weight that hung so heavily on our shoulders from a 9 to 5 day of typing and staring at computer screens. From the back corner of my eye I could see him eyeing the secluded corner tables, but I had already found two empty stools parked right in front of the beer-tap at the bar.

“Is this okay?” I tossed my head to the side and let my cheek-bones move my ears back.

“Well, what about a table or something?” he asked as he motioned himself towards a table in a darker corner. I looked at him curiously; it was enough to make him doubt his suggestion. He started again “Well...Is this the kind of place that brings the drinks to you or do we have to order at the bar?” He knew his attention to me wasn't being well received. He felt awkward, I could sense it, but he also wasn't stupid. He wasn't going to let a momentary lapse in smoothness stop his momentum.

“No. This isn’t the kind of place that brings you the drinks.” The attitude was pouring out of me. I couldn’t stop myself. I knew what he was there for. I knew I wasn’t going to give it to him and I knew that I didn’t like how this was happening.

But when a girl is put on the spot with a man who’s in a powerful position, and she wants something from him and she’s aware of how beautifully she’s blossoming into her sexual prime, sometimes she just can’t stop herself from leading a man on and taking herself into situations that will ultimately make her regret it yet love the shameless feeling at the same time. Call her stupid, call her a Jezebel. It is what it is.

“So let’s just stay at the bar then.”

As I plopped myself on the chair I began to make myself comfortable, meticulously unbuckling the gold clasps that pulled my coat tightly over my chest to protect me from the harsh February cold. I continued to fold my jacket over my lap as I reached for the hook underneath the bar and so I would have a place to hang my bag and jacket to avoid the cumbersome feeling of having too much to hold. Wearing nothing but his three-piece navy silk suit, he watched patiently on his stool –calculating my movements with fleeting looks up and down my body, his eyes were lit with stoic concentration. Crossing my right leg over my left, I couldn’t help but notice how suddenly, the slit in my skirt was riding up my leg just enough for him to notice the slight gap between my thighs. It looked like I was asking for it. Maybe I was. I crossed my legs again, this time overlapping the right over the left while trying to inoffensively push my stool back and set myself at a reasonable distance.

The bar tender approached us, and while it sounded like he was asking for our drink orders, his eyes asked what this unequivocally aged pair were doing *here* together. Ignoring this, I reached

in my bag for my I.D. while Jeff ordered our drinks. By the time I found it, the bar tender had moved onto other patrons and my drink was sitting cold and already beginning to perspire in front of me. *If there was one thing I learned from my ex-boyfriend, it's that being in a bar like this, with an older man makes bartenders apprehensive to ask for their younger partner's proof of age to drink.*

Jeff took this to his advantage and used it as an opportunity to make light of things, he swiped the I.D. from my hand before I had the chance to throw it back in my wallet. I removed the pointless red straw from my drink and sipped from my glass as I watched him stare questioningly at my picture. I knew what he was thinking, the same thing everyone usually says out loud when they see the picture of Liz from 2011: the rebellious, fire truck red haired freckled *Lizzy* with piercing blue eyes and a smile that shouted *HEY! I CAN LEGALLY DRINK NOW!* was much different than the refined, blonde haired Liz that was sitting beside him. He gave it back and only said "Cute."

"Thanks... I think."

We sat in silence for a lengthy minute. And then he asked

"May I?"

I shrugged my shoulders in response since I wasn't entirely sure what he was asking. Suddenly his fingers were gripped securely under the patent leather cushion of my seat and my stool was dragging into his trap. It reminded me of that scene in *Jumanji* when carnivorous vines are growing out of the fire place and take hold of Kirsten Dunst's character, dragging her by the ankles into its mouth, hoping it would devour her with one quick swallow. He wanted me.

I wasn't used to Jeff acting this way with me. I had seen the milder version of it with the other girls; the caressing of their lower back, the closeness of his body and theirs when he was relaying commands. And of course they would complain to me, they saw me as their confidante; the one girl who was never touched and in fact, respected by Jeff. But I was always on his defense "Yeah, Jeff's a touchy guy but if you just let him know you're uncomfortable with it, he'll stop."

My opinion was changed when one particular Wednesday rolled around.

"You're not sitting in for that conference tonight, right?" he approached me from behind while I was in the break area (not room). I thought I had a moment for a coffee break. He came in quietly while fingering through his manila folder filled with papers and numbers and facts. He liked to begin conversations like he didn't care what I had to say.

"Nooope, I'm going to a concert tonight!" I liked to combat indifference.

"Oh yeah, who?" he continued looking through his papers, papers and more meaningless papers.

"Fleetwood Mac"

"Wait, what?" finally, he looked up and acknowledged that there was actually a person where this voice he had been talking to was coming from.

"Yeah, I'm going to see Fleetwood Mac tonight!"

“I didn’t know you were a Fleetwood Mac fan... are you going with your boyfriend?”

“Uuh...What boyfriend?” My turn to be cavalier.

“Really? I thought you were dating that guy?” his tone started to change.

“Oh no...we broke up right before my birthday, now I’m single and on the prowl!” I made a catlike gesture and stared him dead in the eye the way a girl can stare a man in the eye to let him know for a brief moment that she’s not quite a girl anymore. I quickly turned my energy towards Michael who was approaching from the confines of our joint cubicle space. Michael returned my playfully sexual advance with a wink and a silent meow.

“Oh so then when are *we* going?” and with one quick motion, he had pulled me close to his side, flinging my body almost like a rag doll to his disposal. He had me under his arm and tightly at his side. Like a boa constrictor, his grip continued to tighten around my body. The more I tried to wiggle my way out, the more my lungs felt as though they would collapse. *A man his age has never held me like this.* My left thigh, touching the inner part of his as my right leg seemed to be wrapped behind him. I think he was talking to me about my old soul and music maybe? But all I could hear were my thoughts screaming “*How the hell did I end up here?*” Was I even responding to him? He looked down at me and smiled, our faces were so close that I was finally able to get a decent look at the age that was well settled on his face. While he carried himself like a man without a care in the world, I could finally see where they were hiding. His fever-green eyes were meant for intimidation but I matched their intensity and read through his façade. I saw the fears that kept him up at night in the bagged circles under his eyes. I saw his contempt for those more powerful than him in the lines that shaped like cracks in mud around his mouth. He

thought he was a God, unstoppable and to be feared, but in that moment I swear I saw the cowardly jackal that truly resided in him.

