

FRANKIE

“YOU LIKE BAD BOYS.” That’s what Frankie says.

I used to date a guy with stab wounds on his shoulder I traced in bed while he slept, raised white dashes like the tick of highway lanes. Bad like with toothpicks between their teeth. Idiots really, the kind who wore black hats backward with no logo, walked with a limp, fucked with their tongue out, dropped out of high school, worked at the Sunoco, or security, and got me in for free.

Guys who would text me *what up* and when I said *nothing, you?* I never heard back. I liked it when they disrespected their mothers. Or picked me up after school, then dropped me off somewhere discreet, like the back parking lot of a movie theater. I liked them for short, ballistic bursts, so much that if I crossed the street I’d get hit.

I got over boys and went for older guys instead: an investment banker, lawyers, one with three kids and one who kept blueberries in the console of his BMW, a fad diet. In the sunlight, I could see his every pore. He was late for a meeting, so everything was quick. He told me my hips looked like a Coke bottle, and my ass, bent over, a heart. Once he grabbed my cheeks and knocked my head back onto the metal pole in his condo. I liked to press that soft spot behind my ponytail, the dull ache, days later when I was spaced out at the register.

These were the kinds of men with magazine subscriptions that I flipped through on the train home, licking my finger to flip the thin pages that smelled like the inside of a wooden treasure chest. The last one bought me Summer Jam tickets, one for me and one for Frankie. Frankie went anyway, even though she said, “No clue he was married? Let’s think of a more original lie.”

Frankie could pick a guy out of a lineup even if she wasn’t the witness. That’s what she does: picks. We live together in a two-bedroom split above Sal’s Pizza, where the dopeheads blabber beneath our open windows at night. Sometimes, when I can’t sleep, I crawl into her bed. She lies on her side with her head propped in her palm, her sheets smelling like a department store with the sweet soak of her Guess perfume.

It’s confession, lying there in the dark while Frankie listens. Wrought iron shadows from branches partition the sheet as she points sturdy words like vectors toward my heart. She knows things. She majors in Human Development. That means something to her since we both dropped out of school our first semester, failing being my specialty, then reenrolled the next fall. I don’t really care about school, specifically the part when men walk in and try to educate me.

Sunday and we’re curled into the velvet couch we carried all the way from Goodwill ourselves, then pushed into the corner of our old, enormous kitchen. When I brought this guy Andrew home the first time, I dragged him to my bedroom as Frankie flashed a thumbs-up from the couch. She tells me she likes him because he has natural blond hair and an office job downtown, and takes me to dinner like a real guy. We met in what Frankie calls “a picturesque way.” This is the thing: ever since Frankie’s mom died, she wants everything to go right.

“How did it go?” Frankie says. I’m wearing a softball tee that got mixed up in the laundry and belongs to Frankie. Frankie’s wearing a button-up sweater and a smile that belongs in toothpaste commercials.

“He took me out for Chinese,” I start. I pass back the gravity bong we fashioned from a Pepsi bottle. Her cheekbones flush with rosacea, which makes her look possessed by insider information, like someone’s got their mouth to her ear.

“Details,” she says.

It goes more or less like this: Andrew reached his hands across the booth just as I was about to say, “I have an early dentist appointment in the morning.” The waiter moved to our table with the purposefulness of a surgeon and filled our water, shard-like ice cubes cracking in the silence. Then the food came, platter by platter, clouds of steam swooshing into our faces. I filled my plate and drowned my rice in duck sauce.

“You must have been hungry,” he said as I scraped the last grains with my fork. “Do you want to order dessert?” He leaned forward with the enthusiasm of a talk show host. I ordered another Blue Moon. By the time he got the check I was almost lying down corpse-like in the booth. I stared at him sleepily, exaggerating my blink like a housecat. I contemplated burping but foresaw him refusing the check and thought better of it. Instead, I reached across the table and crushed a fortune cookie in my fist. I straightened up to pick the fortune from the remains, which read: *You need only to understand that it is not necessary it understand but only enjoy.*

He insisted on walking me home. He tried again to hold my hand as we moved under streetlights that lit up our faces like morons at a spelling bee in which we knew none of the words. I let him grasp my forefinger, which only made me blush.

