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SPIKED

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CONTENT WARNING

SPIKED contains depictions of assault, gun violence, sexual assault, body-shaming and suicide. As well, derogatory terms commonly used to target members of the LGBTQIA+ community are utilized. The views expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect those of the author.

As I stand staring, the freshly turned tassel slightly obstructing the view of high school graduation, I can't help but think back to where this spiral began, where the descent was triggered and whether it logically could have been avoided. I look up to the gigantic screen perched above the stage— above the podium where our Headmaster stands. A white handkerchief is gripped in his hand as he studies the screen projecting Palmer's face plastered with a smile showcasing perfectly straight teeth. I notice the tiniest tinges of yellow squares where the plaque build-up within his braces had stained them during his orthodontist-ripe years of pre-adolescence. I discreetly run my tongue over my own teeth, hidden between two lips plastered in a straight line; unenthused. I begin to think to myself that my teeth are noticeably whiter and, unlike Palmer's, remain intact within my skull. The corners of my lips creep upwards at this thought, that even if my teeth were bouncing out of their sockets in my gums, they'd still be whiter than Palmers.

I glance to my right to find Polo is staring at me, his eyes fixed on the slight smirk I hold. Polo is not smiling. I drop the grin and stare straight ahead, unsure why I care if Polo sees me chuckling at this *In Memoriam* slide. He was chortling through the entirety of the Valedictorian speech, now why does he care if I chuckle at Palm? The poor dead sucker. Polo himself is a first class piece of shit. As was Palmer.

And as am I, I suppose.

I continue to ponder the path I traveled, the prerequisites which transpired to dispose of all of us here, a sea of black gowns staring up at our dead friend. *Despite all of us being a chalkboard summation of pieces of shit, I think, I'm not sure anyone can blame this on us. We didn't kill the kid, we were just running. If it's anyone's fault, it's Lee's—*

And that's when it clicked. *Bryce Lee*. The event that sent this year hurdling off course, into the broken timeline it now resides in.

It's when that fat fuck decided to join the team.

**

Roughly six months prior to graduation, I'm running upon the curved, cracked concrete of Clybourne Stadium. Cold is clicking my ankle joints as the warmth of my calf muscles contrasts the cruel December climate, sweet-sweat sending shivers, inciting blurred vision as it drips into my eyes, this summoning a kaleidoscope of confusing colors. I circumnavigate them and focus on pacing my mile (a concise sub-seven minutes). The spiked cleats I'm wearing, a superior Nike *Elite* pair, *clack* at the track below me and the rhythm gives a sort of calm that helps subside the overwhelming blur of colors.

Running releases a cocktail of endorphins into your bloodstream. When you're really exhausting yourself and feeling *good* about it, all of this enhanced by your innate body chemistry being exposed to shock (i.e it's a snapping 30-degrees Fahrenheit which, even in the dead of winter, is uncharacteristically cold for Texas) can lead to a sudden head-rush, in tune with nicotine buzzing, paint huffing or the convulsions of an orgasm. It's called a *Runner's High*.

The Huntington Cross Country team consists of me, keeping a steady pace behind my then-still-good-buddy Ralph Lauren, the word *POLO* emblazoned across the back of his practice jersey, the nickname he unequivocally earned when his parents decided to indulge in the Lauren surname and coin him after the horse-and-jockey brand. Behind me, Palmer pushes at my heels, desperate to show me up. I keep him in the back of my mind but neglect to sweat over it. We're entering mile two and I know that this is the point in which his stamina will burn off and he'll fall back. I, however will still have enough gas stored in the tank to finish strong with my 6.89 mile time average, possibly even slipping to a 6.94 if the urge to slack wins over, but never falling to a seven-minute mile. This isn't the Jr. High league.

Polo will finish first with an average 6.35 minute mile which is un-fucking-believable. He can practically sprint the entirety of the third mile. Polo is the leader of Huntington's Varsity Cross-Country team. The *Harriers* as the bus which lugs us to our meets has plastered upon it. A

Harrier is a type of dog known for hunting hares. (Fuckin' novel idea, right?) This would appear to be a lame mascot when you're facing off against the *Tigers* or the *Hawks* or the *Grizzled Coyotes*, but Harriers are known for their stamina, their perseverance. Their ability to track, run down and *attack*. A Harrier will rip your fucking throat out, what the fuck is a hawk gonna do?

I'm thinking about the throat ripping as I kick my speed up a notch, ignoring a burning in my quads as I increase my running rate steadily. I'm hopeful the increasing distance between Palmer and myself will discourage him enough that he will slow, indulging in the release of discomfort, conserving his energy and making peace with third place this morning. And essentially getting off my back. As I turn over my shoulder and see his red running shorts decrease to just a blip, I realize my plan has worked as he surrenders to a weak jog. I smile and continue my pace, eager to bump shoulders with Polo, impressing him with my ability to match his stride and leave Palmer in the wafting dust we kick up, an oversized pouting lip and sullen eyes in the vain of *Looney Tunes*' Wile E. Coyote, left in the dust of The Roadrunner. Again.

There are others on the team, about fifteen runners total. But they average around seven-and-a-half minute miles. So they're deadweight, but not hurting anything. All the same, they're nothing to Palmer, Polo and myself. Just inconsequential blips lapped by us three, the true breed of the Harrington Cross-Country team.

I remember the day Bryce Lee joined the team. The team is so small it boasts a “no cut” system. Basically, if you’d like to run, you’ll run. So when Bryce hiked his fat ass onto the track at Clybourne, all six of Palmer, Polo and I’s eyes were burrowing into his head. There was some disbelief, some anger and a hint of actual amusement. We knew he wouldn’t last the week with us, but there was an unspoken camaraderie between us guys which whispered one unspoken, universally understood challenge; get the lard-ass to drop in one day.

Polo started out strongest, within the first quarter of the morning’s practice we were lapping Bryce at a considerable pace. As Polo came over his left shoulder, I heard him say it, just loud enough for Palmer and I to hear;

“Faggot.” he spoke. Then he was past as Palmer and I whipped by, one on either side of Bryce watching him huff and fight for breath through blubbery red cheeks, a look of bewilderment on his face as he attempted to digest what had been said.

No one threw their heads back in laughter, no one egged on Polo in the style of a cheap chorus of high school antagonizers ripe on television, I only smiled softly to myself and continued running, feeling my spikes digging into the turf below me.

We finished our 3.2 miles and cooled down on the field in the middle of the track, shoving and laughing as we stretched out our limbs. We looked up in unison, our internal clocks

telling us it was time to get in and get showered and get to class. But we found no coach to pat us on the ass and send us on our way. In fact, none of the usual dead-weight had congregated on the field, congratulating each other on personal bests which were fucking abysmal in the grand scheme of our athletic hall. We found them huddled near the end of the track as Bryce, engaging in the pussiest jog you'd ever seen, hands limply bouncing in-front of him like a limp-wristed T-Rex, finally rounded the corner of his final lap.

Palmer snickered and the three of us guys turned on our heels to head back to the lockers. I had a literature class first-period and wanted to pick up a protein shake from the cafeteria first. I always get a shake, even if it makes me late. If you go over an hour without protein after a hard workout, you lose sixty-five percent of the muscle build-up you earned. I read that somewhere. Anyway, if I was late for first-period my bitch teacher was going to mark me truant. And even though I was smarter than half of the numbskulls in that stupid class, being marked truant would drop my grade, possibly failing me. And Harrington has a strict no-pass-no-play policy, so I didn't need this teacher fucking things up for me before the region meet.

Anyway, we're walking off the field when the voice of our coach shouts over the goalpost behind us, "Where do you think you're going?"

We turned, looks of bewilderment on our faces as if to say, *Inside? Where the fuck do you think we're going?*

“Practice isn’t over until everyone is off that track. *It’s The Harrington Way.*”

We three turned to each other, Palmer, Polo and myself, unsure what to do.

“Well, if it’s *The Harrington Way.*” Polo said, starting back across the field.

“Yeah,” Palmer echoed, then whispering, “We gotta watch hypertension kill him ‘fore we go in. It’s the *Harrington Way.*”

I shrugged and followed them to merge with the crowd of runners, all of whom were staring at us from the corners of their eyes. Getting chewed out by Coach always meant you’d be getting side-eyes. I felt a tinge of something, not embarrassment because who gives a fuck what these deadweights think, but a flash of *something* as I tried to ignore them. We watched as Bryce made his way across the finish, promptly collapsing to his knees, attempting not to regurgitate his breakfast of Eggos and maple syrup and other fat person shit. He was smiling through his red cheeks, all of the JV Squad cheering for him and clapping him on the back. Polo, Palmer and I did not cheer.

**

Harrington's locker room was really well done, crisp Harrington blues with bright red lockers. The lockers created big open squares with benches in the middle. There were great big metal gates that could come down from the ceiling to close off the lockers, creating a room with no exit. This was to make sure no one would bust into the lockers after school hours or anything. But the janitors always kept the cages up and open as no one had ever busted into a locker at Harrington. This was a private school, they didn't let actual *thugs* go here.