“I only have one seat, Jeff” I was abrupt. He was invasive.

“Well then you’ll just have to sit on my lap.” He winked as I tried to laugh my way out of his cradle, but with a well-intended force he pulled me back. Something was rushing through my veins like a deer sprinting through the woods from the sound of a snapping twig, signifying a predator is near. My eyes darted towards Michael’s, hoping he’d be able to read my horror and break me free with just a cough or clearing of the throat to let Jeff know how inappropriate this was. I felt his pulsating ego on my thigh. He had never done this to me before. What was he doing? Maybe it was just an awkward accident. I kept trying to make it right in my head. Why did he think this was okay?

I found my way out and made an excuse to finish work so I could be back in the privacy of my desk. I couldn’t get over the horrifying feeling that his touch was radiating off of every part of my body he held. I tried to shake it off and reminded myself that I only had one more hour to kill and I’d be gone.

By the next day I had been so overwhelmed by the concert I had forgotten all about what happened with Jeff. Yesterday never happened. I convinced myself there was only a momentary lapse in my judgment. I completely misread the situation and built it up in my head to be much bigger than it was. That sort of thing happens when you’re a twenty-five year old girl with no drama to distract you from your daily activities; you make things up in your head.

After lunch Jeff called me into his office. Walking over to his admirable corner office, I felt the adrenaline pulsating through the tips of my fingers and my nerves tangled in the pit of my stomach. The pale white shades that distinguished the importance of his office from the others were drawn shut. I knocked once to let him know I was coming in then pushed the door open and listened to it shut behind me. His desk was angled so it looked like the closing leg of a triangle against the corner of his office. He sat back in his \$1,400.00 chair detailed with soft black leather and polished cherry wood arm rests -which he had the company pay for, after his two weeks *paid* vacation to Colombia. He looked cool and relaxed, and his normally blonde curly hair was now slicked back and cut shorter than usual. His attention was on his computer screen as I stood at his desk.

“So tell me, how was the concert?” He finally looked up at me and smiled. Clean-shaven today. He wasn’t awful looking.

“Oh, it was fantastic.” I shook my head and smiled, thinking back to the Fleetwood set that mystified me last night.

“I’m sure it was. I can’t imagine they sound anything like they used to, though.”

“Well of course not, I mean, they’re older now ya know? Stevie’s voice did sound a little tired but... the woman can still hold a note.” I loved talking music “I mean, I didn’t go into it thinking I was going to hear the same voices that I hear on my iPod, but just to be there and say that I got to see them perform was awesome. Like... how many people my age can say that they’ve seen Fleetwood Mac live?”

He smiled and nodded “You’re right.” I shrugged my shoulders in agreement and stood in the idle silence for a moment, waiting for something to happen.

“So anyway, I called you in so I could show you how to do those reference reports we were talking about. I think it’s about time for you to start taking on a little more.”

“Oh yeah?” I said with a turn in my voice, this wasn’t what I expected but I liked where it was heading. Working with this man for over a year I grew to be comfortable in the way we spoke to one another. “Are we seeing a raise of some sort in the near future here or what Jeff?” I raised my eyebrows with hope and suggestion that my suspicions were right. He laughed and looked back at the computer.

“I don’t know Lizzy...maybe if you play your cards right we can even get a promotion in there.”

“Well... I don’t know about all that.” I knew a promotion meant being his personal assistant. Which meant being at his every beck and call, being alone in the office with him more than I’d like; being his personal assistant meant I would lose my life and actually become this bullshit job that was only meant to be part-time until grad school was finished.

He looked at me skeptically, as if saying *you’re not really turning down a promotion*. “Right, well anyway, come over here so I can show you these reports.” I nodded, almost forgetting why I was there in the first place and moved to the side of his desk. Wearing a fitting black pencil skirt, I was very aware of how my body looked and was apprehensive to bend down so I could clearly see the computer screen. My ass was going to be right in his face. So, instead I did a half squat as if trying to balance the bottom half of my butt on an imaginary sloped chair behind me and thought *thank God for those chair poses in yoga*. But before I could have a moment to focus on the screen in front of me, he had pulled me onto his lap. *Jesus Christ...is this happening?* I let out an uncomfortable laugh.

“I thought this would be more comfortable than standing like that.” I looked back at him and before I could say anything the door was opening and in came Jason, his right hand man in and out of the office. I liked Jason because he was always an easy guy to talk to. Despite the fact that he had a very short fuse, if things ever got rough, he was always the first to lend a hand –or an ear.

“Oh...uh...am I interrupting something?” his face was perplexed, looking right at me, his face was telling me that he expected more from me. It stung like ice on a dry tongue. My brain was screaming for me to get up: *THIS LOOKS BAD LIZZY GET THE HELL UP!* But instead I remained still, and awkward on Jeff’s lap with a small part of me thinking *maybe if I stay sitting it will look as though I don’t think there’s anything wrong with what’s happening and it won’t look as bad.* Jeff laughed and Jason continued “Well don’t you look comfortable *daddy.*” I felt my lunch coming up at the sound of the title. They both chuckled and Jeff finished with “Yeaah, that’s what all the pretty girls call me, right Liz?” I was done. I felt the heated flames of humiliation burning through my cheeks. The room was suddenly smoldering and my chest felt hollow. I could only let out a choking laugh before my body could finally react and let me stand up.

“Yeah... Jeff was just showing me how to do the reference reports.”

“Yeah. That’s great. Anyway, Jeff when you’re all done in here we need you in conference room 323 WB.”

“Alright, I’ll be there in a minute.”

With one last look to assess the situation, Jason left. Jeff motioned for me to sit back on his lap as he finished showing me how to fill out the reports but I politely declined, paid attention and left his office as quickly as I could.

Two hours later he appeared in my cubicle and sat himself on my desk, his usual parking spot before he left for the day. I looked over at Michael's empty desk hoping that if I thought hard enough, he would reappear. He didn't.

“Hey Lizzy, working hard or hardly working?”

