

Boys Go to Jupiter

The bikini isn't even Claire's thing. Before this winter, if you had said Confederate flag, Claire would have thought of high school beach trips: rows and rows of tacky souvenir shops along the Ocean City Boardwalk, her best friend, Angela, muttering *They know they lost, right?* while Claire tried to remember which side of the Mason-Dixon line Maryland was on. The flag stuff is Jackson's, and she's mostly seeing Jackson to piss off Puppy. Puppy, Claire's almost stepmother, is legally named Poppy; Puppy is supposedly a childhood nickname stemming from a baby sister's mispronunciation, but Claire suspects that Puppy has made the whole thing up. Puppy deemed it wasteful to pay twice as much for a direct flight in order for Claire to avoid a layover, and her father listens to Puppy now, so for the first

half of her trip, Claire had to go in the wrong direction—from Vermont to Florida via Detroit.

Jackson has a drawl and a pickup truck and, in spite of his lack of farming experience, a farmer's tan. Claire meets him at Burger Boy, the restaurant a few miles from her father's house. Its chipping red-and-white tiles and musk of grease give it all the glamour of a truck stop bathroom, but it's a respite from the lemon-scented and pristine house that brought her father to St. Petersburg for retirement. At college, Claire mostly lives off of the salad bar, but here she picks up a burger and fries to go every afternoon. It is the kind of food Puppy says she can't eat since she turned thirty, and Puppy, having no job and, from what Claire gathers, limited ambitions beyond strolling the house in expensive loungewear, is always home to miserably watch her eat it. On her fourth Burger Boy visit, Claire picks up Jackson too. They get high and make out in the pool house that afternoon, and the next and the next and the next.

At nineteen, Jackson is six months older than Claire but still a senior in high school. They try hanging out at his house once, but Claire feels shamed by his mother's scrutiny, assumes she wants to know what's damaged or defective about Claire that has her screwing a high school boy. After that, when they cannot be alone at her house because her father is home (rarely) or Puppy is unbearable (frequently), they find places to park. He gives her the bikini at the end of the first week, after she complains that her

father's move to Florida caught her off guard—she is used to winters that at least make an effort to be winter, but her father's new life in St. Pete is relentless sunshine, sunburn weather in December. Outside, by the pool, she has resigned herself to wearing T-shirts over one of Puppy's old suits, which is spangled with faded glitter and sags over Claire's bee-sting breasts. Jackson presents the bathing suit wadded up in a supermarket plastic bag, the sort of awkward non-gift you give someone in an awkward non-relationship—he bought it for five dollars on a spring break trip, he says, for a girlfriend he subsequently found blowing one of his friends in their shared motel room.

It isn't much—three triangles and some string—but the tag is still attached, and Jackson is beaming at her.

"You'd look so hot in this," he says.

She does look pretty hot: like someone she is not, what with the stars and bars marking her tits and crotch, but like a hot someone she is not.

"You look like white trash," Puppy says to her the first time she sees the bikini.

"You would know," Claire says back. The bathing suit becomes a habit, even after the temperature dips. Two days before she leaves town, she throws a pair of cutoffs and a T-shirt over it before she and Jackson leave the house, but when they get to the parking space—a clearing in a half-built, abandoned subdivision—she makes a show of stripping off the shorts and shirt. In the few minutes before he

takes it off and fucks her in the truck's cab, Jackson snaps a picture of Claire, radiant and smiling and leaning against the crisp foil-flash of the bumper, the bikini's Xs making her body a tic-tac-toe board.

She's already forgotten about the picture when Jackson posts it on Facebook that night, tagged with her name and #mygirl. Claire doesn't have the heart to object. On her last night in town she doesn't even see Jackson—her father takes her out for a fancy dinner along the waterfront, just her, and then it's goodbye. At the gate awaiting her connecting flight, Claire drapes herself over two airport chairs and checks the messages on her phone. She has eighteen new texts, most from casual acquaintances, the closest thing she has to friends at Dennis College. The messages range from hostile to bewildered, and it takes her a few minutes to decipher what has prompted them: a tweet from the account of the Black girl who lives across the hall from her, which features the photo of Claire in the bikini and the commentary "My hallmate just posted this picture of herself on vacation 😊."

