

8 DAYS TILL GRADUATION

I open my eyes and I am tangled in the sheets, books upside down on the floor. I know without looking at the time that I'm late. I leap out of bed, one foot still wrapped in the sheet, and land flat on my face. I lie there a minute. Close my eyes. Wonder if I can pretend I've fainted and convince Mom to let me blow off today and stay home.

It's peaceful on the floor.

But it also smells a bit. I open an eye and there's something ground into the rug. One of Dandelion's cat treats, maybe. I turn my head to the other side and it's better over here, but then from outside I hear a horn blast, and this is my dad.

So now I'm up and on my feet because he will just keep honking and honking the stupid horn until I'm in the car. I can't find one of my books and one of my shoes, and my hair is wrong and my outfit is wrong, and basically *I* am wrong in my own skin. I should have been born French. If I were French, everything would be right. I would be chic and cool and ride a bike to school, one with a basket. I would be able to ride a bike in the first place. If I were living in Paris instead of Mary Grove, Ohio, these flats would look better with this skirt, my hair would be less orange red—the color of an heirloom tomato—and I would somehow make more sense.

I scramble into my parents' room dressed in my skirt and bikini

top, the black one I bought with Saz last month, the one I plan to live in this summer. All my bras are in the wash. My mom's closet is neat and tidy, but lacking the order of my dad's, which is all black, gray, navy, everything organized by color because he's colorblind and this way he doesn't have to ask all the time, "Is this green or brown?" I rummage through the shelf above and then his dresser drawers, searching for the shirt I want: vintage 1993 Nirvana. I am always stealing this shirt and he is always stealing it back, but now it's nowhere.

I stand in the doorway and shout down the hall, toward the stairs, toward my mom. "Where's Dad's Nirvana shirt?" I've decided that this and only this is the thing I want to wear today.

I wait two, three, four, five seconds, and my only answer is another blast of the horn. I run to my room and grab the first shirt I see and throw it on, even though I haven't worn it to school since freshman year. Miss Piggy with sparkles.

At the front door, my mom says, "I'll come get you if Saz can't bring you home." My mom is a busy, well-known writer—historical novels, nonfiction, anything to do with history—but she always has time for me. When we moved into this house, we turned the guest room into her office and my dad spent two days building floor-to-ceiling bookcases to hold her hundreds of research books.

Something must show on my face because she rests her hands on my shoulders and goes, "Hey. It's going to be okay." And she means my best friend, Suzanne Bakshi (better known as Saz), and me, that we'll always be friends in spite of graduation and college and all the life to come. I feel some of her calm, bright energy settling itself, like a bird in a tree, onto my shoulders, melting down

my arms, into my limbs, into my blood. This is one of the many things my mom does best. She makes everyone feel better.

In the car, my dad is wearing his Radiohead T-shirt under a suit jacket, which means the Nirvana shirt is in the wash. I make a mental note to snag it when I get home so I can wear it to the party tonight.

For the first three or four minutes, we don't talk, but this is also normal. Unlike my mom, my dad and I are not morning people, and on the drive to school we like to maintain what he calls "companionable silence," something Saz refuses to respect, which is why I don't ride with her.

I stare out the window at the low black clouds that are gathering like mourners in the direction of the college, where my dad works as an administrator. It's not supposed to rain, but it looks like rain, and it makes me worry for Trent Dugan's party. My weekends are usually spent with Saz, driving around town, searching for something to do, but this one is going to be different. Last official party of senior year and all.

My dad sails past the high school, over Main Street Bridge, into downtown Mary Grove, which is approximately ten blocks of stores lining the brick-paved streets, better known as the Promenade. He roars to a stop at the westernmost corner, where the street gives way to cobbled brick and fountains. He gets out and jogs into the Joy Ann Cake Shop while I text Saz a photo of the sign over the door. *Who's your favorite person?*

In a second she replies: *You are.*

Two minutes later my dad is jogging back to the car, arms raised overhead in some sort of ridiculous victory dance, white paper bag in one hand. He gets in, slams the door, and tosses me the bag filled with our usual—one chocolate cupcake for Saz and a pound of thumbprint cookies for Dad and me, which we devour

on the way to the high school. Our secret morning ritual since I was twelve.

As I eat, I stare at the cloudy, cloudy sky. “It might rain.”

My dad says, “It won’t rain,” like he once said, “He won’t hit you,” about Damian Green, who threatened to punch me in the mouth in third grade because I wouldn’t let him cheat off me. *He won’t hit you*, which implied that if necessary my dad would come over to the school and punch Damian himself, because no one was going to mess with his daughter, not even an eight-year-old boy.

“It might,” I say, just so I can hear it again, the protectiveness in his voice. It’s a protectiveness that reminds me of being five, six, seven, back when I rode everywhere on his shoulders.

