

Chapter 20: Living the Dream

At the new student orientation, FSU hired a motivational speaker. He captivated the audience—primarily the parents and the most overeager of the students—with stories of the uphill battle he had faced throughout his life. He grew up in a dysfunctional family that survived on food stamps and welfare. His siblings and his Christmas gifts each year were basic necessities instead of toys. He had a learning disability that placed him into special education classes and ostracized him from his youth. And, the most devastating reveal yet: he found out at thirteen he could never eat bread and pasta again.

Wait, a gluten allergy and food stamps are all it takes to be a motivational speaker?

I looked around at the audience, noting the admiration they all had for this man. I felt a mixture of hope and envy. Hope, because it meant that people out there cared about my struggle. Envy, because he had a story that could be told without repercussions. He had a paper trail confirming his medical history, educational history, and socioeconomic status at birth.

Me on the other hand? I had all the markers of privilege with none of the actual benefits. People play jurors when you tell them of your abuse. They question the validity of your experience when your abusers are smiling next to you at freshman orientation, bragging about how their daughter is going to be a Marching Chief.

“For the next four years, whenever someone asks you how you’re doing, don’t tell them you’re ‘fine’ or ‘good.’ Tell them, you’re *living the dream*.” The speaker arrived at the thesis of his keynote to roaring applause.

He rattled off statistics, reminding all of us that we are the lucky ones. We are the ones attending a top-ranked state university. We are the ones who get to choose what the rest of our lives look like. The phrase became a common mantra at my university. From freshmen cheekily responding when asked about their day to seniors

announcing post-graduation plans. While I had a fair amount of bitterness whenever this phrase was spoken by someone who seemed to glide through life, I really was living the dream.

For me, “The Dream” started the first day of Marching Chiefs Rookie Pre-Season Training. Or, as Dr. Dunnigan quipped “*band camp*.” I spent the night alone in my suite, jealous of the other groups of girls who had someone to walk to Chiefs’ field with. I was given first part, a goal I hadn’t spoken out loud but of course, wanted. Matt Tenore was given second part. During our first rehearsal break, he walked up to me smiling.

“So, I think I figured out why you got first and I got second. It’s alphabetical, and K is before T.”

“Matt, you got rejected after your first audition to be a music major. You can’t keep playing this game with me.” I laughed off the second sentence. A plea for him to keep the truce he promised as he was crying on my lap. I couldn’t handle another year of Matt antagonizing me for working harder at trumpet than he did. He nodded briefly.

Honestly, from that moment on, I liked Matt quite a bit. He had his temper tantrums from time to time and would often speak to

me like he deeply pitied me despite knowing no actual personal information about me. But I liked him. In Matt, I saw an insecure boy who was so unsure of his talents that he focused his efforts on tearing down his rivals. And my favorite thing about Matt was that he grossly underestimated my intelligence to a humorous degree.

A week later, the “block list” came out. It listed every person who got a “number” in pre-game and every person who was an “alternator.” Basically, the pre-game show hadn’t changed in decades, despite the band growing to nearly 500 members. However, we performed so many different half-time shows that alternators almost always got their own spot.

Screech had a huge audition turnout that year. Matt and I both made alternator. My marching score was lower. Matt’s music score was lower. I was disappointed with the result, but nearly two-thirds of the rookies, or first-years, who auditioned were assigned as alternators. After not making section leader my senior year of high school, minor ego blows like sitting out every other pregame performance seemed silly.

“Hey, Jen. Did you see that if you made alternator and you’re in Screech, you have to switch your part down to second

part?” Matt was sitting next to me. He blurted out this information like it had just dawned on him.

“No, I didn’t see that anywhere. Did you just make that up?”

I asked the question plainly, though the undertone was laughter.

“No, it says it on the block list they posted. It had an asterisk right next to your name.” The longer Matt spoke, the less sense his lie made. “Hey—go ask the section leader if you don’t believe me.” He put both hands up in feigned innocence. I walked across the row of theater-style seats in Opperman until I got to our section leader, a petite brunette named Jessica.

“Hey, so Matt just told me that because I’m an alternator, I need to be moved from first part to second part. Is that true?”