Despite his overt attempts to be sleazy, I still couldn't get past the fact that this man whom I've worked so closely with for the past two years had suddenly become a sexual predator, and I the prey. I couldn't kick my friendly demeanor towards him. Maybe I didn't want too. Maybe I was too naive and was trying to see past the worst that I had come to know in him. I rolled my eyes and laughed.

“Eh...a little bit of both I guess...which is more than I can say for you, Boss.”

“Oh really now?”

This was starting to sound like flirting. My mom always warned me about being too casual with my superiors, especially men. I turned my face back towards my computer to focus on my work so I could leave this place behind.

“So what time are you getting out of here kiddo?”

“UUh... probably not till late, I have some catching up to do since I left early yesterday.”

“You're such a good girl aren't you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I laughed to myself, thinking *if people only knew what happened after I left this office.*

“Well, what do you say to me and you cutting out now and making it over to the Tri Tavern for a little happy hour?”

“Seriously?” (...yes, even after everything that had happened up to that point I still found myself being surprised at this offer.)

“Yeah, why not. You really didn’t miss too much last night and I think it’s about time I treated you to an after-work drink. Plus, we can talk about that raise.”

Even more so, I surprised myself with how quickly I accepted the offer. But like I said, when you’re a young woman, and aware of your capability to influence someone just by the way you look, something kind of just...takes over. Power. You feel like you have *real* power. And no emotion trumps the feeling of empowerment when you’re twenty-five and everything the world has to offer is only an arm’s stretch away.

In my head I had it all planned out. I had friends waiting for me to get out of work. When the time would call for it –they would be my excuse to leave.

So we made our way into the bar.

And there I was, planted securely on my stool, in between his legs.

I kept it to a two drink minimum and made sure I kept myself cool. This was where my poker face was going to be tested. His eyes squared off with mine as we made small talk about the concert and other irrelevant topics.

“So I noticed that eye roll earlier.”

“Which one?” I laughed. “I guess it’s a habit.”

“When I made that comment about you being a good girl.”

“Oh...right...that.”

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“What was that all about?”

“Nothing?”

“Come on Lizzy”

“No, you’re right, I am a good girl.”

He pulled my hand towards the inside of his thigh. My face said I didn’t notice.

“You’d tell me if you were uncomfortable right?”

“Of course.”

“And are you?”

“I’m not frigid, Jeff. I can handle a little game of *does this make you nervous.*”

“Well I don’t think you’re frigid.”

“Thanks.”

He pulled my hand closer and let it rest at the bottom of his fly. I could feel his pants getting tighter. The image of my mother shaking her head in disappointment was replaying in the back

of my mind. *“You’re a bright and beautiful young lady Elizabeth, men will try to take advantage of that in New York.”* Suddenly I was sipping my third Jack and Coke and feeling bold.

“So about that raise?”

He laughed and nodded, he saw I made sure that while he got what he came for, I was gunna get mine.

“Well, what’re you thinking?”

“I want to be at a solid fifty.”

“Why not just take the promotion?”

I shook my head and laughed. “I could never.” He looked stunned “I like the relationship we have now” Lie. “If I’m your permanent assistant I would end up hating you.” Truth. “I’d much rather keep what I have now, and just reap the benefits of getting that salary.” Frankly speaking.

He looked me up and down.

“I heard you have a tattoo”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“I heard it’s somewhere it can’t normally be seen.” I knew where this was headed. “I wanna see it.”

“Maybe if you play your cards right...” This made his eyes light up. I used this to move my hand and flip my hair over my shoulder “And the raise?”

“I don’t see why it can’t happen.” I nodded my head in understanding, I could feel the smugness in my smile. He continued on “How do you feel about getting a room?”

“Jeff” he did it.

“What?” he went that far.

“You’re married. And you’re my boss.”

“I could fire you, then rehire you.” It was all a joke to him.

“Jeff. Your wife just had your second child two months ago.”

He nodded his head with disappointment and sighed.

“Let’s wrap it up then shall we?”

“Yeah... let’s.”

He settled our tab and we made our way out with sets of curious eyes following us to the door.

You’d think in a city where this sort of thing happens all the time, people wouldn’t look twice.

You’d think.

As I tried to hail a cab he stood closely at my side. We waited in an eternal silence for a cab to pull over, and when it finally came I turned to give a cordial hug goodbye.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow then?” he stood quiet. “Oh come on, don’t take it personal Jeff.”

With that I swung the cab door open, and before I could tell the driver where I was headed, he pushed behind me and I could only turn to see hunger in his eyes. He pressed his body against mine, and I was lying flat on my back.

“What the FUCK are you doing Jeff? Get off!” I tried to push him off, but he was too busy trying to shove his slimy tongue into my mouth. There was a bite to my upper lip and his wrists pinning mine down. I screamed, while the driver screamed in his whateverstani accent. I felt the jack and

coke rising in my esophagus. No, I felt anger and resentment. “JEFF!” I screamed and gave him one final swift kick in the stomach, and got him out of the cab. He stumbled backwards and I slammed the door shut as the driver sped off.

I was shaking. I was sick. I was tired.

“Are you okay Miss?” the driver spoke softly, looking at me through the rear-view mirror.

I didn’t know how to answer.

“Miss?”

Walking through the office doors I recalled moments from last night and felt as though I were in a living nightmare, a corpse covered with worms and bugs eating at my skin.

All I could think was, What if he’s in today? What if Jason doesn’t take me seriously? He’ll probably think I’m just a stupid girl who should’ve stopped things before they went too far. I might get fired. But that’s okay. It’s okay... it’s okay if it means working somewhere where I’ll never have to feel this way again.

I saw Michael standing by reception as if awaiting my arrival. Biting his lower lip with his eyebrows raised I knew he had something to spill.

“Oh My God, hunny...” I continued to greet him with a hug and kiss on the cheek.

“Hey dolly, what’s going on?” someone was probably caught stealing supplies again.

“You missed it today!” still holding me in place before I could completely part from the hug.

“Missed what?”

“Jeff got fired!” he was almost shaking me by my shoulders. Meanwhile as the words flew from his mouth, my ears were drowning from the sound of waves flushing out the filth and swelling my brain like a balloon.