Polo, Palmer and I horsed around, not really changing. We were already late for first-period anyways. The damage was done, getting there now wouldn't fix it. We kept an eye on Bryce, clumsily trying to open the locker he had gotten this morning. Most of the kids had gone on to first-period already but Bryce remained. He was a slow mover. It was Polo who made the first step forward, the American Flag printed on his running shorts prowling along the lockers towards Bryce. Bryce was either clueless to us three boys circling in or was feigning a sense of obliviousness. Granted, feigning oblivion was a smart choice in the halls of the school, where one could find safety within the crowd, but here in the locker room, the proverbial belly of the Harrington Beast where testosterone and Axe body spray crept along the walls and leached into the oxygen we breathed, you were alone. You couldn't ignore confrontation, you had to take it head on.

“You chose the wrong sport, faggot.” Polo said, placing a hand on Bryce’s sweat drenched shoulder. From beneath the baggy gray tee-shirt he wore, I could almost see the skin on Bryce’s back begin to crawl up.

“Yeah, fat-ass!” Palmer chimed in. I noticed his aversion to the word *faggot*. By now everyone I knew was pretty averse to the term, even the most retarded sounding kids knowing it was a hot-button word and should be treaded on lightly, Twitter posts often likening it to the *n-word* which, within Harrington’s primarily (if not entirely) white student body, was hardly ever uttered. I didn’t say faggot much. Sure, I thought it often enough, but I hardly found it worthwhile to shout in someone’s face. Being called gay was beginning to lose the sting it held as an insult since our days of junior high teasing, as being popular and being gay were beginning to become less mutually exclusive. Sure, it was still gross, but there were gay people amassing hundreds of thousands of followers online, it was sort of cool to be faggy in a weird way. Plus, I reasoned there were better insults out there. Despite this, Polo liked the word faggot. So he said it often and no one ever stopped him. He didn’t say it to describe gay people (they were referred to as *homos*) but when someone, regardless of sexual orientation, was acting like a faggot, he called them one. It was a loose system of morals, but a distinctive one all the same.

Anyways, this faggot Polo was gripping by the shoulder began stammering, possibly thinking he could maybe talk his way out of this. Maybe he was considering yelling, screaming for help. But I think even then he knew it would do no good. The men's locker room was attuned to all sorts of shouts of horseplay, no one ever came to investigate the towel popping and Grecian-Style wrestling. It was just boys being boys, what could you do?

I saw the moment in Bryce's eyes where he went full fight or flight. He'd had a small backpack in his arms which he pushed in Polo's direction, creating a barricade he couldn't be grabbed through, then he bolted in the direction of the door. But Palmer was quick, and in one jump he had grabbed the metal handle of the cage from the ceiling and brought it down, trapping all three of us inside. This was a tradition within the locker room, the ability to host an impromptu cage match was a gleaming positive of the hallowed cubbies we changed in daily. If anyone on the soccer or football or lacrosse team was having an issue, they brought down the gate and sorted it out right there to a crowd of screaming teammates on the other side, pinning the gate shut and cheering them on. But there were no screaming onlookers right now. Just Polo, Palmer and I staring at a scared Bryce Lee as he rapped against the cage with his hand.

I grabbed the cage to help secure it closed as Palmer, now on his knees holding the bottom of the cage against the floor, antagonized Bryce. “Come on, you fat fuck. What’re you gonna do now?”

Polo grabbed Bryce from behind and basically whipped the two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of kid off of the cage, spinning him around and throwing him into the bench in the center of the lockers, Bryce’s shins making contact with the metal edge causing a reverberation to bounce off the lockers and down the hall. Toppling over top, a small yelp escaped from Bryce’s fat mouth as he landed in a heap on the other side of the bench, a grimace of pain plastered on his round face. Polo stepped forward, looking astoundingly threatening despite his small runner’s body. Polo was short, thin and almost birdlike, but he was uncharacteristically strong with muscles bulging out of his wire frame as they were now, all tan arms and dark hair falling in front of his face, leaving only a crooked smile to be revealed. Palmer, on the other hand, was a little chubbier than Polo and I. His nipples protruded out of his jersey which made him the topic of much teasing. He wasn’t fat by any means, but his body was odd. Long, gangly arms on a wide torso with strange fat deposits in the lower gut and the pectorals giving the illusion of tits as his sternum con-caved inwards. All of this beneath a ginger face with curly hair he often put back in a headband. His teeth were nice though, the subject of countless orthodontic appointments

which thankfully counteracted his hook nose. Polo's nose was long and pointy, but it somehow fit on his face giving him the threatening aura of a vulture with olive skin. Palmer's nose just seemed red and ruddy and too sharp for his pale face, dusted with freckles that were sometimes interchangeable with the acne on his forehead, giving him a bad case of pizza face.

I stop reflecting on Palmer's teeth and glance back to find that Polo is wailing on Bryce, fists meeting the top of Bryce's head, periodically making contact with his face. Ripples sent down his fat cheeks, bouncing tears off like an inflatable bounce house as Bryce blubbers which seems to egg Polo on in his silent beating.

Palmer stands, leaving me to keep the gate pinned shut. I'm not concerned about Bryce getting up anytime soon, so I'm really more playing the part of look-out. Palmer vaults over the bench and starts kicking Bryce in the ribs with the top of his cleat. I think this is what gives Polo the idea to do what he does next.

"Lift his shirt." Polo says.

Palmer looks over to Polo, his red brows furrowed in confusion, his mouth agape.

"Lift his shirt!" Polo repeats, "I wanna see his bitch-tits."

Palmer laughs now and starts pulling at the bottom of Bryce's shirt. Bryce objects, writhing on the floor. Polo achieves Bryce's surrender by pinning an elbow into Bryce's throat,

forcing Bryce's hands to pull at Polo's arms to relieve any circulation at all. That's when Palmer gets Bryce's fat gut out from behind the gray *HARRIER PRIDE* tee-shirt. I contemplate jumping in on the beating here, but decide against it on account of *I don't feel like it*. I don't *like* Bryce, don't get me wrong. He's a fat waste of space who hasn't and most likely won't contribute anything to the world. I think of how I'm seventeen and I already have my name plastered around the Athletic Wing at Harrington, how it will probably be plastered around the Athletic Wing at a State College. And then who knows? The most important thing Bryce Lee will ever have his name on is a tombstone. Does that make me want to beat the shit out of him? Not really. I don't consider myself good, but I'm not *needlessly* cruel I don't think.

Polo stands over Bryce, his stomach and half of an oversized breast with a stretched areola hanging out of his shirt. He looks scared, but I think he's starting to accept that whatever happens next is inevitable. Palmer looks fucking excited, foaming at the mouth like a retard on pudding day. Polo is straight faced, however. Almost contemplative.

Polo lifts his running spikes off the ground, a soft *srckk* as the metal daggers grind off of the concrete floor and stick out of the bottom looking for a track to grip onto, if not a track, then anything it can sink its teeth into.

Spikes are the essential cleat all of us varsity runners wear. They usually run about three-hundred dollars and we replace the metal spikes monthly to keep them sharp and sturdy. They stab into the track to give a runner traction and if you've ever had the misfortune of one grazing your ankle while running, they hurt like hell.

Our spikes are our Tomahawks, our Rapiers, our standard-issued sidearms. A lethal weapon without which you can't scalp an Englishman, stab a French Aristocrat, or perform a routine traffic stop. And you sure as hell can't win a race without 'em.

Polo places the spike gingerly on Bryce's stomach and looks down, but not at Bryce. He's staring into the ground and contemplating his next words very carefully, treating Bryce like a wounded horse facing the barrel of a gun, refusing to look into the scared animal's eyes.

"You're not coming back tomorrow."

Bryce nods his head although it wasn't a question.

"We don't want you here." Polo continues. "You're a fat faggot."

Bryce is now nodding his head *yes* pathetically. Polo looks back to me at the gate, perhaps gauging my opinion. I stare back. Blank. I'm not sure what he's looking for from me, but I'm pretty sure Bryce gets the message so I just cock my head to the side. Palmer still looks like he's at the fucking circus.

“Good.” Polo says.

And with that he drops his foot into Bryce’s stomach with all the force he can muster. The spikes go into Bryce’s skin as he lets out a cry. I wince a little. It looks like it fucking hurt. Polo retreats and turns to leave without even showering. I open the cage and follow on instinct.

As we exit the locker room we can hear Bryce’s muffled crying. He’s still on the floor watching the blood begin to leak from his stomach. He’ll be fine, but he sounds like a dog on the side of the road, hit by a car who couldn’t be bothered to stop. As we walk into the bright corridor leading from the locker room to Harrington’s Main Hall, Polo says my exact thoughts aloud, startling me a little.