“Matt said that? Don’t listen to Matt. He doesn’t know what he’s talking about.” She waived me away, busy counting the sheet music in her hand and distributing it amongst the returning members of Screech. “Actually—wait—Maritza is it?”

“Jen.”

“Right. Sorry. Do you mind switching to second part?

Nothing wrong but we’re a little unbalanced because some of the returning members switched to first.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I should be saving my mouth for practicing anyway. But I want to play first part of Seminole Uprising. That’s my favorite song. “

“Yeah, that’s fine.” She waved me away and turned to the other section leader.

“And the War Chant.”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” She was politely impatient now.

“And—” I was getting cocky now.

“Whatever you want. Just stop talking.” Jessica laughed but I knew the negotiations were done. I walked back through the crowded row of theater seats and trumpets to take my seat next to Matt.

“Hey, so Jessica just asked if I minded switching to second because some of the vets took first. Of course, I don’t mind taking one for the team. But I need to look at your music for today. You know. Because I was assigned first part and you were assigned second.” I couldn’t help being a little petty. The opportunity was right there.

“No problem.” He smiled mischievously. He believed he had won using his manipulation tactic. I let him. It was way funnier for me that way.

Concert band was another story for Matt and me. Because of the way trumpet parts are written for full band, Matt got the very raw end of the deal. Matt was placed one chair number ahead of me, but I was given first part for the entire semester and a couple of mini solos. Matt meanwhile, played the lowest part and had to sit next to me the whole semester doing it.

Unsurprisingly, Judy got first chair. The only reason she was even in the same band as me is because there was a rule that concert band was the highest band a freshman could be placed during their first semester. She got all of the main solos to play, determined the tone of the whole trumpet section, and even had a few duets to play with me. And I was ecstatic to be in the presence of her while she was performing. The best way I could describe her tone on trumpet was sweet, crisp, and clear. It was the exact sound I had been striving toward since I first picked up my trumpet when I was eleven.

There was one duet Judy and I shared at the beginning of Frank Ticheli’s Shaker Variations that I remember particularly

fondly. It was to be played with a mute in the bell for an extra brassy sound. Judy started a few measures before I did, leading the solo. I joined in with the harmony. This was one of those quiet moments when I thought back to the motivational speaker at orientation. The opportunity to play one-on-one with a trumpet player like Judy Gaunt truly was something that no other university could have given me.

“Hey. Jen. The part with Judy. It’s really. Yeah.” Sidney Oser had walked up to me and was standing in front of me. He was beaming and nodding his head enthusiastically, putting his right thumb up for extra clarity.

Is this how Sidney compliments a woman? How does he get so many girlfriends?

“Thanks. I really appreciate that.” I was being genuine. The long-held grudge Sidney had against me seemed to have dissipated now that his mother was not my band director. “It’s all Judy, though. She’s easy to match because she sounds so good.”

As the first semester went on, Therese slowly wormed her way back into my social circle. Or rather, pulled me into hers. It was hard to ignore her—she lived two doors down from me and was

roommates with Judy. She also hung out with a crowd of trombone players that I wanted to befriend. I proceeded with caution, remembering to not allow her too much power over my happiness. One day, we were catching up outside Cawthon when she dropped the bombshell.

“So. Jen. I had my first kiss,” she said with a slight giggle.

“Oh my god, scandalous. Who was it with?” I teased, happy that she finally seemed to be meeting normal social rites of passage.

“This mildly attractive guy in the trombone section.”

“Is it Ryan? Because I think he’s really cute.”

“Oh, God. No. You won’t like Ryan. He’s just like Matt Tenore.”

“Dually noted.”

“No, his name is Andrew.”

“Oh? So do we like him?”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing like that. He kissed me at a Backyard party because I said in front of all the Bones that I hadn’t had my first kiss yet. But it happened. Yay.” Her tone had feigned enthusiasm, but I could tell she was happy.

“Okay, so tell me about him.”

“Actually, Jen. I think you’d love him. He’s lil.”

“Lil in what way? Lil Brown Sandra lil?”

“No. Like Businessman Baby Head lil.” She nodded at me knowingly.