He says, “It won’t.”

In first-period creative writing, my teacher, Mr. Russo, keeps me after class to say, “If you really want to write, and I believe you do, you’re going to have to put it all out there so that we can feel what you feel. You always seem to be holding back, Claudine.”

He says some good things too, but this will be what I remember—that he doesn’t think I can feel. It’s funny how the bad things stay with you and the good things sometimes get lost. I leave his classroom and tell myself he doesn’t begin to know me or what I can do. He doesn’t know that I’m already working on my first novel and that I’m going to be a famous writer one day, that my mom has let me help her with research projects since I was ten, the same year I started writing stories. He doesn’t know that I actually do put myself out there.

On my way to third period, Shane Waller, the boy I’ve been seeing for almost two months, corners me at my locker and says, “Should I pick you up for Trent’s party?”

Shane smells good and can be funny when he puts his mind to it, which—along with my raging hormones—are the main reasons I’m with him. I say, “I’m going with Saz. But I’ll see you there.” Which is fine with Shane, because ever since I was fifteen, my dad has notoriously made all my dates wait outside, even in the dead of Ohio winter. This is because he was once a teenage boy and knows what they’re thinking. And because he likes to make sure *they* know *he* knows exactly what they’re thinking.

Shane says, “See you there, babe.” And then, to prove to myself and Mr. Russo and everyone else at Mary Grove High that I am an actual living, feeling person, I do something I never do—I kiss him, right there in the school hallway.

When we break apart, he leans in and I feel his breath in my ear. “I can’t wait.” And I know he thinks—hopes—we’re going to have sex. The same way he’s been hoping for the past two months that I’ll finally decide my days of being a virgin are over and “give it up to him.” (His words, not mine. As if somehow my virginity belongs to him.)

I say this to Saz at lunch, and she laughs this booming, maniacal laugh, head thrown back, dark hair swinging, and raises her water bottle in a mock toast. “Good luck to you, Shane!” Because we both know there’s only one boy in Mary Grove, Ohio, I want my first time to be with, and it isn’t Shane Waller. Even though I tell myself maybe one day he’ll say something so exceptionally funny and I’ll get so lost in the smell of his neck that I’ll change my mind and sleep with him after all. Just because I don’t think Shane’s the one doesn’t mean I don’t *want* him to be.

I say a version of this out loud. “You never know. He can be really funny.”

Saz says, “He can be kind of funny.” She gathers her hair—heavy and straight and the bane of her existence—up on her head

and holds it there. She is always cutting it off and growing it back, cutting it off and growing it back.

“Would it be so bad for Shane to be my first?”

Our friend Alannis Vega-Torres drops into the seat next to me. “Yes.” She digs a soda and protein bar out of her bag and tosses Saz a couple of hair ties. “By the way, it doesn’t count as losing your virginity if your hymen doesn’t break. I bled buckets my first time.”

“That’s not true,” I say. “Hymens don’t actually break. That’s a big, fat, ignorant myth. Not everyone bleeds, and besides, not everyone has a hymen. Don’t be so heteronormative. Virginity is a bullshit social construct created by the patriarchy.” Saz holds up her hand and I high-five her. As much as I completely, one hundred percent believe this, I’m still desperate to have sex. Like, *right now*.

Our other friend, Mara Choi, throws herself down across from Alannis, cardigan buttoned up wrong, tampons and lip gloss spilling out of her backpack because—except when she’s in the presence of her traditional Korean grandmother—she lives in a constant state of chaos. She disappears under the table, gathering the things that fell. She says from under it, “Fun fact: Did you know you can order hymens on the internet? There’s this place called the Hymen Shop that claims they can restore your virginity in five minutes.” She pops back up, picks up her phone, and immediately starts googling.

“The hell?” Saz rolls her eyes at me like, *These two*.

I look at her like, *I know*, as Mara starts reading from the Hymen Shop website. “Says here they use medical-grade red dye that looks just like human blood. Oh, and they are the ‘original and most trusted brand of artificial hymens.’”

Saz says, “What a thing to be known for.”

Alannis says, “That’s nothing. I read somewhere that girls in China pay seven hundred dollars to have their hymens surgically rebuilt.”

I stop eating because, sex-obsessed as I am, the idea that you could place a price on virginity is, to put it mildly, insane. I say, “This whole concept is so antiquated. As if all that matters is penis-plus-vagina sex. Something like twenty percent of Americans identify as something *other* than completely straight, so why are we still so focused on a *woman’s* first time with a *man*? And why is a girl’s virginity such a big deal anyway? People don’t get excited about a straight guy having sex. It’s all high fives and ‘Now you’re a man.’ They don’t sit around wringing their hands and searching the internet for replacement parts.”

Saz snorts. I’m on a roll.