“Careful,” he said as I kicked my way through the broken glass of me and Frankie’s block, jellied condoms lying shriveled in the cracks. We passed the methadone clinic by Packard’s Corner, where beyond the parking lot the registered sex offenders live in tighter and tighter clusters of red dots like the clap. I was stumbling drunk, and hoped he would leave me at my front door without asking to come inside.

When he did, I said, in my best robot, “I do not have air conditioning.”

We stood in the envelope-littered foyer as he watched me stab keys into my lock. When the door swung open I held my hand on the knob while he waved, tripping down a step as he reversed his way out of my sight.

But I don’t tell Frankie this. I just say, “It’s not going to work out.”

She makes a face, taking the bong between her knees. “This is my last one,” she says. Later on, she wants to study for the first test of senior year. She’s been spending more time in her room, taking notes from textbooks under the clicky

green lamp we took from our neighbor's moving van. Last week, when we were in line at Shaw's, I was flipping through an *Us Weekly*, and she said, "You know what's weird? I think I could actually be a psychologist."

"Okay," I said, my nail hooked to my tooth. "Calm down, though."

She pulls a small hit, the lit aluminum speckled with holes from a safety clip. She watches me as I watch her suck the smoke between her teeth. When she exhales, it vanishes up her nostrils as she bends to put the bong back on the windowsill.

"I thought he liked you," she says in a strained voice, coughing emphatically with my bad-luck white lighter clenched in her fist. "I thought things were good," she says again after a long pause.

I dig for explanations: I need space. He's not my type. He calls me "Miss Serena." I don't like his name. *Andrew*. So kindergarten name tag. Like his parents are still together, paid for his college, take a knee in Christmas cards. Go through his iPod and tell me there's not a Blues Traveler playlist. He probably strolls into work in some you're-gonna-love-the-way-you-look-I-guarantee-it fuckin' suit."

I catch Frankie looking at me like I've turned down the wrong road in my mind only to find her standing there on the other side, tapping her foot.

When Frankie and I first met freshman year of high school, we were both locked out of the basement storm doors of a frat party on purpose. Frankie had a gleaming lip ring that gave her wide eyes a lost but poised look. She was drenched from a forty that got poured over her head, I assumed, for being beautiful.

"Do you smoke?" she asked. Her voice had the sageness of a runaway. I had never had a friend who was a girl. She touched my hand.

"Watch," she said as she pulled a cigar from her pocket.

Some people remember things like their first kiss. I remember this: us sitting against the shingles of the frat house, our knees up against our chests. *Haa-haa*, she went, fogging the emptied paper up with her breath like she was trying to keep warm. Then she licked around the tatty edges and sealed the blunt with her lighter, sticking it carefully between my lips. Like that, a candle between us when Frankie clicked. The flame lit her face, a ghost story, her eyebrows darkly arched and expectant.

She said, "Real light, just a little bit."

I look past her head at the ripped-up billboard that levels with our window. Sometimes it feels like we're waking up to the same morning, weekend after weekend, the billboard the only thing that changes. Frankie asking me how things went, her red-brown hair wet like leaves down her shoulders.

Frankie, despiser of ambivalence, saying, "So what's the problem now?"

If there is a problem, a twitching light bulb, a clogged drain, Frankie fixes it herself. No landlord. No phone calls. No foolery. When we shared a car and it snowed three feet, Frankie hurled a shovel under the buried tires, snowflakes like confetti in her hair.

"I think we're stuck," I shouted, watching her with a frozen face, hands in my coat pockets as the relentless wind bitch-slapped my cheeks.

"We're not," she said automatically. "Grab a shovel."