The rest of the conversation passed with us updating each other on the latest gossip. She had a crush on a trombone player named Zach who everyone thought was gay and was, himself, questioning his sexuality. It felt nice, knowing a piece of the Luginut Sisters had come with me to Tallahassee. Maybe she wouldn’t ruin my life this time? Maybe she had matured from her manipulative ways?

It wasn’t long before Therese and I were back to being attached at the hip. It was hard to not be her friend when she wanted you. She had this special power that only people who knew her could describe. Yes, she was hilarious, but she was also extraordinarily tuned into what made people tick. When she used this for good, it was like you were on top of the world. She had a knack for creating adventure out of nothing. I didn’t know she was too far gone at that time. I thought there was still hope for Therese. If I had known, I would’ve just let the friendship end where it did that summer.

The first Saturday of the spring semester, I walked into Therese and Judy's room to find Therese, Nico, and an oboe major named Michael laughing hysterically.

"Jen. Come here. You have to listen to this." Tears were leaking from the corner of Therese's eyes. Her voice was shaking with laughter.

"What is it?"

"So Andrew—"

"First kiss Andrew?"

"Yes. First kiss Andrew. We were texting and he said he wants to try out for acapella group this year."

"Oh no."

"Uh-huh." Her lips were curled into a tiny "O" shape that indicated she felt pity but in an endearing way. "He chose 'Jesus Take the Wheel.'"

"Oh," I said profoundly. "That's . . . that's a choice."

Therese nodded, her mouth still in a tiny O formation. Therese restarted the recording. He started it by informing her that he was on his break from work at Publix and recording this in his car. He took a

deep breath and thus began the worst rendition of “Jesus Take the Wheel” anyone has ever heard. And I stand by that.

“He’s so . . .” I paused. Not because I was looking for the right word. Because I was laughing so hard. “Earnestly bad,” I finally sputtered out the words.

Therese nodded, silently doubled over in laughter. Nico had not moved from his perch on Therese’s bed. He was laughing along with us, giving his own critique of Andrew’s performance.

“You see what I mean, Jen Jen? Lil.”

“No, he sounds tiny.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. He’s a little too . . . I don’t know. He’s too . . . something to be tiny. It’s the weirdest thing. You’ll get it. But he’s very lil.” We spent the rest of the afternoon watching videos on Therese’s desktop Mac. She was one of the only people with a desktop in the dorms—therefore her room was the ultimate video-watching room.

“Oh my god. Jen. You’re gonna meet Andrew, he’s coming over to hang out.” Therese looked at her phone in excitement. “But don’t tell him we were making fun of his singing. I think he thinks he’s good.” A few minutes later, a mildly attractive brunette man of

average height walked into the room. He looked at me, cocked his head to the side in curiosity, and held out his hand.

“Hi, I’m Andrew. In high school, I was voted most likely to succeed.” His voice had the candor of someone running for mayor of a small but close-knit town.

“I’m Jen. In high school, I was voted most awkward.” I grabbed his hand. He shook it with vigor.

“You know, I can sense that about you.”

“Most people can.” We turned back to the group. A minute later, Andrew pulled out his phone, opened the “create new contact” page, and handed it to me. I was ecstatic that he wanted my phone number. I could tell right away there was something special about Andrew. Being so easily selected as his friend made me feel special. Like when a puppy chooses your lap over all the others to nap in that day.

The hours whizzed by as they typically did when hanging out in Therese’s dorm room. It was around three in the morning when the topic of sunrises came up. We were talking about the times in high school when we drove to the beach to watch the sunrise. We

were saying we wished we could watch the sunrise from a beach now.

If only there was a beach in Tallahassee.

“I mean, I have a car. I can drive us to whatever beach we want.” Andrew’s voice sounded matter-of-fact. As if it was preposterous we didn’t ask him sooner.

“Really, you would just drive us in the middle of the night? Where is the nearest sunrise anyway?” I was skeptical. It was rare to find someone who was so readily down.

“It’s Panama City Beach. It’s two hours and fifteen minutes away with no traffic. The sunrise is at six twenty this morning. Realistically, we want to be there by five-thirty. Five forty-five at the latest. So, we should leave in the next fifteen minutes to account for stopping for gas, bathroom breaks, etc. Plus, we have to walk ten minutes to the parking garage,” Andrew rattled off the itinerary like he had been planning it all along.