“I could use a protein shake.”

**

December slid into January and after the brief Christmas festivities and New Years hollering we were back to Harrington for a new semester and a new batch of classes. I had walked away from everything last semester with passing grades (including literature, which sported a large and brilliant *C* on my report card. I had tried to mask my surprise as I looked, standing there in front of my old teacher whom I would never have to see again. I peeled back the envelope of the report card with an ass clenched so tight you couldn’t get a needle up it with a jackhammer, knowing a *D* or *F* would cement that ass in the crowd for the Regional meet. As I peered down at

the letter printed next to *English 4: Introduction to Literature*, I could feel my Teacher, Mrs. Tiffany Lancaster, staring at me, beady eyes darting through heavy bags brought about by too many nights reading late. She was an old bat with jowls that had caused her husband to move his affections to a younger and prettier secretary at his firm or office or whatever bullshit workspace he inhabited, thus Mrs. Lancaster had escaped into her books. She taught them, read them and lived them, often being unable to resist pulling a worn romance novel from the bottom of her desk as we sat completing quiet work. This was all she really had in life, so I began to understand why it insulted her so badly when I showed up late or neglected to show up at all. And even in my presence she had grown exhausted of confiscating phones, rulers, pens and eraser tips that had brought me much more momentary amusement than her droning lectures. The odd part was the ability I had to maintain a level of competency when completing assignments, always being able to deduce correct answers or finagle partial credit out of essay questions on stories I had only heard a brief synopsis of. Either way, as I raised my eyes in surprise at the sight of a *passing* grade, Mrs. Lancaster piped up, stating, “if you only *applied* yourself more.”

“Mhm.” I had responded and I was off.)

I shouldn't be too surprised, I had thought that day.

I'm Varsity. We always pass. There can't be a feud between the Athletics and the English Department. They'll pass us if we continue to run well. The school doesn't receive funding for their acclaimed English Department.

And that was the last I thought of it.

December had faded and we were back in school, turning in papers with lazily scratched out headings as people failed to change the eight in *2018* to the proper nine. Aside from this,

everything was the same. Bryce Lee had not returned to practice after his initial attempt. He had faded away, occasionally passing us in the hallway between classes, never making eye contact and occasionally placing a hand on his protruding gut protectively, most likely shielding what had turned into a cluster of synchronized, circular scars where Polo's spike had bitten. No, Bryce Lee was a problem no more.

The second week of January we congregated at Polo's house in the early evening. His parents were gone for the week which was par for the course, and this meant the wealthy Lauren's incredibly large mansion just a few miles from Harrington was open for guests. It was a Friday night. We had just returned from a break where several people traveled away and everyone was antsy to get together once more. Everything in the air was right for a party. So Polo took the liberty of throwing one.

Although there is a popular connotation to a teenager throwing a party in a mansion, this get together did not fit the stereotype at all. Aside from a packet of red solo cups which had been dispersed to the party-goers, the party remained void of any direct correlation to the parties found in raunchy, teenage comedies. There were roughly twenty-five people and the lights stayed on for the most part. There was music, but not a thumping theme throughout the house. Different genres being played from different rooms, creating a cacophony in the main room where people gathered around a television playing Xbox, drinking light beer and hawked *Bacardi*.

The party consisted mostly of the Cross Country Team and their plus ones/twos/threes. A few kids who were deemed *cool* and always seemed to know where to find the few parties and drugs at Harrington had shown up. It was predominantly male, exclusively white and garnered the sort of energy that said *aside from the three kids smoking pot out back and the two kids*

grinding jeans in the driveway, I see no threat. If they get too loud I may have to go over there and have a word, but I see no reason the police should get involved. Police? In this neighborhood? Ha! It's a private community, they don't allow thugs in here.

If the party had gotten shut down, things would have gone a lot better in the ensuing months. One would have killed for the big gossip to be the two kids found with a baggy of Marijuana in their jeans, rather than the true storm poised above that mansion, ready to strike down. Maybe those kids would of had to take a drug awareness class. Maybe they would've been suspended, kicked our of show choir, grounded for a whole month. But no one would have died. If that noisy neighbor had made an anonymous tip, if Polo had decided cleaning up a party was too much of a bother to have one. Hell, if Palmer had decided he was too excited about jerking off and playing computer games at home to bother going out than two people could have lived to see graduation. But none of those things happened. And two people end up dying real soon.

Not tonight of course. The night of the party? Everyone walks out alive. Arguably something worse than a drunk driving collision or an overdose was brewing. Just none of us knew it yet.

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“You gotsa pretend it tastes *good* thassa trick!” Palmer instructs an amazed crowd as he tips a clear bottle to his lips, draining the last few swigs of Baccardi from it with a certain *je ne sais quoi* which leaves a small spattering of onlookers bewilder. Virgins, much like Palmer, impressed by feats of low magnitude, such as sucking dry the community bottle of liquor which consisted primarily of backwash. He swallows it down, masking the discomfort in his throat, glowing behind his eyes.

“Ta-da! Lemme hit your Juul.” Palmer continues. A smirk creeps across my lips. Palmer was certainly dedicated to the Life of the Party trope, always competing to be the most rambunctious individual of the function. This came from a clear inferiority complex Palmer failed to keep under wraps. He surrounded himself with individuals who excelled. He was in classes too smart for him, ran at a pace he couldn’t keep up with, he drank more than he sensibly should, and he lied. He lied a lot.

“She couldn’t keep her hands off me, dudes.” Palmer once explained to Polo and I in the locker room. He was giving us an excruciatingly detailed retelling of the virginity he had recently lost. Details which raised a few questions.

“You said her parents were out of town?” Polo began.

“Yeah, so she asked me to come over.” Palmer replied, cool as a cucumber.

“Than how come she posted a photo of them all at dinner this weekend?” Polo asked. He asked it sensibly, without a tinge of interrogative harshness. Just an innocent question. I snickered to myself, Polo had Palmer just where he wanted him.

“No she didn’t!” Palmer protested. “Show me, show me the proof. No one posts their fuckin’ parents.”

“Look for yourself. It’s on her profile.”

“That’s bullshit.” Palmer offered, but he didn’t argue. When caught in a lie, it’s always safer to change the subject than let your dishonesty be known. Palmer had mastered this as he was always lying, and seemingly always being caught. Polo was the best at poking delicate aspects of Palmers story, finding what could hold air and what couldn’t. If Palmer stopped protesting, this was his white flag. He’s been caught in a lie and it was time to let it go. He hadn’t

really slept with Ally Kempler this weekend, and Ally hadn't really posted a photo of her and her family out to dinner (who actually puts their family on social media?).

"Maybe, maybe it's an *old* photo and she just happened to post it this weekend." Palmer offered, grabbing a pair of white Converse from his locker.

"And maybe she really *did* get fucked this weekend," I offered. "Just not by you."

Polo doubled over at this, getting red splotches in his pale cheeks. Palmer always had red splotches on his ginger face, but now they flushed a deep crimson.

"Fuck you, Evan!" Palmer shouted, shoving the first of his Chuck Taylor's onto this feet.

"Easy." Polo stated. And like that, peace was restored. Palmer didn't say another word.

This wasn't the last time he would try to sell us on a cock-and-bull tale of his lost virginity, however. He was eager to craft a narrative that would put Polo and I to shame, Polo, who had lost his virginity in his car outside of the baseball fields one Saturday night Sophomore year, and I, who had traded V-Cards with a kind girl named Courtney who I had met at summer camp my eighth grade year. I remembered the interaction as an awkward and uncomfortable fifteen minutes, but when I described it to the locker room it had been a raging four hours of bunk-rocking thrills. I often thought about Courtney, she hadn't been a counselor at Oakridge since that summer.

"No fucking way." Palmer stated, placing the now empty bottle of Bacardi on the coffee table next to the couch. Polo, Palmer and I turned into the doorway, through the light spattering of partygoers that January evening many months from the Locker Room Virginity Trials to find a small group had just entered the foyer of Polo's home.

“Those are Sophomores.” Polo stated. I stared, recognizing a tall girl with dark hair. She wore jeans and a green tank top covered by a puffy coat. Her name was Veronica, she did the morning announcements. We often crossed paths as I signed in at the front office, picking up a tardy slip for first period as she would come out of the office, chatting with the male cheerleader who accompanied her on the morning announcements.

“Fruit.” I said under my breath.

He, the cheerleader, had walked by one morning, last semester, as I was signing in at the front desk.

“What did you say?” He had asked, turning over one shoulder.

“I was guessing what you eat for breakfast to sound so peppy on the announcements. It must be fruit. Great for energy.”

Veronica giggled. I noticed her for the first time, she had perfectly straight white teeth that shone for just a moment before she covered her mouth. She had little crinkles around her eyes when she laughed, and perfectly plucked eyebrows that sort of flared out at the center of her forehead. I noticed there was a stripe down one, not a notch that had been cut, but the remnants of a scar where the hair would not grow back. It wasn't overly noticeable, it wasn't even ugly. She was cute.