My phone buzzes on the coffee table and I ignore it. I know it's Andrew. Just like I suspected he pocketed our fortunes for a scrapbook. This is what Frankie would die for now, some guy to pose with in pictures, their arms linked like pretzels.

Frankie reaches over for my phone, her lips slightly parted.

"Oh shit," she says. "He's outside?" She tosses the phone in my lap, a bomb built just for me. She scrambles across the linoleum in her sweatpants.

"I think that's him in that car," she says. She's got her back against the wall, looking out the window like a secret agent. I brace myself against Andrew's text: *come outside!*

"What does he want?"

"Everything," I say. I go to my room to put on a pair of jeans, a Pats jersey, and my huge-ass gold hoops.

"Serena, wait," she says. She comes in with her Guess perfume, then dabs at my neck.

"That's good, that's enough," I say. "Am I high?" I ask Frankie, holding on to her forearms. Frankie frowns and genuinely thinks about this. A few minutes ago, we had made elaborate plans to be productive, but I forget what the plans were exactly.

"No," she says. "I'm high."

"Okay," I say, swimming in Frankie's eye contact. "I'll be back." She cups my cheeks with her palms.

“Go,” she says, channeling her mom’s Boston accent, “you whore.” I smile at her, all the way like she’s checking my teeth.

“Be good,” she singsongs. I put my hand on the knob as she *shlacks* the lock. She makes a point of it. Perhaps I don’t think to lock up because more days than not I wouldn’t mind if one of those dopeheads walked on in and shot me, my face pooled in a salad-sized bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch.

“Hey,” I say, bending down to the car where Andrew rolled the window. “You have a car?”

I wrap my arms around my chest, hugging someone. He cocks his head and laughs. Andrew has long, straight teeth, like a dentist’s son. His hair really is blond, which disgusts me. I normally go for guys who are so dark they’re mistaken for terrorists. Making old ladies scowl with their arms around my waist on the T.

“I rented it,” he says meaningfully.

“It’s Sunday,” I say slowly, with equal meaning.

“You look like a rapper’s girlfriend,” Andrew says with that wide smile.

“Thank you,” I say, moving my eyes over the vehicle, his palm balanced over the wheel, the vacuumed upholstery and spotless back seat. It smells new and sick, like sniffing glue.

“So, Miss Serena, can I take you somewhere?” he says.

I don’t know, I think. Can you?

Maybe part of my disappointment lies in the fact that we didn’t meet at the bar holding cold, wet umbrellas, seven shots deep with the stall locked, or online, talking dirty, back and forth, a prolonged handshake in the waiting room, he, my doctor, I, his patient, suddenly braless in his apartment, or at his office, so his wife wouldn’t find out.

We met at the goddamn park. Frankie and I were on the swings, forcing our feet into the sky. We swung to the brink, then leapt off, our bodies like action figures against the fierce heat of the sun, fake crossing ourselves in midair.

He was walking his two-month-old puppy.

“Hi, puppy,” Frankie said, crawling across the playground with wood chips stuck in her palms. “Can we hold him?” she begged.

He bent down, making a crease in his khakis as he released the leash. He

grinned as he watched the dog scramble into Frankie's arms, where it pawed her shoulders, extending its tender belly to lick up her neck like ice cream.

Andrew sat on Frankie's swing. We watched her laugh, coo, then play dead as her hair sprawled over the wood chips and the puppy struggled across her legs. I made figure eights with my shoe, my grip infant-tight around the chains.

"I'm Andrew," he said, his nod as determined as a Hitler youth, his eyelashes faint in the sun.

"I don't want to hold the puppy," I said.

In the rental car, he leans over the passenger seat and swings open the door.

"Get in," he says, faking danger like in a rom-com. The wind blows my hair forward for a second. I feel Frankie's eyes on my shoulder from the sliver of the curtain.