“And another thing. Have you ever thought about the way people talk about virginity? As if it’s owned by *other* people? Someone ‘takes it,’ and suddenly it becomes theirs. Like it’s something we give away, something that doesn’t belong to us. She *lost* it. She *gave it up*. *Popping her cherry*. *Taking her virginity*. *Deflowering—*”

“*Deflowering?*” Mara stares at me over her phone. “Who says *deflowering?*”

“Virgins.” Alannis raises her perfectly groomed eyebrows at me. Alannis Gyalene Catalina Vega-Torres has been having sex since ninth grade.

“Why do you always single me out?” I wave pointedly at Saz, my partner in virtue. When we were ten, Saz and I promised to celebrate every one of life’s milestones at the same time, including falling in love and having our first real relationship—which would, of course, include sex—so that we would never leave each other

behind. It was our way of making sure we always put each other first and never let anyone come between us. Alannis pats my arm like I'm a poor, confused child.

Mara's face is back in her phone. "It's only thirty bucks to 'turn back the clock and bring the va-va-voom back to the bedroom.'" And that's it. We fall apart at this.

Saz sings out, "To va-va-voom in the bedroom!" The four of us clink cans and bottles.

And then we forget all about artificial hymens and virginity and stare as Kristin McNish walks through the cafeteria like a perfectly timed public-service announcement, with her chin jutting out and an unmistakable bump around her middle.

At home, I dig through the laundry pile, but the Nirvana shirt is still nowhere to be found. I find a black minidress lying on my floor and settle for my dad's Ramones shirt, which I throw on over it. For dinner, Mom and I order from Pizza King because Dad has a work thing and he's the cook in the family, his specialty being elaborate meals paired with theme music and wine. Saz loves eating at my house because it's almost always an event, but I love eating at hers. The Bakshis eat at the bar in the kitchen or in front of the TV—takeout, fast food, or Kraft macaroni and cheese, best thing on earth, something I never get at home unless I make it myself. My dad refuses to cook any food that requires you to add orange powder to it.

When I open the door to the delivery boy now, the one Saz calls Mean Jake, even though his name is Matthew and he isn't mean at all, I'm like, "Well, hey, you," as seductively as possible.

He goes, "We were out of ginger ale, so I brought you Sprite instead."

Later that night, I lie in Trent Dugan's hayloft, underneath Shane Waller, my senses in overdrive, lost in the heat of his skin and the smell of his neck. I'm thinking, *Maybe this will be it. Maybe I'll lose it right here, right now.*

It's what I love about making out with someone. The possibility that this could be the one. Cue the lights. Cue the music. Love raining down on us all. Not that I'm all that experienced, especially compared to Alannis. I've officially given a few hand jobs and three or four unsuccessful blow jobs, had five and a half orgasms—not including the ones I've given myself—and made out with three boys, counting this one.

Shane is kissing me, and his hands are everywhere—*Oh yeah*, I think, *there. That's good.* The kissing is strictly for my benefit because Shane, like a lot of other guys at Mary Grove High, is more about all the things that aren't kissing. His goal, always, is to get in my pants. I know this and he knows this, and he will kiss me for a while just to get there. And I'll let him because he's actually good at it, and hey, I love kissing.

And then all he's doing is grabbing me, but it's working because he's so obviously into me that I'm starting to feel a bit into me too.

I think, *Don't let it get too far*, even as I'm helping him unzip his jeans. And then we're kissing again, harder and harder until I half expect him to inhale my tongue and my mouth and my entire face, and in the moment I want him to because of the way my body is pressing into his, wanting to feel more. I feel swept away and powerful at the same time. *What are you waiting for?*

Shane has his tongue in my ear, but I can still hear the music outside. Laughter. Someone yelling something. At first I'm like, *Oh God, yes*, but then his tongue is a little too wet and he's giving

me swimmer's ear. I want to push him away and shake the saliva out, but then he says, "God, you're so hot."

Being hot is not what I'm known for, so I kiss him a while longer. But then I can't get over the fact that we're making out in a barn. At first I think, *Okay, this is kind of sexy* and *Oh, look at me*, but now I'm not sure I believe it. I imagine losing it to Shane Waller here in this hayloft, but of all the ways I've pictured my first time, it's never once been in a barn.

Then he gives my underwear a tug, chasing the thoughts away. Leaving just Shane and me, nearly naked on top of all this straw, which is jabbing into my flesh like sharp little pencils. It's funny that I haven't really noticed the straw before this moment because I've been so swept up in the feeling of my flesh against Shane's flesh, the little fireworks that are springing up between body parts, threatening to set the hayloft on fire. This isn't the first time I've been nearly naked with Shane Waller, but it's the first time in a barn. I feel drunk, even though I'm not, and some far-flung part of me worries that if I can get turned on under these circumstances—sharp, jabbing straw, drunken classmates yelling outside—I will probably sleep with too many boys in college. Because making out is that much fun, even when you aren't in love. Sometimes it's just about his mouth or his eyes or his hands or the way they work all together. Sometimes that's enough.