“Lots of bananas. Same as you runner-boy.” He turned back over his shoulder and walked down the hall with a flourish.

“He's...”

“Colorful?” Veronica offered.

“I was going to say delightful.” I smiled and caught her looking down. *My legs?* I thought. *No, I’m wearing my tan pair of Levis. I wish I was wearing shorts, my muscles are still tight from practice this morning and my calves probably look like they’re ready to pop out of my skin. Is it my shoes? I’m wearing solid white Nike Air Force’s. Given this is my second time wearing them they’re brilliantly white. She’s wearing a pair of white Keds which are stained to shit. That’s it, she must be admiring my shoes.*

“They’re new,” I say. “Got them last week.”

“Back to school shopping?”

“Yeah.” I chuckled. There was nothing funny about what she said but it seemed polite.

“I’m due for a new pair.” She said, flexing her foot to show off the ratty sneakers. I noticed the way the paste-on jeans stretched at the seams of her legs up to her thighs. My interest piqued.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“Biology. You?”

“Literature.” I started off into the direction of the science labs.

“I thought English was in the six-hundred hall?” She asked, pointing a finger in the opposite direction I was heading.

“When I’m already late, I prefer to take the long route.” I said, showing her the tardy slip I had already creased in my hand. She smiled and we walked together to class, making small talk. We’d continued to do this a few times throughout the semester, and I’d always silently enjoyed watching her walk into her Bio class. But she was a Sophomore, so I didn’t indulge myself in asking what she did after school, even though she would probably go for it.

“Look.”

The sound of Polo’s voice jerked me out of last semester and into today. His house. The party. The Sophomores. Veronica spots me and offers a small wave which I return.

“That short girl.” Polo gestures his head a little. I notice a shorter girl wearing jean shorts although it’s still chipper for January. She has a white shirt with orange stripes across and short, black hair pulled back.

“No fucking way.” Palmer reiterates, this time with the emphasis on *way* so you know it’s a new thought, “That’s Abigail Lee!”

“Yeah.” Polo states, his brow furrowing slightly. He takes a sip of a Corona I didn’t realize he had.

“It’s that fat fuck’s sister.” Palmer says, laughing.

Veronica makes eye contact and begins walking towards me. I feign a smile although it feels like a weight has entered my chest.

“Hey, Evan!” Veronica squeals. She wraps her arms around me and I can smell marijuana in her hair.

“You know this faggot?” Polo asks Veronica.

“He walks me to class sometimes!” Veronica responds, giving Polo a playful shove on the shoulder which he does not seem to appreciate. As Veronica shoves Polo she falls backwards against the force of her shove and ends up sitting in my lap. My hands go up to my sides, unsure where to put them.

“*Ro-Me-Oh!*” Palmer croons, slapping me on the back.

“We heard you were having people over, we hope you don’t mind we stopped by. Stacy lives like four houses down.”

“Who is Stacy?” I ask, though no one seems to hear me.

“Of course not,” Polo states, standing. He hands me his Corona.

“*Mi casa es su casa.*” He says with a smile. Veronica returns the gesture by turning her face upwards and delivering an oversized grin. The act of craning her head teeters her balance and she grips her hands on my hips to steady herself. I begin to drink the Corona in my hand to counteract the growing issue resulting from the friction in my lap.

“I’m gonna get me *acquainted*” Palmer says, standing himself up and walking to the group of girls still huddled in the doorway.

“Stacy, you made it!” He shouts to no one in particular and all the girls turn to one dirty blonde in the center with leggings and a hoodie returning their looks of *ohmigod* with her own *ohmigod, I know, right?*

“*Palmmmeerrrrrr*” she squeals and he is swallowed by the gaggle of Sophomores. I turn to find where Polo has gone, but as I look behind me I realize he has disappeared. As I turn back around, I am face to face with Veronica, no more than an inch away from her face.

“Has anyone ever told you you have really nice hair?” She asks, complete seriousness on her face.

What the fuck does it mean to have nice hair?

“A few times.” I say, because I know I have nice hair. It’s why I use Old Spice 4-In-1.

“You’re so *funnnnyyy*” she says. And with that, her arms are wrapped around my neck, her ass on my lap, and she kisses me right there on Polo’s Parents’ couch next to a group of

Junior Varsity Runners drinking light beer and playing *Rocket League*. I keep my eyes open for a moment and am able to clock two things:

One; Veronica's red tinged eyes are closed and her tongue is beginning to explore the back caverns of my mouth.

Two; Palmer just walked out the front door with a short brunette in an orange striped tee-shirt.

I close my eyes and begin to run my hands along Veronica's side, trying to use my tongue to usher her's *away* from my uvula.

**

"Yo," Polo's hand smacks my shoulder and I unlock lips from Veronica, a strand of saliva momentarily connecting our lower lips before breaking off and attaching itself from my chin.

"Where's Palmer?"

I quickly wipe the saliva and look around the room. The Junior Varsity kids are gone, something I had already taken note of as I slid a hand over the cup of Veronica's bra, a gesture she had returned by leaving a nasty bruise on my neck. Judging by the pain in my jaw and the numbness in my lap which Veronica now straddled, we'd been making out for about twenty minutes.

"I thought he went outside." I said, shaking my head attempting to navigate some blood flow back into it. Veronica slid off of my lap and crashed on her side onto the couch, giving Polo a glare.

“Come on.” He said. I looked to Veronica as if to say *I’m sorry* and stood up, slipping a hand into my pocket to attempt to hide the erection protruding from my crotch. She rolled her eyes as I followed Polo to the front door.

“Where were you?” I asked, slightly embarrassed.

“Upstairs, don’t worry about it.”

We stepped outside into the chilly January air. I grabbed at my arms which had been warm under Veronica’s tank top but now ran with gooseflesh. We turned to find Palmer leaning against the door of his white BMW a few yards away. Abigail leaned against him, gripping one of those oversized e-cigarettes with the huge battery. She put it to her lips and inhaled a huge cloud of vapor before blowing it out her nose and handing it to Palmer. Polo trudged over and I followed behind, wishing I had asked Veronica if she wanted to find a more private room.

“What’s up?” Polo asked, unnervingly kindly.

“Juss’ chattin’” Palmer returned. Abigail smiled the same way Veronica did and then staggered a few steps. Palmer grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back against him to steady herself.

“Doin’ alright?” I asked, my mind finding the quickest route to get back inside.

“We’re so good.” Abigail answered, her eyes swimming to me, then Polo, then across the ground for a while before locking on nothing in particular in the distance.

“It’s getting late.” Polo said authoritatively. That’s when it started to make sense. He was trying to clear people out, and had done so effectively judging from the lack of JV kids, aside from Palmer and I’s unexpected dates, one of who was in the living room and the other out here.

“You staying over tonight?” Polo asked.

“Ah, I dunno,” Palmer said. “I was’gonna give Abigail a ride home.”

“That such a good idea?” I said, finally thinking with the head on my shoulders.

“Why not? My last drink was about an hour ago and most of her friends took off.”

“You guys got my brother off your team, right?” Abigail interjected. Both Polo and I turned to her in surprise.

“Bryce, right?” Polo asked.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“He showed up for a day,” Polo said. “Never showed up again. Must have decided it wasn’t for him.” I nodded my head in agreement.

“We never talked to him.” I added.

“Right.” She said.

“Why?” I asked. Polo shot me a look. To be fair, I knew I was pushing our luck, but part of me was burning to know.

“Oh, he moped for a month after that. He only ran because our mom had been asking him to. He’s got a weight... thing.”

“He’s fat.” Palmer offered.

“Yeah. He’s fat.” Abigail said. “He said he wasn’t very good, said he’d just go to the gym to lose weight.”

“Good for him.” Polo said. “We were sad to see he didn’t want to keep with the team.”

“It’s too bad. I said I’d go to you guys’ meets if he ran. You coulda been friends.” She said, starting to trail off. “I think I’m going to be sick.” She said, staggering another couple of steps away.

“Let’s get you home.” Palmer said, grabbing her by the shoulders again. He opened the passenger door for her.

“Palmer.” I started.

“You guys are so nice.” Abigail said as she climbed into the red leather passenger seat and slumped her head down. Palmer walked back around to the driver’s side.

“Drive safe.” Polo said, turning to head back inside.

“Palmer. She’s fifteen.”

“I know. Relax. That fat fuck was a part of the team, the least I can do is give his sister a ride.” Palmer said as he climbed into the driver’s seat. A smile flashed across his face but his eyes seemed dark. I turned to find Polo standing in the doorway. Veronica was staggering out.

“I think my car is here.” She said, pointing in some direction.

“You called a car?” I asked, approaching her.

“My parents want me home by midnight.” She said matter of factly. I knew it was somewhere past 2 AM but didn’t feel the need to correct her.