Claire squints at the thumbnail photo of the tweet's author, the only Black girl on their dorm's floor, and vaguely remembers her. In the frenzied first weeks at Dennis, full of getting-to-know-you games and welcomes, Claire accepted the girl's friend request, but she wasn't really aware that hallmate was a thing, a relationship carrying some ex-

pectation of trust or camaraderie. She is strangely embarrassed by the picture, the way it turns her into someone else. She wasn't wearing the bikini to bother Black people—for Christ's sake, there were none in her father's new neighborhood to bother even if she wanted to—but to bother Puppy, who is half racist anyway, which makes her aggrieved reaction doubly hilarious. Claire turns her phone off again, closes her eyes, and thinks to the mental picture of the girl whose name she cannot remember, if she has ever known it, well fuck you too.

IN THEIR OLD Virginia neighborhood, in the old house, the one Claire's father sold the second she graduated, they have Black neighbors. The Halls move into Claire's subdivision the summer before she starts first grade, back when the neighborhood is still brand-new: tech money is paving western Fairfax on its way out to Reston, which will be malls and mini-mansions and glossy buildings soon. Claire's mother prefers the idea of a sprawling country house a little farther out, but her father likes the idea of something you can build from the ground up, tinkering with room sizes and flooring types, and so her father gets his house and Claire watches her mother choose from seven different shades of granite for the counters and eight different types of wood for the floors. Everything is so new and shiny

when they move in that Claire is afraid of her own house, afraid her presence will somehow dent or tarnish it.

Though Claire has always lived in Virginia, and Virginia, she knows, is technically The South, Angela is the first person Claire remembers meeting whose voice lilts: the Halls moved from South Carolina, and the whole family talks with drowsy vowels and an occasional drag that gives some words—her name, for example—a comforting dip in the middle. In Mrs. Hall's mouth, Claire's name is a tunnel from which a person can emerge on the other side. Claire is fascinated by their accents, and, yes, by the dark tint of their skin, but mostly she is anxious to be seen. In her own house, Claire is alone: her only sibling is a half brother, Sean, ten years older, from her father's first marriage. She sees him for two weeks every summer and every other Christmas. Her father keeps long hours, and her mother has a certain formality; Claire loves her, but feels, in her presence, like a miniature adult, embarrassed by the silliness of her six-year-old desires.

Mrs. Hall is an elementary school teacher and has a high tolerance for the frenetic energy of children's games. Angela's house also has Aaron, her brother, who is only a year older than the two of them. Claire's mother refers to Angela and Aaron as Irish twins, which confuses Claire because they are neither twins nor Irish, so she adopts Mrs. Hall's term: stair-step siblings, one right behind the other. At that age, they are the same size, Angela tall for her age

and Aaron short for his. Aaron is skinny and quiet and wears glasses that dwarf his face; Angela is a whirlwind.

Since Claire has no brother at home to torment, she and Angela torment Aaron together, chasing him around the front lawn, menacing him with handfuls of glitter and other arts and crafts detritus, taking his shoes from the row by the front door and hiding them in cupboards, in the garage, in the laundry. Claire, not yet entirely clear on the rules of family, thinks of herself as having not a half brother, but half-a-brother, and shortly after meeting the Halls she thinks of herself as having half of Angela's brother too. The first summer, Angela teaches her that silly hand game, which starts *My mother your mother live across the street*. Though this isn't technically true of them, it's close enough, so they swear it is about them, and torment Aaron with its refrain—*Girls are dandy just like candy, boys are rotten just like cotton, girls go to college to get more knowledge, boys go to Jupiter to get more stupider*. In most aspects Aaron is indifferent to their teasing, but the Jupiter taunt seems to bother him for its failures of logic. Boys, he insists, would have to be smart to go to Jupiter, and would probably go to college first. The argument has merits that Claire and Angela ignore in favor of papering the door of his room with pictures of Jupiter: crayon drawn, ripped out of magazines, snipped out of Claire's parents' dusty encyclopedia set, and once out of a children's book about the solar system, stolen from Angela's pediatrician's office. *How*

is the weather on Jupiter? they ask him, though he never answers. Even now Claire recognizes renderings of the planet on sight, cloud spotted, big and bright and banded, unspectacular until you consider all it holds in orbit.

THE GIRL ACROSS THE HALL doesn't look like Angela at all. She is lighter skinned and heavier framed and her hair is wilder, deliberately unkempt in a way that would have made Angela's mother raise an eyebrow. Her name, Claire eventually remembers, is Carmen. By the time Claire arrives at her dorm room, on the second floor of a row of flat brick buildings that house a third of the small college's freshmen, there are forty-seven responses to and twenty-three retweets of Carmen's post. Claire is surprised by the level of interest, then annoyed by it. She distrusts collective anger; Claire's anger has always been her own. Claire prints a photo of the Confederate flag and scrawls in loopy cursive on the back **WELCOME BACK! I HOPE YOU HAD A GREAT VACATION**. When she slips the photo under Carmen's door, she means to tell Carmen-the-hallmate to fuck off.