Shane's hands are snaking their way down, and the thinking, responsible part of me—the one that's saving herself for a boy named Wyatt Jones—mentally pulls back into the hay, just enough to separate from him, even as the physical part of me keeps right on going. I try to lose myself in him again, but the only thing I can feel is a million straw pencils digging into my back and the fireworks fizzling to an end so that all that's left is the after-haze and a distant burning smell.

Suddenly there's something hard and damp against my thigh, and I shift a little so he can't slide it in.

"Claude . . ."

His voice is blurred, like he's out of focus, and my name sounds like *Clod*, which I hate. I feel momentarily bad because I was never going to have sex with him. It always ends the same way—him coming into the air or into his shirt or onto himself or against my leg.

Saz says I feel safe in my virginity, like Rapunzel in her tower. That I let down my hair just enough, enjoying the shine of it in the sun and the way it temporarily blinds the poor bastard waiting on the ground, before I yank it back up out of reach. And maybe I do feel safe in it, not just because I'm saving it for Wyatt Jones, but because my life is safe and Saz and I are best friends and I actually like my parents and I don't have anything to prove to anyone. It's my body and I can do what I want.

Shane is staring at me and his eyes are rolling and his breath is coming faster and faster, and he's humping my leg like a dog. His face is half lit from the sliver of moon that shines through the crack in the door. I'll give him this: he's pretty good-looking and he smells nice. And for whatever reason he seems to like me. From what he can tell right now, I'm still in it. I haven't told him to stop or pushed him away. Until he strays a little too far from my leg and I go, "Slow it down, cowboy."

He's going to tell his friends either that I'm a tease or that we did it. I wish I could explain that it's not about teasing or doing it; it's about the *possibility*. It's the almost. It's the *Maybe this time*, the *Maybe he's the one*. I want to say, *For a few minutes I make you greater than yourself, and I'm greater than myself, and we're greater than this barn because we are all this possibility and almostness and maybe.*

But you can't explain things like almostness to a guy like Shane, so I maneuver my lower half away from him, and that's when he groans and explodes. All over my inner thigh. And this is where I freak out a little, because I swear I can feel some of it dripping into me, and I roll over fast, pushing him away.

He groans again and falls back onto the hay. I use his shirt to wipe myself off and then I untangle my dress from around my shoulders and smooth everything into place, and I can already hear what I'm going to say to Saz, the funny little spin I'll put on it just for her: *Unlike so many of our classmates here in farm country, I guess I'm just not a person destined for barn sex.*

I stand up, and to make conversation, I say, "Did you know the Germans used to have a specific word for a male virgin? A *Jüngling*. Doesn't it sound like it means the exact opposite?" I'm an almanac of virgin trivia, especially in awkward situations when I don't know what else to say.

Shane says from the hay, "You know, you're like this series of boxes, and every time I open one, there's another one inside. It's like box after fucking box, and I don't think anyone will ever be able to open all of them." He gets up, pulls on his jeans, pulls on his wet, crumpled shirt.

He stares down at the stain and I say, "Sorry."

"It's my fucking Snoop Dogg shirt. Jesus, Claude." *Clod.*

I say, "I think we should just be friends." *Better to have too many boxes than not enough.*

He says, "No shit," and leaves me there.

I find Saz at an old weathered-looking picnic table, talking to a group of people that includes Alannis and Mara, as well as Yvonne Brittain-Muir, musician and gamer, and her girlfriend of three

hundred years, Leah Basco. For the past few weeks, Saz and I have envisioned every possible scenario in which Yvonne dumps Leah and professes her undying love for Saz. Or at least agrees to have sex with her.

One of the guys passes around a joint, and another is telling this long story about the college party he went to last weekend. Leah holds out her hand to Yvonne—pale as a ghost in the moonlight, long yellow hair dyed blue at the ends—and they go rambling off toward the barn of iniquity, Saz staring after them like they just ran over her dog.

I say to her, “Do you want to leave?” Even though it’s not even eleven o’clock.

“More than anything on earth.”

I throw my arm around her and we walk across the field toward the house and the long gravel driveway where we parked. As we go, I sing Saz the cheer-up song we made up when we were ten: “Ice cream, ice cream, freezy, freezy. You can get over her easy, easy.”

A lone figure comes toward us, and Saz is jabbing at my ribs, going, “Stop it, maniac, before someone hears you,” which makes me sing louder, and then the figure steps into the moonlight and of course it’s Wyatt Jones. Like that, I forget about Saz and Yvonne and Shane and boxes and everything else that came before this moment.