I felt the color drain from my face. I didn’t know if I should feel relief or regret. My insides felt fluttered and moth eaten.

“W-what?” I couldn’t get the words to come out “What...what happened?”

“Apparently the big heads didn’t think he was doing nearly enough for the amount he was getting paid, and he gave them some threat about suing, but they called his bluff and just opened the door and pretty much told him ‘don’t let it hit ya’ kind of thing.” *So he’s just gone? Just like that? He just gets away with what happened to me and who knows how many other girls?* “Can you believe it?”

“No.” I was in shock. The curly haired beady eyed demon who had been haunting my body was gone. Just like that.

“Ugh... I’m gunna miss him, aren’t you?”

“No.”

The Passenger

Iggy Pop's *The Passenger* blasts through the speakers and almost startles me. I guess that means we're officially open for the night. This also means that any minute my bosses will start in a panic over my whereabouts so I should probably put a little more hustle in my bustle. I finish cutting and dividing the not-so-blurred lines on the compact mirror that rests steadily on my lap. I take a second to look around the artsy bathroom with framed pictures of rock stars and models, paint splattered graffiti and one picture with a bottle of someone sipping a handle of Jack Daniels that says "No good story ever started with 'so I was eating a salad...'" and I don't feel so bad about what I'm doing. It reminds that being young is all about taking unnecessary risks –like blowing a few lines of brain sugar before your shift starts at work. And I know that from this information alone your judgment of who I am as a person is starting, and I just want to let *you know* that I am perfectly okay with that. I'm used to it. And you know what else? This is just the beginning. And I'm okay. I'm used to it.

So anyway, tonight we're hosting some lavish, stylish, over-the-top, has-been-done-a million times, party in the lounge of the restaurant. Luckily, my little sister is coming to visit me so I'll get to cut out a little early, but I'll still need all the energy I can get. Normally my weekends are spent in bed, nursing the hangover from the night before. But this weekend is going to be filled with activities including: the beach, shopping, lunch, more shopping, museums and the worst of it all.... a One Direction Concert.

A One Direction concert.

At 9am.

All the way in Central Park.

Yes... we will be having what I like to call a “tourist weekend.”

But for her, I’ll make the exception. Always.

I hear a pounding on the door from outside accompanied by Roman’s very deep, and operatic English accent. I laugh at whatever he’s saying because it’s *that* impossible to take him seriously as a person, let alone as my boss. He’s this pushing fifty-year old who can’t seem to let go of his rock star, party boy image from the eighties. He thinks he knows how to manage a business when in reality all he does is micro-manage and get on everyone’s nerves. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a fun guy to be around and obviously has the money to show for his successes but, how can you take a man [my boss] seriously when all he does is sneak off to the office to take naps and hide from his wife? Every night he brings in different girls to show off the fruits of his “labor” and every night each one falls all over him. And you know it’s only because of his charming accent and even more charming bank account. He has a pudgy face with this blonde curly hair that he tries to slick down, but by the end of most nights it’s all over the place and everyone always makes fun of him for it –I mean, they call him Curly freaking Sue. And his dress style...well like I said, he’s someone who’s stuck in his past with his combat boots, much-too-skinny black jeans with a tee shirt that shows off the tire around his waist and a red and black flannel tied around it. I also know for a fact that he takes *enhancements* –if you know what I mean. But hey, the way I see it, no one can have it all. Everyone is lacking something. If they weren’t, they’d be God.

“Let’s go Ricki, shift started five minutes ago!”

“Alright, alright I’m just powdering my nose!”

“Your nose is fine, let’s go, there are people already waiting at the door!”

I roll my eyes and take one look in the low-lit mirror to make sure there’s no lingering residue and smile at myself. I always look best in the dim lights of the bathroom. The shadows cast from the lighting accents my little black dress as to manipulate and enhance the right curves of my body –or shall I say, lack of. Pleased with the way my hair has fallen into place at my shoulders like black tangled mermaid waves with electric blue highlights, I throw on a coat of cherry red lipstick, wink at my fine self, blow a kiss in the mirror and head out onto the floor.

Showtime.

The lights are already dimmed with an individual tea light in water on each of the small black tables that line against the black leather couches. I use the walkway down the center of the lounge as my runway. I’m feeling rowdy and I need everyone to know that I’m making my appearance. Almost without thinking, the red pumps I wear are stomping down the wooden aisle and I can feel the eyes turned to me. My runway. I am a rock star. The lounge is quaint, so from the moment I step out I can see that there’s a whopping amount of two people waiting rather patiently at the hostess desk. *Roman is so freaking dramatic.*

The night goes smoothly. I greet people, take them to their table. Ask them for a glass of water as they wait for their guests. Answer the phone. Answer questions about the menu. Take down reservations. Mark no shows and cancellations. Greet more people and so the cycle continues.

During my little downtime, I watch the lounge slowly fill with similar faces and couture. The women with red bottom’s and Birkin bags and men custom made suits and slicked back hair. They’re all the same. They sit in their corner tables with entitlement and dead eyes. I shake my

head to myself not in envy –but wonder. What it must be like to have the world as your oyster, just because you were blessed enough to be born into riches and marry right back into them...what it must fucking be like. But I wouldn't want it. I've seen enough, and gotten to know enough of them to know that I would never fit into a world like that. A world where composure and status are everything and heaven forbid you make a fool of yourself and end up on page six with a picture of your hand trying to mask your face.

I come from a humble home and if my parents ever taught me anything, it was not to “worry” about what other people were doing or thinking of me.

Yeah... I could never do it.

Everyone at the restaurant knows my baby sister is coming to visit because I wouldn't shut up about it for the entire two weeks prior. Now that the day is finally here, I feel like a child waiting for Santa to come and everyone can see it in my eyes. Or maybe they just see the effects of the sugar –either way, I'm more eager than ever for her to get here.

“What time is your sister coming, Ricki?” Jamie, one of the cooks I'm closer with asks me.