“Right.” I said. “Get home safe.”

“Mhm.” She said, walking past me and towards a car in the distance with its hazards blinking. I turned to find Palmer backing out of the driveway, his red break light eliminating the surrounding trees making them seem threatening. I suddenly wanted to get back inside.

I met Polo at the door and saw his face staring seriously across the driveway. At first I thought he was staring at Veronica, perhaps upset with me for ditching him the whole night, but as his head turned to follow the white streak that was Palmer’s BMW swerving through the winding rode of his gated community, I began to realize he wasn’t thinking of me at all.

“You staying tonight?” Polo asked without looking.

“You mind?” I asked.

“No. Of course not. You guys are always welcome here.”

**

She had walked to a friend’s house that morning. It was about 5 AM when she rang the doorbell repeatedly. The woman who answered the door, the friend’s mother, had said she looked, “As though she were crying blood.” Tears streamed from an eye almost swollen shut. Her lips were cracked and bleeding and her hair was falling in front of her face, knotted and tangled as it had been yanked from its ponytail. She had walked almost two miles that morning, a dead phone in her back pocket, not recognizing where she was. An old friend she had known from junior high, someone she hardly even talked to anymore, was the only person she could think of. Staring at the girl who stood on her doorstep, the mother burst into tears and wrapped her arms around this girl she had once made supper for when her own mother was late picking her up from an after school get-together. However, it was not the swollen face and eye so blacked it almost pulsed that caused this woman to break down into tears. It’s that when she looked down she saw Abigail Lee had a dried blood stain on the crotch of her shorts and the very same red lines of tears mixed with blood that stained her face could be seen on the inside of her thigh. Thick, viscous, and drying black.

**

“Mr. Patet. Would you come down to the office with me, please?”

A kind looking woman in a crisp red blouse had poked her head into my AP US History classroom one morning in February. She had dark hair and tan skin and bright red lips which

smiled, but lacked sincerity and although shining, were much duller than the badge she had clipped to the lapel of her JC Penney blazer.

I put the cap onto my protein shake and stood up from my desk as sixteen pairs of eyes stared at me from the back of the classroom. Behind the Lady in Red (*aha*) stood one of Harrington's Student Advocates who was clutching a giant tumbler filled with coffee which steamed through the whole in the lid blotted with lip balm. I took a step forward and the Student Advocate spoke up.

"You may want to take your things, Evan."

My guts clenched as I leaned over to pick up my backpack, a black Nike brand with orange accents, before taking the long walk to the gallows through the center aisle of the classroom.

They're going to call you out of class, I remembered Polo telling me. Don't panic, I didn't. We don't have anything to hide.

I walked calmly forward through the hall, each woman on either side of me. The silence was unbearable as the Lady in Red clicked in her heels and the Student Advocate sort of *plopped* behind in her flats. I had to cut the silence.

"Where are we going?" I asked, though the answer was pretty easy to figure.

"We're going down to the office, Evan. These nice officers want to ask you some questions."

"Why can't we talk in the hallway?" I asked, hopeful my effort to have a public conversation would reinforce my innocence.

“That’s just not how we do things.” The Lady in Red answered without turning her head, walking straight as a bullet through the hallways, adorned in blue spirit colors as Regionals drew near for a plethora of activities. Debate, wrestling, but notably Cross Country.

That’s not the Harrington Way, I thought to myself with a grin. It was a simple slogan, invoking pride and allegiance to *Harrington so True...* as our Alma Mater put it, but the mantra was also a tool, a way to demand anything to cease with no other reason other than, “That’s not the *Harrington Way*.” Cheating? *Not the Harrington Way*. Drugs? *Not the Harrington Way*. Police investigations weren’t the *Harrington Way* either, but if we were going to do them, we might as well get them as close to the *Harrington Way* as possible.

“Have a seat, Mr. Patet. We’ll call you when we’re ready.” Said the Lady in Red as she stepped behind the towering Headmaster’s door, leaving me to wait in an uncomfortable chair between the Headmaster and Secretary’s offices, below a wall filled with panoramic photos of the school’s history, all taken inside the same large gymnasium. The Student Advocate stood above me looking worried but stern. She played with a wedding ring on her left hand, a simple band with a small stone. *Her husband probably works in the school system, too. Can’t afford a very big rock.*

“Mrs... Uh, ma’am,” I said. “Could I get a drink of water real quick?”

“Just... Stay seated for now. We’ll get you some water in a minute.”

“I’m real thirsty,” I said, making my voice sound hoarse and dry. “We ran really far this morning, we’re getting ready for the Regional Meet, you know.”

She looked at me with annoyance and contemplation, a look I was used to from teachers who wanted to tell me no, but knew that I was not someone to be denied. The more comfortable I

was, the better I ran. The better I ran, the more money the school received. The more money the school received, the easier their lives were. Thus, it paid to keep my comfortable. If I decided to run for another school they would be losing the money my athletics *and* my tuition bring in, that's too big blows. And a lack of money going into the school made their lives harder. Plus, my grades were highish and my mile times were low, I was on track to go to a real first-rate college, somewhere they would be proud to plaster on the *Oh, The Places You'll Go* wall in the stairwell with all of the little flags in the states kids went to school with a little university logo in the corner. They were excited to have another UT or A&M or possibly MSU tacked on.

“Stay put. I'll get you a cup.” The Student Advocate said as she stepped out for a moment, looking over her shoulder to make sure nothing was amiss.

“You're a life saver!” I called after her with a shit-eating grin. With that, I stood up to stretch my legs and stepped near the Headmaster's office, an ear perched against the wood of the door. I kept an eye peeking out of the right side of my head, eyeing the open door the Student Advocate had just stepped out of. I could hear two voices inside, both deep and muffled. I recognized one, the voice of Don Redding, our Headmaster. He was a tall, balding man with an old face and white hair slicked around the sides of his head. Bright blue eyes popped out against his navy blue suits and black socks which peeked out of his too-short pant legs. He wore suspenders on the inside of his jacket and walked with a slight hobble, an injury he earned from playing college baseball. He was very proud of his baseball, often making long-winded analogies between life and the sport, sucking the life out of pep rallies, but he was a kind-spirited man who understood the importance of athletics and was never to shy to crack a joke while you were in his office, even when it was a visit prompted by demerits. His voice seemed to tremble now

however, and his usual dry wit was missing, leaving only an old man scared but sticking to his guns.

“We’re more than happy to help you,” Headmaster Redding began. “But did it happen on school grounds?”

“No.” A plainer voice responded.

“Was it a result of a school sanctioned event?” Redding asked.

“No.” The voice stated.

“Could we, as a school, have done *anything* to prevent this, erm, *act* from happening?”

Redding asked carefully.

“I’m not sure yet,” the Voice began. “But it is unlikely.”

“Then you are welcome to speak to more students, but after this week the school’s involvement finishes. You’ll need a subpoena to investigate anymore.”

“Don, come on.”

“I have a PTA meeting scheduled and I would like to tell them that our business with *this* is done and we can go back to normal. I really hope you can catch this kid, I really do. But the school can’t keep throwing away money and wasting class time on something it has nothing to do with.”

“A student has been raped, Don.”

“It’s tragic. And we have offered her everything we can. Support, counselors. Everything. But we cannot throw a pep rally and ask whoever did this to step forward, and you can’t keep dragging kids out of the classroom.”

“We know who did it!”

“Then prove it! Arrest him! But we cannot expel a student for *allegedly* committing a crime *off* of school grounds. It’s a lawsuit, officer.”

“Alright, alright. Is the Evan kid out there?” The voice asked.

“Yessir.” The Lady in Red responded. Her voice was much closer to the door than any of the others and caused me to lean back. I heard a soft *plop, plop* drifting through the hall into the open doorway to my right. I stepped quickly and quietly back into my seat, placing my chin into the palm of my hand and looking up into the ceiling, emulating boredom. My face looking slack and disinterested, but my head was swimming.

They just pulled me out of class, I remembered Polo telling me, they asked me about my party. They asked me a lot of questions about Palmer. Where he was, what he was doing. I told them he was at my place all night. All night, you, me and him. He never left.

“He never left.” I mouthed to myself. Just then, the Student Advocate and the Lady in Red stepped into the room from opposing sides. I lifted my head like a puppy waking from a nap to find someone perusing the adoption agency. Big eyes filled with hope and innocence.

“What are you doing?” Asked the Lady in Red.

“Counting ceiling tiles.” I answered.

“Not you.” She continued. “You.” Her eyes pressed into the Student Advocate.

“He asked for water.” The Student Advocate responded, holding a plastic dixie cup defensively.

The Lady in Red turned her head from the Student Advocate back to me.

“In her defense I was *advocating* for a cup of water. Her job title left her with no other choice.”

I sported that shit-eating grin again. I wanted to look like Alfred E. Nueman, asking *What? Me Worry?* As though I had nothing to hide. I suspected it was working as the Student Advocate let out a huff of air that could have been the lightest form of laughter.