The next morning, the voice mail on her phone is full. She has 354 new emails, most of them from strangers. Across the hall, campus movers are noisily carting Carmen off to a new dorm. A reporter from the student paper, unable to reach her by phone, has slipped a note under Claire's

door asking for an interview. She gathers from his note that several bloggers have now picked up both the bikini photo and Carmen's photo of last night's postcard. She has a text from Jackson. The hashtag #badbikiniideas turns up 137 results, including one with a picture of swastikas Photoshopped into palm trees. An email marked **URGENT** informs her that her academic counselor would like to speak to her. In a separate urgent email, the Office of Diversity requests her presence. Someone using the email fuckyoufuckyou@gmail.com thinks she is a cunt. Twenty-two different rednecks from around the country have sent her supportive pictures of their penises.

It seems clear to Claire that most of the hall has taken Carmen's side. Claire forgoes both showering and breakfast, opting instead to burrow in her room. Someone from the campus TV station has interviewed Carmen and put the clip online. In the video, Carmen stands in front of Bell Hall, one of the upperclassmen dorms, where she has apparently been relocated. She wears a Dennis College sweatshirt and wraps her arms around herself. "Up until this happened, I thought she was nice," Carmen says. "We always smiled at each other in the hallway. But she put a hate symbol where I sleep, and she thought it was funny." There is genuine fear in her eyes, which startles Claire.

Sean, who hasn't called her in months, has left an angry voice mail asking her what she was thinking. Claire does

not call him back. Jackson texts again to tell her he knows she's busy, but he thinks she's awesome. Claire turns her phone off and shuts her in-box tab and spends the afternoon watching online videos of singing goats. She is on her tenth goat video when the president of the campus libertarians shows up at her door and introduces himself. His name is Robert and he lives two floors down, where he is the RA. He smiles like someone who has just won second place.

"I'm here in support of your right to free expression," he says.

"Don't take this personally," Claire says, "but unless you're here in support of my right to go to bed early, I don't care. I don't care about any of this. It was just a stupid picture."

"And you shouldn't be punished for it, but you will be if you don't get ahead of this. My friend lives on your hall and hasn't seen you all day, so we figured you were hiding out. We made you a care package."

The care package consists of a foil-wrapped caramel apple from the dining hall, which has declared it carnival week at the dessert buffet, and a book on libertarian philosophy, in case she's bored. Claire considers the offering. She is unimpressed, but also hungry, so she lets him in before his presence in her doorway becomes a spectacle.

"For the record," he says, "I'm not a big fan of the Confederate flag myself. The Confederacy was an all-around failure of military strategy. Lost the battle when they lost the ports, if you ask me. But I'm not going to judge anyone

for their support of lost causes. As far as I'm concerned, you can wear anything you want."

Claire gathers that she is supposed to find this endearing, that she is supposed to bite the apple and lick the caramel off of her lips and ask him to tell her more about military strategy and let him plan her own response campaign, and that sometime several hours into this discussion she is supposed to end up naked out of awe or gratitude. Instead she sets the book and the apple on her desk, politely thanks him, tells him she is tired, and, when he finally leaves, locks the door behind him. She eats the apple alone in bed, figuring it can cover her meals for today and maybe tomorrow—she's still got some Burger Boy calories stored up.

When she checks her mail again before bed, there are another hundred emails. Her student account's address has been posted on several message boards and #clairewilliams vacationideas is a locally trending topic (Auschwitz, My Lai, Wounded Knee). She is losing on Twitter, but a group called Heritage Defenders has picked up the story and distributed it to their members, so at this point she has more supporters than detractors in her in-box. Cliff from Tennessee writes that when he was in college, his fraternity hosted an annual plantation ball for their sister sorority, and everyone dressed in their frilly historical finest. One year he and his frat brother decided to cover the house's front lawn in thousands of cotton balls, so that when they posed for