We drive down Beacon Street, past the CVS where I sort of work, and where Frankie and I would be roaming aisles, trying on lipsticks if it weren't for this. We zoom past the bars we don't go to anymore because Frankie says they're infested with college kids, even though we're college kids.

"I don't know about you," he says as he makes a left turn towards the highway, "but I've been dying to get out of the city." The Citgo sign sinks, then disappears completely as we go down through the snake-cage flicker of the underpass.

We're now on I-93. Maybe I'm still high, but I have to admit, Andrew's kind of a good driver. He zips in and out of lanes, weaving through vans and four-wheelers with precision. His eyes move from the road to the rearview to me in a narcotized triangle. In my chest is a single tire, asphalt-hot, thwacking forward in a low hum.

But then he turns the radio up and starts drumming the wheel with his thumb, mouthing lyrics to this country song about living like you're dying. So here I am, trapped in a car with the kind of guy who would slowly then aggressively start singing "Bye, Bye, Miss American Pie" in unison with a bar full of strangers, fists and flipped stools punching the air over their heads. I check him again out of the corner of my eye. He rests his arm around my seat.

I don't want to know where we're going. This highway looks like every highway in America, though I've never been out of Massachusetts. The truth is I've driven

down this highway my whole life. Once a month after my parents broke up, my brothers and I driving down I-93, Mom asking us deliberate questions like, “What in God’s name do you eat at Dad’s?”

I’ve told Frankie: When I was nine, my dad moved out of Boston to a rental house by a lake in Gloucester. He had a friend, Sharkey the manager, who would babysit us when my dad was gone. Sharkey had curly hair, the kind that looked wet, and a souped-up motorcycle he would carry me to, on the Fourth of July or after a couple beers. My brothers begged him to let them ride, but Sharkey only chose me, and he drove like dying was the aim, the helmet too big on my head. We zoomed down back roads, slicing free out of the still air. He’d lean to turn, my arms tightening on his waist. I thought of dropping from a plane. The glimpse into endlessness gave my laughter a screaming sound. And the engine burned my shins. The white outlines took on the vertical shapes of crocodiles, poised to belly forward.

After, Sharkey would watch us swim in the lake, that skin on my shins peeling a ghostly white. He hung our bathing suits on the shower rod and dried me off with my dad’s thin towels, taking my legs up on the tub one by one. We watched VHS tapes on the armchair: *Problem Child*, *Coming to America*. My hair dried in crimps as Sharkey fell asleep behind me. Sometimes I still feel like I’m in the car while my parents scream in the driveway. My mom had seen the burns on my shins.

“Never again. Never again!” went her raging chant.

But I also used to drive down this highway with Frankie, on the first day Sonic opened or to the mall to buy summer dresses or sometimes just to drive, Frankie blazing up the bowl in a swirl with her knee on the wheel, blowing earrings of smoke rings, with my bare feet up on the dash, sunglasses down to turn the world a purple-black, and blabbing on about how bad we needed boyfriends even though I never felt lonely, then.

I let out a sigh and Andrew looks over at me. He’s sporting puppy eyes, yearning for approval, or, worse, something I can’t articulate. I push the window down a crack, but the air makes a screaming sound, so I seal it back up.

“I’ve never been out of Massachusetts,” I admit.

“Really?” he says.

“Would I lie?” I say.

“You’re mysterious.”

“You’re the one in a rental car,” I say, “driving eighty-five miles an hour towards some town no one goes to so you can, what, dispose of my body in a polluted reservoir?”

We’ve been driving for an hour now. The trees that line the road grow as thick as our silence. My high’s fading fast and I wonder what Frankie’s doing. I text her: *I need you like my morning cigarette*. I cross then uncross my legs, watch how the clouds pretend to be faces. A monster opening its jaw, crazy gray smoke for eye-holes. I hear a lighter clicking, then Frankie’s hysterical laughter, a laugh like a glass building shattering.