Jamie is like a friendly brother-uncle type figure whom I've always enjoyed being around. He's one of those happy-go-lucky type of guys who I can always turn to if I need cheering up or some kind of generic advice that just seems to sound better coming from him. At a height of only 5'8” his personality beams of someone at 6'2” and I could say the same for his looks. While his hair only grows around the side of his head with patches of wispy hair at the top and a slightly long

crooked nose, his smile is like a ray of sunshine. As cliché as it sounds, it's really the only way I can describe it. Whenever he walks into a room with that big smile of his, I can't help but smile back. Once, when I was coming down from a two-day binge and was ready to tear someone's head off, Jamie suddenly came bursting through the door with his giant smile and open arms ready to embrace me in a bear hug and exclaimed "Heeeeey Ricki, what's the good word?!" and suddenly it was like everything awful and ugly that I was feeling, was promptly lifted away from my spirit and it felt like a new day. I like to call that "The Jamie Effect".

"She should be here around 8:30 or 9."

"What? Why so late?"

"Well, my roommates are getting her from the bus at Port Authority around 6:40 so by the time they get back to the apartment it'll probably be 7:30, and then she'll need time to settle and get ready for dinner and well, by the time they walk down here it'll probably be around 8:30/8:45ish." I rush through the sentence as though I'm swimming to the surface from 11 feet deep and I'm running out of air.

"Oh okay... and Denise is coming in to cover you after that?"

Damnit that reminds me! "Well, she was supposed to already be here by now so I could set her up, but she hasn't answered any of my texts yet!" the paranoia beginning to settle in.

"Well if you need someone to cover the front for you I can stay up here while you eat dinner with your sister."

"That's really sweet of you to offer Jamie but, you're in the kitchen, I'm pretty sure you can't just suddenly be the Maître'D."

“I know... but I just don't want your plans to get screwed up with your sister.”

“No, no it's fine” but it's really not “I'm sure I'll figure something out.”

“Alright, well you know where I am if you need me.”

“Thanks Jamie” As he headed back towards the kitchen I ripped my phone and began to text Denise like my fingers were on fire.

Message one: DENISE!!!!.... WHAT THE HELL!!! YOU SAID YOU'D COVER ME TONIGHT!

Message two: WHERE ARE YOU??!! MY SISTER WILL BE HERE IN AN HOUR AND YOU'RE SERIOUSLY FUCKING EVERYTHING UP.

Message three: CAN YOU AT LEAST ANSWER ONE OF MY DAMN MESSAGES?!

Message four: JESUS CHRIST DENISE. YOU CAN AT LEAST HAVE THE DECENCY TO LET ME KNOW YOU'RE NOT EVEN COMING.

Final Message: YOU'RE A REAL BITCH AND I HOPE YOU KNOW THAT.

I can feel my heart beating in my fingertips and my chest is so tight I'm not quite sure if I'm breathing properly. I call one of the cocktail servers over while I make a run to the bathroom.

“Thanks, Mary... I'll be really quick. My bladder is just killing me. I'll be back in two minutes.”

I know how quickly things happen at the door, so I just take two bumps off my pinky nail –check myself in the mirror- and head right back out. Better.

Back at the hostess stand I'm all smiles and thank yous as each guest comes and goes. I check my phone and decide to just give up on the hope the Denise is coming. It's a quarter past eight and I need to have a plan because I'll be damned if my sister's visit starts off on a bad note. I take a look at how many reservations we have left, and what tables are available. It doesn't look

too bad. There are only ten reservations left to seat, three of which are already here and waiting to go upstairs for dinner. I map out which tables they'll be going to and remind them that the table is ready for them as soon as they're ready (people like to linger in the lounge, but what they don't know is that even though they were on time for the reservation, they're technically still not seated, which holds the table back from turning on time for the next group of people to sit there [should we need it], and this can be really frustrating). I then run upstairs to the main dining room and let the bussers and servers know which tables I need and which tables need to be set for our larger parties coming in. They act like they're busy running food and helping guests, but I know they're not doing shit except making trying to look busy. As I talk to them I can't help but notice the intoxicating smell of our Cote' d Bouef and truffle fries, and it takes everything in me not to steal a French fry off a guests plate.

I remember that I can't remember the last time I really ate something.

I ignore the plate of Chicken Rollatini being placed in front of the toothpick blonde across from where I'm standing and try to speak as slowly as possible to the few bussers who can only speak a little English. They nod and say they're listening but I know I'll have to come back in ten minutes to tell them again, because God-forbid they ever take a second to stop staring like they can see through my dress and listen to what I'm telling them.

Khalil, the GM (general manager) comes over to the desk, when he sees I've returned and makes sure everything is under control. Secondly, he asks me the last thing I want to be asked "So when is Denise coming?" I give him a wicked look, which I instantly regret and I hope he knows it wasn't meant for him...not exactly. I respond with a dry tongue: "She's not." He nods and takes in the information. My anxiety takes over and the need to control everything kicks in. I assure him that I'll have everything under control by the time my sister gets here "...But I already have

all the tables mapped out and I'm about to take these parties upstairs, so *really* we only have seven more reservations to go, and this party is actually already a half hour late, so I'll just no-show them..." I tap the screen and make their name disappear from the reservation list on the screen. It feels awesome. "...the party of ten is going to go on the long table by the window and after that we only have two-tops left, so those other tables should be turned and ready to go by then." I need to remember to breathe.

He nods once more and "Okay" is all he says.

I feel better knowing he approves the way I have everything running and check the time again. It's almost 8:30 and I don't know if it's excitement or anxiety I'm feeling. So this time I make a run upstairs to kill two birds with one stone. The upstairs dining room bathroom is located at the back of the room, so while I head for the bathroom to do one more bump before she gets here I can check on tables and make sure everything is set and ready to go for the next round of seating. In the bathroom I notice this will be my last bump and rub the residue from the baggie on my gums. Tingly.

I take a few moments to whip out my phone and text Daniel (my dealer who just so happens to be a server here) that I'll need another two grams. Daniel's in love with me. And I can't help but find it adorable because, he knows he doesn't stand a chance, but he still *really* tries sometimes. I use this to my advantage.

"Hey lover, please tell me you have something on you tonight."

Quick with his response "For you? Always."

"Awesome! How much for two g's?"

“I got some really good stuff in yesterday. So, let’s say a clean \$200?”

“Sick. Okay I’ll leave the money in your tip tonight.”

“Whatever you wanna do beautiful.”