pictures on its steps, the college's mostly Black janitorial staff could be seen in the background of the shot, cleaning up. PC police tried to shut down our chapter for it, but we stayed strong. "Hang in there!" the email concludes. There is an attachment: a picture of a boy, smiling wide in khaki pants with a button-down and vest, his arm around a laughing redhead in a corset and frilly hoop skirt, cotton balls blanketing the ground beneath them, a stooped Black man in a green uniform sweeping up cotton in the background. He has a broom and a plastic trash can on wheels and his uniform is crisp and synthetic-shiny—there's nothing historically authentic about his presence, other than his Blackness. She cannot see the man's face, but she can imagine it, and the imagining comes with a twinge of shame. But she is not Cliff, Claire reminds herself; Cliff thinking they are the same doesn't make them the same. The next email is angry and anonymous; its writer threatens to find out where she lives and set her on fire. Claire decides she will tell anyone looking where to find her. She prints out a copy of the flag and tapes it to her dorm window. She calls the reporter from the student paper back and tells him she is simply celebrating her heritage, like any number of groups on campus encourage students to do. She affects a lilt to say so, but as soon as the words are out of her mouth she realizes that the affect is a mistake. She doesn't sound like herself. She sounds like Angela.

IN THE SECOND GRADE, sometime after discovering that Angela is Black, Claire writes a poem about their friendship for Martin Luther King Day. Most of the lines she has forgotten over time, the exception being the dubious couplet "I judge her for her character / and so I'm never mad at her." Their teacher likes the poem so much that she stages it for the school's February assembly, assigning them costumes: Claire, a stiff black-and-white "patriot" uniform, complete with tricornered hat, and Angela, a kente cloth dress. For the next three years of elementary school they are dragged out to recite the poem every February, a performance that Angela's mother permits only after mandating a costume change.

Claire and Angela forever. By adolescence they have both lucked into beauty, but neither has really noticed yet; there is so little room for interlopers in the tight world of their friendship that they are often each other's only mirrors. When they are swarmed by boys at the mall, Angela will name the game, Wiccans or airheads or runaways, and they will play their roles until the boys catch on that they are being teased. The last good summer, they go to camp together at a college a few hours south of Fairfax. Other girls they know go to horse camp or dance camp or Paris, but they go to what Angela calls nerd camp. Technically

they are not at camp together, because nerd camp is separated by discipline—Angela is there for poetry and Claire is there for language immersion—and most of the time all Claire can do is shout dirty words in French from across the quad when she sees Angela’s group trooping to lunch like a line of maudlin ducks. But in the evenings everyone socializes together, and as the weeks accumulate, the counselors, who are only college age themselves, become lackadaisical about chaperoning and enforcing rules.

The third week of camp, a group escapes the confines of the awkward Saturday dance, flees the repurposed assembly room with its drooping crepe paper, the flailing girls on the dance floor ringed by a wall of scared boys who will not ask anyone to dance and are not cool enough to pretend not to want to. One of the photography campers has a water bottle full of vodka and someone else has a Tic Tac case full of pills, and at some point on their way to the most private patch of lawn they have taken pills and shots and then they are running through lawn sprinklers. Everything sizzles. When they kitten-pile into the grass, Claire turns to Angela. It is a love that requires touch, and so Claire snuggles against her, nuzzles into her neck to say it out loud against her. Love love love. Angela is her best friend, her other self. Someday they will go to college together. The world will unravel for them, fall at their feet.

A year later both of their mothers are sick. It starts slow, with both of them, and then quick quick quick. With An-

gela’s mother it is a lump, with Claire’s a vague malaise. We should have caught it sooner, Angela and Claire say to each other, over and over again, as though their mothers’ bodies are their own. At first it seems as if, even in its cruelty, the universe is being kind, giving Claire a person to suffer through this with. Who else knows the smells of hospitals, the best way to sleep in a hospital chair, the flushed shame of disgust at cleaning up your mother’s vomit, the palpitating anxiety of waking each morning thinking that this is the day something will go terribly wrong, the wince every time the phone rings while your mother is out of sight? Claire doesn’t even have to give Angela words.

Aaron knows too. He is two grades ahead of them and supposed to be gone by now, but when his mother gets sick he defers his college acceptance. “Guess you were right,” he says to Claire one afternoon, all of them in the basement watching daytime TV. “It’s Jupiter for me after all.” On-screen, two men on a court show are declared not the father, but one of them throws a chair at the other anyway.

“Jupiter would be better than this,” says Claire.