Wyatt is going away soon, across the country, across the world, to California and girls with long, swinging hair and sundresses. A fact that makes him seem taller and separate from the rest of us. Saz and I were supposed to go to California too, where I would find him and get to know him, strangers in a strange land, initially bonded by our unfortunate Midwestern roots, and then—gradually—as two worldly adults who discover they are destined to be together.

Wyatt catches my eye, and my bones turn to liquid. There's a rumor that he likes me. That he wanted to ask me to prom but was too shy to do it. That the reason he and three of his friends toilet-papered my house two months ago was because somehow I was special. Until my dad the marathon runner interrupted them and *chased them around the neighborhood on foot*. I break our gaze now and stare at my own feet because the memory is still mortifying.

"Hey," he says.

"Hey," I say back.

I make myself look at him again. Deep brown eyes, light brown skin, broad shoulders, smiling mouth. Even though my lips are still throbbing from all the kissing I was doing *minutes ago*, I want his hands on me.

"You leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Too bad." He breaks into a full-on smile, as blinding as the sun, and everything fades away except for the two of us. His dad is black, his mom is white, and she died when he was a baby. He doesn't remember her, but he always says she gave him his smile.

He's saying something else right now, but it's drowned out by music and laughter and someone screaming. We turn at the same exact moment, and it's Kayla Rosenthal, who always screams at parties. She's standing on the picnic table, waving her drink around like a human sprinkler.

He nods in her direction. "And she got a scholarship to Notre Dame." I laugh a little too hard. "Did you come with Waller?" he asks me.

"No, but he's here somewhere." I wave my hand like, *Whatever*, and hope these five words imply everything he needs to know: *I don't care where he is because he's nothing to me. It's you, Wyatt. It's always been you.*

He nods again, like he's thinking this over. "Hey, congrats on salutatorian."

"Thanks."

"Does that mean you give one of the graduation speeches?"

"A shorter one, but yeah." Jasmine Ramundo gets to speak for ten minutes, but I only get to speak for five.

"Can't wait to hear it." He grins and then does this thing that always makes my stomach flip—contemplates the ground like there's something profound and important there. He looks up at me. "Are you here for the summer?"

"I am."

"Me too."

We are staring at each other, my face getting hotter and hotter, and all I can think is, *I want you to be my first, Wyatt Jones. If you ask me to go into that barn right now, I will race you there and be naked by the time I reach the door.*

He coughs. Looks away. Glances up. Smiles. "See you around, then."

"See you."

He sails past, and it's just an ordinary party filled with ordinary people, and I am one of them.

"We can stay."

I turn and blink at Saz. *Where did you come from?* But even though I want to stay, I see her face. "No way." Friends first. Always. I sing the rest of the way to the car.

An hour or so later, I lie in my bed and think of Wyatt Jones. Of every dirty thing I want him to do to me. My room is heavy with night, except for the moon, which is making everything glow.

I close my eyes, and I am still me, lying here in these yellow

daisy sheets and the navy blue pajama shorts and top I got for my last birthday, books everywhere because ever since I was six years old I've liked to bury myself in a pile of them.

So I am me, but right now I am me with Wyatt on top of me. Wyatt Jones, with his soccer legs and swimmer's shoulders and hair that smells like chlorine and the sun. Wyatt Jones, with eyes that burn when they look at you. He is above me. Under me. His skin on mine. My mouth on his.

My body is warm against the sheet, and my hand is where I'd like his to be. I kick the books away and they go crashing to the floor. My nose starts to itch and I scratch it. A hair tickles my forehead and I blow it away. *Holy hell.*

Breathe.

Concentrate.

Wyatt.

Wyatt.

And there he is again in all his naked glory.

Wyatt.

After a minute, a thousand little needles start prickling my skin.

He says, *Are you sure?*

For all his beauty, Wyatt Jones is famously shy. When he does speak, it's in this soft, scratchy voice that implies great thoughtfulness. I've built an entire inner life for him in my head, one where he is kind and empathetic and sensitive, yet strong enough to pick up a girl—me, specifically—and throw her onto a bed.

Yes, I say. YES.

It's you, Claude. It's always been you.

Stop talking, Wyatt. Stop talking right now.

The needle pricks are spreading throughout my body, and Wyatt morphs into the boy I saw on a plane once, the one who

stared right at me as he walked down the aisle. Now I am on that plane, dressed as a flight attendant—a stylish one, the kind on overseas flights. Red lipstick, red uniform. Or maybe navy because it goes better with my clown hair. I follow him to the bathroom and he pulls me in after him and locks the door, and picks me up in his big, strong hands and sets me on that little counter, the one with the sink, and I wrap my legs around him.

Just as he kisses me, hands in my hair, he fades into Mean Jake, the delivery boy. We're in his vintage Trans Am, and it smells like pizza and cigarettes, but I don't care because we're tearing off each other's clothes, and suddenly he blurs into Mr. Darcy.