“Grab your water and follow me inside for a moment.” The Lady in Red stated. She was walking into the conference room. I stood and took my water from the Student Advocate before turning to find the owner of the voice that was not Headmaster Redding’s. A plain looking man with broad shoulders and closely cut dark hair, receding and developing a salt and pepper hue at the temples. He wore a dark suit, not quite black, with a tan dress shirt underneath. His tie was a red-orange, just a few shades darker than his shirt collar. His face was shaved, his eyes were deep and dark and his mouth seemed to twitch and squirm at the side of the lip he was chewing at. He looked like the cop found in the *Real Men Don’t Hit Women* poster we had in our Jr. High School lunchroom, minus the bright blue policeman uniform. He looked like a cop, alright. Not a traffic worker or a clerical cop, but the real kind. I immediately felt a fear and repulsion from him, like he could hear my inner thoughts. I quickly looked away and stepped into the conference room, finding a single chair on the far side of the table pointed towards me. Without being asked, I sat in it while the Lady in Red leaned forward to organize some papers revealing the top of her white bra showing through the top of her crisp red blouse. I peeked quickly, then looked away but found my eyes gravitating back towards the white bra, itself more distracting than the cleavage which gravity was accentuating. It was the white bra that caught my eye, peering through red cloth like a beam of snow withstanding the heat of a wildfire. Fires had to happen in snowy forests, right? Because even if there was wet snow on the ground, the trees are all dead and dry, like tinder boxes. So if a stray cigarette sets *something* alight, the trees are still bound to go up

and melt the snow around their bases, and *burn*. Regardless of the snow on the ground. How come you never see any photos of snowy wild fires? They must exist, right? That's what this felt like. A wild fire raging through the blanket of snow that was Harrington.

The Lady in Red caught my eyes and stood up abruptly, her shoulders cocked and her back straight. I felt my cheeks flush slightly as I swiftly looked for anything else in the room to catch my attention. But it didn't matter. Just then, in walked—

“Officer Leary, Mr. Patet.”

“Pa-tay,” I said. “But my name is just Evan, really.”

“Alright, Just Evan Really.” Officer Leary said with a smile. I clocked the smile and knew to watch out. He was the good guy. The pal. The one to trust. I knew the Lady in Red would be more of a bitch in the moments to come, but this buddy-ol'-pal Officer Leary was the one who would really try and get me.

“Like I said, I'm Officer Leary—“

“Leary? Like Timothy Leary?” I asked, eagerness on my face.

“Yes, he was my uncle.” He said with a chuckle. “Wowing the police with your drug knowledge?”

“We just talked about him in science,” I said. “I don't even remember what he invented.” I returned Officer Leary's smile, eager to let him think that I trusted him unquestioningly, but was terrified of the Woman in Red with her few words and her white bra.

“This is Officer Maldonado.” He gestured to the Lady in Red. “We just want to ask you a few questions.”

“Shoot.” I said with a chuckle. “I bet you guys don’t hear people asking you to do that so often, do you?”

Officer Leary didn’t smile. He acted as though he didn’t hear me, grabbing some papers in his hand and taking a seat. I made a mental note; *Good Cop/Bad Cop Rule Book: Word play with names? Check. Anecdotes about drug chemists? Laugh. Offhand remarks about cops shooting people? Do not indulge.* It seemed we had reached the end of the formalities.

“What do you remember about the night of January 8th?” Officer Leary asked. I glanced to the Lady in Red/Officer Maldonado who was standing in the corner with her arms crossed, giving me a look.

“I don’t keep a calendar or anything.” I responded, my leg beginning to bounce. I made a conscious effort to stop it and began to feel cold creeping into my toes.

“It says here you were at a party that night. A Saturday, the first week Harrington was back in session.”

“Oh yeah! I remember that night. You talked to my friends?” I asked, picturing myself throwing a basketball back to Officer Leary on the opposite side of the court, Polo on the sidelines, shouting through cupped hands, *all night. You me and him. He never left.*

“We’ve talked to a few people who were at the Lauren residence that evening.”

“Oh man, I’m sorry to hear that. Polo’s parents are probably pissed, he wasn’t supposed to have anyone over.”

“Polo?”

“Sorry, *Ralph*. Everyone calls him Polo. ‘Cause Ralph Lauren, you know?”

“This doesn’t pertain.” The Lady in Red/Officer Maldonado says from the corner, shooting a look to Officer Leary. He meets her gaze and nods, turning back to me.

“What can you tell us about the party you kids threw?”

“Oh, it wasn’t much of a party. Just a few kids hanging out. No one was wearing a lampshade or anything. More of a get-together than anything.”

“Do you remember you or your friends using any drugs? Alcohol?”

I dropped my eyes and forced a gulp down my gullet. My brain was firing on all cylinders as I contemplated what to say. A small truth in exchange for a larger lie? Or deny everything? I opened my mouth, hoping my instincts could make the call for me.

“Uh, no. Polo’s parents are... Sober.”

Fuck, I thought to myself. Did that sound guilty or am I just over-analyzing?

Officer Leary set down the papers in front of him and clasped one hand in the other, looking directly through me.

“Evan, do you know what type of officer I am?”

“No, sir.” I responded.

“Maldonado and I are detectives. We handle larger problems than the usual officers you find around Aberdeen. We investigate assaults, homicides, missing people. Big picture stuff. Nailing you and your friends on drinking a few beers or smoking a little pot is not what we’re aiming to do, but it is important we know what happened. So I need you to be honest with me, alright?”

“Yessir.”

“Do you remember you or your friends using any drugs or alcohol the night of the eighth?”

“Um, we drank a few beers. Just one or two a person, we could only get our hands on a six pack. But there weren’t any drugs. Most everyone there ran for the cross-country team and we get tested pretty often. They’re really strict about drugs here at Harrington.”

“Thank you.” He squiggled something down on the paper in front of him. My palms began to sweat. Had they asked Polo about any drugs? What had he said?

“Can you tell me a little about Alex Palmer?” Officer Leary continued.

“What do you want to know?” I asked, coolness returning to my voice.

“Do you remember seeing him at the Lauren residence that night?”

“For sure,” I responded. “He and Polo, er, Ralph and I are sort of a trio. Where there’s two of us, the other is usually there. He hung out with us all night.”

“All night?” Officer Leary asked, the simple question sounding loaded and threatening. Like he didn’t believe luck had prompted me to answer his next question before he asked it. I began to question if I had jumped the gun.

“Yes. All night.” I doubled down.

“You don’t remember him taking any particular interest in anyone that evening? Maybe a girl? I know how you boys can be. Maybe you each found someone you were interested in? Split up for a while?”

“Aha, I admire your confidence but I don’t really talk to girls. Don’t tell anyone but I get nervous around them still. I never really outgrew that. Polo basically has them eating out of his palm,” I looked towards The Lady in Red to find her looking entirely disinterested in my story.

As I lied I began to remember the feeling of Veronica on my lap. The smell of her hair. Then I pictured her small frame with the Lady in Red's massive chest and began to feel a thrill-boner poking into my leg. I knew my blood pressure was rising as I lied to the officers, coupled with the inadvertent arousal and I knew I'd have a full hard-on momentarily. I began to flex my leg muscles to try to redirect the blood flow, a tip I had once read online to avoid embarrassing erections in class, but it didn't seem to be working.

“And I'm pretty sure Palmer is queer. I mean, I don't have any proof but when one of your good-buddies is gay part of you just knows, you know? I don't have an issue, as long as he doesn't make a move on me or anything, but I know the other guys would treat him like some kind of pedophile if he came out. Plus, Harrington hasn't really rounded the curve on that whole LGBT business, you know? I figure after we graduate he'll come out and stuff but it's his timeline. I just want him happy, even if it's kind of gross, you know?”

Palmer would break my ribs if he heard me calling him a queer. But when a lie has started rolling, it's hard to get it to stop. Besides, this was one of those situations where everyone knew the unspoken truth. Palmer had fucked up. Badly. If he didn't want his world crashing down around him he would need to stomach a few lies at his expense. Being called a queer is better than being called a rapist. I guess he made his bed, so he'll just have to deal with it.

“You think Alex is... Homosexual?” Officer Leary asked, his brows furrowing slightly.
“Has he expressed interest in men?”

“No, well not outwardly. But when you shower with someone every day you start to understand their preferences, you know?”

“I can't say that I do, Evan.” Officer Leary stated.

“Uh. Yeah.” I returned, unsure what to offer.

“Just to... *Reiterate*,” Officer Leary offered after a moment of loaded silence, “Alex Palmer was with you the night of the eighth. In the Lauren residence, the *entire* evening.”

“Only time he left my sight was when he went to piss, chief. Two minutes later he was drinking beer in Polo’s living room again. Just us guys and a couple of friends. By one A.M. it was just us three and we crashed out. When we woke up, we got some breakfast. Nobody came and nobody went, Polo’s house has an alarm system.”