One afternoon when their mothers are miserable and weary from chemo, Aaron finds Claire jogging in the rain, and pulls over for her. She cannot explain why, in spite of the storm, she hasn’t turned around and gone back to the house—why she is, in fact, running in the wrong direction. When she gets into his car she sobs and then dry heaves and then follows Aaron into his house, where she strips

and wraps herself in a throw blanket on the basement sofa and he makes her what his mother always made when they were kids, peppermint hot chocolate. It is out of season but still the best thing that has happened to her recently, though when she reaches for his body, feels the first thing she has felt in months that isn't slow death, that isn't bad either. He is still skinny, his hips slimmer than hers, so she slides underneath him; the weight of her, it seems, might smother him, but the weight of him tethers her to something. He is too gentle with her even after she tells him not to be; after he is finished she has to fake an orgasm to get him to stop insisting he'll make her come too. They don't love each other that way, or pretend to, so it isn't weird afterward, just a thing that happened because everyone is closer now. Claire and Angela can complete each other's thoughts. Claire and Aaron can be naked. Their mothers, who have only ever been casually friendly, now speak an intimate language of supplements and painkillers and hospitals and wig shops. Even their fathers have taken to neighborly gestures of solidarity.

Mrs. Hall has been Claire's second mother most of her life, and Claire fears that she will lose both her mother and her other mother, but it turns out that it is worse to lose only one, when it's the one that counts. Claire knows as soon as she feels it the first time that there is cruelty in this sentiment, so much cruelty that it surprises her, but that doesn't change the feeling. Mrs. Hall walks out of the hospital in full remission. Not a trace of the cancer left. Her

hair grows back, soft and downy. She takes up running to drop the steroid weight. She is working up to marathons. Angela trains with her.

CLAIRE'S MOTHER DIES IN JULY. They bury her on a damp Tuesday when the ground is slimy from an afternoon thunderstorm. She does not hear a word the priest says, thinking of her mother down there, rotting. For weeks before the funeral she has nightmares in which she is the one being buried, alive, the sickening smell of earth always waking her. At the funeral, Angela holds her hand and Aaron puts an arm around her shoulders. He is a perfect gentleman, but one with a mother, and Angela is a friend with a mother, and already they are galaxies away from Claire, alone in her grief.

ROBERT IS NOT EASILY DISSUADED. He returns the next morning with a sandwich, a task list, and backup in the form of a short, freckled sophomore named Alan. By noon, Robert and Alan have sold Claire on their strategy. They tell her putting the flag up was brilliant, and that three other students have taped Confederate flags to their doors in solidarity. One of them, Robert confesses, is Alan. They have drafted a statement for her and agreed to a town hall meeting on her behalf.

“You’re not breaking any rules,” says Robert.

“You have a right to celebrate where you came from,” Alan says. “Just stick to that and you’ll be good. Don’t let them make you sound like a racist. Don’t let them turn you into your own worst enemy.”

Claire’s mother came from Connecticut. She found even the northernmost reaches of the South vaguely suspect. She missed New England seafood and would occasionally, when feeling extravagant, pay an exorbitant amount to express mail herself a live lobster. Claire’s father was originally from Minnesota. Before he retired to Florida, Northern Virginia was the farthest south any relative of hers had ever lived. For the moment, it feels like a miracle to her that no one has to know any of that.

Claire has skipped her Monday and Tuesday classes, but the next morning is the occasion of her mandated appointment with the Dean of Student Affairs, the university ombudswoman, her adviser, and the Vice Dean of Diversity. She showers for the first time this week, blow-dries and teases her hair. She wears a horrible mint-green dress Puppy bought her for an engagement event that Claire refused to attend. She puts on her mother’s pearls, takes them off, puts them on again.

It is a short walk to the ombudswoman’s office, but by the time she gets there Claire is freezing, despite her coat, and wishes she had stopped for hot coffee in the student center. The office is wood paneled, newly renovated in a

bright but bland way that invites you to imagine it decades later and dingy. Behind its windows, Claire knows, is the grace of woods in winter, but this morning the blinds are drawn. Claire’s adviser, a twentysomething brunette whom Claire has met twice so far, gives her a tentative smile. At their first advising meeting, Claire noted that some of her student files were tagged with brightly colored sticky tabs. Claire’s was tagged with red. The adviser was sheepish about it when Claire asked her what the color system was about, and Claire realized later that red must mean exactly what it looked like, though which disaster the adviser intended to mark, Claire still isn’t sure. She doesn’t trust a woman who puts literal red flags on things and expects people not to catch on. The ombudswoman is a middle-aged Puerto Rican woman in a drab pantsuit and the Dean of Student Affairs is a middle-aged white man wearing what Claire can only presume is one in an ongoing series of wacky ties, this one featuring cartoon insects. Together the two of them look like someone’s embarrassing parents. The Vice Dean of Diversity, a thirtysomething Black man with dreadlocks and skinny jeans, has taken his own couch. He has his notepad out and does not meet Claire’s eye.