No. Mr. Rochester. Only I'm not Jane Eyre, I'm me in some sort of riding costume, and he's kissing me by candlelight. We're in front of the fireplace, and suddenly there's a bear rug, only I'm not sure why there's a bear rug. *Is there one in the book?* I'm staring at the bear, and the bear is staring back like, *You murderer*, and it's just so depressing, so I get rid of the rug, and now we're lying on the floor, Rochester and me, but it's *freezing* because Thornfield Hall is, after all, a castle in the English countryside. Rochester produces a blanket, but it's too late; I send him away.

And now it's Wyatt again, sauntering toward me like he does in the halls at school, and his eyes are on me, and they are so intense and serious that I know *this is it*. And we're in his room and his parents aren't home, and things slow down so much that I can hear my own breathing, short and fast, and I can almost hear his as he looks me in the eye and I can see everything—him, me, us—reflected there.

He says, *Claude*.

Claudine?

Claudine.

And then I can feel him. All of him. And I don't worry if I'm too small or too big anywhere because he doesn't even have to say, *You're beautiful*. He's already telling me.

And it's Wyatt and me, closer than I've ever been to anyone, and I'm wrapped around him and into him, and all at once I breathe, *Yes!* as my entire body lifts off the bed. It just rockets right off and hovers there in midair, shooting off fireworks of every color. I am an explosion of color and fire, and my room spins with light. A million fireflies of light swirling and sparkling around me, holding me in the air.

I want to live up here, circled by this flickering light storm. I want it to last forever, but one by one the fireflies start to ghost out and die away. I try to catch them and keep them, but gently, gently, I feel myself floating back down to the bed.

Gradually, the bed absorbs me, head to toe, and I go limp and still.

I open my eyes and the only light is coming from the moon. My body is heavy now, so heavy, and I feel myself drifting away in these daisy sheets, thinking I should have studied more for Mr. Callum's class and I never did find my left sneaker and I can't forget to bring Alannis her green sweater on Monday. And then my mind drifts to Shane and the barn and my wet, wet thigh, and what if some of it got in me and I get pregnant and have to have a baby and marry Shane Waller and live in Ohio forever?

The last thing I remember as I drift off to sleep, underneath daisy sheets, in navy blue pajamas, is Wyatt saying, *See you around, then*, which could mean anything because as of today the entire world is still possible.

7 DAYS TILL GRADUATION

It is almost eleven a.m. and I am in my room, talking to Saz on the phone. We are talking specifically about our summer plans. First and foremost, our road trip, which will be the two of us exploring the entire state of Ohio before we bid it goodbye forever, or at least for the next four years. We've bought matching bikinis (black for me, red for her) and Kånken backpacks (sky blue for me, yellow for her), and Saz is getting permission to borrow the car for a week or two. She wants to start north and I want to start south, and we're both talking and laughing at once, which is why I don't hear the knock on the door.

Suddenly it opens and my dad is standing there, and there is this look on his face as he takes in the posters on the walls and the T-shirts and jeans and dresses all over my floor and the books everywhere and me standing on a mountain of clothes like I'm on the peak of Kilimanjaro, and I'm still laughing but also trying to remember when in the hell he was last in my room, if ever.

I should suspect something then, but I don't. Instead I say, "I'm on the phone."

He says, "I need to talk to you."

And now I'm not laughing and neither is Saz, who goes, "Is that your *dad*?"

She sounds every bit as surprised as I am.

He perches on the corner of the bed, feet on the floor, looking like he might spring up and away at any moment. At first I think something horrible has happened to my mom. Or that he's going to tell me the dog is dead or the cat is dead or my grandparents are dead. I rummage through my memories, trying to unearth the last time he sat down like this to talk to me, and I can't remember anything prior to age thirteen, when he looked at my mom and said, "I didn't speak teenager even when I was one. She's in your hands now."

I sit down next to him, several inches between us. I am wondering where my mom is and if she knows he's here, and then he says, "Your mom asked me to talk to you. . . ."

For some reason my mind goes immediately to Shane and the hayloft. *Please don't let them know.* It is the worst thing I can imagine, because my life so far has been reasonably quiet and reasonably uneventful, which is apparently why I can't write with any sort of feeling. I've never even had a cavity.

And then my dad clears his throat and begins talking in this low, serious voice, which is not at all like his usual voice. And as he talks, he starts to cry, something I've never seen him do before.

I'm thinking, *Stop this. Don't cry. Not you. Dads don't cry.* Which is stupid, really, but there you go.

I think I say, "Don't cry."

Or maybe I say nothing.

Because he is telling me that he doesn't love us anymore, my mom and me.