“Shotgun,” I called.

“Okay, but you have to talk to me the whole time to keep me awake. That’s your job. Everyone else can sleep in the back.”

Andrew said.

“Deal.” I smiled.

And that was that. From that sunrise on, me and Andrew were best friends. Our schedules lined up perfectly so that we could meet each other in the dining hall for lunch every day. We spent hours talking over meals and exploring new parts of campus. I swear, Andrew was a tour guide in a previous life—the way he absorbed the history and culture of each building.

Andrew especially loved FSU and Florida. He was both anxious about the future and enthused about it. He teetered between wanting to be a teacher and wanting to be a politician, both of which he felt called to because he wanted to make a difference in educational policy. When we first met, he was an English major because his English teacher was his favorite in high school.

“You know, Jen, one day my teacher told me *If I knew how the rest of my life would turn out, I would kill myself.*” Andrew told me abruptly while we were on one of our campus walks. Andrew had told me this story many times before. He had a habit of doing that. But I didn’t mind. It gave me time to come up with wittier responses with each retelling.

“Andrew, why are you so dramatic?”

“I’m not dramatic. My teacher said that. But I think I agree.”

I thought about it for a moment. I didn't have a response and he didn't seem to care. He was already on to the next topic. I don't know what it was about Andrew, but I knew I needed to keep him close. Andrew changed the topic, lamenting to me for about the dozenth time that his type A personality forced him to have the worst dorm in the honors college because he got room number one and was forced to live in the basement.

I could see the pain in his eyes. It wasn't about getting a dorm in the basement of the nicest residence. It was about being excluded from the benefits of the upper class. He lived in the honors dorm on campus that had a giant library overlooking one of the most famous views at a university with a storied history. Yet, he was stuck below everyone else, accessing his room from the side door of the building by the dumpster rather than the grand entrance.

That was the biggest connection between Andrew and me. Two parentified children forced to watch those born into more privilege than us get everything they wanted despite working half as hard. I don't think Andrew understood all that about me at the time. He was just happy to have a little buddy.

During our freshman spring semester, Andrew pledged to the music fraternity Phi Mu Alpha. I didn't think much of it except for attending a few of their rehearsals over the year for class credit. But Andrew was ecstatic. Having grown up in the same city as our rival school, Andrew had dreamed of being a Sinfonian—another name for brothers of Phi Mu Alpha—since early high school. About a month into the semester, he received the best news yet: Daniel Rosman was his big.

I am never getting away from this man, am I?

“That’s so exciting!”

“Oh my god, Jen. Stop being so thirsty. I can’t set you up with Daniel Rosman.”

Andrew fake blushed. I could tell he loved being able to tell all his girlfriends that he had an in with Daniel. Daniel was a celebrity-like figure in the College of Music because he was a drum major and also happened to have a six-pack.

“Andrew, I’m out of Daniel Rosman’s league.”

“Jen, that’s not true at all.” Andrew paused, looked off into space, and then laughed abruptly. As if what I said was so

preposterous, it shocked his system. “That’s not even a little bit true.”

“You’re just saying that because he’s your big.”

“No, I’m saying this because I’m concerned about your grasp on reality.”

The conversation continued like this for a little longer before we just agreed to disagree. Back in my world as a music major, I was struggling to stay optimistic. I realized quickly that I did not want to be a band director, but that I still wanted to be in the music world. By the end of the semester, I would switch my major out of music. But not before being stuck in a trumpet ensemble with Matt Tenore.

Spring semester for first-year music majors meant everyone was assigned to a chamber group. All the other trumpet players were assigned to brass ensembles and the lower performing half was subjected to the trumpet ensemble. As the trumpet player in the ensemble with the highest chair rank, I was supposed to be first part and the lead trumpet player. However, I had class right before trumpet ensemble practice every day.

So, Matt got there first, camped out, and manipulated his way into getting first part of the music. The Graduate Assistant did nothing to stop the blatant sexism of Matt Tenore stealing my part. I wondered why he continued to manipulate me when I was so irrelevant to his life anymore. There were so many other female trumpet players who were better than him. He needed a new target.