I don’t really have the money to support my habit so I make sacrifices in my spending, one of which is food. But tonight, when Annabelle comes, she’ll be coming with extra money from our mom. And that’s all I have to say about that.

Continuing my journey back to the front desk, I use the back steps which lead into the kitchen and back downstairs. I always use this way so while I walk through the kitchen I can sneak a piece of bread to nibble on. The dish washers and line cooks can hear my heels a mile away from the way they clap against the concrete steps, and I can already hear them cat-calling me. It’s cheesy and disgusting. But I love it. It makes me smile and giggle every damn time. Before I go back out onto the floor I stop by the pita pan and take a few of the burnt pieces to nibble on. I look over the plate bar to see what the line cooks have going on and I all see are flabs of meat being tossed in a pan. I look to see what the Chef is doing but when my eyes catch her, she looks pissed and she’s really giving it to the pastry Chef. I’m finally making my way to the door when Jamie stops me.

“Is she here yet?!” he probably looks more excited than I do.

“No, not yet, but she should be here soon.” I’m trying to rush out. The cooks are starting with me.

“Awh man, I’m so excited to meet her! Can I pinch her little cheeks?” I roll my eyes.

“Well... she might think that’s a little weird Jamie.”

“Wait... how old is she?” I can barely pay attention to him with the other cooks shouting derogatory things in Spanish in the background

“She’s sixteen!”

“Oh my goodness! When you said baby sister I was imagining a child!”

I laughed at the realization of how much younger I make my sister sound when I talk about her. The truth is, despite her being the age when girls are usually at their worst, she prevails and proves to be an angel. Nothing like me at that age, that’s for sure. I was sneaking out of the house, trying to get into bars and hanging out with the guys on my brothers wrestling team.. But Annabelle, at the tender age of sixteen the only extra-circulars she’s apart of are the ones a mother puts on a bumper sticker. Our little Annabelle takes part in the honor’s society, chorus, soccer in the fall, school play in winter and track in spring. And as far as her innocence goes, let’s just say that the last time I was home I was teasing her about boys and asked her if she’s frenched anyone yet, she covered her porcelain face as it began to blush and didn’t say a word as she shook her head no and giggled. She’s perfect.

“Yeah, that’s the way I see her I guess...but nope, she’s quite the little lady.”

“Does she look like you?”

I take an honest moment to think about how to answer this. Well, let’s put it this way...my mom and sister ran into my old boss from college a few weeks ago. My boss texts me and goes “Your sister is your clone.” And I responded with “Oh wow, thank you!”. Do you understand what I’m saying? Because I really don’t want to have to spell it out.

While we share the same high cheek bones and dimpled chin, her smile is like cotton candy while mine is more like cinnamon. Her eyes are a brilliant mixture of green and light brown while mine reflect nothing but what was once so eloquently described by my high-school crush as “poo-poo eyes”.

“Sort of, but a better looking version.”

“Don’t say that about yourself! You’re beautiful.”

“I know I know...but she’s just better. You’ll understand it when you see her. It’s her personality really, she just radiates this harmonious energy and... you’ll get it when you see her. She’s just better than me. Honestly.”

“Ricki, Stop! You’re a wonderful person and I really don’t like hearing you talk about yourself so negatively.”

“I’m not being negative Jamie. I just... I love her so much that I want her to be better than me.”
And when I said it, I originally meant it just to get him off my back. But then I realized how overwhelmingly true this statement is. I feel my heart beating in my throat.

“That’s beautiful, Ricki. I can’t wait to meet her.”

Walking back out onto the main floor and towards the front desk I think I see my roommate through the now larger crowd of the lounge. As I shimmy and shake my way through the seats, tables and moving bodies I get a good look at the little model that is standing between my roommates. *She’s here!!!!*

I try my hardest to walk subtly to the door, but I can't help the extra skip in my step. I fly past Amanda and Victoria and fly over to Annabelle and swing my entire body around hers. And she returns the gesture with a tight squeeze around my torso.

“My belleeeeeeeeeee!” I sing into her hear “I'm so happy you're finally here!”

I pull away and look her up and down in admiration, for sixteen this girl sure does know how to keep it classy. She's wearing a sheer buttoned down turquoise top with a white camisole underneath with dark blue skinnies that are rolled up twice at her ankles which show off the ankle strap on her white and black patent leather Mary Jane's. I can tell she's been using sun-in because her once chocolate brown hair is now a dirty, summery blonde. And although, it does go perfectly with her sun-kissed cheeks, I can't help but make one of those annoying big sister I-know-better-than-you comments.

“You gotta stop putting that crap in your hair, or by the time your twenty your hair will be straw and disgusting.” She rolls her eyes “I mean, don't you want your hair to be soft and luxurious like mine?” I whip it around like I'm in a Pantene commercial and she laughs.

“I know, I know. Mom said the same thing. I'm gunna stop for now but then do it the week before school starts so my hair will look this way for picture day.”

I sigh “Fine.”

We make small talk with my roommates about how her trip was getting over here and I take them into the lounge to wait for me while I finish up with the last few tables. My roommates take a seat at the bar and I introduce them to the bartender, Natasha, my Russian “big sister” at the restaurant. She asks me if I want to serve Annabelle a little cocktail, I laugh already knowing what the outcome will be and turn to Annabelle.

“Do you want a cocktail? She won’t make it strong.”

“No Ricki! I’m too young to drink! Sheesh!”

“I know, but mom’s not here, and I say it’s okay” I nudge her in the side. She gives a sheepish smile and politely declines. “Alright, alright, if you say soooo!” I wink at her. “Okay, I just have to sit four more tables then we’ll go up for dinner, okay?”

“Okay.”

Turning away from the bar I turn my attention back to the guests and begin to take people upstairs, wishing I could strap them onto a jet-pack so they could move faster.

Fifteen minutes later I look back at the bar and notice my sister facing away from my roommates who are completely engaged in their complimentary cocktails and watching me. I make a face at her and she sticks her tongue out. I know she’s trying to put a good face on as she patiently waits for me. I motion for her to come over to me and she happily hops off the bar stool and makes her way over to the cushioned bench next to the desk. It’s so nice to have her here.