I exhaled deeply when I finished. My final account felt pretty bulletproof and I could see it on Leary’s face. He looked stern, but also a little deflated.

“Alright then. Officer Maldonado, do you have anything else for Evan?”

“No. But I’m sure if Evan remembers anything else he can call us.”

“Of course.” Officer Leary reached into his coat and pulled out a business card. He stood and I followed his lead as he handed me the card.

“Thank you for your help, Evan.” Officer Leary said.

“Anytime.” I responded, pocketing the card and grabbing my bag from the floor. I started out the door before spinning over my shoulder.

“No police escort back to class?” I asked, a smirk on my face.

The Lady in Red returned no smile, eyes cutting through me. However, Officer Leary was back to the jovial mood he had been in when I first met him.

“We’re a little busy. But we can call the truancy officer and ask if he’s available.”

“I’ll live without.” I stated as I walked through the office, into the halls of the school. I pulled out my cellphone. I’d need to tell Polo the story, get it straight between us.

Holy fuck, holy fuck, I thought to myself. I'm so fucked. They now I lied. They're going to take Palmer to prison and I'm going to be his cellmate. And then he'll hear I called him gay and he'll sell me to a bigger inmate for Ramen and cigarettes in exchange for my prison virginity. I'm so fucked.

I opened Polo's and I's messages and began typing rapidly, turning away from my history class and towards the Athletic Hall.

Pulled me out of class. Tlked about Palmer. Panicked. Meet me in Locker Room.

Sent. I knew Polo would come bursting into the locker room in a matter of minutes, excused from class with a flimsy excuse. As I entered the locker room I tossed my bag on the ground and sat with my back against the bright red lockers for a moment. I tucked my head between my knees and began to hyperventilate, Officer Leary's words echoed in my head;

We investigate assaults, homicides, missing people. Big picture stuff.

Palmer had officially drug us all into the Big Picture Stuff category.

**

"What did you say?" Polo asked threateningly, stepping into the locker room slowly but sternly.

"Did you tell them he was with us all night?"

"I did." I responded.

"So what's the problem?"

"I didn't think they bought it." I finished, looking up from the ground I sat upon to find Polo staring down at me with his arms crossed, like a scolding parent.

"It doesn't matter if they *buy* it. They have no proof he was anywhere near Abigail when all that shit happened."

“Palmer’s going to have to go to court.”

“And he’ll tell the judge the same thing we’ve been telling the cops. He was with us all night. Abigail was confused. And drunk. And probably high. She doesn’t know who raped her, but it wasn’t our boy Palmer. Understood?”

“I told the police he was gay.” I uttered.

“Who’s gay?”

“Palmer. I told them Palmer was gay.”

Silence echoed through the locker room.

“Well, why the fuck did you tell them that?” Polo asked.

“He’s being investigated for raping a girl. I told them I had a sinking suspicion he was gay. You know, like he *couldn’t* have raped Abigail because his dick doesn’t even get hard for girls.”

“You trying to save his dignity by ruining it?” Polo asked.

“Wouldn’t you rather be called queer than a rapist?” I asked.

“No.” Polo stated, his face grave. “Palmer didn’t rape anyone and he’s not a faggot. Cops call you out of class again, make sure they know that.”

“Polo.”

“Shut the fuck up, Evan. You’re telling everybody that our buddy, the person we spend all our time with, is secretly a homo. What’s everyone going to think of us? We’re butt-fucking buddies?”

“It was just two cops, they can’t tell anyone. There’s like, confidentiality and shit.”

“Oh that’s bullshit, doesn’t mean anything. Cops don’t have to stay quiet about anything. Have you ever fucking seen *NCIS*?”

“No.”

“They probably think he raped her *more* now since he’s probably being categorized as *debaucherous* or *sodomitic* or something now.”

“This isn’t the fucking fifties, Polo. They’re not going to book him because I said I thought he *possibly* might not be completely straight. I thought it would help his case.”

“Yeah, well think again. Now we’ve gotta defend him against all the retards calling him a rapist *and* a faggot. Way to fucking go, Evan.”

I stand to confront him further but he gives me a shove back onto my ass.

“What the fuck is your problem, dude?”

“The fuck do you think is my problem? We’ve got regionals in like fifteen days and rather than focusing on *that* everyone’s got their heads wrapped around this fucking Palmer thing. Like, I get it. Someone got raped. It’s sad. But Palmer didn’t do it and we probably won’t find the guy who did because Abigail was whacked out of her fucking head. If that bitch would just drop this shit with Palmer everything would go back to normal.”

“She was raped, Polo.”

“I said it was sad, *Evan*.” Polo responds, spite in his voice.

I stare down into the concrete floor for a moment, suddenly becoming aware of the feeling in my chest. A heaviness that I had never really experienced. I then realized Polo was right, I had been so caught up with this Palmer-Business I hadn’t thought about the quickly approaching regionals, the shot to make State.

Thud, thud, thud.

The locker room door opens and Palmer enters out of breath.

“What did Evan do?” Palmer asks Polo between pants. He then turns his attention to me sitting on the floor. “Oh. Hey, Evan.”

“Hey, Palmer.” I offer with a wave.

“I got your message. What did he do?” Palmer asks, jutting a finger at me.

“Evan here just finished talking to the police.” Polo answers.

“Did he tell them where I was?” Palmer asks, panic beginning to flood into his voice.

“Yes,” Polo answers. “He told them you were with us, at my house, all night.”

“Oh. Good.”

“Evan, would you like to tell Palmer what *else* you told the officers?”

“Uhh,” I began, unsure if this was a joke or not. “I may have told them I thought you might be gay.”

“Gay?” Palmer repeated, a head cocking to the side.

“Yeah. I thought it might make you less susceptible to the crime you were being accused of if one of your friends said he thought you might be... Gay.”

“Oh,” Palmer says, the wheels inside his ginger skull turning. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Thanks, I think.”

“*Thanks I think?*” Polo interjects. “He called you queer and you’re thanking him?”

“I mean, it makes sense. I’d rather there was a rumor that I was gay and not a *rapist*, Polo. I trust Evan hasn’t told anyone else and those cops can’t go be telling the whole school.”

“Haven’t *you* ever seen *NCIS*?” Polo asks, visibly exhausted of the conversation.

“Is that a movie?” Palmer asks.

“Forget it. I’m sorry I thought you would want to know Evan was calling you a fudge packer behind your back.”

“It’s Palmer’s antics that got me questioned by cops in the first place, he can handle being called gay.” I finally exploded.

“What antics?” Polo asks, innocent ignorance on his face.

“Don’t fucking start, you know what I’m talking about.”

“Evan, chill.” Palmer says, taking a hesitant step towards me.

“No, I want to know. What antics did Palmer get up to? When was this?” Polo says, inching forward.

“Polo? Guys? I don’t want us to fight.” Says Palmer.

“You wouldn’t.” I respond, not breaking eye contact with Polo. “Cut the shit, Polo. You know Palmer did whatever that girl is saying he did.”

“That girl was incredibly drunk and someone took advantage of her. It couldn’t have been Palmer, he was with us all night.”

“We saw them drive away.”

“You’re confused, must have been seeing double. Probably were still focused on getting your dick tugged by a Freshman.”

“She’s a Sophomore, the same age as the girl Palmer fucked.”

“Palmer didn’t fuck anyone, did you, Palmer?”

“No, Polo.” Palmer says quietly.

“Then who fucked Abigail?” I ask.

“We don’t know. And that’s not our problem. She probably doesn’t remember cause she was so fucked up she doesn’t remember asking for it and wants a MeToo Moment. Palmer is an easy target. Look at him.”

“You’re fucking disgusting.” I say, now standing and looking to leave. I needed a breath of fresh air, the locker room was stifling and this conversation was going in circles.

“Tell the truth.” Palmer says, a hand planted against the lockers to block my path, “Say what really happened that night.”

I look at Polo’s arm blocking my way and then up to Palmer in disbelief. He looked frozen and unusually pale.

“Fuck this.” I say, attempting to push Polo’s arm out of the way. He grabs my shoulder and pushes me against the locker, his face uncomfortably close.

“Say it!” He says. “Where was Palmer? Say where he was!” I feel his hands grip tighter around my shoulders, his eyes were beginning to bulge. He looked insane.

“He was with us,” I say quietly. “All night long.”

“Good,” Polo says. His grip loosens but he doesn’t release. We stand there face to face for a moment until we hear thudding footsteps coming down the hall.

“Someone in there?” Coach’s voice echoes from around the corner.

“Yes, Coach!” Polo hollers back in a feigned tone of high spirits. “We’re in here!”

Coach steps around the corner and stands for a moment to stare at the scene in front of him; myself pushed against the locker with Polo's hands gripping my shoulder, our faces unnecessarily near with Palmer standing a few feet away like a ghost.