Andrew was a nice reprieve from the toxicity of the College of Music. Because he wasn't a music major, he wasn't subjected to the weird mind games and manipulation tactics of all the narcissists taking up residence there. Andrew, meanwhile, believed my readiness to hang out meant that I was in love with him.

"You know, I noticed we always do my stuff when we hang out. And I don't see you do your stuff. I guess you just don't have as much stuff to do as I do." Andrew was thinking out loud one day, his voice growing more confused as he meandered his way to the end of his sentences.

Does he not have object permanence?

"No, I have stuff. I guess I'm just sneaky about it."

What the fuck else am I supposed to say to that?

Andrew laughed at the word sneaky. I could tell he wasn't fully satisfied with my answer but didn't want to press it. I didn't really know why it was so preposterous that almost every time he asked me to hang out, I said yes. I had spent so much time with my friends in high school I didn't realize other people didn't always surround themselves with friends.

The first test of our friendship came about a month in. He had gotten really drunk and made out with Judy, who was also really drunk. Neither of them wanted to date each other and honestly, it wasn't my business. Therese, however, wanted it to be.

"Hey, Jen. I have to tell you something." Therese approached me in my room. She looked like she was delivering a death notification.

"Therese, is everything okay?"

"Andrew and Judy made out last night."

"Oh. Okay. That's really weird."

"Oh, c'mon Jen. I can tell you like him. That must make you so furious."

"Therese, I really don't think I like Andrew. And now that I think about him and Judy kissing, I definitely don't want to do that."

“Well, do you think Andrew is still going to be your friend if he gets a girlfriend?”

“Okay. What do you want me to do? I can talk to Judy and ask her not to make it weird if she tries to date Andrew.”

“No, what you’ve got to do is yell at her.” Therese’s eyes were as wide as they could go, maniacally bugging out of their sockets.

“What? Yell at her? And say what?”

“Just say ‘how could you do this?’ over and over.”

“What happens when she apologizes?”

“That’s not the point. Look, lil Jen Jen. I didn’t want to tell you this, but nobody respects you because you never stick up for yourself. This is just like that part issue with Matt. She knows how much you like your friendship with Andrew. She’s just trying to show power over you. She’s going to do this again and again until you stick up for yourself. And you’re not the only one she’s doing this to.”

I didn’t exactly know what it was that Judy was doing to me, but by the end of Therese’s monologue, I was convinced—I had to take a stand for the other women she was doing this to.

“Okay, I’ll go yell at her.”

I walked into Therese and Judy’s room and started yelling. I don’t even remember what I said. I just remember watching Judy’s crying face. Shocked that I even had it in me to yell at her. Halfway through my fourth “*What were you thinking?*” I just stopped and looked at her plainly. I felt the shame well up in my stomach. I was no better than Therese yelling at me over Jesse over the summer. I had to get out of there.

“Okay you get the point,” I said abruptly.

I turned and walked out of the room. I met Therese in the hallway right outside her door. I could tell she had been listening with her ear to the door. I couldn’t care about that right now. I just had to get some fresh air and wash off the shame of yelling at my friend for no reason.

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Midway through the semester, Christina and Audrey came to visit from UF. As with any reunion of the Lugnuts, we were all hyped. We had a series of parties to go to, the itinerary chosen by Therese. I was happy to be anywhere the four of us were. That was the magic of the Lugnuts. That and the vodka Christina brought.

“Jenny Ko. This is my buddy Shane.” Teddy introduced me to a guy sitting at one of the tables in Cawthon. We were in the lounge of Therese’s and my dorm, waiting for Nico to be ready. Shane was a member of Flush, the tuba section of Marching Chiefs, with Teddy.

“Nice to meet you.” I extended my hand to his. He took it reluctantly. He seemed annoyed by my hyperactive drunk persona.

“Guys. Shane is the guy who got drunk and punched out a window in the flush house.”

“Why the fuck would you do that?” I looked at him amused. My question wasn’t judgmental, more excited.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” he mumbled angrily.

“We’re sorry about her. She doesn’t go out in public much. We’re still socializing her.” Christina put her hands on my shoulders and moved me away from Shane.

“Go sit on the couch, sweetie. We’ll get you when it’s time to go to the party.”