“We can’t force you to take down the flag,” says the ombudswoman, once Claire is seated. “I want to be clear that that’s not what we’re here to do. Your decor is not in violation of any official university policy. But we can ask you, in the interest of the campus community and the well-being

of your peers, to remove the flag from your window, and apologize to Miss Wilson. You will face a peer disciplinary hearing on the subject of your harassment of Miss Wilson, and I can only imagine that having made some attempt to rectify things will make a good impression on the disciplinary board.”

“What harassment?”

“The threat you slipped under Miss Wilson’s door,” says the Vice Dean of Diversity.

“I threatened her to enjoy her vacation and feel welcomed back?”

“You left a Confederate flag postcard under her door,” says the ombudswoman. “Aside from the fact that the image itself, sent to a Black student in the place where she lives, could be construed as a threat on its own, you knew already that Miss Wilson felt distressed by the image and was wary of your affinity for it. She reasonably construed it as a threat and requested that the university relocate her.”

“A threat of what? That I was going to legally enslave her? Secede from the hallway, declare war on her, and then lose?”

“Please take this seriously,” says her adviser.

“I only knew that she was distressed by the flag because she put a picture of me on the internet to harass me. When is her disciplinary hearing?”

“You, or your friend, put your picture on the internet,” says her adviser, exasperation creeping into her voice. “We

stress during orientation that nothing on the internet is private, and we wish more of you took that seriously. So far as we can tell, no one from campus had anything to do with publicizing your contact information.”

“So a hundred people can send me death threats, but I can’t put a flag in my window.”

“No one can send you death threats,” says the ombudswoman. “If any of them are traced to this community, those students will be dealt with. And I would advise you to speak to both campus safety officers and the local police about any and all threats you receive. You’re not on trial here. No one is out to get you, and none of us are on the disciplinary board. It is our job to ask you nicely to make this easier on everyone. What you do with that is up to you.”

“The first thing I would do, if I were you, is take advantage of our excellent history department and talk to a professor about why the image you’ve chosen to go to bat for is so hostile,” says the Vice Dean of Diversity.

Claire focuses on the window blinds and takes a breath.

“I am familiar with the Civil War and the student code of conduct,” she says finally. “But bless your hearts for being so helpful.”

Claire leaves for lunch feeling in control of the situation for the first time, and feeling in control of the situation is luxurious enough that she grabs lunch in the student center, not minding the stares. In an otherwise uneventful lit class, the professor seems confused by her accent, but Claire

doesn't talk enough for anyone to be certain she didn't sound like that before. She heads back to her dorm giddy with relief.

When she first sees the photograph, it takes her a full minute to connect it to herself. One of the blogs that has taken to relentlessly covering the story and recommends she be expelled has posted a photo from the police file. There is her smashed-up car. There is a senior yearbook photo of Aaron. The article only has pieces of the story. Claire reads it to see if the Halls—any of them, all of them, Angela—have made any comment. The article says they cannot be reached.

IT IS NOVEMBER of senior year and Claire is hanging out with a girl named Seraphin, as in that is her actual given name, which never stops being hilarious. Or, Claire was hanging out with Seraphin, but who knows where Seraphin is now—her ex-boyfriend is back in town for Thanksgiving weekend and invited them to this party. Claire is three drinks? Four? Four drinks in to something bright pink that the host calls panty-dropper punch, one drink for every month her mother has been dead so far. She still thinks of it that way, as in, so far, her mother is still dead, but that could change any day now; any moment her mother could walk in and demand to know what she is doing, and what she has been doing, tonight, is drinking.

Grief has a palpable quality, and it is all she can feel unless she's making an active effort to feel something else. Tonight she is feeling drunk—pink and punchy and panty-dropping, because all of those things mean she is not at home, where Puppy has already strutted into the space her mother left behind with such velocity that it's clear to Claire that her father checked out well before her mother did.

Claire is still wearing panties, so far; she has that going for her, though she has held on to them only barely after an aborted tryst with a boy she met in the laundry room. She is barefoot, which she realizes only when something sharp startles her, which she has already forgotten by the time she gets to the other side of the kitchen and braces herself against the counter, but remembers again when she lifts her head and sees a streak of blood on the kitchen floor. *Shoes*, she is thinking, when she hears her name.