If I were home right now, in our kitchen with the Christmas lights, we might be taking everything out of the fridge and arranging it on the coffee table like a feast. The sun would creep across the hardwood as we’d lay crisscross on the couch, knifing peanut butter onto Oreos, towels twisted tight around our heads. Our faces would be caked in homemade sugar masks, the honey dripping slowly down our necks.

We’d be watching some forgotten movie like *L.A. Confidential* or *Uncle Buck* and then, when there was nothing else, repeats of *America’s Next Top Model*. A commercial for a learning center would come on, an Asian woman with blushed cheeks speaking delicately into the camera as she waved a palm across the facility: “Here at Sylvan, we have a different approach to learning. . . .”

“We don’t *learn*,” I’d say, “but we *approach* it.”

Frankie would laugh so hard she’d knock over my water, our fingers Cheeto orange and our bare feet pressed together in a contract.

“What the hell,” I say as we pass a sign that reads, Welcome to New Hampshire. I turn back, gripping the headrest. “We’re in New Hampshire,” I say stupidly.

At the gas station, Andrew unbuckles carefully, the belt zooming across his chest. I think of all the things you can do in New Hampshire that you can’t in Boston: wear flannel earnestly, drive trucks with Republican bumper stickers, carry guns. I flip down the visor and pat my lips with cherry ChapStick, then watch him from the side mirror as gasoline drips steadily from the pump in his hand.

He runs his fingers through his hair and it falls back across his eyes in pieces.

I'm thinking, *Every veterinarian has a freezer*. I'm thinking, *I'm being kidnapped*, and whatever it is that gets me to seeing him in a muscle tee, tattoos of dead relatives peeking out of the sleeve. There I am, tied to the Motel 6 bed, collarbones making a cavity in my neck as I suck in my breath.

"Shut the fuck up," he'd say as he cocked his gun. "And do what I say," he'd whisper, running his dick over my chapped lips.

I bite my nails as we pull out. He jams a CD into the player.

"I used to really like this band Bright Eyes in high school," he says. Conor Oberst whines as we drive.

I say, "He sounds like Doug Funnie but more suicidal."

I guess Frankie and I went through a Bright Eyes phase in high school. We did everything. Made out in front of guys, dressed as JonBenét Ramsey for Halloween, gave ourselves loopy tattoos with India ink, laxatives, arrests. With the India ink, we carved "+/-" into the blue of our wrists because Frankie said we're like batteries, keep each other balanced, charged. She'd lay out wet trash bags on strangers' roofs to tan, squeeze lemon juice over my head, pluck peach fuzz from my tummy trail, tilt my chin up in the girls' room mirror, hold me still, slip a needle through my tongue.

But Frankie's got some kind of itch now. Once we graduate, Frankie says we have to get married. At some point, kids. *But when we get divorced and move back in together, what would we do with the kids?* I thought. We lived with Nat and Raffa, and now it's just us, four apartments together and only sometimes I'm worried we'll keep going like that, apartment to apartment, making figure eights around Boston with our boxes of clattering candles.

Frankie will come home with a kitten that will become a cat, and it'll die before we do. We'll bury it illegally in the backyard. We'll hold vigil candles, our dream catcher earrings drooping our thin earlobes, tatty blankets wrapped around our shoulders like Russian shawls. Frankie will cry, covering her eyes with her fingers, and I won't know what to say, like the day her mom died.

She'll slip a stubbed-out roach from her sweater pocket and we'll blaze up, medical marijuana now 'cause we're on disability. We'll pitch cold shovels into the hard dirt as it starts to snow. Our neighbors will swipe back the curtains and call our landlord, adding to their growing list of complaints.

Back in the car, I have to say New Hampshire is a postcard. It's scenic and lush as it slices by in my window.

"Okay," Andrew says. "If you could go anywhere in the world—anywhere—where would you go?"

Return of the talk show host. Two can play. I steeple my fingers, then bend back my elbows, but it's my voice that cracks, "Do you believe in God or is the lack of God your God? If you were stranded on a deserted island, what is the one thing you would never bring? You ever get a girl pregnant?"