That the past eighteen years of my life—
the eighteen years that make up my entire life—
have been a really horrible joke and that he never actually loved us at all, not once,

or that maybe he did for a tiny while but love dies when the objects of that love are as unlovable as my mom and I are, and unfortunately, it's our fault that we can't be his family anymore.

That he needs us to go far away so he never has to look at us again because our mere presence makes him ill. He's still talking, but I'm not listening. I'm too focused on the way the tears are rolling into the stubbly beard on his chin and disappearing. *Where are they going?*

"Clew," he says. My nickname. The one that only he calls me. Our special name, the one just for us and secret bakery runs before school and secret ice creams before dinner and driving too fast and watching scary movies. All the things my mom is too mom-ish to allow. Even though all my life it's always been Claudine and Lauren, Lauren and Claudine, the Llewelyn women, because Mom never actually took Dad's name, and we've always been more Llewelyn than Henry. Which basically means we believe in possibility and magic instead of always looking at the practical (i.e., darkly realistic) side of things.

Meanwhile, my dad has stood on the perimeter, not as much like us, watching and applauding and joining in as much as he can. All my life, everyone loves us, the two Llewelyns. Everyone, apparently, but him.

"Clew," he says again. "It's not because I don't care about you." Even now, at this moment, as the floor of my room is disappearing, as I'm staring down, past my feet, wondering how I'll ever stand again, he can't bring himself to say *love*. As in *It's not because I don't love you*.

And then he says, "I just can't have a family right now."

And maybe he says none of this, really, but it's what I hear. And at that moment I stop looking at his tears and his beard and I am

staring at the place where the floor used to be. All I can think is how one minute the floor was there and now it's not. How you could go through an entire day, every day, not thinking about the floor or the ground because you just assume it will always be there. Until it isn't.

The real conversation goes more like this:

Dad: "I need to talk to you."

Me: "Okay."

"I don't want you to think there's anyone else. It's important that you know that. But your mom and I are separating, and she asked me to tell you because it's not her idea; it's my idea." He looks away when he says this. And then: "I just can't do this right now. I can't do it." Followed by: "It isn't you and it isn't your mom. It's me. We wanted to stay together for your senior year. We didn't want to uproot you. For the next two weeks, we'll stay here together in this house, and then we'll separate."

When he says *separate*, I think of a heart being cut open, of limbs being sawn off.

"But yesterday you drove me to school." What I mean to say is, *Yesterday we were normal. We ate thumbprint cookies and rode in companionable silence and drove faster than anyone on the road.*

"It's something that's been building for a while," he says. "We've just been trying to figure out what's best for you and your mom and me."

So he knew about this as we drove across Main Street Bridge. As we drove downtown. As we ate cookies outside Joy Ann.

I suddenly feel left out. Like all these years, even when it was Claudine and Lauren, Lauren and Claudine, I believed it was the

three of us married to each other, and I'm only just realizing it was the two of them all along.

"I don't want you to talk to anyone about this, Clew, not even Saz. Not until we get everything sorted out. I know you love Saz and her parents, but they're our good friends and we're not ready for them to know. We're not ready for anyone to know. Not yet."

This is how numb I am: I don't get angry; I don't even ask why. I don't say, *You can't tell me who I can or can't talk to about this. You don't get to tell me the world is ending and then ask me not to share it.* Instead I just sit there, hollowing out, hands withering in my lap, heart withering in my chest, feet dangling over the bed into space because the floor is nowhere to be found.

He says from very far away, "This town's so goddamn small—the last thing we need is people discussing your mom and me because they have nothing better to do. And I don't want them making this harder on you than it has to be."

I don't hear anything else after that.

After he leaves, my mom comes in and puts her arms around me. She tells me we can talk if I want to, that it's important to talk and get things out. "You have to let the tears come," she always says. "Because if you don't, they'll come out eventually—maybe not as tears, but as anger or something worse."

"So this is real," I say.

"This is real."

And, all at once, there is this rush of feeling in my hands, in my heart, in every part of my body that just went hollow and dead, and I nearly double over from the pain of it. I feel as if a bomb has dropped from the sky directly into my room, directly onto my head.

“I know it’s sudden. And it’s a lot. And I’m sorry. So sorry.” She pulls me in tighter.

“Dad says I’m not allowed to talk about it.” For a minute I wonder if she can hear me, because my voice is so far away, as if it’s locked in a dark, empty room with no windows or doors.

“Not outside the house, just while we try to figure this out.” I attempt to strangle the hope that bubbles up over *while we try to figure this out*, as if this whole thing is something fixable and undecided.

“How are Saz and I supposed to go on a road trip without me saying anything?”

“I’m not sure the road trip is going to happen, Claude. At least not right away.”

“But we’ve been planning it.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” And I can see that she’s as lost as I am. “Honestly, I’m trying to understand all of this myself.” She goes quiet, and I can almost hear her choosing her words so, so carefully. “But what you need to remember is that it has nothing to do with you. Your dad and I love you more than anything.”