It shouldn't surprise her that Aaron is there. He has finally gone to college, but it is Thanksgiving, and there is so much to be thankful for in that house, so of course Aaron is back. He looks well. The freshman fifteen suit him. There is a girl on his arm Claire has never seen before—she is curly haired and caramel colored, and he whispers something into her ear that causes her to reluctantly leave them alone in the kitchen. So now Claire doesn't know two things, where her shoes are or who this Aaron is who has a life she knows nothing about. It has been months since she has spoken to either sibling. There is so much she wouldn't

know about Aaron now, and yet standing in front of her he is a flip book of all the other Aarons she has known, from rotten rotten rotten Jupiter Jupiter Jupiter through last year in the basement, the grip of his palm on her hip.

"Claire?" he says. "You OK?"

"I'm fucking amazing," says Claire.

"You don't look good. Do you need me to call Angela?"

"For what? We don't talk."

"She's upset about that, you know. She has no idea why you won't talk to her."

"Because every time I see her I want to tell her I'm sorry your mother is alive, because it reminds me that mine is dead."

Aaron winces. He takes a nervous sip from his red cup before looking at her again.

"That's fucked up, Claire. My mom misses you too. You're messed up right now, I get that, but at some point you're going to have to stop making it worse."

"I'm not making it worse. I'm looking for my shoes."

"Where did you leave them?"

"Maybe with Brendan. He's in the laundry room. Probably still putting his pants on."

"Who's Brendan?"

"Who is anybody, anyway? Who are you?"

"Claire, enough. I'm taking you home, OK?"

There is something firm and brotherly in his tone and it infuriates her. She shakes her head, but he ignores her

and comes close enough that he could touch her if he stretched out his arm. Claire lets out a scream that startles him into momentary retreat, a bestial noise she has been holding in for months. While Aaron is deciding what to do next, she is around him and out the door, the grass cold and wet on her feet. By the time he catches up with her, she is climbing into the driver's seat of her car. Claire leans her head against the steering wheel, suddenly exhausted. Aaron sighs from outside her open door. He hesitates for a minute, then hoists her over his shoulder and carries her around to the passenger side.

"Let's go home," he says.

She doesn't know whether he means her home or his home, but she is too tired to protest. Let him deliver her to her father's doorstep or the Halls' guest room, let someone who is still alive yell at her the way her mother is yelling in her head all the time. She presses her temple to the window and starts to fade out, only barely aware of Aaron digging through her purse for her keys and settling in behind the wheel, only barely hearing the yelling coming from somewhere nearby.

The person yelling is Seraphin's current boyfriend, who is pissed that Seraphin went to her ex's party and invited him as an afterthought. Claire knows him, but not well. He's a little buzzed from pregaming but mostly he's angry, so when he sees, as he tells the police later, *a huge Black guy pulling Claire out of her car and rummaging through her purse*

and driving her away, he is alarmed enough that he and his friends get back in their car and follow Claire's, alarmed enough to call the cops while they're driving.

Claire sleeps through it at the time: Aaron, unnerved by the car behind him, flooring the accelerator; Seraphin's boyfriend tailgating, flashing his brights, then the car full of boys pulling alongside them, his friends throwing a soda bottle and yelling at Aaron to stop. Aaron only goes faster, losing them for a moment, then, less than a mile from their houses, turning onto Cleveland Street at such speed that he spins out and the car flips into the trees. Claire wakes up, vaguely, to sirens, and then for real, in the hospital, where she has a concussion and a hangover and a starring role in someone else's rescue story.

Aaron is dead. By the time Claire is awake enough to be aware of this, it has already been determined that he was not a stranger, that he was just above the legal limit, that people saw him chase her out of the party after she screamed, that she was passed out in her own car. The people who give him the benefit of the doubt mostly feel themselves to be magnanimous.

"He should have just pulled over and explained," Seraphin will say sadly a few weeks later, and Claire will nod, and Seraphin will be quoted saying it again in the paper when *The Post* runs an article about the accident's aftermath. Mrs. Hall will tell the reporter that a Black boy doesn't get out of

the car at night in the woods for a car full of angry white boys in Virginia. Claire's father will read the paper and say it's not the 1950s.