Christina looked down at me with a fake condescending look. Our favorite bit was mom and child who is still learning social skills. We played it regularly. I marched over to the couch that

Christina pointed to, crossed my arms and legs, and stared at my friends expectantly.

Finally, Nico joined us and we were ready to go. The first place we went was a Flush party. I walked in and saw a baritone player named Paul. I recognized him as one of Andrew's pledge brothers, though we had never been formally introduced.

"Hi, I hear you're the other person in love with Andrew?" I walked up to Paul and extended my hand. Drunk off of Christina's vodka and my delusional confidence, I learned nothing from my previous failed social interaction of the evening.

"Andrew, like my pledge brother Andrew? He's my HERO. Of course, I'm in love with him!" Paul gushed. "So, what's your name?"

"I'm Jen."

Paul examined me for a second. He crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall—doing his best impression of a much cooler guy than him.

"So, Jen, tell me about yourself. Where are you from?"

"Wellington. But don't hold that against me, I'm not rich. What about you?"

“I’m from Charlotte, North Carolina—”

“Charlotte?!” I asked excitedly, dramatically putting my hands to my head. I noticed Paul mirroring my gesture. “I *love* Charlotte. That’s where the ACC Championship is.”

“I know! I’m from there. I *love* Charlotte.” Paul continued to mirror my voice tone and mannerisms, but I didn’t pay it any mind. “Do you live in Cawthon?”

“Yes, I’m a music education major!”

“Me, too! We have so much in common!” Paul was enthused. I was enthused that Paul was enthused. I had an opportunity to prove Christina wrong about my social skills.

“So you live in Cawthon. Who’s your roommate?”

“Raleigh.”

“Oh my god, Raleigh is such a cutie.”

“You think Raleigh’s cute, huh?” Paul’s blue eyes twinkled mischievously. He took a step closer to me. “You know, a lot of people think me and Raleigh look alike. What do you think?”

“Really? I don’t see it.” I studied his face for a moment.

“No, you’ve gotta look really close. Right here.” His face was now only a couple of inches away from mine, he turned his head

to his left so his right cheek was right in front of me. He was pointing to a large freckle on his cheek. I looked at him earnestly, wanting to give an honest answer.

“I guess. But the main difference between you and Raleigh is he’s *so* attractive and you’re . . . not.”

Paul stood straight up abruptly, patted me three times on the side of the left arm with his right hand, gave a brief nod, and did an about-face to his left before strolling off.

o for 2. Maybe this is enough social interaction for drunk Jen.

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Andrew’s and my friendship continued to grow platonically. Meanwhile, Therese began a relationship with Zach, the boy everyone believed to be gay and who, himself, was questioning his sexuality. They “dated” for three weeks before Zach officially came out as gay, as expected. Therese was dramatic about it, also as expected.

For the two weeks following the breakup, Therese needed friends by her side twenty-four/seven. She claimed that if she was left alone, she would kill herself. No one knew what to do besides

surrounding her. Of course, that's exactly what she wanted.

Attention, validation, emotional energy. In other words, narcissistic supply. I didn't mind too much that she needed us by her side. Even if it was manipulation, I enjoyed being in her presence. It was the power she had, to make people feel special when they were her friend.

What I did mind, however, was the way she talked about Andrew. Zach, newly discovering his sexuality, developed a crush on Andrew. It was not reciprocated. That did not stop Therese from lashing out about Andrew behind his back. I took it in stride at first. I figured she'd find a new target. By the end of the semester, I was fed up with the constant verbal abuse of someone who had become one of my closest friends because someone had an unrequited crush on him. Therese, meanwhile, was fed up with me slowly standing up for myself. A practice Andrew had been steadily encouraging me to take up.

"Do you know what that's like for me? To watch you and Andrew eating together in the dining hall?" Therese was yelling at me in the hallway outside of my room. It was the last week of freshman year and things began boiling over.

“Therese, what does that have to do with anything?”

“Because you can just have a normal friendship with him even though Zach likes him.”

“What?”

“Watching you have a normal relationship with a guy you like is just holding it above my head because I can’t have a normal relationship with Zach.”