After she leaves, I lie in bed. No pile of books. No dreams of Wyatt or plans for a road trip. Just me, wondering where the floor disappeared to.

I lie there for a very long time.

The house is so still, except for when I hear the whirring of the garage door and the roar of my dad’s car driving away. And then, a little later, when there is a banging at my door, which is my cat, Dandelion, wanting to get in. But I can’t move. So I lie there.

And lie there.

When Vesuvius erupted, the citizens of Pompeii were caught

completely unprepared, but we know from the letters of a survivor that there were warnings. Plumes of smoke. Earth tremors. *How could I not have seen the signs? How could I not have known?*

I think of all the people in the history of the world whose lives have changed in an instant, like the woman I was named for. Claudine Blackwood, my mom's great-aunt, was only five years old when her mother shot herself in the bedroom of their Georgia island home. It was after breakfast on a Thursday, and Claudine's father had left the house moments earlier. Claudine was the one who heard the gunshot, who found her mom lying in a pool of her own blood. It was one of those tragedies that my mom the writer refers to as a *defining moment*: that moment when life suddenly changes and you're left picking up the pieces. She says it's actually *how* you pick up the pieces that defines you.

Aunt Claudine and her father remained in the house, even after that. She spent a few years in Connecticut at Miss Porter's School for Girls, but returned to the island for good when she was nineteen. When her father died, she inherited the house. I often wondered what that must have been like, to grow up in the same space where your mother killed herself, to walk by that bedroom thousands of times over the years.

Aunt Claudine was my mother's favorite relative. When Mom was ten, she went to visit her and found the bullet hole in the closet door. She said she could fit her finger inside it. From the pictures I've seen of Claudine, she looked like a neat and tidy woman with a short blond bob and three fat dachshunds that supposedly followed her everywhere. She dressed in button-down shirts and khakis, but according to my mom, she carried herself like royalty.

I wish I could ask Aunt Claudine if, looking back, there were signs leading up to what her mother did, but Claudine died before I was born. And maybe she noticed signs, maybe she didn't. After all,

Aunt Claudine was only five when it happened. Whatever memories of her mom, and the girl Claudine might have been if that gun had never gone off, went with her. She didn't leave a husband or children behind, or anyone who could tell us why she stayed her whole life in that house on some island off the coast of Georgia.

It makes me wonder, *Is this a defining moment for me? And if so, what will I do with all these pieces?*

At some point I realize that I should keep moving. That lying here is only making it worse. So I pick up my phone. Saz has sent fifteen texts and left three messages. Instead of going downstairs to eat what my dad calls "breakfast for lunch," like I have every Saturday morning for the past eighteen years, I turn the phone off and reach for the notebook and pen I keep on my bedside table. All my life, I've given stories to everything because I've felt that everything deserved to have a history. Even if it was just an old marble lodged into the basement wall. *Where did it come from? Who put it there? And why?*

The thing no one knows—I am writing a novel. A bad, overly long novel that I am in love with even though it has no plot and about seven hundred characters and I'll probably never finish it. So far it fills three notebooks, and I am still going. One day I will either throw the notebooks away or type all these words into my laptop.

I open the notebook. Uncap the pen.

I stare at the page.

It stares back.

"Stop staring at me," I tell it.

I write my name on it, just to show it who's in charge here. *Claude.*

I circle it. Circle it again and again until my name looks like it's trapped inside an angry cloud.

I write my full name. *Claudine Llewelyn Henry*. Llewelyn, as in my mom's maiden name. I cross out the *Henry* and write: *Claudine Llewelyn*. Maybe this is who I'll be from now on.

I reach for my phone, turn it back on, and call Saz.

"What did your dad want?"

"What?"

"Your dad," she says. "What did he want?"

"Nothing. Just to talk to me about graduation. My grandparents are coming to visit us so they can hear my speech." And I think, *Oh, I'm really doing this. I am really not telling her.* I look down at the inside of my arm, where I am pinching the skin so hard it's turning blue.

"You sound weird. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm good. Just tired. I didn't sleep much." I think about telling her then, even though my dad said not to, even though my mom agreed I shouldn't, about the bomb he just dropped onto my head and onto my heart. But that would make it real, and right now it doesn't feel real. Instead I say, "What are you doing later?" Just to see what happens, I poke my skin with the tip of my pen, again and again, until the skin is blue all over from the ink, or maybe from bruises.

"Nothing. Right now I'm kind of half watching a movie and making a Leah Basco voodoo doll."

"Can you get the car?"

"Probably. You can always come over here." Saz lives three blocks away.

"Okay."

"Or we can go to Dayton instead."

I think of driving fast and turning the music up loud, loud, loud. "That sounds better."

"Are you sure you're okay?"