Jamie comes out from the kitchen and we exchanged excited glances as he makes his way over to us, and I introduce them.

“Oh Annabelle!” He hugs her. “So nice to finally meet you! You’re sister does nothing but brag about you!” I give him these big shut-your-mouth eyes and tell her “He’s obviously lying Annabelle, so don’t get excited.” But the smile on her face tells me she’s already taken this information to the moon and back. She knows that she’s my best friend and I love her more than anything, but as children we’ve always had this long going joke where I deny my relationship to her as my sister but rather some mutant child my parents found on the street and brought home to

be my pet. And never takes it for granted whenever this aspect of our relationship breaks character.

After what feels like an eternity, my work for this shift is about all caught up with the exception of one table which my boss will take care of and I finally take my sister and roommates upstairs for dinner. We sit in one of the V.I.P. booths and it immediately feels odd to have my peers waiting on us. Working here for over a year, this is my first time I actually get to reap the benefits of working in a five-star, restaurant. Daniel, another veteran here, and also one of my dealers, will be our server this evening.

When he approaches the table I can tell he's nervous. I introduce to him to Anabelle and try to make a joke but it doesn't go so smooth and I can tell I've made him feel more awkward. When I look at him, I feel bad. He's the nicest guy in the world, but he's been dealt a few unfortunate hands and the first was the combination of not-so-great-skin, lack of height the stereo-typical Latino super-gelled and slicked back hair. Disgusting. But he supplies me with what I need. So will never know that he seriously doesn't stand a chance.

I'm vain and I'm superficial.

I know.

He leaves the table and I guess I wasn't the only one who was paying attention to detail. The cocktails are obviously hitting my roommate Amanda because after he walks away to put our order in she says the dumbest thing [she could have said in that moment]

“Oh Rick, isn’t he the one who deals you-“ I stop her with a quick motion to my mouth to zip her freaking lips and a look in my eyes that tells her I will end her life from across the table if she slips again. Victoria quickly changes the subject but this hasn’t gone over Annabelle’s head. She looks at me questioningly and I just shrug my shoulders and tell her not to worry about it. *She’s not an idiot Rick.*

Other than that, dinner goes great. Everyone comes over to say hello and I introduce my sweet Annabelle to them. Even Roman stumbles over and says hello, his retired rocker look even makes Annabelle question his authority and say “*That’s the owner?*” I laugh and tell her yes, unfortunately *that* is the man who signs my paychecks.

A few cocktails, a meal and two desserts later, we leave our generous tip and make our separate ways home. Amanda was leaving to visit her boyfriend for the weekend and Victoria decided to do the same so my sister and I could have the tiny apartment to ourselves. I appreciate this.

While Annabelle and I stand out on the sidewalk in front of the restaurant waiting to hail a cab, I hear Daniel’s voice from behind me and I turn to see him coming out of the restaurant. *He’s the best.* He approaches me and as he’s thanking me for the generous tip he swiftly hands me a little baggy and winks. I hold his hand in place and raise my eyebrows, I feel an extra treat.

“Seriously?”

“Only for you, love” I laugh like I’m flattered and quickly motion my hand into my purse and drop the baggies.

“Awesome.” I give him a hug and kiss on the cheek and he smiles at Annabelle and heads back in.

I'm suddenly terrified to look back at her, and sure enough she's looking at me with those big hopeful eyes and all I can do is sheepishly smile back and pray she hasn't caught on. She looks at my purse, then back at me and nods her head. I don't know what thinks just happened or what she's thinking of me, and my heart goes into panic mode. I need another bump.

I fight the hunger until we get home and run up the five stories it takes to get to my place, nearly rip off the lock and run to the bathroom with the excuse that my bladder is ready to burst. Instead of a bump, I decide to make it two lines –it's good stuff after all, I can't just *not* try it with enthusiasm. And it's *really* good. What was once exhaustion that had me crawling through the night, is now terminated by the feeling of an inexhaustible fire. I am a rock star.

The come down is always the worst.

But I can't let her know.

She probably already knows, even if she doesn't.

Tired because it's 5am and I want to die.

But more importantly, I'm exhausted from a night spent trying to keep her awake with dancing, silly games and a Glee marathon. I can only fork through my oatmeal at breakfast while we sit in minimal conversation that could be mistaken for silence. I opt to take a shower and show her how to work the cable so she can watch movie on paper-view.

I just need some time alone.

I need to tell myself it'll all be okay.

I need another bump.

I don't want it.

But I need it.

Holy hell do I need it.

As she makes herself comfortable on my bed and begins to search through the channels, inconspicuously (I hope) I grab my baggie that I stuck in my underwear drawer while pretending to search for clean pair, and wrap the black and white striped pair I chose around it so it just looks like I'm holding onto them tightly. I look back at her to make sure she's not seeing any of this, grab the bright orange towel hanging from my door knob and tell her *I'll try not to be long*.

“Okay” she says back with a sweet smile and a nurturing voice, as if reassuring me that she'll still be here when I'm out.

“Okay” I say back as I leave the room and take the ten steps it takes to walk to the bathroom and shut the door behind me.

Immediately, I scoop my pinky into the baggie and take a bump.

Finally.

I place the baggie next to the faucet and begin to undress.

Our bathroom is tiny. Tiny enough where I can sit on the toilet, that resembles a public toilet with no cover and its heavy duty flusher, wash my hands in the sink and rinse my feet in the tub

all at the same time. So my movements are concise, or else I risk the danger of banging my foot into the bath tub or banging my head on the sink, should I decide to bend over.

I undress facing the mirror above the sink and hang my clothes piece by piece on the silver rack behind me; meant for hanging a hand towel, but since we live like animals, we just wipe our hands on our clothes when done in the bathroom –if we even wash our hands that is.

First my shirt, slipped over my head the way a jock pulls his shirt off after a relentless game of taking hits over and over and over again. Then my shorts, pulled down to my thighs and then free fall to the floor. I kick them up with my foot, catch them and hang them. No bra because –who in their right mind sleeps with a bra on? And no panties because I haven't done laundry in over a month.