"You're real weird," he says.

"Case dismissed."

"We're almost there," he says, ticking on the blinker and pulling onto a two-lane highway past all the fast-food signage that glows over the whole road: *Get your six inches! Hot 'n' juicy. Try our new fish bites box.*

He parks in a bend in the middle of nowhere. Evergreens reach tall. Power lines rustle with an electric tinge like before it starts to rain, and I hope it does. The rain gets me.

"Follow me," he says.

We walk up a steep path, snap back branches, and climb up through the trees. We walk forever, falling into a hypnotic, fairy-tale pace, deeper and darker into the woods. The dirt dusts up my shins and sticks in the heat like the skin on a peach. I get thirsty but follow. The back of his neck gleams with sweat.

I once had sex with a stranger in woods kind of like this. We met at a bar and got drunk on PBRs. I whispered, "Let's go," my tongue flicking his ear after he spun me around on a barstool, faster and faster, my head thrown back like an over-sugared child. I woke up parched in my then-boyfriend's bed the next morning. I went to pee and found tiny, incriminating twigs in my hair and in my underwear.

"Are we almost there?" I ask.

We're both panting when we stop at an opening in the trees. He lifts me up by the waist. We climb onto this rock that ledges out before the drop, so high up it's like the end of a Jeep commercial. The sky as open as the washed-up wetland below.

"What is this?" I say. "The Grand Canyon of New Hampshire?" I tuck my hands inside my sweatshirt cuffs to hide my smile.

“It’s called Deer Leap.”

We sit at the edge on the weathered granite with our feet kicked off the ledge. From this angle, September comes on thick, the way the heat fades off the grass. But what now?

“This whole thing used to be a pond,” he says, pointing to the deserted valley. “It dried up.”

“Weird view,” I say, the expanse of dead earth gaping under us, “for a voyeur.”

I look up, trying to grasp something enormous, or alive. I want to be this girl who’s taken with the sky, and sometimes I am, so I pull my hoodie up over my head and we kiss.

“You know what I like about you?” he says, taking my chin. I want to slither away, back under the leaves we marched on. “You’re honest.”

I pick up a pebble and squeeze it as hard as I can, chuck it as far as I can throw.

“Want me to be honest?” I say.

“Of course,” he says, shaking my shoulder.

“Your puppy needs a bath. He smells like Doritos.” I pick up another pebble, then steal a glance his way. He’s recovering from the slap, nodding along and smiling too hard.

“More like Smartfood?” he says, his eyes narrowing.

“Can I be actually honest?” I say.

“I don’t know now,” he says, tearing open a pack of nuts from his backpack.

Frankie knows that the first time I masturbated I was nine. In my neighborhood, the kids played after school on this trampoline in my neighbor’s backyard. After I did it, I lay in my bed, holding my hand over my chest to keep my heart inside my body. I could hear the kids shrieking frantically like birds. I remember being seriously worried that they were laughing at me.

One summer I wore gloves to summer camp because I thought I had AIDS.

In high school, Frankie and I went to this rager with an indoor pool. We did mushy coke off the diving board with a senior we barely knew who fed us blueberry Stoli, his arms around us in the hot tub. The next thing I remember I was getting pulled out by the cops. I can still feel the heat on my cheek from the hood of the cop car in the driveway, dripping wet, shivering in Frankie’s bikini. A flash-light clicked and she was already in the back of the car.

The cop had my wrists locked, and I steeled my lower back against his crotch as he bent down to my ear and said, “Have you ever been arrested?”

I tried to pry my arms free and screamed, “Have you ever been raped?”

What if I told Andrew about Sharkey? How he lifted us up out of the armchair and laid me on my dad’s springy mattress, where I waited, stiff as a knife. How he slipped his middle finger inside me like he was separating me from myself. How he laid that same hand on my chest, waiting for my breath, like on a doctor’s table.