“Therese. I don’t like Andrew. And even if I did, that has nothing to do with you and Zach.”

“You need to choose, right now. Me or Andrew?”

“Therese, come on. You *like* Andrew. He’s the mildly attractive trombone player who gave you your first kiss. It doesn’t need to be like that.”

“Me. Or Andrew?”

“Andrew. Because he’s not the one forcing me to not be friends with people.” As I said it, I saw the rage Therese boil over and I was scared. Really scared, for a moment. As her eyes bulged out the way they did when she was having a narcissistic meltdown, a flashback was triggered.

My mother is yelling at us in the kitchen of our Wellington home, standing too close to the knives.

I went to the wall, steadying my hand on it.

“Oh, what? Are you going to fake a seizure now?”

“Therese. Stop. Talking.” I turned and began walking back to my room, my hand still on the wall to guide my balance and keep me grounded in reality.

My mother is slamming her hand on the black granite countertop to make her point. I pray she doesn't accidentally hurt herself in the process. She's already so escalated. Anything that sets her off will be deadly.

“Oh, that's right, just walk away,” Therese said dramatically, as if we just ended a lovers' quarrel, but I didn't care. I was too focused on pushing the memory away. I slammed my door shut behind me, making it to my bed before the rest of the flashback came.

My mother hit the palm of her hand extra hard against the granite. It didn't seem to hurt her, but the sound of the slap makes me jump. She notices. I see a twinkle of malice in her eyes. I'm scared and she knows it.

In mid-April, a couple of weeks before the end of the semester was the chamber winds recital. All of the first-year musicians would perform with their brass quintet, woodwind quintet, or, in my case, trumpet ensemble. The power struggle between Matt and I continued. I tried to talk to the graduate assistant, Simon, one-on-one multiple times, but Matt was always hanging around him, so I couldn't.

Finally, during one eleventh-hour practice, Simon, the graduate assistant, made the executive decision. We would switch around parts, so everyone got a chance to play first. It was not my preferred resolution. I preferred for the blatant sexism of the only woman in the group being the one whose accomplishment went unnoticed in favor of a man's ego to be recognized and resolved. But it was better than nothing I supposed.

The part I got was definitely the "best" first part. It came in on a high A above the treble clef staff, stealing the show. I practiced my entrance obsessively, determined to not make a fool out of myself in front of every music major. This recital was particularly well-

attended because it was one of the last chances for music majors to get class credit for attending recitals.

For whatever reason, the trumpet ensemble was the last performance. I believe it was arranged this way because it was the only one of its kind. But everyone knew the trumpet ensemble was for the overflow trumpets. So, everyone knew they were saving the worst for last.

The first four songs the trumpet ensemble played were unremarkable. No one messed up in a noticeable way or sounded bad, but it was a boring performance. You could see the audience's eyes glazing over. They were already fantasizing about what they were going to have for dinner once the recital was over.

Finally, we made it to the last song. The other five trumpets began the piece in a mezzo forte. The opening bars were supposed to be uneventful. I counted thirty full seconds of rest—a lifetime in a chamber ensemble piece. As I neared my grand entrance, I moved closer to my music, hobbling up to the stand with my booted foot. I saw some snickers from the front row. My dumb little boot really did look silly when the rest of me was in concert black.

I came in on the most perfect A I could have performed. Clear, crisp, and double forte. It was such an impressive note that it startled the audience. They began chuckling in a low tone, everyone thinking the same thing: *“Did anyone know that little girl had it in her?”* I tried my best to ignore the crowd’s approving laughter, though a smile was threatening to disrupt my trumpet embouchure.

We finished out the piece to louder applause than any other ensemble had gotten. The crowd still buzzing from how endearingly funny my grand entrance was. I heard multiple groups of people joking about it in the hallways after the recital. It was dubbed by one of the trombone players as “the cutest thing that’s happened this year.”

From that high A above the staff entrance, everyone was in on the joke. The awkward, unassuming hot girl with a dumb little boot on her right foot because she broke her dumb little pinky toe in the worst chamber ensemble of the year was one of the best performers Longmire Music Hall had ever seen. They just didn’t know exactly how deep that sentiment ran. Everyone was too busy looking at her boobs to notice much else.