All that's left is the haunting image in front of me: A milky white shadow and a bony reflection with hollow eyes and a devil red nose. My hair falls around my face, only emphasizing the ghastly appeal of my face without make-up. It's becoming too much to bear. Without a seconds thought, I reach again for my power-powder. And before I know what's happening, I knock the fucking baggie and its entire contents into the toilet.

Damnit.

Gone.

Happiness -wasted.

\$200, literally, in the toilet.

2 grams of who I am. Lost.

And I fall to my knees and burrow my face in my hands. And I am lost.

I can't let her hear me. I turn on the shower, hoping it's loud enough to drown out my cries.

It's not.

There's a light knocking on the door.

I can't answer.

"Ricki?...are you okay?"

I can't.

"Ricki?" I hear the knob turning and push the door back so she can't come in.

Between breathes "I...I'm naked Annabelle."

"That's never stopped you from anything before." Making a joke, referring to the many times I've flashed and mooned her just to piss her off. But I can't see the laughter right now. I can't see anything right now. I can't see anything except the money I didn't have, now wasted in the toilet. The money I was supposed to use to spend on our activities while she's here. Money that would have even sustained for after she left and that I could have used on groceries. Money so I could finally do laundry and have clean underwear. Money that was supposed to be spent on anything but my own vices.

"I SAID I'M FINE!" I don't want to take it out on her.

"Oh...okay...I just thought I heard you crying." I hear the concern in her voice.

Crying more. "I'm fine" remembering to breathe "I just stubbed my toe...stupid bathroom"

"Do you need a band-aid or something?" unconvinced.

“No...I’m fine Annabelle.” breathing “Everything I need is in here, I’ll be out in a little. Okay?”
relaxing.

“Okay”

I put myself together as much as I think I can and step into the already steamed shower. The hot water is comforting to my cold shoulders and I let it run down my back as I rest my forehead against the wall. I could pass out.

My body is already giving into the defeat of the come down. Negative thoughts start to rush through my brain like race cars in the Indie 500, speeding round and round and round till I’m so dizzy that I let myself slide down into the tub so that my knees are bundled into my chest and I can wrap my arms around my legs.

This is horrible.

This isn’t living.

This isn’t worth it.

Sometimes I just get lost and wonder where and what I’m wandering to. I tell people things that makes it sound like I know where I’m heading, I know what I’m doing. And they say “That girl’s got a strong head on her shoulders”. Especially Annabelle, I’m her big hero - hah!- when really, she’s mine. I wonder if I’m alone in feeling this way, or if it’s something we all go through, and if it is, I hope to the God that exists, that she doesn’t go through it the way I have. I look at her and I see this great person who is the epitome of everything I’ve ever wanted to be.

I get out of the shower an hour later and wipe the fog off the mirror to get another look at myself. The heat from the steam has put some color in my cheeks, but it doesn’t hide the tired circles

under my eyes. In spite I flip my hair back and forth and let the excess water smack the mirror so any reflecting image will be blurred while I'm in there.

When I finish drying myself off, I make my way out and the cold air from the rest of the apartment hits me and my skin immediately rises into chicken skin. I always hate the walk from the bathroom to my room after a shower because the dirt from the floor clings to the bottom of my feet and reminds me that I live in a pig pen.

I hear the faucet running in the kitchen and see Annabelle standing over the sink with my purple rubber gloves on. The kitchen is the only room with a window, so there's no need for the florescent hospital ceiling light until after five. She doesn't notice me standing in the doorway, and she's singing to herself.

"Whatcha doin there little one?" I approach her, and she's startled. She jumps, and then laughs.

"Just washing the dishes." The sunlight is hitting her hair, and her highlights look even more prominent. Her eyes, brighter.

"Belle! You don't have to do that, I was going to do them, you're my guest!" I try turning the water off.

"No offense Rick, but uh... it did not look like you were going to wash these anytime soon." She gestures towards the pile of dishes she's already washed, that had been sitting there days before her arrival. I'm embarrassed.

"Well... I was gunna do it today. After my shower."

"Sure, sure." She looks at me, and I can tell she didn't mean to offend me. I knew she didn't, but she thinks she did. "There were no good movies on anyway, and I don't mind washing the

dishes, it's just like at home!" she makes a mocking gesture like washing dishes is the only thing she loves doing, and continues with her regular chore.

"Well, thank you." I put my arms around her, and get so comfortable that I just stay. She turns the water off, turns around and hugs me back. I can feel my tear ducts burning, her warmth is overwhelming and I am paralyzed by it.

"Are you sure you're okay Ricki?" Her words sound clear and nurturing.

"Yeah, yes...I'm just tired." My words are muffled in the fabric of her tee shirt.

"We don't have to go the concert today."

I realize I need to be the grown up, not her. I step back and the stains from tears have turned the bright blue hue of her shirt to a darker shade.

I wipe my face "No, no, we're going to that concert missy!" turning my frown upside down "I mean, I had a whole entire day planned for us that included shopping and lunch after and maybe even the beach! Buuuuuuut if you want to just stay home and watch movies all day I *supposeee* we can do that instead." Rolling my eyes I look back at her and she's already attacking me and putting her hand over my mouth.

"No no no! I'm sorry, I didn't mean it that way! Let's do all those things!"

"That's what I thought!" she's ecstatic "Alright, so let's get dressed and then we're outta here little momma!"

"Okay!" she runs to my room and it takes seconds for her to change from her pj's to shorts and the One Direction t-shirt she's made for the concert. And lucky for me, she's made a matching one for yours truly. Glitter, stars, hearts and all.

We're halfway down the steps of the building when I realize I forgot the tickets. I tell her to wait for me downstairs while I run back up.

Nearly out of breath I bust the door open after unlocking the several safety locks and run into my room where I see the tickets sitting on my dresser. Blindly, I feel through my bag to one last search to make sure I have everything I need before I leave, when the familiar feeling of a plastic pouch skims the tips of my fingers and my heart skips a beat. *Could it be?* I decide to go full throttle and practically tear my purse in two so I can see what it is I'm really looking for. And there it is, wedged in the clamp of my eye-glass case, the extra baggie Daniel gave me the other night. I totally forgot that they were separate. Excitement runs through me like an explosion. I remember Annabelle waiting downstairs. I look at the bag and impulse takes over. *After this bag, I'm done.*