“Are you asleep?” he would say.

“Yes.”

Frankie never had a dad, but she understands how the thought of him walking through the door at any second could make you come. I have dreams about Sharkey. We’re in the supermarket, embarrassing everyone in the checkout. Underwater, can’t tell that we’re kissing, our throats filling up with bubbles. In the waiting room, he comes out in a white coat. The supermarket, the kissing, the white coat, night after night. In the white coat, he looks desperate. He’s rushing to me, coming to tell me something critical, but it always stops right there.

Andrew has his arm around my waist as the sun drops fast. He’s stroking the skin above my jeans, and I let him pull my shirt up.

“What does this mean?” he says.

He’s thumbing the *DNR* tattoo on my rib cage. The most painful place for ink. I look at him, then burst into flames, laughing so hard that I’m afraid I’m going to pee. Andrew watches me, amazed. Frankie says my eyes sparkle when I laugh and that it’s evil and contagious. No one knows me like she does. I swipe up the leaves, tear them to pieces, toss them into the abyss. I fall onto my side to catch my breath. Andrew lies next to me, our noses touching, that same, stupid-ass amazement in his eyes. I blink slowly so he can notice mine when they open, and say this instead: “I love you.”

We say it the whole ride home. Him kissing the inside of my wrist with one hand on the wheel, at the toll, grinning at each other dopily while we wait for change, cars honking behind us, at the diner we stop at, the taste of grape jelly on my tongue.

“Can I call you tomorrow?” he says, the car idling outside my apartment. It’s midnight.

“This was great,” I say. “But can you unlock this?”

I bend down to the window because I need a place to lean. Any light between us flickers restlessly like last call. I walk away, knowing what I am. Free as the day God made me, but where’s that guy been?

I climb into Frankie’s bed, where she’s buried, block Andrew’s number, then cling to her pillow, caffeinated from the diner. Awake until it’s light, the birds making frenzied, electronic chirps outside her window.

Later, Frankie’s at her vanity, curling her hair for class. She looks at me in the mirror, our eyes catching. The rosacea on her cheek makes a flustered arc. I lie at the foot of her bed while she twists her hair around the iron. The room swells with the mist of her hair spray, thick lacquer like the rooms of a new house.

“Francesca,” I say, “we should drive somewhere. It’s not that hard to rent a car and move to LA.”

In the corner of the mirror, Frankie’s blush halves. She pulls the curler away, a section of her thick hair bouncing all tame up by her shoulder. I close my eyes and let the spray cover me from head to toe.

“We could become actresses or something,” I say. “No one would even know us.” I hear her lifting her backpack. Zipping her new boots.

“Hang on,” I want to tell her. “I need you like a Tylenol PM.”

Or something more: “I’d carve your name into my arm.”

“I’m a fucking evangelist for your love.”

I press the +/- on my wrist like a button on an elevator that won’t stop dropping.

Frankie, you’re the positive. I’m the negative, aren’t I?

I feel my own tears begin to roll in the wrong direction, behind my ears and down the back of my neck and onto Frankie’s sheets. And then her palm on my forehead like she’s checking my temp. She moves it to my neck, where my pulse jumps, wet and receptive. She takes her hand away, then backs up to the door. I whisper, “You should skip class. Please?”

“I can’t,” she says.

She says, “Stop being sad.”

I say, “I can’t.”

My eyes are still closed, but I can feel her there. The smallest creak, the *shlack*

of the lock, the keys on her carabiner jangling off her hip as she skips down the steps. Why does she do this to me? I want to rip open the window and scream at the birds. I want Frankie to rip open the window to scream at me, just so I can scream back: "I'm not sad. Stay the fuck out of my business. Get your own life if that's what you want so bad. You think some guy is going to strong-arm you out of the muck? Good luck with it." But I stay still and stiff, my cold palm on my chest. I listen to my own heart beating two skips too fast.

Hear it? *Frankie. Frankie.*