It isn't; it's the first decade of the new millennium, but Claire's father is a lawyer, and Seraphin's boyfriend's father is Claire's father's golf partner. No one is assigned any legal responsibility for the accident. The Halls' lawsuit is dismissed before Claire has to say anything in public. It's Angela who won't talk to her now, and the tenth time Mrs. Hall knocks on their front door and no one answers, Claire's father gets a restraining order. Claire tells the reporter Aaron was a friend, that she was drunk and he was taking her home, but the bones of that story don't convince anyone it wasn't all, at best, a tragic misunderstanding; at worst, a danger she didn't see coming. Claire tells the reporter some innocuous nice thing about Seraphin's boyfriend, and the paper calls him one of her best friends, after which she stops trying to explain.

The Halls rent out their house for the spring and Angela finishes her senior year at a private school closer to DC. When Claire sees them rolling their suitcases out to the car, preparing to follow their moving van, she feels shame and relief, in which order she cannot say. Claire rides to prom in a limo with Seraphin and her boyfriend and a date whose name she forgets soon after. A month later the house Claire grew up in is on the market and her father and Puppy

are formally engaged. Three months after that she is gone, tucked away at a small liberal arts college where no one has ever met her, and anything is possible.

Robert is at her dorm door again. She sees herself as he sees her, a problem to be solved. He is logic; she is *x*. The internet's discovery of the accident has driven the attention to a pitched furor. He wants to prepare her for the town hall that has been called regarding her continued presence on campus. Claire is not even sure she likes Robert, let alone trusts him, but she tells him everything. Someone has found a photograph of Aaron, the one that ran with his obituary. His smile melts into the part of Claire that still remembers when he was missing his two front teeth.

Aaron's favorite joke:

Knock-knock.

Who's there?

Anticipation.

Anticipation who?

...

Who?

...

...

It takes Claire and Angela more than a year to stop falling for it, to realize that the joke is their own impatience, not a punch line he's been holding out on them. Even as teenagers, they sometimes take the bait; they don't put it

past him to have been waiting years for the right moment of revelation, for the payoff they've been promised.

THE TOWN HALL is held in the library's rotunda. The evening has been devised as an open mic, moderated by the Vice Dean of Diversity and the Dean of Students. People who do not wish to speak may make comments on note cards and drop them in boxes at the end of each row. The cards will be periodically collected and read aloud. Robert has provided Claire with an annotated list of episodes of Confederate valor or sacrifice, anything she might say she believes the flag stands for. She scans it for highlights: Albert Johnson, who sent his personal doctors to treat injured Union soldiers while he bled out on the battlefield—don't mention that he probably didn't know he was shot—the point is a crueler man might have lived. Thirty-two hundred African American Confederate veterans. Such a young army; so many dead boys.

Claire is wearing a dress marked with yellow flowers. The first person to speak is a weepy white sophomore boy, who expresses how distraught he is to be on a campus that has been touched by hate and personally apologizes to the Black students on campus, which apology takes the full remaining three minutes of his allotted time. Claire watches Carmen, who does not look in her direction. Carmen is surrounded by two full rows of Black students, more Black

people than Claire has ever seen on campus before—maybe, it occurs to her, more Black people than Claire has ever seen at once in her life. None of them stand to speak. A boy in a vest and fedora approaches the microphone and dramatically reads the lyrics of “Sweet Home Alabama.” No one can determine whether or not he is being ironic.

Robert has told Claire to wait for as close to the end as possible, to let everyone rage against her and then win with the last word. Claire waits.

She is only supposed to talk about Aaron if somebody asks. She is supposed to say accident as many times as she possibly can. She is supposed to say that he was one of her best friends and she is insulted by any speculation to the contrary. She has practiced saying these things as truths and saying them as lies. I killed someone. I loved him. I walked away. A warped version of that icebreaker game. Two truths and a lie, or two lies and a truth.

After the boy in the fedora finishes, two other white students speak, and then the microphone stands unattended. None of the Black students move. At first Claire thinks their silence is hesitation, but everyone remains still long beyond awkwardness—ten minutes, exactly. One by one the Black students stand. They hand their note cards to the Dean of Students, and then they leave. The Dean turns over card after card after card; all of them are blank. Handfuls of white students begin to stand, gather their

things, and file out behind them. Robert is scribbling a note.

Claire has come prepared for an argument. She does not know how to resist this enveloping silence. It is strategic. It hums in her head. But the room is still half full. The microphone is still on. There are three reporters from the student paper, and ten from national news outlets. There are still ten feet between her and the echoing sound of her own voice, telling her she can still be anybody she wants to.