"What're you fags doing in here? You should be in class." Says Coach. "This isn't *The Harrington Way!* Get out of here!"

"Yes, Coach!" We all say in unison as we hightail out of the Athletic Hall. Back in the main building of Harrington, Polo takes a sharp left and departs without a word. Palmer and I stand, unsure what to say.

"I wish you wouldn't have called me gay," Palmer says, breaking the ice. "But I kind of get it."

"Thanks," I offer as Palmer turns on his heel to head down the hall Polo had disappeared into a moment ago. He stops and turns back towards me.

"Hey, Evan. You're a good guy."

And with that, he walks out of sight.

"No I'm not," I whisper to myself. "I'm a sack of shit like you."

**

A week and a half came and went and we began to notice Officer Leary and the Lady in Red coming around less often. At first they were like a lover refusing to let go after a break up, hanging around constantly. Greeting us at the front of the school, monitoring the halls, always popping up where you'd least expect. But when the lover gets it through their head that their beau will not be returning, they begin to ease off, and when Leary began to realize the case of *he said, she said* would reach no definitive outcome, he eased off, too. We began to realize they

were no longer vigilantly standing guard. Kids stopped talking so much, too, and the weekly high school rumor mill began churning out new news of who was kissing whom as it always does.

Abigail was noticeably absent, as was Bryce Lee, and the school was better for it. Palmer certainly was, he began walking taller and laughing louder, beginning to think that the worst was behind him. It seemed that Palmer had emerged from the coals, unscathed and able to go about his usual antics. In all honesty, seeing the conclusion we had reached left a rotten taste in my mouth, but I began to ignore it and fell back into my usual runner's habits, leaving the guilt of what may-or-may-not have happened on the track. I even began to convince myself of the new truth, that Palmer *was* there all night. We had turned in around 1:00 that morning, after the usual conversations of teachers we hated and students we hated, and teachers we wished we could fuck and students we wished we could fuck, and better shoes we were contemplating asking our parents for before the regional meet. The usual antics. Region was fast approaching, only five more days until we boarded the bus for that fateful meet, and it was beginning to become all encompassing. I trained for Region, I ate for Region, I fantasized crossing that finish line first, maybe even outpacing Polo slightly. I knew that wouldn't happen, but the idealization kept me hungry and I was ready to earn us a place at State.

It was a Friday in early March when Harrington hosted its pep rally to get the student body hyped up for Regionals. Blue and gold flooded the gym and the entirety of the school was compacted into the bleachers, squished like sardines as second period was left empty, only a few of the reject kids hanging out on the steps of the auditorium, commiserating over, "bullshit pep rallies," and "bullshit parents," and "bullshit 7-Eleven clerks who won't sell them cigarettes."

The people who mattered and those who almost did found themselves in the gym that day in

March. Cheering, hollering, generally enjoying the ability to raise their voice during school hours. Fourteen to eighteen year-olds are always trying to find excuses to yell, and when a sea of five-hundred adolescents are joined together, you can bet your ass they're going to scream.

Palmer, Polo and myself (accompanied by the Dead Weight team members) stood just outside the gymnasium in a line, excited to be announced. Coach was going to give a rousing speech and after Headmaster Redding's opening remarks (a terribly long winded metaphor describing high school as your second strike and graduation as your chance to hit a home run) we were hungry to get the crowd cheering again.

I heard Coach take the microphone and my palms began to sweat, adrenaline coursing through my veins. The idea of being the center of attention to all those screaming kids became more appetizing by the second. I turned to Palmer who *had* been the center of the attention for the past week. He was pale as a ghost, but I knew it would fade fast. At a pep rally, nobody gives a fuck who you are. Narc, junkie, racist, rapist. Doesn't matter. We were in uniform and we were a team. When we stepped onto that court we were Harriers, and we were going to rip the throat out of all those other runners out there. The mob in the stands could see that, we could see that, and soon Palmer would see it, too.

“ALRIGHT, WHO'S READY TO GIVE A HARRINGTON WELCOME TO OUR BOYS?”

A cheer erupted through the gymnasium, bouncing off of the walls.

“COME ON, YOU CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT. LET 'EM HEAR YOU!”

Another cheer, this one somehow louder.

“GIVE IT UP FOR HARRINGTON'S OWN CROSS COUNTRY RUNNERS!”

A final cheer, blowing the roof off of the school. In a single line we jogged into the gym, hands in the air and smiles plastered on our faces. We stood in a line at the edge of the gym, facing the bleachers which housed the Juniors and Seniors of Harrington, our backs to the underclassmen. We stood with our hands folded in front of us, looking more like Marines than runners, as I peeked to my left to find Palmer grinning, his cheeks flushed but his skin back to a pale which seemed normal. Polo stood straight as an arrow, a wry smile coming out of the corner of his mouth. His brows pressed together seriously.

Coach walked over and handed the microphone to Polo who stepped forward out of line.

“Who here wants to see us give those other runners hell?”

A cheer erupted. I noticed a few teachers in the corner of the gymnasium shift their weight uncomfortably. *Hell* was one of those fun words that always riled up the students, it being a swear and all, but it wasn't liable to get your microphone cut off mid-speech.

“Well then, let me hear you!” Polo continued, riding on the rush of applause. His smirk had grown to a full grin now but his eyes still seemed somewhat dangerous. I wondered if he knew the names of ten people in this crowd. They all knew his.

“I want everyone here to show up to the track on Saturday and watch us win Harrington a place at State, you hear me? We're gonna take *no* survivors! And when I say *Harrington*, you say *wins!* Got it? *HARRINGTON!*”

“*WINS!*” The crowd responded.

“*HARRINGTON!*”

From the corner of my eye I noticed the door of the gymnasium open. Someone stepped inside slowly.

“WINS!”

A late student maybe, but they weren't turning to squeeze into the stands. They were walking towards the gym floor.

“HARRINGTON!”

They were walking *quickly*, making a bee-line to us. Teachers began to look up, we could see them whispering to each other, confused if this individual was part of the rally or maybe a prankster hoping to snag the microphone.

“WINS.”

I studied the kid walking towards us. They had a big puffy jacket which would have made sense in December, but it was in the high sixties today, most kids pulling back out the uniform shorts they had tucked away during the winter. His head was turned down and he had a hood pulled up, but even before I caught a glimpse of his face I knew who it was. The puffy jacket extended his size reasonably, giving him the look of the Michelin Man. It was Bryce.

“HARRINGTON!”

Bryce, now only a few steps away from the team, proceeded to take his hood off but Polo still didn't notice. Teachers were now stepping onto the court, attempting to redirect Bryce back to his seat. I saw his face. It was still large, but it was much paler than I'd seen it. And even though it was round I saw the dark circles under his eyes, almost making them look hollow beneath greasy hair which usually swooped to the side in an out-of-date fashion, but now fell down into his face. Bryce stepped behind Polo, then across me until he was next to Palmer who turned to look at him, a stupid look of confusion plastered on his pimpled face.

As all the air in the gymnasium clasped together to form the *W* of the final *WIN*, Bryce locked eyes with Palmer and reached inside of his oversized, puffy winter coat. From the breast of the coat he retrieved a handgun, impossibly large compared to what you see on TV. He pointed it directly between the eyes of Palmer and, as the *N* of *WIN* cut through the air, the pop of the gun joined its chorus, a deafening blast reverberating off of the walls, the court, the high ceilings, everything. My hands instinctually went to my ears, attempting to drown out the high pitched ringing which cut through my forehead. I opened my eyes to find myself on my knees, hands plastered against the sides of my head. Everything seemed to move so slow, like that moment you're fifty yards from the finish line and you let it all out, sprinting with everything that's left in the tank. The world seems to slow down around you and that finish seems to stretch a million miles away. That's how the world felt right then. Kids in front of me clambered over themselves, trying to find a way off the bleachers and to the exits. Teachers ran towards the crowd, pointless in the grand scheme of things but honorable I suppose. I turned to find Palmer laying on his back, the place his mouth once resided now ripped to the nose, blood quickly exiting the wound and pooling on the gym floor, staining the pale skin exposed by his uniform. There seemed to be white pearls positioned around his red hair, making the tan gym floor resemble a beach. My eyes blinked once and just as quickly I realized: *those weren't shells. Those were Palmer's teeth.* Perfectly white and sprawled around him, some knocked out of the back of his head and covered with the meat that lines the back of the throat.

I turned my head up to face Bryce who stared down at me. No, not at me, but *through* me. His eyes not windows to anything, but just black buttons which left nothing to be read. He looked hollow. He looked empty. He looked like a mannequin. I think Bryce Lee had already

died in that moment. That piece of yourself that lives inside of you, the piece that inhabits your body and makes you *you*. Your soul, that's what it is. I think it was already gone, and I truly think Bryce Lee was dead at that point.

If not dead then, he sure was in the next moment as he turned the handgun on himself, placed the barrel into his mouth, and blew his head onto the score board.